

Yarmouk: A War of All Against All



(Demonstration in Gaza in solidarity with the Palestinians of the Yarmouk camp / Ashraf Amra / APA Images ©)

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“Yarmouk has been living under siege for over 650 days; water and electricity have been cut for over 200 days... Yarmouk's suffering is more than a few days old!” explains Basela, a 45 year-old Palestinian from Syria and an activist in the humanitarian field¹. Whilst in April, the media focused on Yarmouk² for a while, a Palestinian refugee camp south of Damascus targeted by a raid from the Islamic State organisation, the torment lived by its population is however not a recent event and seems to have no end in sight.

The increase in fighting between the forces of the Syrian regime and the armed opposition groups have led to mass desertion and, currently, Yarmouk is home to approximately 18 000 people who have been the target, since July 2013, of an implacable siege. The regular army and the militias of the PFLP-GC³ block the northern access of the camp, forbidding the circulation of people and food goods. The violence that has fallen upon Yarmouk since April 1st has only worsened an already tangible humanitarian crisis, choking the civilian life which had managed to sustain itself throughout the siege and the flight of a large part of its population, thanks to the actions of multiple civilian organisations⁴ and Palestinian activists⁵.

¹ Telephone interview, April 6th, 2015.

² Situated south of Damascus, Yarmouk was founded between 1954 and 1957 by an initiative of the Syrian authorities aiming at resettling Palestinian refugees arrived in 1948 who remained in a precarious situation. This camp gradually became the largest Palestinian community in Syria, with a population of approximately 150 000 Palestinians according to UNWRA (United Nations Work and Relief Agency) estimates of December 2012.

³ Acronym for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command. This organisation was created in 1968 following the split within the PFLP of a group led by Ahmad Jibril, a former Palestinian soldier of the Syrian army.

⁴ Since the beginning of the Syrian contestation, in March 2011, several civilian organisations were formed within the camp of Yarmouk in order to manage the different aspects of the crisis. Amongst them, some have stemmed from the reconversion of activist organisations for the Palestinian national cause (as in the case of the Jafra organisation, a youth centre transformed into a humanitarian organisation); others were created to face the retreat of the governmental institutions and UNWRA that followed the takeover of the camp by the Syrian armed opposition (amongst them the Palestinian Charitable Organisation, “the alternative schools”, the local Council).

⁵ I would like to thank Khalil Abou Salma in particular, a member of the local Council of Yarmouk (an institution representing civilian and military organisations based in the camp) and founder of the “alternative schools”, for the information he gave me to write this article and the numerous interviews we had since the beginning of the Syrian contestation.

The militarisation of Yarmouk

During the first months of the Syrian contestation in 2011, Yarmouk camp had managed to maintain a neutral position, playing a central role in the reception and the supply of humanitarian aid for thousands of displaced Syrians fleeing the regions affected by the regime's repression⁶. The first signs of the militarisation of the Palestinian camp appeared with the formation of “Popular Committees”, armed militias mainly staffed by members of the PFLP-GC and the Fatah al-Intifada⁷, Palestinian organisations close to the Syrian regime. These militias hence aimed at implementing an “intra-Palestinian” repression within the camp, insuring the suffocation of contestation and opposition support. In reaction, large parts of Yarmouk’s population pleaded for the implementation by all PLO factions⁸ of joined armed forces in charge of guaranteeing the protection and the neutrality of the camp. These invocations remained unfulfilled and Yarmouk was taken over by conflict.

In September 2012, Yarmouk was placed under the Free Syrian Army’s (FSA) control, thus becoming an armed front of fundamental importance because of its proximity with Damascus. The camp is indeed located in the immediate periphery of the capital, the regime's bastion. New armed militias were then formed by the inhabitants, aiming at defending them not only from the regime, but also from the exactions committed against them by groups of the armed opposition, notably by the Suqur al-Julan group⁹ led by a former member of the Syrian security forces, Bayyan Mezel. Amongst the militias created in the camp, the Aknaf bait al-Maqdes became, as the months passed, one of the most important ones, staffed by former Hamas fighters with whom the militia maintains close but informal relations.

⁶ For a reconstruction of the engagement and positioning modalities of Palestinians of Syria within the Syrian contestation see: BITARI, Nidal (2014), “Al-Filastiniyyun fi Surya bayna al-thawra wa al-qalaq” (The Palestinians in Syria between revolution and anxiety), in *Majallet al-dirasat al-filastinie*, n° 91, pp. 153-161. NAPOLITANO, Valentina (2012), « La mobilisation des réfugiés palestiniens dans le sillage de la “révolution” syrienne : s'engager sous contrainte », in *Cultures & Conflits*, vol. 3, n° 87, pp. 119-137.

