

Syrian voices on the Syrian conflict: The plight of Palestinian refugees in Syria in the camps south of Damascus

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Introduction: the historical role of Palestinians in Syria

After they took refuge in Syria after the 1948 war, Palestinians refugees were treated in the same way as other Syrian citizens. Their numbers eventually reached 450,000, living mostly in 11 refugee camps throughout Syria (UNRWA, 2006). Permitted to fully participate in the economic and social life of Syrian society, they had the same civic and economic rights and duties as Syrians, except that they could neither be nominated for political office nor participate in elections. This helped them to feel that they were part of Syrian society, despite their refugee status and active role in the global Palestinian liberation struggle against the Israeli occupation of their homeland.

At the start of the anti-government movement in Syria, when the peaceful uprising against the Assad regime turned into an armed conflict, the inhabitants of most Palestinian refugee camps tried to remain neutral. But as the conflict grew more violent and regional alliances changed, the disparities and significant differences between the Palestinian factions, especially between Hamas and Fatah, led to divisions in their positions vis-à-vis the Assad regime. These divisions were enhanced by the reduction of the role of the Palestinian diaspora in the struggle against the Israeli occupation and the new relevance of the geographic location of Palestinian refugee camps in the growing Syrian conflict. This was particularly true for the camps south of Damascus, because they separated the area west of Damascus from East Ghouta, both of which were opposition strongholds. These divisions resulted in the camps becoming targets in the armed conflict, leading to their bombardment and blockade, and the displacement of many of their residents to Lebanon, Turkey, Europe, and other locations both inside and outside Syria (Darwish & Metwaly, 2015).

The fate of the Palestinians in Syria after the Oslo Accords

The sense of Palestinian national identity began to shrink in favour of merging into Syrian society after the signing of

the Oslo Accords in 1992 and the resulting loss by both the Palestinian diaspora in general and the inhabitants of the al-Yarmouk refugee camp in particular of their position as a key source of both material and ideological support for the Palestinian armed revolution in the diaspora. This was due in part to the failure of the various Palestinian national liberation factions to identify new ways of engaging the diaspora – including the half million Palestinians living in Syria – in the Palestinian struggle for the liberation of the land occupied by Israel.

This process happened slowly. After the Israeli blockade of Lebanon in 1982, the Palestinian militant struggle declined. Nonetheless, the Palestinian factions, through their developmental, social and cultural institutions, managed to continue to encourage the Palestinian youth in Syria to search for ways to peacefully struggle for liberation, in place of the militancy of the previous stage of the struggle against Israel.

With the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1992 the slogan became “the priority of the struggle is in the occupied territory”. This resulted in the budgets of the Palestinian factions being reduced, as a consequence of which their work in Syria almost stopped, creating a wide gap between the factions and the refugee community. Many refugee community members then joined Syrian political parties, such as the Ba’ath Socialist Party or the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, while the vast majority of young Palestinians declared themselves to be independent of any Syrian political affiliation. As a result, in the last ten years many independent groups were created under the banner of the “Right of Return”. Many calls were made to oppose the Palestinian factions and hold them accountable for the marginalisation of the Palestinian refugees and the dilution of their national identity, especially after the Syrian regime suppressed the organisation of trade unions and banned all the unions of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The Palestinians in Syria therefore no longer played a political role in the Palestinian liberation struggle.

This pushed the Palestinians to blend further with the lives of Syrian citizens: whatever affected Syrians in terms of economic or political achievements or setbacks would in one way or another affect the Palestinians in the camps.

Since 2006, the Palestinians have suffered many setbacks in Syria. Unemployment increased, reaching 34% among Palestinian youth. Poverty increased, as did the magnitude of the social and moral problems faced by Palestinians. What worsened the situation was the 70% decline in the sociocultural work of the Palestinian factions and their nationalist role in Palestinian communities. This resulted in the increased reluctance of Palestinian youth to participate in the factions' political work.

