



# Yarmuk Refugee Camp and the Syrian Uprising: A View from Within

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With all of Syria engulfed since spring 2011 in spiraling destruction, the fate of the country's small Palestinian population receives scant attention. This report focuses on that community through the lens of Damascus's Yarmuk camp, the largest Palestinian concentration in the country. Starting with the 2011 Nakba and Naksa Day demonstrations, the report provides a detailed account of how the camp has lived the turmoil, highlighting in particular its determined efforts to preserve its neutrality and the factors that ultimately led to the fatal entry of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) into Yarmuk in December 2012. The ethnographic portrait of Syria's Palestinians before the uprising, their life in the camp (including the role of the factions), their privileges and unique integration, makes what the author sees as the destruction of the community even more tragic.

YARMUK CAMP, at the southern edge of Damascus, is the largest of the twelve Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, housing about one hundred fifty thousand refugees, almost one-third of those registered in the country. Syria's total Palestinian refugee population reached five hundred twenty-nine thousand before the uprising began, including those who arrived after 1948 and therefore are not registered. Yarmuk is also Syria's most important camp, a bustling commercial center with a huge market, and the place where all the Palestinian factions in the country have their headquarters. The other camps are quite small. Three of the twelve are technically "unofficial," meaning they were established not by UNRWA in the wake of the 1948 Nakba but by the Syrian government later. Yarmuk is one of those, having been established in 1957. The three "unofficial" camps receive the same UNRWA services as the other nine, minus some municipal services provided by the Syrian government.

## Before the Uprising

Palestinian refugees in Syria have traditionally enjoyed a privileged situation compared to their counterparts in other Arab countries. Whether registered or not, by law they enjoy almost all the rights and benefits of Syrian nationals except citizenship and the right to vote. They have full access to Syrian schools and universities on the same basis as citizens, although most go to UNRWA schools in the primary grades because the classes there are smaller. There are a few minor

restrictions on the ownership of property, but no restrictions on employment (including the public sector) or travel. And because their numbers are tiny compared to the general Syrian population (less than 2 percent), the refugees were never perceived as a threat, and the degree of integration between Palestinians and Syrians—through work, education, and intermarriage—has no parallel in the Arab world.

Such factors have played an important role in shaping the camps themselves. Without marked boundaries or entry checkpoints as in other refugee host countries, Syria's camps could expand unhindered in a way that favored a high degree of intermixing with Syrians. Thus, while Yarmuk's official surface area, according to UNRWA, is 2.1 sq kms, the camp as commonly defined is well over twice that size. Given its location on the outskirts of Damascus, its expansion naturally involved large numbers of Syrians. In fact, over the years Palestinians gradually became the minority, and on the eve of the uprising, the area that had become Yarmuk—an interlinked network of streets and open spaces—numbered almost six hundred fifty thousand Syrians, along with some one hundred fifty thousand Palestinians. Despite the Syrian majority, however, Yarmuk's identity has always been distinctly Palestinian, with its politics and public events focused on Palestine, and the Syrian residents themselves often becoming "Palestinianized." Other camps, such as Sbeineh, Dera'a, al-Wafideen, and al-Ramel, were also extremely mixed. The Palestinians of Syria who do not live in camps—according to UNRWA, about a third of the total—are even more fully integrated.

To understand what happened to Yarmuk during the Syrian uprising, it is important to emphasize how much it differed from other camps in Syria and, more generally, from the usual stereotype of a refugee camp. Yarmuk was exceptionally diverse. All social classes and economic levels were represented, from the poor and very poor to millionaires, with large numbers of merchants and middle-class professionals in between. For many, living in Yarmuk is a conscious, deliberate choice. People who became rich and successful continued to live there. It would be impossible to count Yarmuk's doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, civil servants, and businessmen with offices inside or outside the camp. Thus, its residential areas range from densely crowded sections to comfortable middle-class and even wealthy neighborhoods. Palestinian camps everywhere are social incubators of Palestinian identity and culture, places where links to Palestine and the idea of return are kept alive and Palestinian traditions and heritage are preserved. But Yarmuk is particularly important in this regard because Palestinians throughout Syria see it as the center of Palestinian life in the country.

Though unspoken, the essential underlying condition for the Palestinians' advantageous situation in Syria has been that they remain outside the Syrian political sphere; for Palestinians, political activism and expression were confined to specifically Palestinian issues and events. Unlike their counterparts in Lebanon, the camps in Syria had no political structures besides the offices of the Palestinian factions—no decision-making bodies, camp-wide councils, or coordinating committees. Given Palestinian access to Syrian state benefits and resources, there was less need for such structures, but beyond that, they were discouraged by the state, and the Palestinian groups and organizations that did exist in the camps were closely monitored. Also in contrast to Lebanon, there were absolutely no weapons in the Syrian camps apart from a few light arms to guard the factional offices. Certain factions very close to the regime—notably Ahmad

Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), Fatah-Intifada, and al-Sa'iqa—have training areas in Syria equipped with heavy arms, but these are far from the camps. Al-Sa'iqa and Fatah-Intifada, in fact, had practically no presence in the camps at all.

Aside from the PFLP-GC and others closely allied to the state, the Palestinian factions in Syria have maintained formal, low-profile relations with the government. This has been especially true since the Lebanese civil war, which had disastrous effects for Palestinians in Syria, particularly after the bitter split between Damascus and the PLO in 1982–83, which lasted until the war ended in 1991. Fatah was by far the most affected, with thousands of its militants arrested and imprisoned: the last prisoners were released only in 2000 and a number have never been accounted for. All Fatah's offices were confiscated and turned over to the radical breakaway group Fatah-Intifada. To this day, Fatah has no officially recognized presence in the country, and Fatah meetings have been held in secret at members' homes. Samir Rifai represents the movement in Syria unofficially, operating out of one of the PLO offices in central Damascus.