⁷ Group stemming from the split from the Fatah in 1983 of a group structured around leaders such as Saleh Nimr, Abou Moussa and Abou Khaled al-Omla and opposed to the orientations adopted by Yasser Arafat. This group is supported by the Syrian regime. It established its headquarters in Damascus where the loyalist Fatah has been banned henceforth.

⁸ Notably the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

⁹ Accused of having committed numerous pillages against the inhabitants of Yarmouk's camp, this armed group was then ousted from the FSA.

During 2013, the changes taking place in the entire Syrian landscape gradually impacted the Yarmouk camp. The al-Nusra front, a Syrian armed group affiliated with al-Qaeda, then gained importance over the FSA, becoming alongside the Aknaf bait al-Maqdes militia one of the main military forces within the camp. On the other hand, the Islamic State first appeared in the Yalda region south of Yarmouk and sought, for the first time in July 2014, to enter the camp. The Jihadi fighters then managed to take over two sites (the electricity plant and the camp's 15th street) which were previously controlled by the al-Nusra front. Some members of the latter had moved closer to the Islamic State, handing over some of Yarmouk's positions, going against the Front's command's initial advice. Faced by the opposition of the camp's population who did not tolerate the intransigence of the Islamic State and following the many altercations with the Aknaf bait al-Maqdes fighters, the Islamic State quickly left the camp a month later. It then retreated to the Hajar al-Aswad region where it established its fortress.

The entry of the Islamic State in Yarmouk

The April 2015 incursion was preceded by a series of murders targeting Palestinians involved in civilian organisations. Amongst the victims, Yahya Hourani, a former personality of the Hamas, was known for his commitment to the humanitarian field. According to some of Yarmouk's inhabitants, these murders were organised by the Islamic State in order to rid the camp from its political leaders, and seemingly also from a civilian life which could threaten its development. For others, the responsibility for these assassinations lied rather with the Syrian regime which would have aimed at feeding the conflicts between the different armed groups to mutually weaken them¹⁰. Whichever way, this episode directly triggered the incursion of the Islamic State in the camp, following the arrest of a member of the organisation by the Aknaf bait al-Maqdes militiamen¹¹.

¹⁰ Interview with Khalil Abou Salma, April 12th, 2015.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Several hypotheses are drawn to account for the Islamic State's decision to enter the camp before backtracking a few weeks later. Contrary to what more than one media outlet have explained, this incursion does not seem to demonstrate a strategic advance towards the heart of the Syrian capital, as a prelude to a battle for Damascus. As in other regions of Syria, the Islamic State indeed seemed to favour the takeover of territories already under the control of the Syrian opposition, in this case the southern and eastern surroundings of the capital, avoiding in an increasingly obvious manner any confrontation with the regime. The reasons for its intervention then rather seem to lie with a desire for revenge against the Aknaf bait al-Maqdes group which was responsible for its eviction from the camp eight months earlier. It could also have been about aiming at the failure of the negotiations taking place in the previous months between Aknaf bait al-Maqdes, the Palestinian political factions represented in Syria, and the Syrian regime. These negotiations should have led to an agreement planning the implementation of a truce, as well as the establishment of a neutral zone in the camp under the control of a joint coalition of Palestinian factions. Thus this could have allowed the regime to regain a territory, or at least to subtract it from the opposition, as done in other regions of the country.

On the other hand, the Syrian regime has been accused by many Palestinians and Syrian opponents of facilitating the incursion of the Islamic State in the camp, or at least of having allowed for its supply in armament in a region locked in by its forces for months. When the terrorist threat clearly materialised a few kilometres away from the Syrian capital, the regime had a pretext to bomb Yarmouk for the first time with TNT barrels, causing civilian casualties, whilst the impressive siege established by the Islamic State in Hajar al-Aswad remained safe from the attacks. The entry of the Islamic State in the camp also gave the Syrian regime a new bargaining chip with the Palestinians. To repel the advance of the Islamic State, the regime offered help to Aknaf bait al-Maqdes through the PFLP-GC. Some military contingents of this movement were then called upon as back-up to lead this operation. This allowed the regime to "Palestinise" the Yarmouk conflict on the one hand, by transforming it into a struggle for the survival of Palestinians against the Islamic State, and on the other, to dominate the situation locally, by imposing its Palestinian allies to control the camp and by presenting itself to the international community as the only solution to face the advance of the Islamic State.