The Syrian revolution occurred at a time when the Palestinian camps, especially those south of Damascus, were experiencing high levels of unemployment among workers and university graduates, while poverty and drug use were spreading, education declining, and corruption increasing in Palestinian institutions and trade unions, together with the failure of the national Palestinian political project and an almost complete lack of participation by the diaspora in Syria in the global struggle for the liberation of Palestine.

All these factors caused tensions to rise among Syria-based Palestinian youth in general. This tension was particularly palpable in al-Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus after its avant garde role in the Palestinian revolution of the 1970s and 1980s had dwindled (Darwish & Metwaly, 2015).

Palestinian positions on the conflict in Syria

Currently, the Palestinian refugee community's positions on the conflict in Syria can be categorised as taking on one of three possible roles:

1. Neutrality

Despite their moral support for the Syrian revolution, this group attempts to remain neutral in the Syrian conflict. They are the largest percentage of the Palestinian community, and maintained the camps' neutrality towards the events in Syria from the start of the protests against the Assad regime until the Free Syrian Army (FSA) entered the refugee camps in December 2012.

This group's position was that the Palestinian refugee camps have their own unique characteristics and the conflict is an internal Syrian one – a view that was widely echoed in Palestinian circles, at least in the first nine months of the Syrian revolution. This view is supported by the suffering experienced by the Palestinians of the diaspora during the war of the camps in Lebanon, and the deportation of Palestinians from Kuwait after Yasser Arafat expressed support for Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait in 1990.

This position was also that of the Palestinian Authority and the PLO factions who wanted to protect the Palestinian camps and avoid a repetition of the Lebanese experience. Moreover, the Palestinian Authority's position was motivated by domestic deliberations in the framework of the internal power struggle with Hamas: it was attempting to benefit from the declining support for Hamas provided by Iran and the Syrian government.

2. Pro-regime

This position is confined to the Palestinian groups associated functionally with the Syrian regime and the factions traditionally loyal to it, i.e. the Palestinian Ba'ath Party, the Popular Front, the General Command and Fatah al-Intifada. The majority of Palestinians in Syria understand such support for the regime, because these factions have no presence outside Syria and the fall of the regime would mean their own downfall, so the issue for them is one of basic survival, especially since their annual budgets come solely from Iran and the Syrian government.

To this category a group of people can be added who, after comparing the Palestinian situation in other Arab countries to the privileges conferred on the Palestinians by the Syrian state, decided to side with the Assad regime.

3. Pro-revolution

The majority of those who adopt this position are intellectuals, academics, and the middle class, who believe that the Syrian uprising and the overthrow of the regime would benefit the Palestinian revolution. Feeling that they have become an authentic part of the wider Syrian community, they were not so much supporters of the Syrian revolution as much as shareholders in its creation and evolution, while maintaining the specificity of their Palestinian identity.

Of course, this does not negate the existence of many voices in the Syrian opposition who reject the specific nature of Palestinian identity. The majority of these Palestinians are either nationalists or Islamists. This explains the shifting position of Hamas, which had and still has a prominent aim – even if it is an unofficial position – of moving away from the Syrian regime and Iran to conform with the Muslim Brotherhood's positions and align itself first politically, then militarily with those opposing the Syrian regime, including the FSA.

The situation in the Palestinian camps

The regime's attempts to play the Palestinian card and the collapse of camp neutrality

The Syrian regime has tried to lure young Palestinians to take up arms against the opposition, but all such attempts have failed. To put pressure on other countries in the region, especially those supporting the opposition, the regime opened Syria's borders with Israel to thousands of peaceful young Palestinian demonstrators, allowing them to cross over to Israel on June 5th 2011. When the demon-

strators tried to enter Palestine from the town of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights, Israeli soldiers shot at them before the eyes of a passive Syrian army, reportedly killing 22 young Palestinians and wounding more than a 100 (The New Arab, 2011; *New York Times*, 2011).

That day was a defining moment in the general mood of the Palestinians, not only in al-Yarmouk camp, but in all the Damascus camps and the surrounding countryside. The rational discourse that advocated for the neutrality of the camps was weakened and the activists who were conscious of the importance of camp security in southern Syria were no longer able to make their voices heard above the claims of more radical groups in the camps and those who proclaimed the need to turn the camps against the regime and join the opposition's armed struggle.

