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SYRIA'S UPRISING AND CONFLICT, FROM  
THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PALESTINIAN CAMPS

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ABDULLAH AL-KHATEEB is a Palestinian-Syrian human rights activist from Yarmouk, Damascus. Since 2011, he has been part of the peaceful movement against the Assad regime and later, with other activists, organized civil resistance against local extremist forces. During the siege on Yarmouk, which lasted from 2013 until 2018, they set up alternative schools and civic centres as well as agricultural projects to break the siege. Through a Syrian-Russian agreement, Abdullah and local civil society groups were forcibly expelled to northern Syria in May 2018. With activists displaced from all parts of Syria, he set up the Hooz Center in Azaz in the Aleppo countryside, which today hosts political debates on the ground and remains committed to organizing local communities against authorities that shrink spaces of civil society. In 2017, Abdullah co-founded the literary blog, Sard Network—its goal to provide spaces for Syrian narratives on revolution, expulsion, exile, and war, and thus to participate in the construction and documentation of Syrian memory. Abdullah has lived in Germany since 2018.

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## CONTENTS

Executive summary . . . . .	4
About this report . . . . .	5
Abbreviations . . . . .	6
Introduction . . . . .	8
Syria: 'Prime patron' of the Palestinian cause? . . . . .	9
The Syrian uprising, viewed from the camps . . . . .	10
<b>1 Daraa . . . . .</b>	<b>12</b>
'We never distinguished between Palestinians and Syrians' . . . . .	12
'Accusing Palestinians became routine' . . . . .	13
From siege to war . . . . .	14
To arms . . . . .	15
<b>2 Yarmouk . . . . .</b>	<b>17</b>
'The ones who sent us to die, we want to bury them in the ground!' . . . . .	17
The 'lungs of Damascus' . . . . .	18
'Day of the MiG' . . . . .	21
'Land of jihad' . . . . .	22
An 'Islamic state' in Yarmouk . . . . .	23
The final offensive . . . . .	24
<b>3 Neirab . . . . .</b>	<b>25</b>
The Aleppo camps . . . . .	25
The Syrian uprising in Aleppo . . . . .	26
'It was important for the camp to protect itself' . . . . .	27
Liwa' al-Quds: Aleppo and beyond . . . . .	29
<b>Conclusion: The camps, today . . . . .</b>	<b>30</b>
Daraa . . . . .	30
Yarmouk . . . . .	31
Neirab . . . . .	32
<b>Postscript: A new Palestinian-Syrian community? . . . . .</b>	<b>33</b>
Community dynamics . . . . .	33
Socio-economics . . . . .	34
Return . . . . .	34
Reconstruction . . . . .	35
<b>Bibliography . . . . .</b>	<b>36</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report represents the first-ever dedicated study in English of Palestinian-Syrian politics and community dynamics since the beginning of the 2011 Syrian uprising until the present day. It investigates how the Syrian uprising, and the conflict that followed, played out in Palestinian-Syrian communities and how Palestinians themselves participated in events after the first major protests broke out in Daraa in March 2011.

The authors were motivated to write this report based on the belief that, for too long, there has been too little focus on how the Syrian crisis has impacted

the roughly 560,000 Palestinian refugees who were residing in Syria on the eve of the 2011 uprising. Contextualizing Palestinian experiences of the Syrian uprising through a history of the uprising itself, this report melds together two histories. Rather than talking about Syria's Palestinian community as something separate from the Syrian body politic, or as a homogenous, dehumanized entity merely talked about in terms of being "pro-regime" or "pro-opposition," here the authors have sought to return agency to Palestinian-Syrian communities.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

The report focuses on three camps in Syria—Daraa, Yarmouk (Damascus), and Neirab (Aleppo)—that were selected in order to establish a broadly contiguous timeline of the Syrian uprising and conflict, while also exploring how camps were dragged into that conflict by different actors. The report itself is principally built off at least 12 hours of primary interviews, conducted remotely between August and December 2019. Interviews were conducted with a range of key actors including: activists and human rights defenders, civil society figures, rebel fighters and commanders (from

both Palestinian and Syrian backgrounds), members of pro-government Palestinian factions, and those who negotiated settlements to local conflicts in Palestinian camps. This interview sample is not intended to be representative. Instead, the authors sought to interview sources with direct, first-hand knowledge of key events while also making use of the authors' own first-hand knowledge—whether as active participants in activist and civil society initiatives inside Syria, or as researchers documenting events from outside the country.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ASA	Arab Salvation Army A force formed by the Arab League in 1947 to combat Zionist militias forcibly displacing Palestinians from their homes and communities within Historic Palestine.	ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (later shortened to Islamic State) A hardline Islamist force that emerged in Iraq and Syria after mid-2013, later seizing vast swathes of territory across the two countries and forming a self-proclaimed “caliphate” in June 2014. The group’s brutal stranglehold over this territory was later reduced on several fronts by a US-led international coalition backed by Kurdish-majority forces fighting on the ground, as well as the Syrian government and Iranian-backed forces. ISIS is often known as ‘Daesh,’ based on an acronym of the group’s name in Arabic.
FSA	Free Syrian Army The main anti-Assad force in Syria at the beginning of the armed rebellion and ensuing conflict, the FSA was originally formed out of officers and rank-and-file soldiers who defected from the Syrian army to join the opposition.	LCCs	Local Coordination Committees The LCCs, or tansiqiyat, became a crucial activist initiative in the early days of the uprising, organizing protests and monitoring violations through local chapters distributed throughout the country.
GAPAR	General Administration for Palestine Arab Refugees Originally founded as the PARI in January 1949 but renamed as the GAPAR in the 1970s, the GAPAR operates as a government body for governing Palestinian affairs in Syria—providing official paperwork, services, and other tasks. GAPAR’s website also states that the administration depends entirely on financial contributions from the Syrian state budget, and that it is administratively affiliated with the Syrian government’s Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.	LDF	Local Defence Forces An Iranian-backed collection of militias in Aleppo and the surrounding countryside in the vein of the National Defence Forces.
HTS	Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham A hardline Islamist coalition formed out of, and spearheaded by, the faction formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. HTS currently controls much of what remains of Syria’s rebel-held northwest, and once maintained a presence in Yarmouk camp for Palestinian refugees in southern Damascus.	PARI	Palestinian Arab Refugee Institution The forerunner of the GAPAR, PARI was established in January 1949 as the Syrian government’s principal authority for governing Palestinian affairs in Syria.
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps An Iranian military force that took an active role in supporting the Syrian government after 2011. The IRGC has been responsible for overseeing formation of pro-government militias around the country, including in and around Palestinian communities in Aleppo and Rural Damascus Governorate.	PFLP-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command The PFLP-GC is a historically pro-Damascus Palestinian faction led by Ahmad Jibril, which split with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in the late 1960s. The PFLP-GC has supported the Syrian government since the beginning of the Syrian uprising and ensuing conflict.

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PIJ	<p>Palestinian Islamic Jihad</p> <p>An Islamist Palestinian faction with historical ties to Iran. The PIJ was one of 10 Damascus-aligned Palestinian factions that formed the Alliance of Palestinian Forces, or Alliance of 10, in rejection of the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority. Although the PIJ may have initially taken on a more pragmatic stance towards the Syrian uprising compared with other Damascus-aligned factions, the group maintains close political ties to Damascus although it has not contributed to military activities on the side of the regime—unlike other Palestinian factions in Syria.</p>	PLO	<p>Palestine Liberation Organization</p> <p>Formed in 1964, the PLO was later recognized by the Arab League as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”</p>
		SARC	<p>Syrian Arab Red Crescent</p> <p>A government-affiliated aid agency in Syria that conducts aid operations within the country. SARC has repeatedly come under criticism for an alleged lack of impartiality in its aid operations.</p>
PLA	<p>Palestine Liberation Army</p> <p>Originally formed in the 1960s as the standing army of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the PLA was later absorbed into the Syrian army. All descendants of Palestinian refugees displaced to Syria in 1948 were required by Syrian law to serve in the PLA.</p>	UNRWA	<p>UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East</p> <p>The UN’s agency for providing humanitarian assistance and some protection to Palestinian refugees that fall under its mandate.</p>



## INTRODUCTION

Around 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes in Palestine during what Palestinians call their catastrophe (*nakba*)—the forced expulsions by Zionist militias in the context of the UN partition plan (1947), the foundation of the State of Israel (1948), and the following first Arab-Israeli war (1948-1949). As a result of the *nakba*, between 75,000 and 90,000 made their way as refugees to Syria. With three quarters of Historic Palestine’s population displaced and sent running towards fields, neighbouring villages and borders, Palestinians newly arrived in Syria found shelter wherever they could: in hastily assembled tent settlements on the outskirts of the cities, mosques and schools, families’ homes, and (for the few with the financial means), rented housing.

Early on, the Syrian government began drafting legislation and building institutions to govern the newly arrived Palestinian presence in Syria.<sup>1</sup> Incremental acts of legislation led up to the 1956 Basic Law (260/1956), the central legislation governing Palestinian life in Syria. The law stated that “Palestinians residing in the Syrian Republic as of the adoption of this law are to be regarded as Syrians in origin” in terms of all regulations passed until that point related to Palestinians’ employment, work, trade rights, and military service, but crucially “while retaining their original nationality.”<sup>2</sup> In effect, Palestinians were given much of the same rights as Syrian nationals, apart from the right to vote. Some restrictions were also maintained over property ownership.

In January 1949, the Palestine Arab Refugee Institution (PARI) was established as the Syrian government’s principal authority for governing Palestinian affairs in Syria. PARI would be renamed the General Administration for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR) in 1974, its name until today. Even though PARI operated under the Ministry of Interior—and GAPAR now operates under the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs—the institution has been granted a certain amount of independence over the years, operating “very much as a government ministry in itself although it does not have that title.”<sup>3</sup> Crucially, GAPAR provided services to Palestinian communities, and it also registered Palestinian refugees, issued documents, and coordinated with a UN agency established specifically for the newly displaced Palestinian refugees.

Established in December 1949 to assist refugees (and their descendants) from Palestine,<sup>4</sup> the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) began field operations in Syria in May 1950 by providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and helping establish camps in sites around the country. However, UNRWA has always been more than just an aid agency to Palestinians, becoming more a symbol for the international community’s responsibility for the catastrophe imposed on the Palestinian people. UNRWA’s mandate covers Palestinian refu-

gees “whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.”<sup>5</sup>

Because of the largely unparalleled rights afforded to them in Syria compared with other Arab countries,<sup>6</sup> many Palestinian communities developed into dynamic spaces that preserved Palestinian memory without necessarily ghettoizing their inhabitants. Street names commemorated the names of inhabitants’ origin cities, towns, and villages within Palestine, and Palestinians participated in dynamic movements focused around refugee rights and return.<sup>7</sup> Different members of the same family might speak with different accents—some closer to their Palestinian roots, others closer to origin communities. Palestinian-Syrian camps were not the physical symbols of legal discrimination that they often are in other neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon. In effect, Palestinians were legally given the space to participate in Syrian society with many of the same rights as citizen nationals, while also retaining their Palestinian nationality. (This is, of course, not to idealize Palestinian communities, some of which were as marginalized, with limited living conditions and socio-economic opportunities, as some of the poorest Syrian communities.) But by affording Palestinians almost the same rights as its own nationals, a system that predated the Ba’athist takeover of the 1960s, Syria was almost certainly the most hospitable country for Palestinian refugees before 2011.

On the eve of the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Syria was home to approximately 560,000 Palestinian refugees. The majority of that number lived in and around Damascus, with one third of the total Palestinian population found in Yarmouk, an unofficial camp in southern Damascus that was Syria’s

<sup>1</sup> For example, in November 1948, Palestinian drivers and fishermen were given the right to work, before a September 1949 law gave Palestinians access to public sector jobs. In 1955, Palestinians were given the right to a government-issued Palestinian Refugee Travel Document. <sup>2</sup> *1956 Basic Law (260/1956)*, quoted in Anaheed al-Hardan (2016), *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities*, Columbia University Press, p. 57. <sup>3</sup> Nell Gabiam (2016), *The Politics of Suffering: Syria’s Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Indiana University Press, p. 23. <sup>4</sup> UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2007), “The United Nations and Palestinian Refugees”, January 2007, available at ‘<https://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2010011791015.pdf>’. Last accessed on 9 January 2020. <sup>5</sup> UNRWA, “Palestine Refugees”, undated, available at ‘<https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees/>’. Last accessed on 13 March 2020. <sup>6</sup> A. al-Hardan (2012), “Uncertain fate for Palestinians in Syria”, *Electronic Intifada*, 12 July 2012, available at ‘<https://electronicintifada.net/content/uncertain-fate-palestinians-syria/11490/>’. Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>7</sup> Following the perceived abandonment of Palestinian refugees’ rights by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) during negotiations that ultimately led to the 1993 Oslo Accords, Palestinian camps in Syria birthed their own Right of Return (RoR) Movement through activist networks, cultural activities, and literature production. The RoR movement would go on to play a crucial role in future Palestinian political activity, not least after the outbreak of the 2011 uprising when Palestinian refugees twice marched on the borders with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. On Nakba Day (15 May) in 2011, Palestinians mostly from Yarmouk actually crossed into Israeli-occupied territory and clashed with Israeli soldiers. These events, explored in Chapter Two of this study, would in turn reach back into Yarmouk and contribute to a then-escalating process of politicization and militarization inside Syria’s largest Palestinian camp. For more information, see: A. al-Hardan (2016), *Palestinians in Syria*.

largest and arguably most significant Palestinian community. In total, Syria was home to 12 camps as well as many more smaller communities known as “gatherings” (*tjama’aat*). Camps were classified as either official or unofficial by UNRWA—a camp was categorized as official if the UN agency conducted solid waste collection there.<sup>8</sup> There were nine official camps, in Daraa, Hama (al-A’ideen), Homs (al-A’ideen), Jaramana, Khan Dunoun, Khan Eshieh, Neirab, Qabr Essit (Sayeda Zeinab/al-Hosseiniyeh), and Sbeineh; as well as three unofficial camps in Ein el-Tal (Handarat, Aleppo), Latakia (al-Ramel), and Yarmouk.<sup>9</sup>

### SYRIA: ‘PRIME PATRON’ OF THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE?

Palestinian-Syrians were able to engage with their Palestinian identities, albeit within the bounds set out for them by Syria’s security apparatus. Palestinians were expected to behave as citizens and accept the limitations of a Syrian government that would only grow more authoritarian over the years. Under Ba’athist rule (after 1963), Syrian authorities repeatedly launched purges against Palestinian organizations and militant groups.<sup>10</sup> The government’s universe of intelligence agencies and security branches surveilled, monitored, and controlled the Palestinian community like any other. For example, Branch 235, or Palestine Branch, was a security branch directly responsible for the security file of Palestinians in Syria.

Syria was always more than a host country to Palestinians, and since 1948 has been acting as an important patron of diaspora Palestinian politics and militant-political activity. Syria contributed to the Arab League’s Arab Salvation Army (ASA), meant to fight Zionist militias during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The ASA would be dissolved later that same year. However, those early cadres would go on to form much of the command structure of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA),<sup>11</sup> formed as a standing army for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from brigades in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, but later absorbed into the Syrian army. Starting in the 1950s, Syria also formed its own Palestinian brigades, albeit under Syrian military commanders.<sup>12</sup>

Syrian involvement in Palestinian militia politics really came into its own after the Ba’athist takeover in 1963, and Hafez al-Assad’s “corrective” coup in 1970. In September 1966, Syrian authorities formed the Thunderbolt Forces (*Quwat al-Sa’iqaa*, hereafter referred to as *al-Sa’iqaa*) in an attempt to create a Damascus-reliant alternative to Yasser Arafat’s Fatah, then emerging as the most prominent force within the PLO. And while Syria-backed forces were expected not to involve themselves in domestic politics,<sup>13</sup> Syria all too often used Palestinian militias for its own objectives against regional foes. This in turn created divisions within the Palestinian community back home. By the time of President Hafez al-Assad, Syria was clearly leveraging itself as the key broker in the

Arab-Israeli conflict, carrying with it “pretensions to be the prime patron of the Palestinian cause and to control the ‘Palestinian card.’”<sup>14</sup> Hafez took an active role in supporting Palestinian factions that complemented his foreign policy, while moving against PLO factions he deemed politically inexpedient or insufficiently loyal.<sup>15</sup> With the beginning of the civil war in 1975, Lebanon would become his laboratory.