There are no figures on “factionalization” inside the camp, but a reasonable estimate would be that 90 percent of Yarmuk's Palestinians belong to or are followers of a faction. It is generally accepted that Fatah takes the lead in terms of popularity, followed by Hamas, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and Islamic Jihad—in that order. The PFLP-GC never had much of a popular following, but before the uprising, the presence in the camp of a group closely tied to the regime had no ill effects. In fact, before the uprising there was virtually no animosity among the factions—relations were cordial, even friendly, including with the General Command. All the leaders knew each other, and members of different factions freely mingled; personal friendships ranged across the spectrum. In this, too, the situation in Syria's camps was very different from the situation in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Except for Fatah, all the factions maintained cultural, social, youth, and other centers, besides their party headquarters and meeting places. They also sponsored a range of activities and special events. The DFLP was known for its libraries in almost all the camps, and Hamas for its readily available social and medical services and charitable activities. In the decade prior to the uprising, such centers and activities proliferated as the factions competed to increase their following, but in the end, it was ideological perspectives that played the major role in determining factional affiliations.

When the Syrian uprising began in early spring 2011, the great majority of Palestinians in the country were determined to remain neutral. This was the case both for the factions, including those tied to the regime, and for ordinary people. Everyone knew about the September 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres in Beirut and about the mass expulsions of stateless Palestinians from Kuwait during the first Gulf War, not to mention what happened to them after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. No one wanted anything like that here. Many of the militants also had personal experience with the Damascus government and knew how harsh it could be when opposed. So there was a strong consensus, shared alike by the regime's harshest critics and its strongest supporters, that the best way to protect Yarmuk was to stay out of the conflict. This same consensus held true for all the camps in Syria. Even in places like Homs, where vicious fighting engulfed the city early on, the camp managed to remain neutral until quite recently.

## Nakba Day and Naksa Day, 2011

For Yarmuk camp, the first important date with relevance to the Syrian uprising was 15 May 2011—Nakba Day—the anniversary of the creation of Israel and its dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948. Early in 2011, a huge grassroots movement of Palestinian youth in the Arab countries bordering Israel, as well as in the occupied territories, organized to commemorate the Nakba with right of return activities, including demonstrations and a march to the Israeli borders. Plans for Nakba Day 2011 were extensively promoted over the Internet and on Facebook, and Yarmuk camp youth talked by Skype about the event with their friends in Jordan and Lebanon.

In March 2011, not long after the uprising started, the Syrian government itself began promoting demonstrations at the Golan border both for Nakba Day and “Naksa Day” on 5 June, which marked Israel’s 1967 defeat of the Arab armies and its occupation of Arab territories. This was a red flag to a number of us in the camp, because Palestinians ever since the June 1967 war could not get closer than twenty kilometers to the border without a military permit. Such unprecedented access to the Golan Heights led to suspicions that the government and its allies wanted to use the protests to send a message to Israel and the international community that it was prepared to take the conflict to Israel itself.

In light of these concerns, we decided to form a Yarmuk coordinating committee—specifically a “Youth Coalition” of Palestinians to deal with important issues pertaining to the camp. We approached all the factions and each of them nominated a representative. Our meetings were attended by anywhere from twenty to thirty and even forty persons. We tried our best to be as representative as possible in terms of political views and affiliations, but our core group was committed above all to safeguarding the camp’s neutrality. Our first meeting was taken up with what attitude to adopt concerning Nakba Day. Most of us were strongly opposed to any Palestinian participation for the reasons I mentioned, and though the factional representatives disagreed, our position prevailed by a clear majority.

We publicized our decision by word of mouth, but it had little impact. A lot of excitement had already been generated by the grassroots Internet campaign, and the government’s surprising support sparked even greater interest. Meanwhile the press was full of accounts of the Nakba, and the factional leaders were interviewed on Syrian television about the right of return and Palestinian liberation. Looking back on it now, I understand why, as Palestinian leaders, they could not have supported our position to boycott the Nakba Day activities, particularly in the camps, where the idea of return and memory of the Nakba are so central.

On the morning of 15 May 2011, scores of buses were waiting at the camp’s main entrance to take people to the border about fifty kilometers away. I myself went with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), where I had been employed full-time for three years, the last year as project coordinator. For the first time, there were no checkpoints, and the road south was open to Palestinians.

I don’t know the exact figures, but there were certainly thousands of people at the border by the time we arrived about 10 A.M. Even though I had been strongly against the event, I was so carried away by the emotion that I took off my SARC uniform and followed the crowd from the Heights down the precipice-like hill to the no-man’s land and border zone below. Crowds of people, many

in traditional dress, mostly young but some in their eighties, crying with joy at times, just wanted to get near this fence that suddenly made return seem so possible. The Israelis were firing tear gas and live bullets at protestors who scaled the fence, some even managing to get into the occupied Golan. Given the huge number of people, it was amazing that the day's casualties were as low as they were. Many were wounded, but there were only three deaths, all from Yarmuk: Obaida Zaghmot, Bashar al-Shihabi, and Qays Abu al-Hayjaa'.

The people from Yarmuk were very upset by the deaths. Each one of the martyrs had a story. Obaida's killing in particular had an impact. He was popular in the camp and it was known that he had come from his job in the Emirates just to participate in the Nakba Day event, so when it turned out that he had come all that way just to get killed, there was a strong reaction. A feeling began to emerge that the regime had used the Palestinians for its own ends, without regard for their safety, to deflect attention from the uprising then gaining ground. While the intensity of the Nakba Day experience outweighed these negative emotions at the time, the anger continued to simmer and build over the next weeks as Naksa Day approached.