The blockade of Palestinian camps south of Damascus

The five Palestinian refugee camps south of Damascus are al-Sabeenah, al-Sit-Zeinab, al-Hassanyeh, Jaramaya (all of which are relatively small), Falasteen and al-Yarmouk. The latter is the largest, with a population of nearly 800,000 people before 2011: around 150,000 Palestinians in addition to more than 600,000 Syrians. In 2002 UNRWA reported 112,550 registered Palestinian refugees in al-Yarmouk (UNRWA, 2002).

Once the armed opposition entered al-Sabeenah and al-Hassanyeh, and battles raged in Falasteen, the Syrian regime countered by imposing a blockade on the occupied camps, not allowing any medicine or food to enter. Many inhabitants fled to al-Yarmouk, increasing its population to an unsustainable 1 million-plus people, the majority of whom were Syrians who had fled the neighbouring East Ghouta towns and villages. By the end of 2012 the armed opposition forces had entered al-Yarmouk and most of its inhabitants had left. The number of remaining residents dwindled to an estimated 18,000 Palestinian refugees by 2013 (UNRWA, 2016a) and no more than 10,000 Syrians. As the fighting intensified and moved from neighbouring regions to inside the camp, the Syrian regime imposed an even tighter blockade and siege, isolating the camp and preventing supplies from reaching the civilians who lived in it, both Palestinians and Syrians (Darwish & Metwaly, 2015).

Currently, of the original five Palestinian camps south of Damascus, only two are left: al-Yarmouk and Falasteen (the latter is under the administration of al-Yarmouk). This came about after the armed opposition entered al-Sabeenah camp and most of its inhabitants fled to al-Yarmouk or Kadsayah in Damascus. Al-Yarmouk remained under opposition control until 2014, when regime forces managed to regain control of it (after approximately 70% of the camp had been destroyed) and prevented the return of its original inhabitants. Meanwhile, regime forces took back control of both al-Hassanyeh and al-Sit-Zeinab camps after the opposition withdrew from them, and did not allow their original residents to return to them. This was partly due to the huge destruction there, and partly

because the regime's foreign allies replaced the original Palestinian refugees with Shia families of Hizbullah militias, as well as Iraqi and Iranian Shia militias.

Civil society work under siege

Effectively, few institutions are left to support the besieged civilian camp population. Survival inside the camps relies on civic initiatives. The most important groups that are still on the ground trying to support civilians are discussed below.

Alternative community schools

These schools came about after the educational system in the camps came to a halt when UNRWA withdrew, claiming that it could not work while armed militias controlled both al-Yarmouk and Falasteen camps. After two months the few teachers who stayed in the camps started a new educational initiative with some 20 children. They first met in the Falasteen mosque, until it was shelled. Then students and teachers convened in the Afrah Happiness Hall, a venue where weddings had been held, which became an underground shelter.

From this meagre beginning, and through the teachers' devotion and hard work, this small school succeeded and began to gain community recognition. Local parents began sending their children to it. In a short time, the student population had grown to more than several hundred students. Then neighbouring areas started sending their children to the school. This success made it necessary to expand the project by adding teachers and finding more safe places to hold classes. And thus began a project that is now called the Alternative Community Schools.

Difficulties and solutions

The situation was very difficult at first. The teachers were personally providing books, notebooks and pens, while the parents would donate petrol from their home supplies to fuel the electricity generators needed to light the classrooms. Given the dire economic circumstances in the camp, it became clear that the expanded programme could not continue without extending the modest facilities it started with.

The project organisers' main concern was that of finding more classrooms that were safe from shelling. Additional specialised teachers were also needed to support the ever-expanding student population. The teachers started to contact popular relief organisations and recruit volunteers from among recent university graduates. The additional school supplies that were needed were scraped together through the collective effort of teachers and individual donors. With the help of the parents, the school supplies left in UNRWA stocks and other official schools were moved to the new classrooms in the shelters and the few safe kindergartens at the far end of the camp, away from the fighting.