Longstanding differences between Assad and PLO leader Yasser Arafat broke out into the open. In the early 1980s, the Lebanese Civil War in full flow, President Assad supported and possibly orchestrated an internal Fatah coup against Arafat. Damascus-aligned factions in opposition to Arafat—among them, al-Sa’iqaa, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), a Fatah breakaway called Fatah al-Intifada, and other pro-Syrian factions<sup>16</sup>—sided with Syria and were brought further into Damascus’s fold.<sup>17</sup> Thousands of Fatah fighters and activists inside Syria were meanwhile rounded up and imprisoned, the movement’s offices confiscated and handed to the more radical breakaway faction. The Fatah movement was driven underground. Politically marginalized and unable to operate freely within Syria, Fatah would remain popular in the camps. Ultimately, the crack-down was the latest example in a years-long policy of repression and interference used to deal with the Palestinian issue that had earned the regime an intense distrust, and even hatred, among generations of Palestinians raised on stories of betrayal and violence by their fathers and grandfathers.<sup>18</sup>

On the eve of the Syrian uprising, Syria hosted a broad range of Palestinian factions. Damascus became home to all manner of Palestinian armed groups and

<sup>8</sup> GAPAR recognized all of the 12 camps as Palestinian camps, though, and UNRWA also cooperated with GAPAR in providing basic infrastructure services to unofficial camps. For more information, see: A. al-Hardan (2016), *Palestinians in Syria*, pp. 60-61. <sup>9</sup> UNRWA, “Where we work: Syria”, *undated*, available at ‘<https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria>.’ Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>10</sup> R. Baroud (2014), “How We Disowned Palestinians in Syria”, *Counterpunch*, 9 January 2014, available at ‘<https://www.counterpunch.org/2014/01/09/starving-refugees/>.’ Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>11</sup> Shafiq al-Hout (2011), *My Life in the PLO: The Inside Story of the Palestinian Struggle*, Pluto Press, 2011, pp. 9-10. <sup>12</sup> These included the 68th Reconnaissance Battalion (*Kateebat al-thaamneh uw al-siteen*), formed by Syrian military intelligence in December 1955 and largely intended as an auxiliary force to conduct intelligence and border monitoring operations on the border with Israel. At its height, the 68th Battalion could count a force of up to 600 commandos (*maghawir*). See: Yezid Sayigh (1997), *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993*, Oxford University Press, p. 67. <sup>13</sup> The 68th Battalion was caught up in the regional split between Ba’athists and Nasserists, for example. In the early Sixties, the battalion was regarded as a relatively Nasser-friendly outfit and more than a dozen members were executed for involvement in the Nasserist coup of July 1963. Syrian authorities later established Palestinian security arms to step up surveillance and policing of Palestinian organizations through the Palestinian Detachment and Palestinian Section. For more information, see: Sayigh (1997), pp. 69-80. <sup>14</sup> Raymond A. Hinnebusch (1986), “Syrian Policy in Lebanon and the Palestinians”, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 8, p. 13. <sup>15</sup> For comprehensive accounts of Syria’s role in the PLO and Palestinian militia politics more broadly, see: Sayigh (1997); and Hinnebusch (1986). <sup>16</sup> *Los Angeles Times* (1985), “6 Palestinian Units Unite to Oppose Arafat”, 25 March 1985. <sup>17</sup> This trend of factions gaining support and bases in Syria continued through to the 1990s. Factions based in Damascus were opposed to Fatah’s negotiation of the 1993 Oslo Accords, and relations remained icy. <sup>18</sup> The circle of distrust and hatred expanded when President Assad was seen to use Palestinian factions for his own ends during the 1985-1986 War of the Camps in Lebanon, in which pro-Damascus factions and al-Sa’iqaa collaborated with Lebanese Shia movement Amal in attacking Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Testimonies at the time attested to al-Sa’iqaa fighters refusing to open fire on fellow Palestinians, and being shot or detained by Syrian army officers as a result.

political parties—ranging from the Islamist Hamas and PIJ to leftist or Ba’athist groups like the PFLP-GC, Fatah al-Intifada, and al-Sa’iqaa. Many of these groups also had strong, longstanding ties with Syrian intelligence. Factions operated offices in many of the camps around Syria—although prominent factions like the PFLP-GC were strongest in and around Damascus, and particularly Yarmouk—and also ran their own military bases and youth training camps, where during the summer months young Palestinians would learn the arts of the resistance up in the hills.<sup>19</sup>

### THE SYRIAN UPRISING, VIEWED FROM THE CAMPS

There has often been a tendency in the media since Syria’s 2011 uprising to talk of the Palestinian community as a single, homogenous entity—defined either as pro-government or pro-opposition. However, Palestinian-Syrian communities were often diverse and politically complex spaces. Just as the roots of Syria’s uprising were often incredibly local, the uprising in the Palestinian camps was also dictated by local geographies, community dynamics, and histories. The regime’s attempts to manipulate Palestinian politics in the past, sometimes violently, created simmering tensions and pushed Palestinian-Syrians to “engage with the Syrian revolution in the same quest for ‘dignity’ and ‘liberty’.”<sup>20</sup> Palestinians had their own historical grievances with the regime beyond the national protest movement’s broader demands for an end to the Emergency Law, political repression, and corruption. Generational gaps emerged between younger Palestinians and their parents and grandparents, dividing responses. Meanwhile, some quarters of the Syrian opposition came to regard the Palestinians as experienced political operatives, as allies worth having.<sup>21</sup> All these dynamics would vary from camp to camp.

At the same time, Palestinians had their own ‘wall of fear.’ Palestinians may have empathized with some of the early demands of the protests, but a shared history of displacement and vulnerability in host countries led to a tendency towards positive neutrality or limited involvement through humanitarian and relief activities. The hard-learned lessons of Palestinian history often made communities around the country reticent to involve themselves in events directly. In times of war, Palestinians had often been scapegoated, finding themselves caught in the middle of warring sides. Refugees paid a high price during the 1970-71 PLO confrontation with Jordan, the Lebanese Civil War, the First Gulf War, and the chaos that followed the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. These events all led to politicization of Palestinian refugees’ positions in their respective host countries, ultimately leading to expulsion (Jordan), massacres (Lebanon), detention and forced displacement (Kuwait), and bloody, sectarian violence (Iraq). Refugees were left doubly vulnerable by their statelessness and pre-existing

refugee status, meaning that avenues of protection available to other displaced populations were not necessarily available to Palestinians.<sup>22</sup>

In the beginning of the events in Syria, various Palestinian voices pushed for neutrality, lest they repeat the experiences of Lebanon, Kuwait, and Iraq. (Of course, there were also others directly calling for participation in events—either on the side of the opposition, or the regime.) Eventually, that neutrality would be stymied by events outside that reached inside the camps: pitted clashes in areas close by the camps made neutrality more difficult, while by mid-2012, many of the camps had started to turn in on themselves, becoming sites of intra-Palestinian conflicts as well as frontlines between the various parties to the wider Syrian conflict. All too often, neutrality became impossible.

Palestinian factions reacted in different ways, further complicating dynamics within the camps. It became fairly clear early on that several historically Damascus-aligned factions—namely the PFLP-GC, al-Sa’iqaa and Fatah al-Intifada—were going to support the Syrian government, although generally it would take time before these factions actually joined the regime’s campaign of repression or military operations against the opposition.<sup>23</sup>

The responses of other factions were more complicated:

- **Fatah:** An early political intervention in 2011 saw voices within the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah comment on and criticize the Syrian government’s attack on al-Ramel camp in Latakia, however after this the PLO and Palestinian Authority in Ramallah largely remained quiet, perhaps a pragmatic stance to wait for a clearer reading of events in Syria. The movement was itself divided, and there were elements within the Syrian branch of Fatah who actively supported anti-government movements—evidenced by an approach made in secret by some Fatah figures to support anti-government trends through the Yarmouk LCC. Officially, though, Fatah went on to pursue a policy of supposed neutrality through most of the conflict. Fatah never made any direct decision as a movement (either from Ramallah or Damascus) to participate in either side of the conflict, even though many Fatah-affiliated activists were quick to side with the uprising between 2011-12. Palestinian officials did, of course, take on behind-the-scenes roles throughout—particularly in Yarmouk—often by mediating between different Palestinian actors on the ground and Syrian authorities. However, the PLO has come under intense scrutiny.

<sup>19</sup> Participation in youth camps did not necessarily reflect one’s politics, and it was not unusual—for example—for a Palestinian teenager to attend Islamic Jihad summer camps. <sup>20</sup> V. Napolitano (2013), “Hamas and the Syrian Uprising: A Difficult Choice”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 20, no. 3. <sup>21</sup> Others within the nationalist opposition came to distrust Palestinian communities because of a perception that Palestinians were somehow “pro-government.” <sup>22</sup> N. Erekat (2014), “Palestinian Refugees and the Syrian Uprising: Filling the Protection Gap During Secondary Forced Displacement”, *Oxford Journal of International Refugee Law*, vol. 26. <sup>23</sup> Napolitano, “Hamas and the Syrian Uprising”.

tiny for not doing more—publicly or otherwise—to defend Palestinian communities inside Syria. Some suspect that the PLO, and Fatah in particular, hoped to improve its standing with the Syrian government through its purportedly neutral position during the course of the conflict, following years of alienation after the break with President Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s.

- **Hamas:** In February 2012, Hamas officially broke with the Syrian regime and sided with anti-Assad protesters and rebel fighters. The Islamist movement reportedly went on to support FSA units around Damascus with training in tunnel construction and rocket engineering.<sup>24</sup> Hamas has repeatedly denied this, as well as its links with Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis—an Islamist Palestinian faction that played a prominent role in events in Yarmouk from 2013 onwards, and which also maintained branches in Daraa camp as well as the Sbeineh and Khan Eshieh camps outside Damascus. Still, reports of Hamas giving support to the opposition earned the Islamist movement enmity with former allies in the so-called Resistance Axis—namely the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and Iran—although Hamas has arguably managed to isolate its stance vis-a-vis the Syrian regime from its strategic relations with Iran, which have since improved.<sup>25</sup>
- **Other Syria-based Palestinian factions:** Smaller factions such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have attempted a more pragmatic course, acknowledging the legitimate demands of anti-Assad

protesters early on in the uprising but always being careful not to risk regime enmity or expulsion by authorities in Damascus.<sup>26</sup> These pragmatic stances, over time, eventually transformed into closer identification with the regime’s narrative about the nature of the uprising/conflict—particularly after the later stages of the crisis in Yarmouk. Although the PIJ may have initially taken on a more pragmatic stance towards the Syrian uprising compared with other Damascus-aligned factions, the group maintains close political ties to Damascus although it has not contributed to military activities on the side of the regime—unlike other Palestinian factions in Syria.

- **Palestine Liberation Army:** All descendants of Palestinian refugees displaced to Syria in 1948 were required by law to serve in the PLA, barring some exceptions. PLA officers and soldiers were targeted, likely by both pro-government and opposition groups, as the uprising increasingly turned into an armed conflict. Although the PLA witnessed a wave of defections during the first two years of the conflict, groups within the force have gone on to fight on the side of the Syrian government on several prominent fronts across the country—including the Damascus countryside, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and beyond.

After mid-2012, Syrian intelligence increasingly turned to Palestinian loyalist militias and proxy forces to try and keep the camps on side. Despite some attempts to keep camps out of the conflict, politicization and militarization initially by the Syrian government and its allies—but increasingly, by some groups affiliated with the opposition—made neutrality almost impossible.

<sup>24</sup> N. Blanford (2013), “Assad suffers new blow as Hamas switches sides to aid rebels”, *The Times*, 5 April 2013. <sup>25</sup> M. Alabbasi (2019), “How did Hamas’s military expertise end up with Syria’s rebels?”, *Middle East Eye*, 29 January 2019, available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/how-did-hamass-military-expertise-end-syrias-rebels>. Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>26</sup> Napolitano, “Hamas and the Syrian Uprising”.

## 1 DARAA

On 31 January 2011, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a rare interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The Arab Spring uprisings had already felled one regional despot—Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali—and as Bashar spoke, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s long hold over power was about to come to an end as well. Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi would follow a month later.

And yet Bashar seemed at ease. “I am not talking here on behalf of the Tunisians or the Egyptians,” the president said. “I am talking on behalf of the Syrians.”

*We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people’s beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance.*<sup>27</sup>

Bashar clearly felt he had done enough since coming to power in 2000 for the Arab Spring to not take root in Syria. And despite a few scattered protests in Damascus shortly after his interview, Bashar could have been right.

Sometime in February, roughly a month before the first day of protests in Daraa that would eventually spark the nationwide Syrian uprising, Ahmad and dozens of other Palestinians from Daraa camp were summoned for interrogation by Military Security in Sweida (around 45 kilometres east of Daraa, in Syria’s southern Druze-majority region).<sup>28</sup>

“About 40 of us from Daraa camp were summoned [by the authorities],” Ahmad remembered. “Not as a mass arrest, but with each individual getting a summons from Military Security. Most of us were from the Fatah movement. Me and my father were both called.”

On the day, after being insulted and threatened by three interrogators, the men were taken into the office of the commanding officer. *Al Jazeera* was playing on a TV in the background. The presenter was talking about the *Palestine Papers*: a cache of more than 1,600 leaked documents revealing the role of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Fatah leadership in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.<sup>29</sup>

Ahmad remembered how the officer then turned to face them.

*[These] documents have exposed you,’ he said.*

*He started threatening us, saying that Fatah’s activities had betrayed [Syria], that that could be punishable by death.*

*But the second accusation, the most important one, came straight from his mouth.*

*He said: ‘If something happened in Syria like what’s just happened in Egypt ... then what would be your position? How would you react to it?’*

*That suggested that they were expecting something.*

Eventually, Ahmad and the others were allowed to go home, but not before being given phone numbers “in case we saw anything strange, basically so that [they] could use us as informants,” he said.

Whether or not the regime apparatus was expecting something like in Egypt, it was getting paranoid.

Just a few weeks later, a group of boys scrawled graffiti on their schoolyard wall openly mocking President Assad. Authorities were quick to act—the boys were arrested and brutally tortured. The families’ attempts to get the boys released proved unsuccessful, with senior security officials insulting their mothers (an affront in Daraa’s tribal society).

The families organized a protest for 18 March 2011 to demand the boys’ release. Others came along to support them, but some probably just went along out of curiosity. Ahmad was there with another friend from Daraa’s nearby Palestinian camp to see what might happen.

### ‘WE NEVER DISTINGUISHED BETWEEN PALESTINIANS AND SYRIANS’

Daraa’s Palestinian community was usually referred to as ‘Daraa camp,’ or ‘the camp’ in the singular, even though the area it occupied along the central-eastern suburbs of Daraa al-Mahatta was actually made up of three camps established over the years to accommodate different displacements—Palestinian and otherwise.