About a week before the 1967 anniversary, activists from Majdal Shams, a village in the occupied Golan overlooking the border, got in touch with us via Skype and Facebook to report that the Israeli army was building a huge rampart of earth, sand, and stone on Syrian land running parallel to the border fence. In subsequent messages, they warned that the rampart had changed the features of the land, and that if we came "there would be a massacre." Naturally we informed everyone we could, and there were intense discussions among the factional and camp leaders and activists about what to do.

When the Youth Coalition met a few days later, all its members, including all the factional representatives, strongly opposed the border demonstrations. Obviously the government was aware of everything that was happening on the border, and on the eve of the protests, after the Lebanese government cancelled events on its own border, Damascus made known through the PFLP-GC that the protests had been called off. Meanwhile I had been asking the head of SARC for several days whether preparations were being made for the protests, and he told me that there was no need since they had been canceled.

So the morning of Naksa Day, I went to work as usual at the SARC headquarters in central Damascus, as did all the other employees. Early in the afternoon, a friend called to say that there was a lot of shooting and at least one person dead at the border, and that he was on his way there himself. It seems that at 9:30 that morning, three minivans sent by Syrian Security had shown up at the camp to take people to the border; about fifty Yarmuk residents, most of them young, went. Syrian TV crews were there, filming live, and people in Yarmuk and other camps became frantic about their children when they saw the nationally televised images. I was shocked and angered by this news and ran up to the director's office to tell him I was going. His deputy told me to take a SARC car.

There were a lot of people at the border when I arrived around 2:30 P.M. For the next few hours, more kept coming, though I doubt that there were ever more than one thousand people that day. Some came to look for their children or friends and some—especially those with first aid training—came because they thought they could help. But many others, especially young people who had missed Nakba Day, simply wanted to be part of the action and to protest against Israel.

Despite what SARC's director had assured me, two field hospitals, filled almost to capacity, had been set up early that morning on the Heights and the medical teams were fully occupied. Like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other humanitarian organizations, SARC does not allow its volunteers and personnel to expose themselves to danger in the line of duty, so the wounded were being brought up the steep hill from the border zone by fellow protestors and civilian volunteers from the camps. What was shocking was that the wounded were being carried not on stretchers but in the arms or on the backs of these volunteers.



Demonstrators carry wounded fellow protestor hit by Israeli fire on 5 June 2011. (JACK GUEZ/AFP/Getty Images)

From the Heights, there was a good view of the border zone and especially of the huge earthen rampart the Israelis had built since Nakba Day. It was about two meters high, topped by coils of barbed wire and about 200 meters long, maybe halfway between the border fence and the foot of a steep hill that led to the Heights. Even from this distance, it was obvious why the rampart was so deadly. Young men tried to vault themselves over it: those who could not got stuck at the top, and those who could became sitting ducks in the open field between the rampart and the Israeli soldiers at the border fence. Israeli soldiers were also posted at both ends of the rampart, far into Syrian territory, firing at protestors who approached it. You couldn't see such detail from the Heights but you could see the chaos of demonstrators throwing stones and shouting slogans against the regime for not intervening to defend them. Among the most common chants, repeated again and again, was "*Wahad, tnaayn, al-jaysh al-Soori wayn?*" ("One, two, where is the Syrian army?") You could also see the wounded lying in the field and people trying to help them.

I didn't ask for permission to go down. Since there were no checkpoints I just took off my uniform and went. Supply problems were apparent from above, but up close they were shocking. There were no first aid kits, no equipment. Two doctors from the camp had brought what they thought were enough supplies, distributing them to volunteers, whom they directed as best they could. But already, supplies were running out, and people were beginning to use their clothing for bandages. As the day continued, more and more men in the field were topless. The absence of stretchers made a terrible situation almost impossible.

When I got back up to the SARC operation on the Heights, I asked the team leader for supplies—especially first aid bags and stretchers—and for permission to take them to the field at my own risk. He refused, saying there wasn't enough equipment to spare. I could plainly see stacks of stretchers and other materials and began to argue. The argument became very heated and ended in a fight.

Over the next two hours, I was back and forth between the Heights and the battlefield. The ICRC's representative in Syria arrived around 4 P.M. to negotiate a ceasefire with the Israelis in order to

evacuate the dead and wounded. I went with him to the border zone and briefed him about the situation. He paid special attention to the rampart, where the greatest number of casualties occurred. He called the Israelis on his wireless and asked for an hour's ceasefire to clear the field; after some discussion, they gave him fifteen minutes, warning that anyone trying to get over the rampart would be shot instantly. In this situation, the ICRC representative advised that our focus now should be on trying to get the protestors to leave the area as soon as possible, so I got a couple of friends well-known to the camp's youth and we split up, each taking a segment of the field to systematically reach the greatest number of people to urge them to leave so as to avoid further deaths and injuries. Many refused, and after the brief ceasefire there were still hundreds in the field.

Around five o'clock, shortly after the ICRC representative left, SARC began a hasty withdrawal from the area on orders from Syrian Security. No explanation was given, but we later learned that word had been received that the Israelis were about to use tear gas. Within fifteen minutes, the entire SARC operation had decamped, with all the wounded, to a location about fifteen kilometers north. With no clear instructions as to how to handle further casualties, I called my friends at the rural Damascus branch of SARC in the town of Duma, where I was a volunteer in my spare time. I asked them to come as fast as they could with vehicles and supplies. In the meantime, the wounded were transported to SARC's new field hospital by volunteers from the camp using their own cars.

The Israeli helicopters went into action about an hour later, dropping tear gas in huge quantities—far more than anything seen on Nakba Day—over the border zone. When the sun set around 7 P.M., a few hundred protesters were still in the field, but there was no let up in the shooting and tear gassing, which continued with the same intensity for hours; my friends later told me that it wasn't until around ten that the Israelis stopped firing and the last protesters left. By then, some of the volunteers who had been working non-stop, in the dark and exposed to so much tear gas, were themselves in need of first aid.