Success resulted in further obligations. The reorganisation of the project became essential as the number of students grew to more than a thousand. Moving forward, the project had to become an integrated educational initiative with a proper pedagogical and administrative infrastructure. Everyone agreed that the official certification of the learning process was an imperative. Guaranteeing the legitimacy of this community educational initiative meant bringing UNRWA on board. The organisation was contacted and an UNRWA coordinator was appointed (Darwish & Metwaly, 2015).

Alternative Community Schools under shellfire

Despite all the success and collaboration, major challenges still faced the project. At the start of the school's second semester in operation a Hawn missile fell on the grounds of one of the community schools. As terrified children scrambled for safety, a child died in the mayhem. A few weeks later, on March 19th 2013, tragedy struck again when the school next to Falasteen mosque was hit by shelling. Two children – Hisham Mahmoud and Farhat Mubarak – were killed and three others were wounded (UN News Centre, 2013).

Nonetheless, the first school year ended successfully, and children entered the second year in 2014 with the opening of new centres for the secondary cycle and high school. The Palestinian factions and UNRWA coordinated with the Syrian regime to allow the students studying for diplomas to take their final examinations outside the camp (Darwish & Metwaly, 2015).

The initiative effectively came to a halt when foreign armed groups invaded the schools in April 2015 resulting in armed clashes in which many children were wounded. Things got worse when the so-called Islamic State (IS) took control of both al-Yarmouk and Falasteen camps in 2015 (Washington Institute, 2015), imposing new teaching methods stemming from their extremist ideology. Teachers were beaten and ejected from their classrooms for resisting IS interference in the schools.

Activists from the besieged Yarmouk refugee camp reported that IS prevented the opening of most public schools in the camp in 2016, and limited the open schools to one for boys near the Mosque of Abraham al-Khalil in the al-Ourouba neighborhood south of the camp and a school for girls in al-Hajar al-Aswad ("the Black Stone", a local IS stronghold). Both schools were teaching a new curriculum that IS had prepared, but civilians refused to send their children to these schools and demanded the reopening of the former schools.

Nevertheless, according to teachers in al-Yarmouk, in early 2016 students residing in the camp were mostly unable to exercise their right to learn due to the halting of humanitarian support for schools after they had come under IS control (Syria Direct, 2016).

Camp health-care centres

Health care in Palestinian refugee camps suffers from the same problems as medical activities in other parts of Syria in terms of lack of medicines, equipment and staff. Most of those currently working in the camps are medical students who were in the fifth or sixth years of their studies and did not graduate, or volunteers who through sustained practice in the field have gained enough experience to qualify as nurses.

The four-year blockade of the Palestinian camps by regime forces and their allies has had such a stranglehold on the camps and their neighbouring communities that no medicines could be obtained. Medical equipment barely works due to the many electrical outages. Furthermore, both regime forces and the armed opposition have targeted medical personnel.

The most important medical centre is Falasteen clinic, which is affiliated with the Palestinian Red Crescent, which in turn is considered to be the pillar of all medical activities in the southern region in general and in al-Yarmouk camp in particular. This clinic has been invaded by armed opposition groups several times and has been bombed by regime forces.

According to activists inside the camp, the Basel clinic – the second largest clinic in southern Damascus – has been controlled by IS since it entered al-Yarmouk in April 2015 and confiscated the clinic's equipment, which led to the interruption of its service to civilians. Also, when IS took control of the camps and killed numerous activists, many relief agencies retreated to nearby Yalda, leaving camp residents to fend for themselves.

It is important to note that because of the lack of specialist doctors, many civilians who need specialised operations have died. Because of the lack of vaccines for children, serious diseases such as pneumonia, hepatitis and typhoid have spread all over the southern region, and in the last four years nearly 165 people have died as a result of the shortage of medicines and lack of specialised doctors, including 45 children and a woman (PRCS, 2014).