The official UNRWA-serviced Palestinian camp was established between 1950-51 for refugees who had fled Palestine in 1948. Another area just to the east known as Daraa Emergency camp was then set up for the 4,200 Palestinian refugees fleeing newly Israeli-occupied areas of the West Bank and/or Golan Heights during the 1967 Six-Day War. Shortly after the arrival of Palestinian refugees in 1967, another wave of displaced people—this time, Syrians fleeing towns and villages in the newly Israeli-occupied Golan—arrived in an area southeast of the original Palestinian settlement. It became known as the ‘displaced camp’ (*al-mukhayam lil-naziheen*).

In the years following, the three areas melded together to the point that they were largely indistinguishable. Daraa camp was not a particularly well-off place: the housing there was generally cheaply built and often informal. But the camp was socially and

<sup>27</sup> *The Wall Street Journal* (2011), “Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad”, 31 January 2011. <sup>28</sup> All sources interviewed for this chapter, with the exception of Tareq Hammoud, asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. Names have been changed and identifying details withheld accordingly. <sup>29</sup> The leaks were published, and a series of documentaries about them broadcast, by *Al Jazeera* in late January 2011. The leaks included revelations of unprecedented concessions offered to the Israelis by Palestinian negotiators, and were a significant embarrassment to the PLO and Fatah. The leaks prompted discussions in Arab media for weeks and months afterwards.

culturally integrated with both the displaced Syrian community next door as well as with wider Daraa life, part of the city's fabric. The camp's Palestinian inhabitants generally worked in low-income jobs such as farming, or in the local government's public sector.

Tareq Hammoud is director of the Palestinian Return Centre, a London-based advocacy group, who grew up near Daraa and worked in Damascus-based civil society groups after 2005.

People in Daraa would only ever say 'Daraa camp'; nobody distinguished between [them]. It was basically the same camp. The only difference was a theoretical one, from the perspective of the government or UNRWA.

*For example, there was a street that ran from the Palestinian camp into the displaced camp, and you could walk from one part to the next without noticing any change.*

According to Amro, a Syrian displaced from the Golan Heights in the late Sixties:

*The neighbourhood that included the camp for Palestinian refugees and the camp for displaced Syrians was considered to be one of the main neighbourhoods in Daraa.*

*In the years before the uprising, there were no real disputes between Syrians and Palestinians. There were plenty of Palestinian families living outside the camp in other areas of the city and, in more recent years, increasing links between the Syrians and Palestinians [in Daraa] through marriage.*

Jalal is another Syrian from Daraa's IDP camp, although originally from the village of Saham al-Jawlan that he fled with his family in 1967.

*Daraa camp was made up of Palestinians and Syrian IDPs from the occupied Golan. Relations between us were so good and fraternal that we often wouldn't recognize them as Palestinian refugees. We never distinguished between Palestinians, Syrians, or those displaced [from the Golan].*

It would later prove significant that the Palestinian community grew side by side with the Syrian IDP community, that there were in-built solidarities between the two communities. Many within the displaced Syrian community were still angry with the Syrian government for ceding territory, and their homes with it, in 1967.<sup>30</sup> (The Syrian army, then under the command of Hafez al-Assad as minister of defence, was accused of withdrawing from the Golan without a fight.)

As a former senior figure with the Free Syrian Army's Southern Front put it: "this mix of [displaced Syrians] and Palestinians made the camp more closely tied to the concerns of Daraa."

At the same time, the camp also had its own distinct Palestinian identity and appearance. UNRWA provided services to the oldest Palestinian area that (on the eve of the 2011 uprising) included an area office, six schools, a health centre, community centre, women's centre, kindergarten, and distribution centre.<sup>31</sup> And like all

Palestinian camps in Syria, the camp had its own infrastructure of political offices and faction headquarters representing the PFLP-GC, Fatah al-Intifada, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and others. Some of the camp's residents were former fighters who had served in the 1970-71 Black September face-off with Jordan or the Lebanese Civil War. Smaller numbers had fought *jihād* in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>32</sup>

There was also a "pro-Fatah movement more or less operating in secret because of the years of persecution [under President Hafez al-Assad]," said Muhammad, another Palestinian activist from the camp.<sup>33</sup> "[That] was notable because most of the movement were young men."

### 'ACCUSING PALESTINIANS BECAME ROUTINE'

18 March 2011.

A group including the detained boys' families were standing outside the al-Omari Mosque in Daraa al-Balad, the southern half of the city. Others were gathering around them, waiting.

Ahmad was there. So were other Palestinians from the camp, including others summoned by Military Security just a few weeks before.

"We tried to avoid one another so as not to provoke any suspicion," he remembered. They didn't want it to appear that Palestinians were at the protests in some organized way.

"Everybody was waiting around trying to work out if something was going on."

Abu Saeed, another Palestinian activist involved from early on, remembered a similar sensitivity among Palestinians at the protest.

*I was one of the people who joined the protests from the beginning, and was also involved in organizing the demonstrations and encouraging more guys from the camp to join as well by covering our faces.*

Soon, the stand outside the mosque unravelled. Stones were thrown and demonstrators moved in the direction of the city centre, reached via a river valley between Daraa al-Balad and Daraa al-Mahatta further north. To stop the march, authorities started with water cannon, then tear gas. And although the protesters did not yet know it, an order had come from Damascus for live fire to follow.

Several former camp residents, like people around the city, remembered watching a helicopter fly over and land somewhere in the north of the city. Shock

<sup>30</sup> Similar displaced communities on the outskirts of Syrian cities—including Al-Hajar al-Aswad in the southern Damascus suburbs—would quickly come to be key constituencies of the Syrian uprising once it fanned out from Daraa in March 2011. <sup>31</sup> UNRWA, "Dera'a Camp", *undated*, available at 'https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/deraa-camp.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>32</sup> One prominent example is Qahtan Abu Obeida, a Palestinian originally from Daraa camp, associated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and who was in Jordan when the uprising broke out. Abu Obeida later crossed back into Syria to fight pro-government forces, and would go on to lead the Islamic State-affiliated Liwa' Shuhada al-Yarmouk (later Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Waleed) in the western Daraa countryside's Yarmouk Basin. <sup>33</sup> At the same time, Fatah undertook some political activities in Syria after the events of the 1980s—for example, through scout groups.

troops from the capital. Shortly afterwards, the shooting started. Two young men were killed.

It may be that the regime thought that by quickly and resolutely turning to violence, protests in Daraa would die out. But the opposite happened.

The next day, there were more demonstrations. And the day after.

As security forces killed more people with live fire, Daraa's protesters grew angrier. The protests continued, and edged ever closer to the city's Palestinian camp. More Palestinians, mostly youth, started getting involved.

"In the beginning, we would go out as individuals one by one," Ahmad said. "But eventually, we started going out in groups."

On March 20, two days after the first protest on the hillside in Daraa al-Balad, angry demonstrators burned down several government offices in the central district of Daraa al-Mahatta, including the Palace of Justice and Syriatel (the telecoms company owned by President Assad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf). All of the buildings were just a few hundred metres away from the entrance to Daraa camp.

The regime was quick to blame Palestinians. The following day, an article in the pro-government daily *al-Watan* pointed the finger at "extremist Palestinians" for involvement in unrest, looting, and arson, quoting an anonymous "senior Palestinian source" in Damascus as saying that Palestinians were indeed responsible.<sup>34</sup> Former camp resident Hamoud, reflecting on that period the following year, argued that "accusing Palestinians became a routine."<sup>35</sup> The same tactic would be repeated by pro-government outlets, as well as Assad advisor Bouthaina Shaaban, after unrest spread to the Alawi-majority city of Latakia.

Reflecting on those early moments of the revolution, Palestinian doctor Abu Muhammad criticized protesters' use of arson on the March 20 protests, before recalling a feeling within the camp at the time that Palestinians should stay out of what was fast becoming an out-of-control situation. In the past, Palestinians had paid a heavy price for getting involved in national events in other countries.

*It was clear from the start that these protests were for the Syrian people and not the Palestinians, who were guests in the country and so had no right to protest and assemble. So the camp tried to stay out of events.*

Palestinians were going to the demonstrations but not demonstrating inside the camp itself, for a number of reasons. With its narrow alleyways, Daraa camp could not host the kind of huge street protests popularized during the Arab Spring; added to the fact that Palestinian activists likely wanted to maintain the perception that 'the camp' itself was neutral, avoid informants working on behalf of pro-government Palestinian factions and security branches within the camp, and dispel any possibility that pro-government voices would point to Palestinian involvement as proof of their 'theories' about the nature of the

Daraa protests. Even so, any attempt to stay neutral was made all the more difficult given the protests happening inside the Syrian IDP camp next door, and an area immediately next to it, Tareeq al-Sadd.

"Things just started to take on a life of their own," Ahmad remembered.

*Slogans and chants being raised at the funerals would be met with bullets, so that new victims fell and each funeral grew bigger than the last one. It was a bloodbath.*

## FROM SIEGE TO WAR

On April 25, just over a month after the beginning of protests, the Syrian army and security forces encircled and besieged Daraa. A curfew was imposed, water, electricity, and internet supplies cut. Checkpoints at the entrances and exits of the city restricted movement of key supplies including food and medicine. And snipers stationed on rooftops around the city targeted civilians moving around the city. In the days that followed, up to 200 people were shot dead.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile in many of the Palestinian camps around Syria after the outbreak of the uprising, there were attempts to maintain neutrality for extended periods. But Daraa camp's history of integration into the broader body politic in Daraa, as well as the escalating repression by security forces, quickly made neutrality impossible.

According to Palestinian activist Abu Saeed:

*Daraa was different to the other [Palestinian] camps in how difficult it was for Daraa camp to remain neutral. Its geography imposed itself. With the displaced camp to the east, Tareeq al-Sadd to the south and [central Daraa's] market to the north, we found ourselves in the middle of the conflict. Of course, it was extremely difficult to remain neutral.*

*Those who wanted to stay neutral left the camp, and those who stayed behind to protect their houses were counted as being with the opposition.*

Daraa camp quickly became part of the burgeoning pro-opposition strongholds around Daraa, linking Daraa al-Balad with Tareeq al-Sadd and the Syrian IDP camp beyond. Separated from the rest of the city by the river valley, Daraa al-Balad would have been cut off were it not for the other areas. So the camp served as a bridge, and Palestinians began ferrying supplies to besieged areas and transporting the wounded to hospitals back in Daraa al-Mahatta. Eventually, the camp hosted the first non-governmental field hospital in the city.

<sup>34</sup> The *al-Watan* report in question appears to be no longer available on the newspaper's website, and a link to a previous version of the article is now dead. However, the content of that report is quoted and referenced in a series of articles reflecting on the outbreak of protests in Daraa in March 2011. For more information, see: T. Hammoud (2012), "The Impact of the Syrian Revolution on Palestinian Refugees", in *Journal of Palestinian Refugee Studies*, vol. 2; and A. al-Hardan (2012), "Uncertain fate for Palestinians in Syria". <sup>35</sup> T. Hammoud (2012), "The Impact of the Syrian Revolution on Palestinian Refugees", p. 11. <sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch (2011), "Syria: Crimes Against Humanity in Daraa", 1 June 2011, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/01/syria-crimes-against-humanity-daraa>. Last accessed on 25 November 2019.

Wissam al-Ghul was shot dead while trying to rescue two wounded men from Daraa al-Balad. He became the Syrian conflict's first Palestinian martyr.

"It had been Wissam's job to get two injured guys from a protest and take them to the National Hospital [in Daraa al-Mahatta]," said activist Muhammad. "A sniper shot Wissam from behind—God have mercy on him—and killed him."

Several Palestinians would be killed in similar fashion in the following days. According to Ahmad:

*There were only two cars that could pass to and from the besieged areas, belonging to Hussam al-Ter'ani and Abu Ahmad Moussa al-Tafouri. Both men were from the camp, and they would be martyred later on. They would transport all kinds of things—medical supplies and water, the wounded and the dead.*

Another Palestinian man from the camp who was transporting supplies, Mostafa al-Bahteeti, was shot and killed in early May 2011.

Soon enough, activists, medical workers, and doctors started providing services within the camp itself. The first field hospital in the city was co-founded by Dr. Hossan Adel—an ear, nose and throat specialist originally from the camp who had a medical practice in the city. Dr. Adel was inside the camp when the siege began, when "someone opened up their home, which had a large hall in it ...and [he] and some nurses from the camp would treat people in that hall," activist Ahmad said. Supplies were brought from a pharmacy still functioning inside the camp and, when there were shortages, bandages from an UNRWA clinic inside the camp.

The siege was relaxed in mid-May. But the camp's humanitarian role, seemingly in direct support for the protests, had not gone unnoticed. "After the siege was over, there was talk that the camp had attracted the anger of the regime because of that role," said Muhammad. "People started being called in for interrogation."

The uprising had arrived inside Daraa camp.

## TO ARMS

Within weeks, the Syrian army and security forces had surrounded and besieged Daraa, and the city's Palestinian camp with it. Pro-government forces would not attempt a similar counter-insurgency campaign until the bloody Baba Amr offensive in Homs the following year.

Daraa happened quickly, and took many people by surprise. Pro-government Palestinian factions responded to events by monitoring pro-opposition activity inside the camp but crucially not by arming their allies inside the camp. And protests only grew with the repression—rather than take a conciliatory stance with the protesters, Assad and his inner circle turned to a default of absolute violence. It backfired.

Palestinian communities were not passive observers in the uprising which was quickly gathering speed around them, either.

Once protests had started in Daraa, a group of Palestinian activists from Yarmouk camp in Damascus headed to the south to observe and participate in the street-level organizing which was already happening there. As with many of the Palestinians already getting involved in the uprising, they were mostly young men and women who identified with the ideals and aims of the burgeoning uprising. Among them was Ahmad Koussa, a Yarmouk-born Palestinian NGO worker and activist.<sup>37</sup> Koussa was working with the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) within Palestinian communities, in an attempt to establish local committees in the camps. The LCCs (*Iijan al-tansiq al-mahaliyyah*, or *tansiqiyat*) became a crucial activist initiative in the early days of the uprising.<sup>38</sup> Many of the Palestinians initially involved in the LCCs, like Koussa, were loosely affiliated with Fatah and pre-war civil society networks. Through them, Palestinian camps like Daraa would witness an explosion in civil society and humanitarian initiatives to monitor violations, document deaths and injuries, provide healthcare, house displaced people fleeing the violence, and transport key supplies into areas in need.

By now others were mobilizing, too. By November, the growing number of defectors leaving the Syrian army had created small bands of Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades in and around Daraa who were engaging in clashes with pro-government forces more and more.

Rabea Habeeb and Yayha al-Salti were two brothers-in-law from Daraa camp—their story a reflection of the camp's own.

Habeeb was Palestinian, and al-Salti an IDP originally from the Golan. Both came from working-class backgrounds in Daraa camp, and had married two sisters from the same family before the uprising.<sup>39</sup>

Together, Habeeb and al-Salti formed the camp's first rebel formation in February 2012: the Taher al-Sayasna Martyr Brigade.<sup>40</sup> While the faction began life as a neighbourhood protection committee, by mid-2012 it had become an important part of the local rebellion. Other Palestinians followed their lead between 2012 and 2013, including the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Battalion, the Youth of Al-Aqsa Battalion, and the Returnees'

<sup>37</sup> Koussa was gunned down by a regime sniper in January 2013, during the early stages of the siege of Yarmouk. Shortly after his death, activists in Dael, Daraa province published a video celebrating Ahmad's life and activism. See: Adnan ReVoO, "Dael sings for the martyred hero Ahmad Koussa, son of Yarmouk camp (داعل تغني للشهيد البطل احمد كوسا ابن مخيم الرموك)", 13 January 2013, *YouTube*, available at '<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8TsFwqngA8>.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>38</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center (2012), "Local Coordination Committees of Syria", *Diwan* blog, 20 December 2012, available at '<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50426?lang=en>.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>39</sup> Al-Salti was killed fighting on the frontlines on 27 July 2012, before Habeeb finally fled the country sometime in 2013. <sup>40</sup> The faction's statement announcing its formation was posted to YouTube on 29 February 2012. Masked men holding rifles stand in what looks like a living-room in a working-class home, as the speaker positions the brigade as being "from the city of Daraa, and in support of the Free Syrian Army." There is no mention at all of some of the founding members' Palestinian roots. See: Freesyria0003 (2012), "Daraa: Formation of the Taher al-Sayasna Martyr Brigade (٢٠١٢-٢٠١٦ درعا تشكيل كتية الشهيد طاهر صياصنة)", *YouTube*, 26 February 2012, available at '<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUxy-br6mzsQ>.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019.



