

# Yarmouk Camp Set on Fire

(April 22, 2018)

## **Introduction:**

Palestinian refugees in Syria adopted a stance of 'caution' since the beginning of the upheaval, seeking to avoid evocative experiments their peers had experienced in Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. Syrian Security apparatuses, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Palestinian factions defied this public attitude and tried to exploit the Palestinian youth in the regime war against the Syrian upheaval. Such an endeavour, however, was fronted by Palestinian protesters on June 6, 2011, to announce their refusal of the attempts to involve them in the conflict.

The regime has made a definitive decision of involving the Palestinian refugees in the bloody conflict, in spite of their clear message of stopping tampering with the Palestinian blood. The regime has known that it can't mobilise the majority of Palestinians to be fuel in the Syrian catastrophe, thus the number of Palestinians who have got recruited in the pro-regime militias was less than what it expected – especially in Yarmouk Camp -, and in spite of the persecution and the incitements.

Indeed, the Yarmouk Camp attitude is an intensifying expertise, the Palestinian refugees hold in Syria, regarding their reality and their relation with the environment surrounding them. Such an expertise has been founded away from the traditional Palestinian political institutions, and indeed, more advanced and mature than these institutions' stands. This "neutralised" stand was enough to push the regime to classify Yarmouk as an 'enemy', which resulted in involving the Camp in the war, and in refusing to neutralise the Camp during the long period of besieging.

There are many evidences shown by Yarmouk Camp's inhabitants, which point to the deliberate protracting of their crisis, in order to reach the position of abolishing the Camp entirely. (It is noteworthy, here, that we understand the concerns of the Palestinian refugees whom we have

contacted while preparing this report that the Syrian regime will expand the scale of retaliation against them over time, and we demand intervention to prevent this).

One of these evidences is the executive scheme of housing project in the Southern area of Damascus (adopted by the Damascus governorate), including the Camp. It will change entirely the nature of the Camp as a primary trade market in Damascus, thus, the Camp is to be destroyed and the business cycle not to be revived again as it was before the war. In other words, the society of the Camp will be destroyed.

Another evidence of the deliberate demographic change that is planned to be applied in the Camp is the Law No. 10, for the year 2018. This law is specified to 'regulating' the urban status in Syria. We think that this law is created to legally run the post conflict reconstruction as a public punishment of the majority of Syrians, who have rebelled against the regime by confiscating their properties. It is noteworthy that the majority of the Syrians –who have rebelled against the regime regardless of the ways they did that – can't meet the conditions that are posed to protect their properties.

This report includes what we could document of abuses regarding 'Camp destroying' crime, since April 19, 2018 to the present (when the regime and its allies staged a military campaign in the Southern area of Damascus).

### **The Most Severe Events**

The number of the Palestinian refugees in Syria was estimated between 75.000 and 85.000 in 1948, most of them are from the northern parts of Palestine.

On November 4, 2013 the number of registered Palestinian refugees in UNRWA, Syria, was 564.691 refugees, of which 27% live in camps.

Most of Yarmouk Camp's inhabitants left it after the regime's bombardment of the mosque of Abd Qader Husaini – which lies in the heart of the Camp - on December 16, 2012. Following this attack, the opposition

groups have entered the Camp, and the regime forces started a severe siege over the Camp, with its allies of Palestinian factions (Palestinian Liberation Army, Fatih Intifada, Free Palestine, Liwa Quds...) in July 2013.

The number of the Palestinian refugees – who were living inside the Camp as the siege was posed – is estimated at 30.000 civilians. This number decreased continuously as the fighting intensified, because of the displacement of civilians to Yelda and the other southern neighbourhoods of Damascus, which had fulfilled the 'reconciliation' agreement with the regime (or signed a truce more adequately).

The number of refugees in the Camp - before the last campaign launched by the regime and the Russian air forces - is estimated at 3000 civilians, (it is not possible in the current circumstances to accurately estimate the number of those who managed to escape, under this intense bombardment in the region). Coming back to the siege, on September 8, 2014, the siege reached a peak, as the regime cut off the water. 200 victims died because of severe lack of health care, water and food, out of a total of 1355 Palestinian refugees from Yarmouk camp, who have been killed since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

In April 2015, ISIS broke into Yarmouk Camp and controlled it. ISIS, moreover, besieged neighbourhoods of the Camp, because of Al-Nusra Front's existence in them, as it said. (ISIS had appeared surprisingly in the Southern parts of Damascus, and people assert that it could not have come into play without an 'easing' from the regime).