Relief organisations

Most relief organisations have been unable to assist people with food and clothing due to the blockade by Syrian regime forces and the failure of UNRWA and the Palestinian factions to bring in food, except in four rare cases. The estimated number of civilians who died from starvation in the camp in 2015 after the blockade was imposed is almost 170 (The New Arab, 2015). The vast majority of those left in the camps cannot afford to buy the food that is offered for sale on rare occasions by merchants, because the price of a kilo of rice, for example, reached the equivalent of \$100, while a kilo of sugar cost \$70. This drove a few religious figures in the camp to announce a fatwa (a Muslim religious decree) allowing the consumption of cats, dogs and mice. Otherwise, the best lunch that can be obtained by

civilians in the camp is soup consisting of some spices and a few lentils.

The situation in the southern region has improved a little in the past few months after a ceasefire was brokered between regime forces and the armed opposition in the region of Yalda, which is adjacent to the camp. Yet IS's control of the camp and the intervention of militias that are said to be pro-regime prevent the situation of civilians from improving. Over the last four years only four food convoys have been allowed into the camp, because the pro-regime factions blockading the camps disrupt safe passage agreements by provoking clashes during the distribution of food parcels. Generally they show little or no concern for the health and safety of the people living in the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, which since 2012 has led to a large displacement of the Palestinian civilian leadership and ordinary people to Lebanon, Turkey, and other locations inside and outside Syria, and particularly to Europe, adding their numbers to the largest refugees crisis since the Second World War.

Conclusion

The tragedy of the civilians in the al-Yarmouk and Falasteen refugee camps mirrors that of thousands of civilians trapped in various parts of Syria. International bodies have made many calls for safe corridors for food aid to be opened up, but those making these calls lack the will, wit, and power needed to enforce them.

The fact that civilians are being killed and are dying from lack of food and medical treatment is therefore not only the result of the fighting and blockades, but also the consequence of the utter failure of international actors to effectively protect the most vulnerable, and their inability to plan and implement a political solution to end the Syrian tragedy.

Annex: note on context

According to UNRWA, Palestinian refugees remain particularly vulnerable and have been disproportionately affected by the conflict, due to their proximity to conflict areas inside Syria, high rates of poverty, and the tenuous legal status of those forced to flee to Lebanon and Jordan. An estimated 450,000 of the 560,000 refugees registered with UNRWA in Syria remain inside the country; over two-thirds (280,000 people) are internally displaced and an estimated 95% (430,000) are in need of sustained humanitarian assistance. This includes tens of thousands of Palestinians who are trapped in areas of active conflict, such as al-Yarmouk or Khan Eshieh in Damascus or Muzeirib and Jillin in Dera'a, with extremely limited access to humanitarian assistance (UNRWA 2016a).

Of those who have been forced once again into exile, around 42,000 have fled to Lebanon and more than 17,000 to Jordan. The vast majority are living a precarious,

marginalised existence, unable to regularise their legal status or access civil registration procedures and basic social services. They are largely dependent on UNRWA for their basic subsistence needs, including food and shelter, basic education, and health care (UNRWA 2016a).

During the past five years the war in Syria has resulted in the deaths of 3,411 Palestinian refugees to date (Action Group for Palestinians in Syria, 2016). Most of them were killed in al-Yarmouk camp, which, due to the blockade imposed on it by Syrian regime forces four years ago, has been left with a population of no more than 18,000 people. Furthermore, there are 1,134 detained Palestinians in Syria, while 300 are missing (Action Group for Palestinians in Syria, 2016). Of this number, it is reported by the Centre for Detained and Missing Palestinians in Syria that 1,200 are still in custody, 280 have been killed by torture and more than 250 are still unaccounted for (Watanserb, 2016). What adds to this tragedy, which has been described by Palestinians as the "Second Nakba" (the first Nakba, or "Tragedy", was the occupation of the Palestinians' land by the Israelis in 1948), is the discriminatory treatment that Palestinian refugees face in the Arab countries to which they fled for safety (UNRWA, 2016b).

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