Brigade. Defected officers and soldiers from the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) also joined the fight in and around Daraa camp, including a prominent PLA colonel: Qahtan Tabasha.<sup>41</sup>

According to the former FSA Southern Front representative, both the regime and opposition did not really distinguish between Syrian and Palestinian involvement in the Daraa-based FSA.

*When the regime eventually raided Daraa ... they dealt with the camp as rebel Syrians. They didn't differentiate between Syrians ... or Palestinians. They were all the same.*

At the same time, he added, "the Daraa brigades ... [also] treated the Palestinian factions as part of the opposition."

Opposition factions like the Taher al-Sayasna Martyr Brigade became an indication of Daraa camp's history within the Daraawi urban fabric—its proximity to the displaced camp as well as its integration and solidarity with ordinary, working-class Syrian concerns within the city. And so both regime and opposition came to treat the camp like any other pro-opposition neighbourhood in the *balad*.

By June 2012, the Syrian army was regularly hitting Daraa camp with mortar fire and shells. Army forces eventually tried to storm the camp on 27 July 2012 but rebels, led by Taher al-Sayasna fighters, responded by attacking a nearby regime position known as Daraa Station (*makhfar Daraa*)—the last in the immediate vicinity of the camp.

*Makhfar Daraa* fell after four days' fighting. It was the first site in Daraa city in the hands of Syria's burgeoning armed opposition.

Ahmad, the activist who had been summoned before the uprising even began, was tasked with burying the dead.

*We dug a large hole into the ground of the garden and divided it up into sections with stones, documenting the identities of the people buried in them. In the first hole, we buried 12 people.*

*From then on, we dug from that hole in a line to create a series of graves in a line. Eventually, the park became an official cemetery.*

Eventually, the camp emptied and remained that way for years. The cemetery is still there, though, surrounded by rubble.

<sup>41</sup> Tabasha was later killed in 2012, but was a formative presence in the early battles in and around Daraa camp.

## 2 YARMOUK

By May 2011, the Syrian army had started storming more towns and cities in an attempt to violently quell what was fast becoming a nationwide movement against President Assad. While Daraa was already under siege by the Syrian army, with the city's Palestinian camp thrust into events, the central city of Homs would soon enough earn its moniker as the 'capital of the revolution' as neighbourhood after neighbourhood turned on the regime, clashing with security forces and even expelling them altogether.<sup>42</sup> Protests were beginning to grow in strength in and around Damascus, too.

Up to that point, Yarmouk camp in Damascus—Syria's largest Palestinian community and its most politically and culturally significant—had more or less managed to keep out of the anti-government uprising fomenting on its outskirts.

Like in Daraa, the sprawling Palestinian camp in South Damascus was well-integrated into its surroundings, linking Damascus proper with the sprawl of mostly working-class suburbs on the southern city limits and the outlying countryside beyond. Also in common with Daraa, the area included numbers of Syrian families displaced during the 1967 Six-Day War (mostly in the southern Damascus district of Hajar al-Aswad). South Damascus would soon become typical of the neglected suburbs on the outskirts of Syrian cities, formed as a result of tolerated informality and rural-urban migration after the 1970s, that became the key constituencies of the uprising after 2011.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, Yarmouk's significance to Palestinians, but also to the Syrian regime, went some way to explaining why the camp encountered things differently in those early days.

Originally established in 1957, Yarmouk became Syria's largest Palestinian community, accommodating Palestinians displaced in 1948 who had since taken up shelter in mosques, schools or other public spaces.<sup>44</sup> Middle-class families from cities in northern Palestine (like Safad) mixed with rural and working-class Palestinians. Yarmouk was not an "official" camp—according to UNRWA's designation—but the UN agency ran many services within Yarmouk,<sup>45</sup> including three health centres, 16 schools, two community centres, and other training spaces.<sup>46</sup> The camp was also one of the capital's key commercial centres: markets on Loubia Street were famous around Damascus, and Syrians and Palestinians across the city would come to Yarmouk to shop, do business, and socialize.

The camp was a key national site for Palestinians, known to many as the "capital of the Palestinian diaspora": key PLO figures were from Yarmouk, or once lived there; and the camp's cemeteries remembered the names of *fedayeen* killed in the decades-long fight with Israel.<sup>47</sup>

Just as Yarmouk was well integrated into its physical surroundings, so it was into the body politic of

regime-controlled Damascus. Since 1964, the camp had its own municipality that made it institutionally part of the capital. Palestinian factions had offices, factional representatives, and community centres dotted around Yarmouk. And in stark contrast to other camps, Yarmouk even had several wide streets large enough to incorporate city bus routes, connecting the camp to the rest of Damascus.

At the same time, security agents monitored goings-on in the camp as meticulously as anywhere else.<sup>48</sup> Like their Syrian neighbours, Palestinians were expected to live by Assad's rules.

### 'THE ONES WHO SENT US TO DIE, WE WANT TO BURY THEM IN THE GROUND!'

Before mid-2011, there had been one demonstration inside Yarmouk (in solidarity with al-Ramel camp in Latakia) but Yarmouk had largely stayed out of political events. The camp had received hundreds of families from Homs as well as Damascus neighbourhoods that had encountered crackdowns, and NGOs and associations, including those affiliated with factions, went to great efforts to support the newcomers. But come the summer, it was Palestine, not Syria, that would begin the camp's long walk towards catastrophe.

Barely three weeks separate Nakba Day (15 May) and Naksa Day (5 June), two of the key anniversaries in the Palestinian national calendar. 15 May remembers the destruction of the homeland in 1948, as well as what followed. *Naksa*, or setback, is the Arabic word used for the defeat of the Arab armies at the hands of Israel in 1967.

In 2011, Palestinians were planning to commemorate their displacement by marching on the borders of what is now Israel. In Syria, the return march to the Golan Heights for Nakba Day involved a mass mobilization of Palestinian factions, political associations, NGOs and civil society organizations, cultural groups,

<sup>42</sup> N. Thompson (2012), "Homs: Bloody winter in Syria's revolution capital", *CNN*, 7 February 2012, available at 'https://edition.cnn.com/2011/12/16/world/meast/syria-homs-profile/index.html.' Last accessed on 6 January 2020. <sup>43</sup> T. Rollins (2018), "Syria's uprising came from its neglected suburbs, now Assad wants to rebuild them", *The National*, 18 June 2018, available at 'https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/syria-s-uprising-came-from-its-neglected-suburbs-now-assad-wants-to-rebuild-them-1.741483.' Last accessed on 6 January 2020. <sup>44</sup> UNRWA, "Yarmouk (Unofficial Camp\*)", *undated*, available at 'https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/yarmouk-unofficial-camp.' Last accessed on 6 January 2020. <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*; A. Tiltnes, (ed.) (2006), *Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Human Capital, Economic Resources and Living Conditions*, Fafo Research Foundation, 2006, p. 7. <sup>46</sup> Almost all UNRWA installations in Yarmouk were destroyed or badly damaged in the pro-government offensive that brought Yarmouk back under Syrian government control in May 2018. For more information, see: UNRWA (2018), "Almost all UNRWA installations in Yarmouk and Dera'a Camp in Syria severely damaged or destroyed", 1 December 2018, available at 'https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/almost-all-unrwa-installations-yarmouk-and-dera%20%80%99-camp-syria-severely-damaged.' Last accessed on 6 January 2020. <sup>47</sup> *Fedayeen* is an Arabic word that loosely translates as "those willing to die for a cause." It became the most common name for Palestinian fighters during the Palestinian *thawra* (revolutionary period) of the 1960s and 1970s. <sup>48</sup> Although Palestine Branch's Damascus headquarters were a kilometre or so away from Yarmouk, the branch fielded a detachment at the camp's municipality.

and activists. Activists in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria coordinated plans online. Crucially, the march also got permissions from Syrian authorities so that people could access an area of the country that was ordinarily heavily securitized—particularly for Palestinians, who were generally not allowed near the border.

According to some accounts, the day went better than expected. Marchers convened at the border before they started storming the fence with the Golan, streaming into the village of Majdal Shams. Israel seemed taken by surprise.<sup>49</sup> The march was a visual reminder that the right of return had not been forgotten.<sup>50</sup>

The *second* march, on Naksa Day, would be far more controversial—and deadly. Activists in Yarmouk were already suspicious of the intentions of the second march's organizers, namely the PFLP-GC and Yasser Qashlaq, then a little-known businessman dubiously portraying himself as a youth leader who had laid on buses to transport protesters from Yarmouk back to the Golan.<sup>51</sup> Some of those activists held a tent sit-in at al-Wassim Mosque inside the camp to vote on the June 5 proposal, and rejected it. Even so, come June 5, the buses were waiting to take people from Yarmouk to the Golan.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army was making preparations of its own. From the Israelis' perspective, the events of Nakba Day were *not* going to happen again. The army had bolstered security at the border fence, and built a huge artificial earthen rampart in the valley floor that protesters had crossed the previous time to reach the fence. Barbed wire lined the bottom of the other side of the rampart. It was a death trap.

As the marchers descended back towards the border area, the Israelis started firing. People were trapped by the earthen embankment, barbed wire, and sniper fire. Throughout the day, at least 20 were killed by Israeli snipers, and hundreds others injured.

Many, including the PFLP-GC, blamed Israel as being principally responsible.

According to PFLP-GC official Kafah Dabour, the "Zionist enemy had made all the necessary preparations to inflict the highest-possible number of casualties."

But at the same time, people in the camp felt used. The Golan border area had been off-limits to Palestinians for decades, and all of a sudden people could board a bus and saunter in? Many felt it was as if the regime was trying to send a message to Israel, or to try and create a distraction from the protests already starting to sweep across Syria. People were angry.

The following day, the bodies were brought back into Yarmouk for burial. According to Dabour, it was clear tensions were running high even before the burials, as the funeral procession made its way to the camp's Martyrs' Cemetery.

*During the procession, there were a number of chants for Palestine and the martyrs. Then another chant caught my attention. Someone was chanting:*

*'The ones who sent us to die, we want to bury them in the ground!'*

After the bodies were lowered into the ground, angry protesters starting scuffling with factional representatives. Angry demonstrators then poured out of the cemetery down Yarmouk Street, eventually arriving at the PFLP-GC's headquarters, al-Khalsa. The building was surrounded, before stone-throwing and clashes broke out. After a cagey PFLP-GC fighter fired on protesters, activists and marchers moved to burn down the building with the PFLP-GC officials and fighters inside.

The PFLP-GC members were eventually evacuated by Syrian security forces, but lines were increasingly being drawn. Growing numbers of Palestinians in Yarmouk were angry with the PFLP-GC for seeming to represent the regime's interests first, the camp's second.

The PFLP-GC, meanwhile, saw conspiracy. Shortly after what became known as the "Khalsa Events," PFLP-GC leader Ahmad Jibril described the protesters as *agents provocateurs* "stirred up by Saudi Arabia and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas," according to one account.<sup>52</sup> It would remain Jibril's go-to narrative for the remainder of the Syrian conflict: those opposing either the PFLP-GC and/or President Assad were Fatah-backed rabble-rousers at best, or terrorists.

The day after al-Khalsa, the PFLP-GC distributed pamphlets detailing a list of wanted persons (*matloubin*) including their photographs and descriptions of their supposedly seditious acts.

In the aftermath of Khalsa, talk started going round the camp of an idea to form popular committees (*al-Lijan al-Sha'biyah*). But in the beginning, there was little support for the idea. It would still take months yet for the uprising, then the war, to actually reach inside Yarmouk.

## THE 'LUNGS OF DAMASCUS'

Between late 2011 and early 2012, as the brutality of Syria's security apparatus grew and grew, there were growing signs that the anti-Assad uprising was turning into a full-blown armed rebellion—and perhaps something else altogether. In December 2011, two massive bomb blasts rocked Damascus. Ragtag bands of military defectors and young men fighting under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were clashing

<sup>49</sup> That said, several Palestinian marchers were shot that day—although in nowhere near the numbers that would occur on the next march. <sup>50</sup> At the same time, comments made in a *New York Times* interview by regime insider and tycoon Rami Makhlouf just days before the march, in which Makhlouf threatened Israel by suggesting that instability in Syria would mean instability across the border, have led some to suggest that the regime orchestrated the march as a message to Israel (and the wider international community). <sup>51</sup> Qashlaq would become a more prominent player in Yarmouk after the camp was actually militarized in 2012, but before then, he was a little-known pro-government businessman with little clout or legitimacy on the ground. Qashlaq suddenly rose to prominence around the time of the Golan marches, and would later use the Free Palestine Movement (formed in the 2000s) to form a new militia known as the Al-Aqsa Shield Forces. <sup>52</sup> A. al-Hardan (2012), "Uncertain fate for Palestinians in Syria".

with the Syrian army and security forces in Daraa, Homs, and other cities. And in February 2012, the Syrian army stormed the Homs district of Baba Amr with devastating levels of violence. Homs marked one of the first major displacements of the Syrian conflict, and just a few months later, the government-linked Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) estimated there were some 1.5 million IDPs displaced around the country.<sup>53</sup>

FSA groups had emerged in many of the southern suburbs of Damascus around Yarmouk, including Hajar al-Aswad, Yalda, and Tadamon. And as pro-government repression stepped up in 2012, more and more IDPs headed into Yarmouk for safety. Given its history as a shelter for Palestinian refugees, as well as refugees fleeing subsequent displacements from Iraq (2003) and Lebanon (2006), IDPs from Homs and South Damascus (and the outlying countryside) headed to Yarmouk.<sup>54</sup> Although there were no official figures at the time for the number of IDPs living in Yarmouk, estimates ranged between the tens and even hundreds of thousands. Displaced families took up shelter in schools and mosques, they rented housing, or they were put up by hospitable families in the camp. Yarmouk's vibrant civil society movement stepped in to help, with communities and community-based groups operating school shelters kitted out with kitchens and staffed by teams of volunteers. According to one youth activist from the camp: "At this point, Palestinian civil society and Yarmouk residents were operating in the light of day."<sup>55</sup>

This was part of the reason that rebel groups in South Damascus came to conceive of Yarmouk as the "lungs of Damascus."

Abu Tawfeeq al-Souri, originally from Jasim in the western Daraa countryside, was among the most senior rebel commanders in South Damascus at the time.

"We came to see the camp as a lung for the Free [Syrian] Army, it allowed us to breathe," he said.

*Palestinians [inside the camp] were already providing whatever support they could—whether on the level of food, or sometimes ammunition. Plenty of shabab [youth] were helping us and smuggling ammo to us. The situation was good.*

As a result, he added, "the Free [Syrian] Army had no desire to enter the camp."

Abu Hamam al-Nidal, a pro-opposition Palestinian figure from Yarmouk who later became a commander in the Hamas-affiliated Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, acknowledged the camp at the time "fulfilled their medical and logistical needs ... [and] there was also a shelter set up nearby for the families who had fled neighbouring areas." He also described the camp's role as a "vast lung through which the Free [Syrian] Army could breathe."