Meanwhile, the Duma team had also arrived at around 7 P.M. with an ambulance, a clinic van, a jeep, and a couple of cars. This was not enough to handle the volume of wounded still coming up from the field, so the volunteers continued to shuttle between the border area and SARC's new field hospital with their own cars. Not long after my Duma friends arrived, I drove to the new field hospital myself and began taking critically wounded patients from there to Kuneitra hospital, a fast thirty-minute drive away. I personally transported five bodies to Kuneitra before leaving around 9:30 P.M. In all, there were twenty-three martyrs that day, twelve from Yarmuk and the rest from other camps like Khan al-Shiha and Aleppo.

Late that night, the Youth Coalition held a meeting in the camp. As I recall, none of the factional representatives was there—certainly no one from the General Command. There was a huge anger in Yarmuk about the deaths and the hundreds of wounded—people felt they had been used by the regime, which they held responsible for facilitating access to the border and then not providing any backup. But the rage was almost as great against the factions for not doing anything to stop the bloodshed. To defuse the situation, we decided that the funeral for the Yarmuk martyrs would have to double as a demonstration.

All the factions were represented at the funeral the next morning except for Hamas, whose leaders had left Syria in May. I remember noticing Maher al-Taher of the PFLP, the PFLP-GC's

## Yarmuk Refugee Camp and the Syrian Uprising

Ahmad Jibril and his deputy, Talal Naji, Fatah's Samir Rifai, and so on. When camp residents assembling outside Masjid al-Wasim for the funeral procession saw the factional leaders, they began shouting at them angrily. Seeing the crowd so riled up, the men immediately left, as the procession headed south on Yarmuk Street to the cemetery at the other end. Taher, Jibril, Naji, and the others were waiting there, and when the crowd spotted them and someone even tried to attack Taher, they fled.



Google map of Yarmuk refugee camp.



There were at least thirty thousand at the funeral/demonstration, by far the largest ever held in the camp. Yarmuk Street, about two km long and very wide, was packed from one end to the other. Soon the demonstration got out of hand. Protestors started rampaging and some turned onto the small street where al-Khalsa, the PFLP-GC headquarters, was located. A huge crowd, increasingly agitated, surrounded the building. In my opinion, it was less because of Jibril's close ties to the government than because al-Khalsa was the closest at hand—even if it had been a Fatah office, I think it would have been attacked. One of the PFLP-GC guards fired at the unarmed crowd and killed a fourteen-year-old boy named Rami Siyam, and other GC militants began shooting from the roof.

People went mad. They began setting fire to cars, and thousands stormed the building. Ahmad Jibril and his top deputies had to be rescued by the Syrian army, and PFLP-GC reinforcements were called in from Lebanon. At some point in the mêlée, gas bottles inside the building exploded, starting a fire, and by nightfall the four-story building was badly charred. Besides the boy, there were two other people killed that day, including a member of the PFLP-GC who died in the blaze; hundreds were injured. The press articles the next day reported that twelve or thirteen people had been killed during the demonstration, but this was totally false and some press agencies later corrected the story.

The Naksa funeral/demonstration was a turning point for Yarmuk camp. After that day, people began to feel threatened and in danger. There were fears that PFLP-GC's firing on the crowd indicated a plan to involve the camp in the uprising on the side of the regime. Sharp divisions developed: at one end of the spectrum, were those who actively supported the regime, and at the other, were those who actively supported the uprising and who wanted to hold pro-opposition demonstrations inside the camp. The great majority of the people, though sympathetic to the rebels, were even more determined to remain neutral. As for the strongly pro-opposition people, they were mostly young activists who were already demonstrating outside the camp, in Syrian areas like Midan. Their attitude was: "We live in Syria, we are like Syrians, and one of our duties is to support the Syrian people." Their numbers, however, were extremely small at the time.

After Naksa Day, the Youth Coalition held several meetings to discuss what attitude to adopt with regard to the uprising. Everyone was determined not to put the camp in a position where it would have to confront the regime. However, some members of the coalition, mostly independents, wanted to provide some help to the rebels. Since they probably formed almost a third of the group, the Coalition reluctantly decided that it was O.K. to give temporary refuge inside the camp to "wanted persons" and to care for the wounded, but not more than that.

## The Battle for the Camp's Neutrality

A second major turning-point for the Palestinians in Syria in general and the camps in particular came in mid-August 2011, when the Syrian army, in the course of a major crackdown on protestors in Latakia, invaded al-Ramel camp on the city's edge. About five thousand Palestinians fled the camp under fire. Over four months earlier, in March 2011 when the uprising was in its first weeks, Syrian officials had accused Palestinians in al-Ramel of causing unrest in the city, and now

they were claiming that the army had entered the camp because of armed men inside. This was a charge no one in Yarmuk believed because they knew there were no weapons in any of the camps at the time, so rumors immediately spread that the regime was deliberately trying to blame the Palestinians.

The government's assault on Latakiya, in which a number of Syrian protestors were killed, was also a watershed in the conflict as a whole. Until then, the Syrian rebels had been unarmed. Afterwards, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Hama, and the Houran became battlegrounds. Weapons began flowing into the rural areas around Damascus—Duma, Harasta, and so on—including the neighborhoods around Yarmuk. Syrians were joining the opposition in growing numbers, and clashes between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the regime moved closer to the camp.