The livelihood situation in the Camp was getting worse, after that, especially when the roads to the Camp are blocked, either by the opposition fighters or the regime forces. Basic nurturing materials were lost (Wheat, sugar, rice, etc.) besides other essential materials like fuel and gas.

### **Documenting the last assault**

On April 19, 2018, regime forces (and their allies: Liwa Quds, National Defense, Palestinian Liberation Army, the Qalamoun Shield Forces and

others) launched an extensive military campaign against Yarmouk camp, Tadamun, Hagar Aswad, and Assaly neighbourhoods in the South of Damascus. This campaign was after the regime reprimanded ISIS for 48 –hour to leave its controlled places in the southern areas of Damascus (Yarmouk Camp, Qadam, Hagar Aswad, Tadamun neighbourhoods). This was confirmed by the Syrian "Watan" newspaper and other media outlets.

Yarmouk Camp is facing a severe bombardment by Russian and Syrian war jets, and it has reached its peak of 2 airstrikes each 1.5 minutes as "The Action Group for Palestinians in Syria" has documented. The airstrikes have targeted: Quds street, Magarebah Street, Street 30, Street 15, Madares Street, Saeid Aas Street, Ain Gazal Street, Reigeh Square, and Zein neighbourhood.

The regime also struck Beit Sahem Town –south- with two missiles from its warplanes, despite the fact that the town was included in the reconciliation agreement with the regime.

On April 22, 2018, the Action Group for Palestinians in Syria documented 140 air strikes targeting Yarmouk Camp, Tadamun, Hajar Aswad, and Qadam neighbourhoods, in addition to 78 explosive barrels that were thrown on Hajar Aswad neighbourhood and Yarmouk Camp. Another 98 surface-to-surface missiles struck Yarmouk Camp, Tadamun, and Hajar Aswad neighbourhoods.

This intensive bombardment was used along with attempts of achieving advances on the ground by the regime, from different axis: Reigeh Square, Tadamun, Sliekhah, 30 Street, Palestine Street, Zein neighbourhood, and others.), which resulted in a massive devastation of civilian properties.

The strikes and bombardment have also targeted infrastructure, worship places and hospitals, including: the Japanese Hospital, Palestine Hospital – run by the Palestinian Red Crescent -, Hamdan baker, and Palestine Mosque. The Civil Defense teams have been also targeted, killing one of its members, "Jamal Samieh Hamid". Another 11 civilians were killed at least, according to the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria's documentation.

Finally, this military campaign exaggerated the miserable situation in Yarmouk Camp, because of the tightening siege imposed over it, as the regime closed the road of Orouba, which is the vital vessel of the Camp, in addition to closure of the Qadam road.



*1 The controlled areas in the Southern Damascus*

## What should we do?

We observed that the regional and international reactions to the ongoing events in Yarmouk Camp (and the Southern Neighborhoods of Damascus) are disappointing, as they were for Syria. Even UNRWA has issued a weak announcement over the situation, and it seemed as influenced by the regime's propaganda.

Important steps should be undertaken to tear up the silence that encourages the regime to go ahead in its crimes:

1. Ending the military campaign on the southern area of Damascus and Yarmouk Camp, where 3000 civilians live in, immediately.
2. Trying to evacuate the extremist fighters (IS and Tahrir Asham – Al Nusra previously), by starting off a real cooperation with the international community and the Syrian community – including the

Palestinian refugees, and by fulfilling the international resolutions, not by killing the civilians and destroying their cities.

3. Supplying the area with water, electricity, education and health care services once the fighters leave, to pave the way for immediate return of civilians.
4. Compensating the people affected by the war, and providing the financial and humanitarian aids to the civilians through international organisations (including UNRWA for the Palestinian refugees) in cooperation with the civil and local society.
5. UNRWA should fulfil its humanitarian tasks, and should extend its mechanisms to provide physical and legal protection to Palestinians in Syria.
6. Disclosing the fate of missing persons and detainees in prisons and detention centers and stopping violations against civilians.
7. Protecting all legal rights the Palestinian refugees have ever acquired, particularly, the Casablanca Protocol of 1965.

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