Activist networks and civil society networks also came to regard the camp as something similar: civil society networks flourished by supporting displaced families, providing humanitarian relief and organizing

initiatives throughout the camp. A new generation of Palestinians witnessed an explosion in civil society initiatives and political activism, separating them from their parents' and grandparents' generations.<sup>56</sup>

However, this interpretation of neutrality would not be tolerated as protests became more frequent—many of them in response to the regime's actions against the Palestinian camps. In the first few months of 2012, flash demonstrations were on the increase inside Yarmouk.<sup>57</sup> Some were met with repression by government security forces. Early protests were often a game of cat-and-mouse—quick flash protests, chants hastily shouted, with everyone getting away before security forces could crack down. But by March 2012, the Syrian government and pro-government Palestinian factions were running out of patience. Some accounts have suggested the regime at the time focused its threats on Fatah,<sup>58</sup> but in reality, the protest movement was far broader, cutting across any factional lines or political affiliations. Regime repression inside and outside Yarmouk created new ranks of demonstrators, particularly among the camp's youth.

In July 2012, rebels launched their first major offensive: the Battle for Damascus. FSA factions in Hajar al-Aswad, Yalda, and Tadamon were already in the neighbourhood of the camp, but the offensive used Tadamon as one of two fronts to storm the capital from the south and penetrate central districts of Damascus (such as al-Midan). The regime responded with withering bombardments, and artillery was fired from Mount Qasioun into the southern suburbs.

It was in this context that the PFLP-GC finally took the decision to form popular committees (*al-Lijan al-Sha'biyahh*) and distribute weapons among the new recruits. According to the PFLP-GC's Dabour, whose father was partly responsible for forming the committees, the principal aim was to "preserve ... neutrality."

*The situation demanded immediate action from the Palestinian factions in Yarmouk camp to preserve the camp's neutrality and to keep it out of the conflict ongoing in the surrounding area. So the [PFLP-GC] issued a directive to form Palestinian popular committees to protect the camp from anyone trying to drag the camp and its people into the Syrian events.*

<sup>53</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council (2012), "No safe haven - A country on the move, a nation on the brink", 16 August 2012, available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/syria-brief-aug2012.pdf>. Last accessed on 26 November 2019. <sup>54</sup> S. Salamah (2016), "The Unacknowledged Syrians: Mobilization of Palestinian Refugees of Yarmouk in the Syrian Revolution", *Confluences Méditerranée*, No. 99, pp. 49-50. <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. <sup>56</sup> These initiatives would develop and respond to developments in Yarmouk as time went on: for example, activists created a hotline for camp residents to report violations by rebel groups like Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad, which started looting residents' homes in late 2012, just as activists developed farming initiatives in an attempt to stave off the worst effects of Yarmouk's siege after mid-2013. <sup>57</sup> Some have suggested that this can be attributed to the arrival of IDPs from Syrian communities that had already experienced the brunt of regime repression. However, Palestinian activists and civil society networks were already engaging in protests and other activities. <sup>58</sup> For more information, see: K. Hussein (2012), "Yarmouk camp in Damascus under the watch of the Syrian regime - Kamal Hussein", 27 March 2012, as published on al-Hayat newspaper's Facebook page, *daralhayat*, available at [https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=324727504258310](https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=324727504258310). Last accessed on 26 November 2019.

*That plan went into action right away because the situation was deteriorating from one day to the next, meaning it was necessary to put an end to that as soon as possible by forming and arming popular committees consisting of people from Yarmouk camp—from the factions or any side that wanted to protect the camp and keep it out of the events.*

Names were registered and weapons distributed.

Initially, there was coordination between the popular committees in Yarmouk and the rebels outside. In some cases, relations were actually positive.<sup>59</sup> The wounded from South Damascus were brought into Yarmouk for treatment in the camp's hospitals, and the committees coordinated to resolve problems between rebel-held territory and Yarmouk.

However, as time went on, it became increasingly apparent that some of these popular committees were designed only to keep Yarmouk on the side of the regime. Neutrality would be punished, just as rebellion.

By the PFLP-GC's own admission, formation of the committees was a rushed job. Dabour admitted they were formed under "urgent circumstances":

*Mistakes were made—in terms of how many people were armed, and the fact that some of them were good while others were bad.*

*In the end, most of [them] came forward and presented themselves as defenders of the camp. The fact is that the [PFLP-GC] did not have all the time to properly vet each person.*

Many agree that bringing weapons into the camp was massively controversial in and of itself, but worse was yet to come. It appears that during the second half of 2012, the regime infiltrated at least four of the popular committees, who started answering to Air Force Intelligence, the Republican Guard, and the Syrian army's Fourth Division rather than the PFLP-GC. These regime-aligned committees were led by Saeed Mahaad, Maher al-Muezzin, Muhammad Tamim (otherwise known as "al-Tamtam"), and Muhammad Abu Za'al. Their actions ensured that the popular committees became notorious within South Damascus, drawing the ire of rebel groups and pro-opposition Syrian communities. Purportedly designed to preserve the camp's neutrality, by late 2012 these committees were setting up checkpoints immediately next to Yalda and Hajar al-Aswad, attacking rebels on the outskirts of opposition-held territory and also carrying out other hostile actions (such as arresting injured FSA fighters taken into Yarmouk for treatment, thereby destroying the previous status quo of coordination). Around the same time, pro-government figures started selling weapons to the rebels—it is still unclear whether this was old-fashioned regime corruption, or a more deliberate attempt to create a worthy enemy in South Damascus in order to justify future military action. Either way, one of the officers chiefly responsible for these weapons sales was Saed Abd al-Aal, who would go on to play a crucial role in the 2018 pro-government offensive to retake Yarmouk.<sup>60</sup>

Even though rebel commanders suggest that many of the popular committees were in the beginning either genuinely trying to protect Yarmouk, or they had little interaction with them, the actions of people like al-Muezzin created tensions. Pro-opposition Syrians began to see the committees—and by extension, the Palestinians of Yarmouk—as pro-regime troublemakers who were against *their* revolution.

"There were bad people [in the committees] ... as well as some good people who were dealing closely with the Free [Syrian] Army in terms of providing assistance and treatment to the wounded," said Abu Hamam al-Nidal, from Hamas-affiliated faction Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis. "[But] the *perception* of the committees was that they were generally bad."

By Ramadan 2012, the situation had escalated. Pro-government forces starting hitting peripheral areas of the camp with mortar fire—the most infamous incident, a double-tap mortar strike on Jou'neh Street, killed dozens on August 2.<sup>61</sup> Um Ibrahim, a former Yarmouk resident originally from Jou'neh Street, was in the street with her daughter buying food in preparation for breaking the Ramadan fast. "That was the first time there was bombing," she said. "But afterwards, every day there were clashes between the *shabab* and the army: clashes, strikes, people fleeing and people dying."

Nowhere did Palestinians bear the brunt more than on the eastern outskirts of Yarmouk, opposite Tadamon. The road separating the two neighbourhoods, Palestine Street, became a full-blown frontline long before the rest of the camp. Night-time power cuts often were a sign that clashes were about to start, while snipers took potshots at Palestinian families on their rooftops, or men walking in the streets. Mortar fire became more frequent. The war had as good as arrived at Palestine Street, and as winter set in, it felt like the camp was already starting to come apart at the seams. Small numbers of Palestinian refugees were already fleeing Yarmouk, either moving into safer areas of the capital or heading to Lebanon and Turkey instead.

Rebels were still advancing. In early November 2012, they clashed with Syrian army units in Yalda and Tadamon, seizing an important checkpoint next to the Mothers of the Faithful (*Imhaat al-Mu'mineen*) Mosque that borders the two areas. By now, the FSA was just a couple of hundred metres from the entrance to Yarmouk. However, at the same time, the regime-aligned popular committees stepped up hostile actions

<sup>59</sup> For example, an informal agreement with the popular committees allowed rebel fighters in South Damascus to transport their wounded into Yarmouk for treatment, while they could visit family members in the displacement shelters provided they did not enter the camp armed. <sup>60</sup> Like Yasser Qashlaq, Saed Abd al-Aal is another name that would rise and rise as the conflict progressed. Abd al-Aal, the eldest son of a member of the Ba'ath Party's regional leadership, went on to lead the Free Palestine Movement's Al-Asqa Shield Forces militia, featuring prominently in the 2018 pro-government offensive against the Islamic State. <sup>61</sup> *The Telegraph* (2012), "Syria: refugee camp shelled near Damascus", 3 August 2012, available (behind paywall) at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9448635/Syria-refugee-camp-shelled-near-Damascus.html>. Last accessed on 8 April 2020.

against rebel groups. Inside Yarmouk, FSA fighters and their families were harassed and even detained by the popular committees. The two sides started regularly clashing on the outskirts of the camp, while the popular committees established checkpoints on the very perimeters of Yarmouk. As clashes intensified, the committee's fighters would withdraw and redeploy, withdraw and redeploy, until they were actually on the borders of the camp. Some saw it as a trap.

According to rebel commander Abu Tawfeeq al-Souri:

*There were attempts to lure us into the camp. Field movements [by the popular committees] during battles at the time were intended as small antagonisms followed by withdrawals. It was like a form of incitement to actually draw us towards the camp, and to enter the camp altogether.*

He remembered how Muezzin and Tamtam's men were using the Japanese Hospital, in southeast Yarmouk, to "snipe deep into Yalda."<sup>62</sup>

"After that, we sat down and asked the factions to restrain [those men]. We sat down with them several times," al-Souri added.

The rebels felt nothing was being done to stop people like Muezzin. So, they started to see Muezzin and his entourage as fair game. By extension, that meant Yarmouk as well. In December 2012, rebels attacked Muezzin's headquarters. Muezzin was lucky to escape with his life.

An emergency meeting was arranged between Palestinian faction representatives and rebel commanders. According to Syrian rebel commander Abu Bakr al-Zeed, who had led the fight on the Imhaat al-Mu'mineen checkpoint:

*The Palestinian factions realized there was a risk that we could actually enter the camp, so negotiations were started with the aim of keeping us out of the camp and respecting the camp's neutrality. They started sending personalities who would negotiate in the talks.*

In one such meeting, he remembered, factions met to "discuss the matter, and to ask what we would want in return [for not entering Yarmouk]."

In response, according to Abu Tawfeeq al-Souri, opposition factions requested the disbanding of all military formations within the popular committees that answered directly to the regime.

That was the final meeting.

### 'DAY OF THE MIG'

It was early afternoon on 16 December 2012 when a Syrian Air Force MiG jet suddenly screamed through the skies over Yarmouk. The crack and low rumbles of rockets hitting the ground rang out.

The MiG rockets targeted a mosque and a school, meaning that dozens of civilians were killed. The PFLP-GC's Dabour claimed that Syrian jets targeted a rebel operations-room meeting in the Abdel Qader al-Husseini Mosque at the time—a claim which several eyewitnesses denied, including one youth activist

who was among the first on the scene—and that the December 16 strikes were deliberate attacks on two places in the camp known locally as shelters for Syrian IDPs displaced from the South Damascus suburbs.

Many of the rebel commanders in Hajar al-Aswad would have had families inside those shelters, or would have known people who did. After all, as one commander said, "the real value of the camp was the fact that it sheltered our families." As such, some believe that the MiG strikes were deliberately intended to rile up rebels and bring them inside Yarmouk.

At the same time, the regime-aligned popular committees had become a serious problem for rebel groups in Hajar al-Aswad, Yalda, and Tadamon even before the MiG strike declared Yarmouk's entry into the conflict proper (after months of intermittent clashes, bombings and explosions on the peripheries of the camp). After mid-December, Yarmouk was a war zone.

"Our last meeting with the camp representatives—including some of the factional representatives—had ultimately failed to reach a solution regarding curbing and restraining the popular committees," said senior rebel commander Abu Tawfeeq al-Souri. "So the decision to enter the camp was taken."

There were risks—the camp had been the "lungs" of the rebellion in the southern suburbs, after all.

*We grew extremely worried that if we entered Yarmouk camp then we would lose this lung that allowed us to breathe through it, that we would lose the possibilities that the camp was providing to us.*

On 17 December 2012, rebels finally moved on Yarmouk. But despite all the preparations and deliberations, Yarmouk fell without much of a fight. Within 24 hours, most of the camp would be under the control of the opposition. In fact, Yarmouk fell with almost no fighting from the pro-government side, which seemed odd for a number of reasons: for example, the amount of efforts by the regime and PFLP-GC to protect the camp's neutrality, let alone the fact Yarmouk was on the doorstep of Damascus.

At the very least, it appears that the PFLP-GC and popular committees conducted a tactical withdrawal from frontline positions in Yarmouk. But rebel commanders still believe that they were duped, by being gradually drawn towards Yarmouk over the course of 2012 and then finally encouraged to go inside. Some rebel sources seem to suggest that this must have been the case because their local fortunes suffered afterwards. Factionalism became rife. Mysterious unclaimed assassinations started targeting various sides. And by mid-2013, the camp was completely besieged by the Syrian army, PFLP-GC, and National Defence Forces (NDF). With the benefit of hindsight, it could also be that rebel commanders regretted the loss of Yarmouk as it

<sup>62</sup> The Japanese Hospital was a UNRWA health facility under construction at the time, built with support from the Japanese embassy in Damascus. The building was not finished by the time it was commandeered by fighters, and is now badly damaged as a result of aerial bombing that took place during the 2018 pro-government offensive to retake the camp.

had been their lungs, their breath. However, at the same time, the accounts of advancing rebels do point to some kind of tactical withdrawal: the PFLP-GC was a superior and better-trained force than the thousand or so rebels in South Damascus, and yet barely engaged them; while there had been surprisingly little resistance from the popular committees formed precisely to stop that happening, let alone the Syrian army or PFLP-GC units stationed in and around the camp. Several figures within the PFLP-GC—Rateb al-Nemr, Mahmoud Abu Zeid, and Abu Samra Abu Zeid, among others—were also said to have directly aided the entry of opposition groups into the camp.<sup>63</sup>

According to Abu Tawfeeq al-Souri:

*It became apparent to us later on that the regime was already preparing for this eventuality, and that it had plenty of tools at its disposal—including Bayan Omar [Meza'al] and Mahmoud Abu Zeid. There was already an arrangement to spoil the situation.*

Abu Tawfeeq al-Souri's final thought almost sounds naive now, but can be taken as more of a reflection of the high hopes of the anti-Assad rebellion at the time. "Our decision to enter the camp was in response to events at the time, as a reaction to the actions of some elements within the popular committees," he said. "We imagined that the camp would be our gateway to reach deep into Damascus."

#### 'LAND OF JIHAD'

One of the first groups inside Yarmouk was Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad, a faction native to South Damascus that was led by Abu Uday and Bayan Omar Meza'al. The brigade, in the words of Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis commander Abu Hamam al-Nidal, "wreaked havoc and ran amok around the camp." Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad fighters started looting and vandalizing homes, harassing Palestinian residents who had not already fled, and firing mortars from areas still with civilians living in them.

Opposition sources maintain that there was more than just thuggery at play. They argue that both Abu Uday and Meza'al were already communicating with the Syrian regime's security services, and that they were effectively acting as regime agents within the command structure of Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad.<sup>64</sup>

Cracks started to emerge. For one, Palestinians in Yarmouk were angry and scared, and a narrative that the opposition were thieving and corrupt spread quickly. Divisions between Palestinian communities and pro-opposition displaced communities in Hajar al-Aswad started to emerge. Islamist groups moved in to stop Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad, whose commanders were apprehended—however, this created further bad blood and the brigade's commanders were released after the intervention of tribal representatives from Hajar al-Aswad. Other rebel factions were also angry with Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad.

Inter-factional infighting soon became a stalwart feature of life under the rebels. There were clashes

inside the camp. Fighters from hardline Islamist faction Jabhat al-Nusra started moving into the camp.