Immediately after Latakiya, on 17 August, Yarmuk camp held its first demonstration against the regime that was directly related to the uprising. A handful of others followed over the next year, all in response to actions directly targeting other camps. I attended that first one in August, which had about three hundred protestors and was by far the largest. After Latakiya, the protests were mostly staged by displaced Syrians who flooded into the camp in September to flee the fighting in their neighborhoods, finding shelter in schools, mosques, in any public space available. Within days, there were about seventy thousand in Yarmuk. Their protests, which gradually attracted Palestinians, had slogans such as "One! One! We are one [people]!" and "Freedom, freedom, freedom!" In terms of numbers, all the protests held in Yarmuk, except the first, were insignificant. They probably never numbered more than one hundred and, because people were afraid, soon dwindled to a few dozen or less. Even so, the regime was angered by the protests from the start. The government paid a lot of attention to such things. Some factional leaders in the camp told us that senior Security officials had warned them: "We don't want to enter the camps, so find your own solutions inside. We don't want to have to confront the Palestinians." In other words, stop the demonstrations.

Even before the Latakiya operation, a Palestinian millionaire named Yasir Qashlak, who had extensive dealings with the Syrian government, had recruited and financed small bands inside Yarmuk camp to demonstrate in favor of the regime and to stand outside the mosques after Friday prayers to prevent anti-regime protests. Like everyone else in the camp at the time, Qashlak's mercenaries were unarmed. But in late summer or early autumn 2011, Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-GC distributed weapons to 1,100 of his men in Yarmuk. Then Qashlak armed his men. So now there were these two armed groups intimidating camp residents. People were angry and resentful, especially when their requests that the men stop parading around with their weapons were ignored.

Around that time, Yarmuk's Youth Coalition met again concerning the developments described above. Since pro-regime forces had brought weapons into the camp, some of the Coalition members wanted to do more to help the rebels. They also favored coordination with the Syrian opposition, which at the beginning of the uprising had formed "revolutionary coordinating committees" for different regions, including Damascus. These persons were outnumbered within the Coalition, where a clear majority argued that any coordination with the rebels would end our claim to neutrality and endanger the camp. As a compromise, we took a collective decision that anybody who wanted to get involved in the Syrian revolution was free to do so, but on a completely

individual basis. This decision was probably the Youth Coalition's last: before the end of the year, we had disbanded because of the growing differences between the majority and the minority, and because it was more and more clear that we did not have the means to protect our decision to keep the camp neutral.

The great majority of the Palestinian people in Syria understood instinctively that Palestinian neutrality was absolutely necessary to safeguarding the camps and therefore the community. But the camps were not allowed to remain neutral. The regime, through the PFLP-GC, wanted the camps to visibly and strongly demonstrate their support for the government. At the same time, the FSA was doing everything it could to involve Palestinians in the opposition with the ultimate aim of getting inside Yarmuk.

The factions, too, all understood perfectly well the consequences for the Palestinian community if the camps lost their neutrality. The factions that took sides—the PFLP-GC and Fatah-Intifada on the side of the government, and Hamas (once its leadership was out of the country) on the side of the opposition—were equally aware of the consequences, but they acted out of sheer opportunism or for their own ends without regard for the people. All the other factions did remain neutral, refusing any communication with the opposition and in some cases (for example, Islamic Jihad) even expelling members who contacted the rebels. But their neutrality was meaningless because they did nothing to support it. Basically they remained on the sidelines and avoided any action that could be seen as offensive to the government. The factions were all very weak and afraid of the regime; their primary concern was saving themselves. In fact, at the meetings we had with factional leaders asking for their intervention or support in this or that matter, they were quite open in acknowledging their powerlessness. I remember in particular a meeting after the al-Khalsa incident at the Naksa Day funeral demonstration, when one of our group said to a factional leader: “What you say makes me feel like an orphan, without any support or protection if we are in trouble.” And the leader replied: “What can I say? I can't even protect myself in the current situation.”

But the real problem concerning the factions once the uprising began in earnest was the unprecedented polarization that set in, totally disrupting the easy camaraderie that had existed among the factional leaders. Whatever their differences, they had been neighbors and comrades-in-arms and, in their own way, had the people's interests at heart. The polarization was immediately felt by everyone: almost overnight, the entire atmosphere of the camp changed. Especially in the early days of the conflict, after the Naksa Day events, people began calling for some kind of dialogue or reconciliation among the factions to reach a common approach to protect the camp.

Clearly such an undertaking faced incredible challenges. From the start of the conflict, the General Command seems to have taken a firm decision to support the regime all the way, to an extent far greater than before, when there was a certain balance between its ties to the government and its Palestinian-ness. And Hamas, with its leadership gone, would not feel able to participate in a cross-factional effort to find a common ground to save the camp. I personally feel particular disappointment at the neutral factions, because they had similar views on the matter. They easily could have coordinated among themselves to form a common front that would have been a start, and that would have made it easier to approach the General Command. Some of us tried to enlist

the PLO in Ramallah to get behind this idea, especially since the PLO had weight with a number of these groups, but it remained aloof. In fact, the Palestinian national structures both in Ramallah and Syria failed miserably in their duty toward the Palestinians of Syria by doing nothing to protect either them or their neutrality. The end result was that with the passivity of the neutral factions there was an enormous imbalance, and the only force in the camp that really counted was Jibril's.

Meanwhile, even as the forces favoring neutrality were doing nothing to support it, a growing minority of young Palestinian activists had abandoned any pretense of neutrality and were exploring various forms of contact with the opposition. These young people established their own "coordinating committee" specifically to communicate with their Syrian counterparts. Even though they were acting completely on their own, many of us found these contacts very dangerous for the camp's safety and neutrality. We talked to them many times in an effort to get them to end these contacts. Eventually they did, in late spring 2012, when the FSA began floating the idea of planting car bombs inside the camp to get residents to invite them in for protection. At that point, even these strongly anti-regime young people could not continue the "coordination." Everyone knew that once the FSA was nearby, tanks and mortars would soon follow.