My enemy's enemy is my friend...

Whilst a simplistic vision of the Yarmouk events shows a struggle opposing the Palestinians to the Islamic State and the Syrian regime, in reality, the conflict has grown considerably more complicated and closer to a “war of all against all”.

After several days of fighting during the first week of April, the Islamic State had taken control of the majority of the camp, except for the northern neighbourhoods located at the border with the zones controlled by the regime and where the Aknaf bait al-Maqdes fighters had barricaded themselves. When faced with these conquests, the latter accepted the support offer from the PFLP-GC. This choice has been considered as a “betrayal” by many Palestinian activists as well as by other local militias opposed to Bashar el-Assad's regime. The Aknaf bait al-Maqdes fighters probably did not have any other choice in a situation of military inferiority which would have led them to defeat. This turn towards “Palestinian” actors, even though they are in favour of the Syrian regime, is in the end the lesser of two evils. Furthermore, the Aknaf bait al-Maqdes militiamen did not find significant support from the Syrian opposition groups based in the neighbouring regions. These groups, which have recently locked the checkpoints between Yarmouk and the neighbouring region of Yalda, seek to defend their local interests and do not want to jeopardise the support from the al-Nusra Front, which in Yarmouk, contrary to other Syrian regions, has collaborated with the Islamic State. Ahmad, an inhabitant from Yarmouk, even mentions a possible consensus which would have taken place between the Syrian armed groups of Yalda, Babila and Bait Sahem, and the Syrian regime in order to empty the camp from the remaining inhabitants and make it a battlefield. This informal agreement would have materialised notably through the interdiction for Palestinians to receive humanitarian aid in the Yalda region without them having previously accepted to leave their homes and register as displaced in this region¹².

¹² Telephone interview, April 20th, 2015.

Three weeks after the Islamic State's incursion in the Palestinian camp, the activist radio Yarmouk 63, based in the camp, related a pursuit of fighting in the south and in Hajar al-Aswad, where the Islamic State would have retreated by delegating the control of its effective territorial gains in the camp to the al-Nusra Front. This withdrawal and the retake of a part of the camp by Aknaf bait al-Maqdes (Yarmouk's town hall) was announced by the leader of the PFLP-GC, Anwar Raja, as a victory accomplished in the "liberation struggle"¹³ of the camp. On the other hand, the Islamic State is said to have opened a new front against armed groups of the Syrian opposition, this time in the neighbouring Yalda. Yarmouk seems now deep in a phase of stasis on the military level, before a possible muscled intervention which details should be discussed with the PLO delegation that arrived in Damascus on 8 May 2015, and which would allow the Syrian regime to take over the camp once more.

Taken hostage

Although the military and strategic dynamics of the Islamic State incursion in Yarmouk remain largely opaque, leading to deep reorganisations, the sole undeniable fact remains the suffering endured by the civilian population that stayed in Yarmouk. Entirely dependent on food aid delivered by humanitarian organisations, the population of Yarmouk is faced by an unprecedented crisis while it has been already much affected by two years of siege and a humanitarian crisis which has made headline international news for a few days. A part of the population has recently managed to reach the southern regions, Yalda, Babila and Bait Sahem, where it could be resupplied. UNWRA and the other humanitarian organisations however still do not have direct access inside the camp. There, the majority of civilians remain hostages of the different warring parties : the regime's forces which block the northern access, the armed confrontations and the bombings in the camp's streets, the blockade imposed by Syrian armed groups in the south. The Palestinians of Yarmouk are today torn between their will to survive and their bond to the camp as an incarnation of Palestinian collective history as well as a symbol of the sacrosanct "right to return" of refugees to Palestine. The provocative poster "We do not want a humanitarian corridor to leave Yarmouk, but one to return to

¹³ Interview with the leader of the PFLP-GC on the Lebanese and pro-Syrian regime satellite channel *al-Mayyadin*, April 20th, 2015.

Palestine!” which was held high by some of the camp's inhabitants during a collective gathering on 12 April 2015, refers to this mindset. Although the population requests the urgent implementation of a humanitarian corridor for them to flee through, it however remains aware that once outside the camp, its ordeal will be far from over.

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