After seizing territory on the outskirts of Yarmouk and the South Damascus suburbs starting in early 2013, the Syrian army and PFLP-GC (stationed at the very northern entrance of the camp at the Batikha Roundabout) started to restrict movement in and out. Yarmouk was soon under partial siege. But in July 2013, that siege became total. Among the first sieges seen in the Syrian conflict, it would be one of its most devastating. Hundreds starved to death inside the city limits of the Syrian capital.

This history is still contested. The PFLP-GC's Dabour repeatedly blamed "those who came to regard Yarmouk as 'land for jihad'" for what happened to the camp—its collapse and takeover by the rebels, the siege, as well as the failed attempts to reach a ceasefire between the warring parties. It is important to interrogate this line of argument because it would become more prominent the moment the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized Yarmouk in April 2015. This same narrative re-emerged, stronger than ever, after the beginning of the 2018 pro-government offensive against hardline Islamist and opposition pockets of South Damascus. Pro-government social media accounts began to portray ISIS as the party chiefly responsible for the tragedy of Yarmouk—including the siege, even though ISIS only seized the camp in April 2015. The joint Palestinian-Syrian force (made up of Syrian army units, old-guard loyalist factions such as the PFLP-GC and Fatah al-Intifada, the Free Palestine Movement, and Iranian-formed NDF militias) finally seized the camp in May 2018, notably with Russian air support which played a large role in managing operations and conducting aerial strikes during the offensive.

According to Dabour:

*The [PFLP-GC] brought in large quantities of relief supplies, both openly and secretly, during the period of the closure. All the parties involved were aware of this. In many cases, we were unable to actually reach civilians inside the camp because of the gunmen from Hajar al-Aswad who were deployed on the outskirts of the camp.*<sup>65</sup>

What he does not mention is that the PFLP-GC participated directly in the siege, and shot dead those trying to bring supplies into the camp. Perhaps one of

<sup>63</sup> Al-Nemr was killed during the storming of al-Khalsa by rebel forces on 18 December 2012. Mahmoud Abu Zeid remained inside Yarmouk, during which time he led groups including a formation of PFLP-GC defectors, until 2014, when he returned to the ranks of the PFLP-GC. Abu Samra Abu Zeid, meanwhile, left the camp immediately after the rebels' entry into Yarmouk, and he was detained by the Syrian government. Rebel commander Abu Bakr a-Zeed believed incidents like Abu Samra Abu Zeid's arrest reflected an "attempt [by the regime] to hide something: the ease with which the Free [Syrian] Army entered the camp and took it over." <sup>64</sup> Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad was later expelled from Yarmouk by a coalition of Islamist factions, later heading to Sbeineh in the Damascus countryside. According to accounts, Meza'al handed over maps of rebel positions to the Syrian army, which retook the town on the outskirts of Damascus in November 2013. Afterwards, Abu Uday returned to his former work in the regional security branch for Rural Damascus (Branch 227) until he was detained by Air Force Intelligence for unknown reasons in 2019. <sup>65</sup> Note that Dabour uses the Arabic word for closure (*aghlaa'*), rather than siege (*husaar*).

the most infamous examples happened on 11 January 2013, when Ghassan al-Shehabi, the founder of al-Shajara Publishing House in Yarmouk, was shot dead at a PFLP-GC checkpoint while trying to ferry in bread to the camp.<sup>66</sup>

However, Dabour's portrayal of PFLP-GC fighters as defenders of Yarmouk grew with the arrival of Jabhat al-Nusra after 2013, and then ISIS militants in April 2015—the date when the hardline group seized almost all of Yarmouk with the help of Jabhat al-Nusra. Foreign journalists permitted to cover the situation on the front lines sat down with PFLP-GC veterans and younger fighters confident that they would one day push back the jihadists.<sup>67</sup> However, this is a simplification of the evidently complex situation on the ground in Yarmouk after its militarization between 2012 and 2013.

The PFLP-GC were also not the only pro-government factions manning frontlines after the beginning of the siege. Siege lines were divided up between different factions: the PFLP-GC guarded the northern outskirts of the camp from their main base in Batikha Square; smaller factions such as al-Sa'iqa manned positions on the eastern axis of the camp; while Fatah al-Intifada and Saed Abd al-Aal's Free Palestine Movement militia would come to take on more prominent roles around the camp after 2015. Hezbollah trainers and military advisers were also present further south, and reportedly provided training to Palestinian fighters from Fatah al-Intifada.<sup>68</sup>

Back inside Yarmouk, Islamist groups were gaining in strength. By early 2013, Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis had emerged from a number of other smaller factions. Although the group has always denied its links to Hamas, just as Hamas has denied links to Aknaf, it is generally accepted that the commanders and fighters that joined Aknaf were "Hamas people."<sup>69</sup> Aknaf and cells of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters began capitalizing on camp residents' desire for an authority that could intervene and stop the corrupt practices of FSA factions such as Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad. As was the case elsewhere in Syria at the time, Islamist factions came out on top for a number of reasons: discontent with corrupt or thuggish practices by some FSA factions, as well as ideologies and rhetoric put forward by the Islamist factions, and their reputation on the battlefield as efficient fighters against pro-Assad forces. Furthermore, a wave of assassinations against perceived opponents, nearly all of them unclaimed, helped to quell any pockets of possible dissent. Ultimately, the Islamists seized total control of Yarmouk through the formation of the Islamic League (*al-Rabitah al-Islamiyah*), bringing together various factions present in South Damascus: Jabhat al-Nusra, Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Sham al-Rasul, and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). (Jaish Ababeel and al-Ahdeh al-'Amriyeh did not join, meanwhile.) After its formation, the League expelled Liwa' Hajar al-Aswad, who went on to Sbeineh in the Damascus countryside.

## AN 'ISLAMIC STATE' IN YARMOUK

On 1 April 2015, ISIS militants moved into position, ready to storm Yarmouk. Within the space of barely 24 hours, the camp would be theirs.

The fall of Yarmouk to ISIS may have come as a surprise to some in the camp.<sup>70</sup> However, ISIS-linked militants had been in South Damascus ever since the split with Jabhat al-Nusra in April 2013. ISIS, whose leadership mostly came from neighbouring Yalda, had also tried to seize South Damascus before, after growing friction—between ISIS and Jaysh al-Islam in Yalda, and then between ISIS and Afnaj al-Sham and Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis in Yarmouk—turned into all-out clashes. ISIS tried to dominate Jaysh al-Islam, which controlled Yalda, by arresting its leaders and trying to altogether destroy the group.

It failed. All rebel factions in South Damascus united against ISIS, pushing it out of Yalda and into a small corner of Hajar al-Aswad, where what remained of the hardline group was besieged and hemmed in for months. ISIS wasted away. Food was allowed in, but otherwise the group were under siege for seven months.

While the factions failed to eliminate ISIS once and for all, the various groups manning frontline positions on the besieged ISIS pocket—Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis being one of them—started to withdraw and focus resources elsewhere. This was in part because of fears at the time that the US-led International Coalition formed to combat ISIS in Syria and Iraq might target southern Damascus, and prompt a broader response against factions present there. However, some put it down to complacency, as well.

"Some of our leaders kept on insisting that there was no chance that Daesh would [try to take the camp], which meant that we weren't prepared for the scenario of Daesh coming back in our direction," said Abu Hamam al-Nidal, a commander in the Hamas-affiliated group, blaming what happened next on "our leniency" as well as the "betrayal of Nusra."

In the days leading up to April 2015, Nusra facilitated the movement of ISIS fighters out of the rebel-besieged pocket that had kept them hemmed in for months, so that they could spread out within the larger regime-besieged pocket of Yarmouk and South Damascus. ISIS fighters took up positions on the western, southern, and eastern edges of Yarmouk, via Hajar al-Aswad and

<sup>66</sup> C. Nasser (2013), "To My Valentine: Death will not part us", *Amnesty International*, 14 February 2013, available at '<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2013/02/to-my-valentine-death-will-not-part-us/>'. Last accessed on 26 November 2019. <sup>67</sup> For example, see: N. Samaha, (2015), "The Defenders of Yarmouk", *Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2015, available at '<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/04/inside-the-ruins-of-yarmouk-refugee-camp-syria/>'. Last accessed on 23 March 2020. <sup>68</sup> S. Anderson, (2017), "The Next Middle East War? Hezbollah May Risk Everything in All-Out Fight With Israel", *Newsweek*, 3 July 2017, available at '<https://www.newsweek.com/2017/07/14/middle-east-war-hezbollah-israel-syria-630990.html>'. Last accessed on 14 January 2020. <sup>69</sup> As one example, Aknaf's lead commander Abu Ahmad al-Mushir previously worked as a bodyguard in the entourage of Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal, the former political bureau chief of the Islamist movement. Abu Hamam al-Nidal also previously performed a similar role within Hamas. <sup>70</sup> A commonly used nickname for ISIS is Daesh, an acronym of the group's name in Arabic. Both names are used interchangeably in the following text.



Hay al-Zein, ready to move on what was left of rebel-held Yarmouk. Sleeper cells were present within the camp itself.

The offensive finally came on 1 April 2015. ISIS continued to assassinate activists, civil society figures, and humanitarian workers, part of a wave of killings that had preceded the offensive. The fighting, followed by ISIS repression, pushed several thousand civilians into neighbouring Yalda. Barely six thousand people remained in Yarmouk, while the regime bombarded Yarmouk from the air—including with barrel bombs. Pro-government sources, and even PLO figures like Ahmad al-Majdalani, claimed that Yarmouk was empty and that the regime should take the fight to the hard-liners inside the camp.

A small remainder of Hamas-affiliated Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis fighters were surrounded—including Abu Hamam al-Nidal himself. He described how around 150 fighters were “trapped.” They sent a message to ISIS asking to be allowed safe transfer to nearby Babbila, but were refused. ISIS started beheading captives.

Abu Hamam al-Nidal started communications with two figures with known contacts in Syrian intelligence, in the hope that they would mediate for their exit via regime-held territory.

*I was communicating with Sheikh Muhammad ‘Alyan and Abu Khaled Adnan Ibrahim (a secretary in the Fatah movement). Because of my position within Aknaf, I was the one communicating with them.*

*I called Abu Khaled Adnan ... [and] then I called Sheikh Muhammad ‘Alyan and told him that the camp had fallen into the hands of Daesh, except for the area we were in. I requested that [the regime] provide us with safety.*

*After a while, [the sheikh] called back that it would be safe for me and all the shabab who were with us. We came to be regarded as safe in the eyes of the regime, and managed to get out from the grip of the vice.*

Cross-line communications were not just taking place on the ground. According to Abu Hamam al-Nidal, Hamas political chief Khaled Meshaal actually contacted the PFLP-GC’s Ahmad Jibril, and requested that the pro-Syrian faction help “our guys” who were besieged in the camp.

The Aknaf fighters were finally allowed to leave through government-held northern Yarmouk, and travelled to rebel-held Babbila.

Others were not so lucky. Some six thousand civilians stayed behind to live under ISIS rule, as the hard-

line group quickly began implementing its brutal interpretation of *sharia* law—women were forced to follow strict guidelines for veiling and clothing, suspected “spies” and “apostates” were publicly executed or flogged, and the group’s *hisbah* (morality police) force patrolled the camp’s markets looking for contraband items like cigarettes. Sleeper cells affiliated with ISIS conducted security operations—including assassinations and bombings—within besieged areas of southern Damascus outside the group’s direct control, such as Yalda, Babila, Beit Sahem, and al-Qadam. ISIS also claimed responsibility for a bombing inside a government-controlled area of Damascus city.

### THE FINAL OFFENSIVE

By spring 2018, Batikha Square was fast becoming a who’s who of pro-government militia politics. In the weeks after the Ghouta offensive, Batikha Square became the gathering-point for a joint Palestinian/Syrian pro-government force, meant to retake Yarmouk from ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (since renamed Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS). New pro-government actors—including Liwa’ al-Quds—headed straight from Ghouta to South Damascus.<sup>71</sup> The joint force would include Syrian army units, Lebanese Hezbollah, old-guard Palestinian factions such as the PFLP-GC and Fatah al-Intifada, National Defence Forces militias, Liwa’ al-Quds fighters, as well as the military wing of the Free Palestine Movement, led by Saed Abd al-Aal.

After days of talk that ISIS was negotiating with the Syrian government to evacuate to the central *Badia* desert, negotiations reportedly faltered. Pro-government forces were deployed almost immediately afterwards. On the late afternoon of 19 April 2018, the tanks started rolling in.

In the days and weeks that followed, the pro-government joint force used airstrikes, barrel bombs, artillery, tank units, and infantry in its fight against Islamic State and HTS militants. The offensive saw ISIS militants evacuated to the central *Badia* region and HTS militants to Idlib, while the three rebel-held villages just east of Yarmouk underwent reconciliation, with several thousand fighters and civilians (including a number of Palestinians) evacuating to poorly serviced IDP camps in northwestern Syria.<sup>72</sup>

The last battle for Yarmouk lasted just one month, but would see much of whatever remained of Yarmouk turned into rubble and memory.

<sup>71</sup> See the following chapter for a full study of Liwa’ al-Quds and their role in the Palestinian camps of Aleppo. <sup>72</sup> ISIS fighters evacuated from southern Damascus would later play a vital role in a horrific multi-pronged ISIS attack on several communities in southern Syria’s Sweida province in July 2018. Hundreds of civilians died in the onslaught.

### 3 NEIRAB

Aleppo's Neirab camp would be different to many of the other Palestinian camps around Syria. Unlike Daraa and Yarmouk, it never fell to the opposition—although it was briefly and partially besieged by rebel forces between 2012 and 2013. Additionally, Neirab was a place where the popular committees (*al-Lijan al-Sha'biyahh*) project pioneered by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC) in Yarmouk would not only succeed but, through support from Syria's allies, lead to the formation of arguably the most significant and powerful pro-government Palestinian militia seen during the course of the Syrian conflict.

#### THE ALEPPO CAMPS

Aleppo was home to two Palestinian camps before the conflict: Neirab and Handarat. Approximately 13 kilometres east of Aleppo, Neirab was the largest of the nine official camps around Syria before the war, with around 20,000 Palestinians living there.<sup>73</sup> The camp was originally established between 1948 and 1950 for refugees fleeing northern areas of Historic Palestine.<sup>74</sup> Some of the newly arrived refugees took up shelter in an abandoned military barracks (*baraksaat*) that had been used by Allied forces during the Second World War. Each of the 94 barracks buildings were divided into ten housing units initially separated by sheets.<sup>75</sup> Families would remain for decades in this poorly ventilated concrete-block slum housing, separated into units with makeshift walls and roofed over with corrugated iron sheets, leading to UNRWA to report in 2007 that Neirab “suffers from the most abysmal living conditions of all the Palestine refugee camps in Syria,” with refugees there “living for almost 60 years in dreadful and inhumane circumstances sheltered in a series of vacated army barracks.”<sup>76</sup>

In 2000, UNRWA launched a first-ever development project to rehabilitate housing and reduce overcrowding in Neirab before rehousing families in the other Aleppo camp, Handarat.<sup>77</sup> Handarat (*Ein el-Tal*) camp is around 13 kilometres north-east of the city of Aleppo, and was established as an unofficial camp in 1962. The camp was previously home to some seven thousand inhabitants before rebel forces entered the camp in April 2013 and forcibly displaced the entire population.<sup>78</sup>

The two Aleppo camps had different features and so experienced the Syrian uprising in different ways. Compared with other camps around the country, Neirab and Handarat were well outside the city, spreading out on remote plots near agricultural land (Neirab) or rocky hill slopes (Handarat).<sup>79</sup> This was in contrast with almost all of the major Palestinian camps in Syria—including Daraa and Yarmouk, whose strategic value and significance during the course of the uprising came from the fact that both camps were

extensions of their respective host cities. Palestinians were not directly integrated into Aleppo society in the same way that they were in somewhere like Daraa or Yarmouk. At the same time, some sources suggest that out of the two camps, Handarat was better integrated into its surroundings compared with Neirab—with the help of social networks forged through work and university.