During the summer of 2012, the rebels, who seemed to be making gains in the area, became more and more determined to get into the camp, sooner rather than later, ostensibly to expel the Jibril people. When the FSA's entry began to appear inevitable, some Palestinians began discussing among themselves the possibility of forming independent Palestinian brigades inside the camp. Those involved in the discussions had no connection to the young activists mentioned above. Instead, the leaders of this loosely-knit informal group were seasoned officers of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA)—the PLO forces that had been stationed in Syria for decades under Syrian army command—who had defected after refusing orders to intervene against the rebels. For this group, which included politically like-minded activists in the camp, the purpose of such brigades would not be to fight with the FSA but to preserve the camp as a safe zone. Underlying their idea was the longstanding dream shared by many of a rebuilt PLO structure and fighting force; in their minds, these brigades were a step in that direction. Some of these former PLA officers sent a message to Abu Mazin explaining their defection and asking him to give support to their idea in the interests of Syria's Palestinian community.

Informal contacts were initiated by these people with the FSA, and a series of meetings were held. The Palestinians supported the FSA's intention to eject the General Command, but argued that once the Jibril people were gone, the new Palestinian brigades should take over inside the camp to make sure it remained neutral, to preserve it as a safe area. The FSA, while eager to support the formation of Palestinian brigades inside the camp, had no interest in the kind of independent force the Palestinians had in mind. More importantly, the FSA leaders had their own reasons for wanting to enter the camp and had no intention of leaving it once they got in.

In all the discussions, the FSA insisted on the complete subordination of any Palestinian brigade to rebel command. For the Palestinians of Syria, this was a non-starter: they felt they had been under the thumb of the regime since 1982–83, when Yasir Arafat had lost his struggle for control of the Palestinian movement in the country to Hafiz al-Asad. For ordinary people, this did not have much concrete importance, but politicized Palestinians chafed under this control. Not surprisingly, the talks went nowhere.

Contrary to common misperception, there was never an alliance between the FSA and the Palestinians. From the start of the uprising, Palestinians in contact with the Syrian opposition repeatedly asked that it issue a clear statement on its position on the Palestine question; these requests were repeatedly turned down, raising doubts as to the opposition's true attitude toward the Palestinians. After the FSA entered the camp, residents were shocked to hear rebel fighters telling them to go back where they had come from. A similar attitude was reflected later at the official level: during negotiations for lifting the siege on Yarmuk (see below), the FSA reportedly rejected a proposal that all armed men leave the camp on the grounds that the rebels were fighting for their land, and that camps were on their land. Also, when individual Palestinians who had fought alongside the opposition asked the Syrian National Council (SNC) based in Turkey to support their asylum applications in the EU and elsewhere, they either received no response or a form letter regretting the SNC's inability to help.

## The FSA Enters Yarmuk Camp

Though the PFLP-GC and its Qashlak-financed allies inside the camp had been armed for more than a year, during that entire period they had never used their weapons against the rebels, only to bully camp residents. But in December 2012, undoubtedly acting on orders from the regime, the Jibril group made the fatal error of establishing checkpoints outside the camp and began to clash with the FSA in neighborhoods like al-Hajar al-Aswad and Yilda, south of Yarmuk camp, where the city limits end and the rural areas begin.

The FSA, by that time joined by the extremist Jabhat al-Nusra, had long set their sights on Yarmuk camp as the "gateway to Damascus." Since the autumn of 2012, they had been talking more and more openly about the "zero hour" for liberating Damascus, and everyone knew that Yarmuk was the intended launching pad. As the southernmost area of Damascus still within the municipal boundaries, Yarmuk not only had direct access to the heart of the city but also could be supplied via the rural areas to the south. And with the PFLP-GC now fighting the rebels *outside* the camp, the FSA could claim that the camp's neutrality had ended and use that as an excuse to go in.

On 16 December 2012, in what the government later claimed was an error, a Syrian MIG fighter-jet bombed the camp, killing tens of civilians. The next day, FSA brigades and their Jabhat al-Nusra allies entered the camp. A stiff battle took place as the PFLP-GC tried to stop them. Despite the intervention of the Syrian army, which shelled rebel positions, the FSA prevailed, and in the next days the PFLP-GC, followed by the Qashlak mercenaries, were forced to pull out of the camp, retreating just to the north where they set up new headquarters.

With the FSA's entry, all hope of keeping the camp neutral was lost. From the start of the uprising, the government had made very clear that if the rebels ever entered, the camps would automatically become targets. In February 2012, for example, at a time when Yarmuk and the Damascus region were still relatively calm, and when the Baba Amro neighborhood of Homs was being razed by tanks and mortar fire, its entire population having fled, a senior Syrian Security officer pointedly warned one of our factional leaders: "Keep Yarmuk quiet, because we don't like

Yarmuk more than we liked Baba Amro.” It didn’t matter to the government that the majority of Yarmuk’s residents opposed the FSA’s entry, any more than it mattered to the FSA.

Prior to the MIG strike, Yarmuk’s total population of Syrians and Palestinians is estimated to have reached as many as nine hundred thousand as a result of the influx of displaced Syrians in autumn 2011. Under the combined impact of the MIG bombing and the entry of the FSA, tens of thousands of people fled, reducing the camp population to the low five-digits by some estimates. Still, little by little, people began to come back, simply because the situation outside was equally bad. Some residents had been able to find accommodation with friends or relatives, and others who had money could rent living space or leave the country, but most did not have these opportunities. Many slept in the streets, in public squares and gardens, shelters, or schools. With a slow and limited return, Yarmuk’s population gradually reached eighty thousand, mostly Palestinians, about what it is today.