According to an informed source from Aleppo, who is close to the Palestinian factions in Neirab:<sup>80</sup>

*Handarat was better integrated into its local surroundings, and that was something that you could detect in the camp's accent. Because the camp had more contact with the city, the Palestinian accent in Handarat was closer to the Aleppo accent rather than a Palestinian accent. In Neirab, on the other hand, the Palestinian accent was closer to the Galilee accent [in Palestine].*

Perhaps attributable to these lower levels of integration of both camps into local Syrian communities was a high level of participation in Palestinian politics. According to that same source, most people in Neirab were associated with a particular faction or political organization. Additionally, anthropologist Nell Gabiam found that Palestinian factions took on a prominent role in charity work and social programmes in the camps before the war. Hamas, Fatah, and PIJ operated “community-based charities” in Handarat, while the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) ran a kindergarten for low-income families, and a youth centre in Neirab.<sup>81</sup> Like other camps, Neirab also hosted a centre for the government-affiliated Palestinian Charitable Organization (*al-hay'et al-kheiriyet al-aghathet al-sha'ab al-falasteeniyeh*), whose board included Palestinian members of the Ba'ath Party, factional representatives, and independents.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>73</sup> UNRWA, “Neirab Camp”, *undated*, available at ‘<https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/neirab-camp>.’ Last accessed on 6 January 2020. <sup>74</sup> H. al-Mawed (1999), “The Palestinian Refugees In Syria: Their Past, Present and Future”, *International Development Research Centre*, 1999, pp. 17–18 & p. 25, available at ‘<http://prn.mcgill.ca/prn/al-mawed.pdf>.’ Last accessed on 6 January 2020. <sup>75</sup> N. Gabiam, (2014), “Implementing the Neirab Rehabilitation Project: UNRWA's approach to development in Syria's Palestinian refugee camps”, *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development*, edited by Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal and Lex Takkenberg, Routledge, 2014. <sup>76</sup> UNRWA (2007), quoted in N. Gabiam (2016), *The Politics of Suffering*, p. 86. <sup>77</sup> The so-called Neirab Rehabilitation Project became UNRWA's first attempt at a longer-term project specifically aimed at development/rehabilitation rather than merely humanitarian assistance. The project aimed to rehouse those living in the *baraksaat* (or at least those residents willing to move to newly built housing in Handarat) and then replace the barracks with better-quality housing. Initially, the project garnered controversy within the local Palestinian community because of a perception that the UN agency sought to destroy the *baraksaat*, a site with immense significance to local Palestinian notions of memory and the suffering meted out by Israel and the international community. For an authoritative account of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, see: N. Gabiam (2016), *The Politics of Suffering*. <sup>78</sup> UNRWA, “Ein El Tal (Unofficial Camp)”, *undated*, available at ‘<https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/ein-el-tal-unofficial-camp>.’ Last accessed on 6 January 2020. <sup>79</sup> Even now, the main entrance to Neirab from the camp's western approach looks more like a country backroad passing through fields. <sup>80</sup> All sources interviewed for this chapter asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. Names have been changed and identifying details withheld accordingly. <sup>81</sup> N. Gabiam (2016), *The Politics of Suffering*, p. 57. <sup>82</sup> *Ibid*.

At the same time, though, none of the loyalist Palestinian factions—for example al-Sa'iqa and the PFLP-GC—were particularly strong in Neirab, which would impact how pro-government actors mobilized in and around the camp after the uprising broke out in 2011.

### THE SYRIAN UPRISING IN ALEPPO

The Syrian revolution took much longer to get off the ground in Aleppo than in other Syrian cities. A historical centre of commerce, Aleppo had long been home to powerful networks of merchants, businessmen, and industrialists for whom there was little to gain and much to lose from unrest—let alone an all-out uprising.

While Aleppo's first protests followed soon after the outbreak of the uprising in Daraa, the movement failed to take root in the way it had there, or in Homs or Damascus. Aleppo protests escalated gradually through those few early months of the uprising—particularly in the working-class sprawling informal settlements of Eastern Aleppo. Nevertheless, the Syrian government soon stepped up repression. Live fire was used on multiple occasions. On 6 September 2011, tens of thousands reportedly marched for the funeral of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Salqini, a pro-opposition sheikh who died in hospital in mysterious circumstances following a visit to his home by state security agents (*Mukhabarat*). Rumours spread soon after that it was the *Mukhabarat* who had killed him for his pro-revolutionary stance.<sup>83</sup>

Aleppo University soon became the centrifuge of the local protest movement. The fact that Palestinian students participated strongly in those campus protests established the first solid link between the city and the two Palestinian camps sitting out on the outskirts. Students brought the fervour of the revolutionary slogans and the grassroots activism into the camps.

Despite the protests still happening on a weekly basis in the eastern suburbs of the city, it was the countryside that birthed Aleppo's armed rebellion. Soon rebels were sweeping through eastern areas of Aleppo's countryside. As such, both Palestinian camps became of huge strategic importance by virtue of their locations as well as the strategic sites that they stood near—the reason why both rebel and pro-government forces were so keen to see the camps politicized and militarized (often over the heads of the Palestinian civilians living in the camps).

- Handarat sits on a sloping hill that gives a vantage point over much of the rural approach into north-eastern Aleppo. As the conflict developed, it also became important because of its proximity to crucial frontlines such as al-Kindi Hospital which would change from regime to rebel hands, and back again, several times during the course of the conflict.
- Neirab, on the other hand, sits barely a kilometre from Aleppo's main civilian and military airports. After 2012, the military airport became the centre of

Assad's aerial campaign in Aleppo, from which the Syrian Air Force launched airstrikes and *barameel* (barrel bomb) sorties over rebel-held parts of the city and the outlying countryside. The airport was also a vital strategic supply link for the regime as well as its Iranian and Russian allies. As rebels began to encroach on the area from all sides after 2012, the airport had to be protected at all costs.

By mid-2012, the Syrian government and its allies could not ignore the camps any longer. As rebels advanced from the southern Aleppo countryside towards the highway beside Neirab, and the airport with it, something had to be done. In other camps, the regime might have turned to the PFLP-GC or other loyalist Palestinian factions for help preparing and arming local communities. But their comparatively weak presence in the Aleppo camps meant that Syrian intelligence instead turned to new allies—relying on new military formations of *shabiha* on the margins of the security establishment that did not have a single reference within security branches, and that were not subject to the geographical spheres of responsibility that traditionally apply to regime security actors.

The way Liwa' al-Quds tell it, the group came from relatively humble beginnings. Interviewed as part of a 2017 documentary about Neirab by Hezbollah-linked TV channel Al Mayadeen, deputy commander Adnan al-Sayed suggested that Liwa' al-Quds received a "green light" from the Syrian government to arm Neirab, before small bands of honourable men got to work.<sup>84</sup>

*The state provided us with weapons—some weapons, but on an individual basis ... not on a continuous basis.*

*We took this green light, to arm the camp. There was myself, Mr. Muhammad (the leader of the brigade) and the martyr Muhammad al-Rafea. We would buy weapons ... and the state provided us with ammo and weapons via [Aleppo] airport.*<sup>85</sup>

Muhammad Abu Leil, Liwa' al-Quds's media representative, similarly framed the brigade along the lines of a nationalist Palestinian narrative with the rebels as Zionist infiltrators, and Liwa' al-Quds as protectors of the land.

*The aims of these armed [rebel] groups, which emerged around Neirab camp and Aleppo, were the same aims as those of Zionism—to pressure and displace the Palestinians from the camp.*

<sup>83</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "SYRIA: Death of popular Sunni cleric stirs unrest in Aleppo", 6 September 2011, available at '<https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/09/syria-aleppo-sunni-cleric.html>.' Last accessed on 11 April 2020. <sup>84</sup> All of the subsequent quotations from Liwa' al-Quds members come from the 2017 *Al Mayadeen TV* documentary cited below, unless stated otherwise. The authors attempted to interview Liwa' al-Quds members during research for this report, but they either did not respond, or refused. The authors also conducted social media monitoring of Liwa' al-Quds's Facebook pages to aid research. <sup>85</sup> *Al Mayadeen TV* (2017), "From the ground—Aleppo: Neirab Camp (من الأرض حلب: مخيم النيراب)", YouTube Channel: Al Mayadeen Programs, *YouTube*, 5 May 2017, available at '<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ez1b5SyWrYo>.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019.

It was a sentiment repeated by Liwa' al-Quds commander Muhammad al-Saeed in an interview earlier that same year. "The brigade ... played a major role in protecting the Neirab camp," al-Saeed claimed,<sup>86</sup> adding that they had fought back purportedly Israeli-backed rebel groups at great cost to the camp. "Images of martyrs from the Palestinian youth line its walls."<sup>87</sup>

In fact, the formation of what would become Liwa' al-Quds actually involved high-level coordination between local Syrian intelligence branches, *shabiha* (state sponsored militia) networks and the loyalist Palestinian leadership in Aleppo, with support shortly afterwards coming from the Syrian regime's two main backers, Iran and Russia.

Liwa' al-Quds would become much more than a neighbourhood protection unit.

### 'IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR THE CAMP TO PROTECT ITSELF'

When the Syrian revolution first broke out in Aleppo, most of the men who would go on to become key commanders in Liwa' al-Quds were leading small *shabiha* groups tasked with violently shutting down anti-government protests within Aleppo. Adnan al-Sayed was running a failing business selling furniture. Al-Rafea, the son of a former Fatah fighter, was known as little more than a local criminal: "a failed person," as one former camp resident put it.

*Faced with demonstrations and the [popular] movement in Aleppo, the regime started forming popular committees of shabiha. Palestinian communities in and around the city were part of this as well.*

*Around mid-2012, the regime started forming small groups inside Neirab camp that didn't number more than the fingers on two hands. There was Hassan al-Masri, Adnan al-Sayed, and Zuheir al-Shareeh—these were the individuals in Neirab concerned with the formation of the popular committees. Hassan al-Masri was the first one to form one of these armed committees, and he was always claiming that these committees were for the protection of the camp, that they would never be involved in anything outside the camp itself. And yet each week, Adnan al-Sayed and Zuheir al-Shareeh would take people out in a pick-up truck—there were never more than nine of them—to suppress the demonstrations that were happening on Fridays near so-and-so mosque in such-and-such an area.*

Muhammad al-Saeed was in a similar line of work, but within Aleppo itself. The son of a prominent Fatah fighter from Neirab, al-Saeed had previously worked as an architectural engineer in the Gulf before returning to Aleppo in the years immediately before the uprising. There, al-Saeed started working in the construction industry alongside powerful members of the Syrian regime's local patronage networks. He built up vital contacts with officers in Air Force Intelligence—al-Saeed is said to be very close with Air Force Intelli-

gence's former Aleppo chief, Brigadier-General Adeb Salameh,<sup>88</sup> who is in turn well-connected with pro-government affiliates in Aleppo such as Hussam Katerji. Crucially, al-Saeed also worked in construction with the Berri clan, a powerful Sunni family from Aleppo that is close to the Syrian government but also doubles as an organized crime network with its own illicit business networks, smuggling revenues, and militias operated from its main constituency in Bab al-Neirab, on the southern outskirts of Aleppo and just a few kilometres west of Neirab camp.<sup>89</sup>

According to Mazen, a Palestinian rebel commander originally from Aleppo:

*[Al-Saeed and the Berri clan] worked together on construction and urban planning projects ... [and] because of the Berri clan's solid relations with the security services and parliament, they managed to bypass the official regulations against unauthorized construction [of informal settlements]. Al-Saeed was the one supervising this work.*

As a result, al-Saeed became the prominent figure in the new *shabiha* formation emerging out of Neirab.

Meanwhile, pro-opposition Syrian communities watched Palestinians committing violence on behalf of the Syrian government, and took note. Soon, the Aleppo camps were drawn into a cycle of escalation with their Syrian neighbours.

On 24 June 2012, Neirab saw its first clash. Men were killed on both sides. Clashes then erupted between Palestinian *shabiha* from Neirab camp and a neighbouring village of the same name. Pro-opposition sources blamed Adnan al-Sayed and Muhammad Mahmoud al-Rafea for attempting to stoke up divisions between the two communities.<sup>90</sup> "The regime and the *shabiha* started broadcasting propaganda around that the Free [Syrian] Army ... were going to enter the camp, so it was important for the camp to protect itself," Mazen remembered.

Worse was to come. A few weeks later, on 10 July 2012, unknown assailants kidnapped more than a dozen Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) fighters— young men from either Handarat or Neirab—as they headed back to Aleppo from the Syrian army's Masyaf camp (in Hama province) for holidays from military service. According to the official narrative, the men were

<sup>86</sup> "Claimed" because, according to almost all accounts of the establishment of Liwa' al-Quds, the brigade was actually established around the time of the rebel capture of Handarat and siege of Neirab, in 2013. <sup>87</sup> A. Douri (2017), "Liwa' al-Quds commander to Dam Press: Our aim is to clear all Syrian territory of terrorists, and our compass is Jerusalem (البراهيبين ويوصلتنا في القدس قائد لواء القدس لدام برس: هدفنا تطهير كافة الأراضي السورية من رجس)", *Dam Press*, 17 February 2017, available at 'http://www.dampress.net/mobile/?page=show\_det&category\_id=6&id=77095.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>88</sup> Omran Center for Strategic Studies (2019), *The Syrian Military Establishment in 2019: Sectarianism, Militias and Foreign Investment*, p. 81. <sup>89</sup> The Berri clan have been a key pro-government presence in Aleppo for years, and got rich off smuggling during the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. Hassan Berri is a member of Syria's parliament, and his brother led the Berri until his execution at the hands of rebels from the Liwa' al-Tawhid (Unity Brigade) in July 2012. <sup>90</sup> The commanders were blamed for this locally. Protests filmed in Neirab village at the time show angry protesters calling for al-Sayed's head before chanting pro-opposition slogans including, "the people demand the fall of the regime!" Another video from the clashes shows local men from the village fighting what they call *shabiha* from the Berri clan.

kidnapped at a roadside somewhere in Hama province by rebels and then executed. Bodies were returned to the camps. People in Neirab were furious.

However, the story is still steeped in competing narratives and rumours, with one side blaming the other. Rebel commander Mazen, for example, claimed that:

*The news from the beginning was that a group from the [PLA] were detained in a security branch. That story was being conveyed at the time by leaders of the [PLA] in Masyaf, who were following the case of [the fighters'] detention in one of the security branches.*

*Of course, the regime's supporters claimed that this had been carried out by the opposition, but the reality is that they were arrested by the regime, who then tortured them to death in [its] dungeons.*

Reports later suggested that photos of the bodies of two of the kidnapped PLA fighters, Mahmoud Abu Leil and Anas Karim, were found in the Syrian government's Criminal Security Branch in Idlib—in information reportedly garnered from documents seized when mostly hardline Islamist rebels stormed the city (and various government installations) in early 2015.<sup>91</sup> It was not possible to independently verify those reports.

Regardless of what happened to the PLA fighters, events escalated quickly afterwards. By late 2012, opposition forces had almost encircled Neirab and imposed a partial siege on tens of thousands of civilians living there. Intelligence branches started actively arming Palestinian *shabiha* groups inside Neirab. A joint operations room in Aleppo airport, including Iranian commanders, coordinated military operations in tandem with the *shabiha*.