One of the FSA’s first acts upon invading the camp was to storm al-Khalsa, which the General Command had rebuilt after it burned down in the 2011 Naksa Day funeral demonstration. Inside the building, the rebels found light weapons and large stores of ammunition, which they kept for themselves and refused to share even with Hamas, which had openly supported them. Thus, in the first months after the rebels took over, the only weapons inside the camp were with the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra.

During this same period, when people were still fleeing the camp and few had returned, the rebels became more and more abusive toward those who remained. Some brought in friends and relatives to squat in empty houses; looting and robberies became common. Jabhat al-Nusra set up Islamic courts, and Palestinian activists were arrested and tried. There were rumors of assassinations. The most serious abuses were committed by the FSA’s Eagles of the Golan and Ababil Hawran brigades, which the FSA leadership, located outside the camp, said it was unable to control.

Not long after the FSA came in, Hamas formed a brigade called the Pact of Umar. Though initially unarmed, in early March 2013 it began to receive weapons from outside Syria and distributed them to its men. Responding to widespread anger at FSA abuses within the camp, the Hamas brigade turned its weapons against the Eagles of the Golan and Ababil Hawran. By summer, Hamas had succeeded in ejecting them from the camp and arresting their leaders. In addition to fighting these groups, Hamas also fought with the FSA during incursions of varying duration by the regime, carried out mainly through its proxies, al-Sa’iqa, and the General Command. Meanwhile, several smaller Palestinian armed brigades were also formed in the camp. These had no relation to the brigades proposed by the PLA defectors and others in late autumn 2012, and it was unclear what their purpose was or who was funding them and supplying their weapons.

Despite a decrease in robberies and other abuses against camp residents following the ouster of the worst of the FSA units, the level of anxiety and uncertainty in the camp remained extreme. All the factional leaders had left by the time the FSA came in, and most of the activist youth leaders, many of them “wanted” by the regime, had either gone abroad or been arrested or killed. The FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra soon began fighting each other, and some of the FSA brigades were also quarrelling among themselves. The smaller Palestinian brigades formed earlier began fragmenting into even smaller groups, now numbering as many as twenty, each with a handful of fighters. Hamas was the only Palestinian group with a program or any kind of cohesion.



Behind a sheet, PFLP-GC fighters seeking relief in a Yarmuk camp alleyway after fighting with anti-regime forces, 12 September 2013. (ANWAR AMRO/AFP/Getty Images)

The Jibril forces, from the time they were thrown out of the camp at the end of 2012, had been manning the checkpoint at the camp's northern entrance, controlling all traffic in and out. None of the international organizations such as the ICRC or UNRWA, nor any other group, could send in any kind of relief or aid. Sometimes the General Command also closed the checkpoint to people, allowing no one to enter or leave, but this was erratic. For the first six months, food was smuggled in from the rural areas to the south, but it was expensive. Some medicines and aid were also smuggled in.

Then, in early July 2013, the camp was put under a total blockade, which is still in place. Nothing enters or leaves the camp—not people, not goods, including necessities like food. There was no more wheat and people began making bread from rice or lentils. Some of the food supplies have gone bad, in some cases causing illness. The humanitarian situation, already very bad, got much worse. At the beginning of October 2013, the imam at Yarmuk's main mosque issued a fatwa giving people permission to eat cats, dogs, and donkeys. Severe malnutrition is reported.

The FSA and the armed groups don't have food either, so at the time of writing (early December 2013) there isn't much fighting inside the camp. Everyone is exhausted and just trying to survive, including the armed men. The shelling by the government, however, continues, though compared to September 2013, when it reached over seventy mortar shells a day, it has slacked off and is sporadic. From the time the rebels first entered Yarmuk in December 2012, comparisons were made to the War of the Camps in Lebanon in the mid-1980s, when Palestinian (pro-Arafat) camps were besieged by Syrian-backed militias, which prevented supplies from entering and

people from leaving. After the blockade was imposed on Yarmuk in July 2013, the comparison became even more apt.

## An Uncertain Future

Throughout the crisis, especially after the Latakia assault and when Palestinians all over Syria began to be dispersed and to flee, a group of us inside the camp were sending messages to Ramallah. In particular, we were asking the PLO to press the Arab League to intervene with the Lebanese and the Jordanian governments to allow displaced Palestinians from Syria to enter those countries. Mostly we got no reply, but I recall one, sent through the PLO embassy in Beirut, that consisted of a single word—“*endabbo*,” which basically means keep to yourselves and shut up.

After the FSA entered the camp, Ramallah did make efforts to intervene. In February 2013, Abu Mazin sent the first of several missions to Damascus. What they all had in common was that none ever visited the camps, not even Yarmuk which was right there in the capital. This made people very angry—especially during the July mission, which was during Ramadan, when it was learned that the Palestinian leaders shared an *iftar* meal with high-ranking Syrian officials in a very fancy Damascene restaurant while the camp was being shelled and people could hardly find food.

But during autumn 2013, the rough outlines of an agreement between the Syrian government and the Palestinians concerning the camp appeared to emerge, which would then have to be negotiated with the parties inside Yarmuk. The basic idea was that the army would stop shelling the camp if the FSA pulled out and the Palestinians handed over their weapons; discussions reportedly also involved the return of displaced persons to the camps. Several rounds of talks based on these points were reported, with the PFLP-GC entering the camp under a temporary ceasefire to negotiate, on behalf of the government, *separately* with the FSA on the one hand and their Palestinian allies on the other. Each time, however, the talks broke down.

On 10 November 2013, a mission from Ramallah led by Fatah Central Committee member Zakariya al-Agha arrived in Damascus and met with Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad and General Ali Mamlouk, head of Syrian Security. It was agreed that regime forces as well as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) would begin implementing the terms of a deal to open a safe corridor for civilians and remove weapons and insurgents from the camp in preparation for the return of displaced people and the beginning of reconstruction. As of early December 2013, the deal is still pending, but in the view of some activists who participated in the talks, the chances of it succeeding are small.

The PLO mission involved a relief component, which headed to the camp every morning with humanitarian supplies. Sometimes the aid convoy was greeted by heavy shooting as the General Command posted at the entrance claimed to respond to fire from inside the camp. Over a number of days, the team managed to get a limited amount of food and medical supplies into the camp and to bring out a small number of sick children to be hospitalized, but that was all.

Thus, as of December 2013, the siege and the blockade continue. At present, over half of Yarmuk camp has been destroyed and is totally uninhabitable. Khan al-Shieh, Sbeineh, al-Husayniyya, and Dera'a camps are gone altogether. Exact numbers are impossible to obtain, but an estimated two



hundred fifty-five thousand Palestinians are displaced inside Syria, and up to one hundred thousand outside. Those who have left the country are mostly in Lebanon, with about seven thousand in Jordan and about ten thousand in Egypt. Others have fled to Turkey and even to Gaza. Almost all borders are closed to them now. Many of those who managed to reach Europe, largely by fleeing from Egypt's Alexandria port by sea and landing in Italy, were given asylum, especially by Sweden, where about five thousand Syrian Palestinians are now staying. Others drowned when their boats capsized during the journey.

Palestinians in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the occupied territories fall under the responsibility of UNRWA, whose mandate includes relief and infrastructure works but no protection authority. In principle, Palestinians in other areas should be under the protection of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but only on condition that the host country gives its approval. No country so far has granted such approval. Egypt, for example, has always refused to allow Palestinians there to register with UNHCR on the grounds that their presence in the country is a security issue. As for the recent arrivals from Syria, they have been accused of supporting the Morsi regime (a charge that is entirely unfounded), leading to the arrest and expulsion of hundreds of Palestinians either to Lebanon or back to Syria. According to activists, those deported to Syria are arrested when they arrive at Damascus airport.

"Protection" has therefore been left to the PLO/PA through its offices and embassies in various Arab countries. The PLO has been unable to alleviate in any way the suffering of Palestinian refugees in Egypt or Jordan. The same is true elsewhere. Only in Lebanon has the PLO been able to do anything: under an agreement it reached with Lebanese General Security, the visas of Palestinian refugees from Syria can be extended every three months.

In terms of humanitarian aid, UNRWA recently began registering Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon, providing monthly financial assistance to families at about \$80 per individual. Inside Syria, UNRWA has stopped operating in many camps because of insecurity, and in general the shortage of donations has limited its response. As for the PLO, it is sending \$750,000 in cash monthly to its representatives in Syria for relief in the camps there. So far, however, while this assistance has helped some camps, such as in Homs and Aleppo, it has been impossible to get any aid into Yarmuk, which remains under blockade.

It is too soon to know whether the Geneva II conference, convened for January 2014 with the aim of finding some solution to address the Syria conflict, will actually be held. If it is, there are credible rumors that the issue of the Palestinians in Syria will be on the negotiating table. This has dangerous implications for Syria's Palestinians, since it would mean that they are no longer considered a humanitarian issue but a political one linked to a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement. In other words, the very *presence* of the Palestinians in Syria would be up for negotiation. Would they be allowed to stay? And if so, in what capacity? Would there be new laws governing their presence? Would those who left the country be allowed to return? What about the ones not registered with UNRWA, which covers only 1948 refugees and not those who entered the country in 1956, 1967, and the 1970s from Jordan and Lebanon? And if the Palestinians cannot stay in Syria, where can they go?

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The war in Syria is a terrible and horrific tragedy for all Syrians, but it is as much a tragedy, though in a different way, for the Palestinians who lived among them. For Syria's Palestinians, the destruction of their camps is not just the destruction of their homes and environment, but the destruction of an entire social structure, webs of relationships, economic and cultural systems, the loss of their positions and roles, and a grave assault on their customs and political values.

We were raised with the idea of the right to return. We had dreams of liberating Palestine and of rebuilding the PLO, but at the same time, our life was with Syrians, in Syria. Consciously or not, we felt part of this country, and we never felt a contradiction between feeling part of Syria and being Palestinian. Now, there is a sense of being orphaned.

It is possible that there is a difference between the Palestinians still in Syria and those abroad. When you Skype your friends and family in the camp (which is almost every day), even now, you get a clear sense of *sumud*, of their determination to stay, a kind of pride in having been steadfast despite everything. You also sense a hope that things may settle down and eventually work out. But for many of us who have left, it is not like that. There is a sense of something that has ended, which cannot be repaired. There is also the realization for the first time in our lives of what it means to be "Palestinian," what it means to be stateless, feelings we never had in Syria. The sense of not being welcome anywhere, not treated like other Arab nationals, of having to feel lucky when you find a place to stay. And with all these losses, there is a bitterness at how political forces continue to use the Palestinian issue for their own ends, as when Hizballah Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah stated on 14 October 2013 that "We are fighting in Syria to defend Palestine and the Palestinian cause."

We heard much about the Nakba from our parents and grandparents, about their suffering when forced to leave their country, at having lost everything. They worked hard to build their lives in Syria, and what they built is destroyed. And now we, the third generation, are experiencing this also, of starting from zero in other countries, but this time individually, without any help, and unable to stay together as a community. Not to mention that most don't know where to go, and everything is up in the air, uncertain, a question mark.

#### **About the Author**

Nidal Bitari is a Syrian Palestinian journalist from Yarmuk refugee camp in Damascus. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in political sociology from Damascus University. He left Syria for Lebanon in December 2011, and then came to the United States in April 2013. From the time he left the camp, he has been in almost daily contact with friends and colleagues in the camp. He would like to thank the editors of *JPS* for their encouragement in writing this report.