Although the siege of Neirab would be broken by the Syrian army in April 2013—the same month that rebels stormed Handarat camp and forcibly displaced its entire population<sup>92</sup>—both events dramatically turned local Palestinian sentiment harshly in favour of the Syrian government. This only made it easier for the security branches and Palestinian factions to arm Neirab, and keep the camp on side.

By October 2013, the messy collection of *shabiha* groups were brought under one name. Because of the relative weakness of loyalist Palestinian factions like the PFLP-GC in Neirab, the regime instead looked to form a brand-new Palestinian formation not part of those traditional networks, and which would not differ in origins, form, or conduct from any of the other militias formed by the Syrian government and its allies during the course of the conflict. Unlike the popular committees established directly under the command of traditional loyalist factions (al-Sa'iqa, the PFLP-GC, etc.), groups like Liwa' al-Quds were closer to the regime militia networks, many of them linked back to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Russians would later join in this work through their support and training of groups like Liwa' al-Quds.

As such, several government allies had their hand in the formation of Liwa' al-Quds. Al-Saeed made use of

his ties to Air Force Intelligence and the Berri clan to secure weapons and funding early on.

As Mazen put it:

*Support for [Liwa' al-Quds] first came via Air Force Intelligence and the Berri [clan] in the form of financing and weapons. They started recruiting among the residents and youth in Neirab camp under the pretext of defending and protecting the camp along its boundaries—as opposed to having anything to do with fighting outside or actually inside the camp.*

By 2014, Liwa' al-Quds was also receiving Iranian support and funding, as well as likely Hezbollah training on the ground, as part of the Local Defence Forces (LDF).<sup>93</sup> At the same time, individuals within Neirab likely provided Liwa' al-Quds with an additional bridge to the Iranians.

According to the source with links to Palestinian factions in Neirab, one of the key characters behind the scenes during the early years of Liwa' al-Quds's formation was Riad Kamel al-Khateeb. Himself a leader of one of the *shabiha* popular committees in Neirab before 2013, Khateeb was important because he provided a bridge to the Iranians, having purportedly worked with them previously as a recruiter for Iranian-backed Palestinian factions (namely Hamas and Islamic Jihad) before 2011.<sup>94</sup> The source added that the PFLP-GC's political secretary, Talal al-Naji, approached al-Khateeb as well as Muhammad Mostafa, head of the Ba'ath Party's local Palestinian branch in Aleppo (the Tayseer al-Halabi Division), in providing local legitimacy to the initiative:

*The aim behind the establishment of Liwa' al-Quds was to create a united, dominant Palestinian front with Talal al-Naji at its helm running things on behalf of the Syrian leadership, while gathering together all of the mercenaries, unemployed, and others [in Neirab] willing to fight the opposition under this front.*

And while Liwa' al-Quds is always described in pro-government media as a Palestinian outfit, often as the 'Palestinian Jerusalem Brigade' (*Liwa' al-Quds al-falasteeni*), many of the rank-and-file fighters are Syrians rather than Palestinians (who tend to hold senior positions). Liwa' al-Quds recruited and absorbed fighters from the two Shia-majority villages of Nubl and al-Zahraa, northwest of Aleppo.

<sup>91</sup> Action Group for Palestinians of Syria (2017), "5 Years since Massacre against Palestine Liberation Army North of Syria, Perpetrator Remains Unidentified", 11 July 2017, available at '<https://www.actionpal.org.uk/en/post/5468/news-and-reports/5-years-since-massacre-against-palestine-liberation-army-north-of-syria-perpetrator-remains-unidentified>.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>92</sup> N. Gabiam (2016), *The Politics of Suffering*, p. 153. <sup>93</sup> The LDF is a set of Iranian-backed militias specific to Aleppo and the surrounding countryside that is comparable to the nationwide Iranian-backed militia, the National Defence Forces (NDF). A July 2014 Facebook post by Liwa' al-Quds identified the group with "the Local Defence Forces affiliated with the Syrian Arab Army": Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, (2016), "The Local Defence Forces: Regime Auxiliary Forces in Aleppo", *Syria Comment*, 23 May 2016, available at '<https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/local-defence-forces-regime-auxiliary-forces-aleppo/>.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>94</sup> A video published to Facebook by Liwa' al-Quds media representative Muhammad Abu Leil in January 2019 shows al-Khateeb addressing several senior Liwa' al-Quds figures.

### LIWA' AL-QUDS: ALEPPO AND BEYOND

Liwa' al-Quds has existed in some form since 2013, but really rose to prominence during the battles to retake Aleppo from the opposition after 2015, when the brigade started participating alongside the Syrian army, Iranian-backed Shia militias, and Russian Air Force. Liwa' al-Quds was crucial to the September 2016 capture of Handarat from rebel groups, which helped the Syrian government and its allies dominate the Castello Road and ultimately besiege rebel-held Eastern Aleppo.

Liwa' al-Quds has since participated on pro-government frontlines across Syria—in Deir ez-Zor, Latakia, Hama, Idlib, Damascus, the Damascus suburbs, eastern Homs, Quneitra, and Daraa—often coordinating closely with the Russians. The brigade has started forming local chapters in these areas. As such, Liwa' al-Quds has gone from a Palestinian force with a mission apparently restricted to protection of the Aleppo airport, to a force with national reach that frequently participates in offensives alongside regular units of the Syrian army and its Russian allies. Liwa' al-Quds is among the largest auxiliary forces fighting alongside the Syrian government and its allies.<sup>95</sup>

Since early 2018, the Iranians began to step back from their previous support for Liwa' al-Quds, leading to internal restructuring within the unit's ranks, and Liwa' al-Quds also came under pressure for alleged criminal activity including looting. Samer al-Rafea, brother of former operations chief Muhammad, was detained on charges of theft and embezzlement.

Over the years, Russia's support for Liwa' al-Quds has become more overt—particularly since the fall of rebel-held Eastern Aleppo, and the purported decline in Iranian support that began in 2018. In October 2016, al-Saeed and al-Rafea were photographed receiving medals from Russian military officers, possibly in recognition of Liwa' al-Quds' role in the recapture of Handarat the month previous.<sup>96</sup> Al-Rafea was awarded another Russian medal the month before that. Earlier

photos point to Russian links to Liwa' al-Quds as far back as spring 2016.

Some observers claim that Russia aims to have Liwa' al-Quds man the outskirts of Aleppo in order to regulate the influence of Iranian-backed militias and the Syrian army's Fourth Division. The brigade now has two headquarters, one for Muhammad al-Saeed in central Aleppo and another for his deputy, al-Sayed, in Neirab camp itself. The brigade has also been allocated control of Handarat, about 75 percent of which was completely destroyed during the course of the conflict, and uses areas of the camp for military training alongside Russian military advisers. A video released on 5 March 2019 shows Russian military advisers and Syrian officers observing a training exercise in "storming fortified positions" for Liwa' al-Quds fighters.<sup>97</sup> At the same time, civilians wishing to visit their homes in Handarat must obtain a paper from the brigade's security officer. The Palestinian brigade also lords over basic services, for example by monopolizing the local gas market. Local sources also accuse Liwa' al-Quds of a litany of abuses towards civilians in Neirab, Handarat, and the Aleppo countryside more broadly.

According to the same Neirab source with links to Palestinian factions there, Liwa' al-Quds fighters returning from frontlines have begun acting like any other *shabiha* group through a combination of repression and extortion.

*There are no longer any major battles involving the brigade, so a number of people who were participating in the battles beforehand are now back in the camp. This has led to friction.*

*[These fighters] started abusing and assaulting people within the camp; trading off drugs, alcohol, and prostitution in the camps where they are present; and robbing people—for example, during power cuts in Aleppo when people rely on generators, they impose measures on the owners of the generators as well as measures on the bakeries.*

<sup>95</sup> Omran Center for Strategic Studies (2019), *The Syrian Military Establishment in 2019*, p. 83. <sup>96</sup> A. Toumaj (2016), "Russian influence evident in Palestinian militia in Syria", *Long War Journal*, 14 October 2016, available at 'https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/russian-influence-evident-in-palestinian-militia-in-syria.php.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019. <sup>97</sup> C. Weiss (2019), "Russian special forces train Palestinian militia in Syria", *Long War Journal*, 6 March 2019, available at 'https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/03/russian-special-forces-train-palestinian-militia-in-syria.php.' Last accessed on 25 November 2019.

## CONCLUSION: THE CAMPS, TODAY

This report follows a historical timeline through roughly sequential chapters charting events in Daraa, Yarmouk, and Neirab: beginning on the eve of the Daraa protests on 18 March 2011 that would ultimately create the spark for the nationwide uprising, exploring the first political rumblings in Yarmouk, before ending with Syrian government policies to control the Palestinian community in Neirab that saw the rise of one of the most powerful pro-government militias seen in the war.

But what happened afterwards? As the current iteration of the Syrian conflict has largely ended in all three camps, the authors will now provide updates on what has happened to each of the three camps until the present day in an attempt to demonstrate some of the challenges—both local and national—facing Palestinian communities around Syria.

### DARAA

Daraa was the last camp to be returned to government control in 2018. Most of the camp had been emptied through regime bombardment and ground offensives from 2012 onwards, and subsequent bombing has laid waste to most of the camp. A video filmed by local media activists in July 2017 shows the shocking extent of destruction in the camp: a haunting landscape of houses folded in on themselves, with nobody in sight.<sup>98</sup>

In July 2018, Daraa al-Balad and remaining rebel-held areas of Daraa province accepted a series of localized truces. Those willing to settle their status with the Syrian government would undergo reconciliation (*musalaha*) and settle their status (*teswiyat awda'un*) within a six-month grace period. Those unwilling to reconcile had the option to board the Syrian government's tell-tale green evacuation buses to rebel-held areas of the northwestern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib.

As has happened in other post-reconciliation areas of Syria, the agreements in Daraa have been marred by broken promises and repression against individuals that authorities perceive to be enemies of the state. That has in turn prompted reprisals by reconciled rebel groups, who have launched a wave of assassinations and small bombings against pro-government targets (including local officials responsible for brokering reconciliation deals). Daraa has even seen the formation of an anti-government insurgent group known as the Popular Resistance. In early November 2019, unknown gunmen inside Daraa camp distributed a printed-out statement threatening escalation against pro-government forces, including Iranian-backed militias, if they did not vacate the camp within 72 hours.<sup>99</sup> Although the threat was not followed up on, it reflected the simmering tensions still present in Daraa. Assassinations have continued since then. Some expect a looming offensive to retake semi-autonomous areas

of Daraa that have survived until now, including Daraa al-Balad, after pro-government forces began attacking similar areas such as al-Sanamayn and Jillin in early 2020.<sup>100</sup>

Since Daraa al-Balad fell in July 2018, small numbers of civilians have returned to their homes. UNRWA has conducted damage assessments inside Daraa camp. Still, reconstruction appears to be a far-off prospect. That same year, officials in Daraa hinted at a possible reconstruction plan for Daraa camp, along the lines of the 'Marota City' development currently underway in southwestern Damascus. However, those plans were later withdrawn, according to sources familiar with the matter. It remains unclear how the government plans to implement these controversial reconstruction plans in Palestinian communities, not least because the systems of ownership in Palestinian camps may differ to those of Syrian areas, and Palestinians live under different ownership legislation (which impacts various stages of the legal process, including how a Palestinian-Syrian property owner is required to verify ownership of their property). One of the main pieces of legislation that the Syrian government intends to use for future reconstruction is Law 10 for the year 2018.<sup>101</sup> If Law 10 were one day to be implemented in Daraa, it is likely that the Daraa Emergency camp and Syrian IDP camp—as mostly informally built areas—would be razed.

At the same time, UNRWA has begun work on rehabilitating some of its former facilities in Daraa camp, and opened a previously damaged school in February this year.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Nabaa (2017), "Aerial footage shows the huge amount of destruction in Daraa camp due to aerial bombardment and shelling (تصوير جوي يظهر حجم الدمار الهائل)", *YouTube*, 10 July 2017, available at '<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-ZbaY0tc94>.' Last accessed on 26 November 2019. <sup>99</sup> Action Group for Palestinians of Syria (2019), "Syrian security charged with publishing inflammatory leaflets in the name of Daraa camp (اتهامات للأمن السوري بنشر منشورات تحريضية باسم مخيم درعا)", *http://www.actionpal.org.uk/ar/post/12529*.' Last accessed on 26 November 2019. <sup>100</sup> T. Rollins (2020), "Unrest in south-west Syria erupts into urban warfare", *The National*, 8 March 2020, available at '<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/unrest-in-south-west-syria-erupts-into-urban-warfare-1.989980>.' Last accessed on 23 March 2020. <sup>101</sup> Passed in 2018, Law 10 allows the Syrian government to designate areas for redevelopment under future reconstruction projects. It gives local authorities powers to request proof of ownership from current and former property owners within those areas, before property owners must then vacate the area and reconstruction can begin. According to Human Rights Watch, the "procedural requirements in the law coupled with the political context in which it operates create significant potential for abuse and discriminatory treatment of displaced residents and residents from areas previously held by anti-government groups." The law can also be understood within the frame of the Syrian government using purported urban planning policies (particularly in terms of regularizing informal settlements) to dispossess, displace, and punish perceived opponents. For more information, see: Human Rights Watch (2018), "Q&A: Syria's New Property Law", 29 May 2018, available at '<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law>.' Last accessed on 17 April 2020. <sup>102</sup> UNRWA (2020), "UNRWA inaugurates new school in Dera'a Refugee Camp", 12 February 2020, available at '<https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-inaugurates-new-school-dera%E2%80%99-refugee-camp>.' Last accessed on 23 March 2020.

## YARMOUK

Yarmouk was Syria's largest and most significant Palestinian community, accounting for about a third of the total Palestinian population in the country. But it was also its political and cultural epicentre, known among refugees inside and outside the country as the "capital of the Palestinian diaspora."

Although Yarmouk was no stranger to fighting in the years after rebel groups, and then hardline Islamists, controlled the camp, the 2018 pro-government offensive to retake the camp was far more devastating than anything that came before. Daily aerial bombardments by Syrian and Russian jets, as well as barrel bombs, levelled whole streets inside the camp. One former resident returning to the camp afterwards to check on his home said that he struggled to recognize what street he was on for all the rubble.<sup>103</sup>

Immediately after the offensive, Syrian soldiers engaged in a massive campaign of looting (*ta'feesh*) that saw homes gutted of anything even remotely of value, down to wooden door frames and copper piping.

GAPAR and teams of volunteers, with small-scale support from the PLOs, later arranged for clearing some of the camp's main streets.

Older community activists, still in Damascus and updating the Yarmouk diaspora about updates from the camp, remain upbeat about the future. Those far from the camp are less so.

Yarmouk remains almost entirely closed to civilians in Damascus, who must apply for a security permit in order to temporarily access the camp. At the same time, a small community—estimated to be little more than 200 families—has already been allowed to return to the "Old Camp" (in the area of Jou'neh Street), largely because those residents are said to be affiliated with the PFLP-GC or Free Palestine Movement, either as fighters or relatives of fighters.<sup>104</sup> Just a kilometre or so down Palestine Street, on the eastern outskirts of Yarmouk, several thousand Palestinian-Syrians from the camp—who were displaced to the rebel-held suburbs next door—live in dire poverty with limited freedom of movement, access to humanitarian aid, nor formal Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) rights. This is just one example of the regime's (very deliberately) uneven application of HLP legislation, something that will become a mainstay of any post-war Syria. Loyalists will be rewarded, while potentially untrustworthy communities residing in former opposition areas could well be punished. For Yarmouk's displaced now living in the South Damascus suburbs, very little has changed since the end of the 2018 offensive. And that situation may become yet harder if the Syrian government decides to implement recently announced reconstruction plans for the camp and surrounding suburbs.

Recently, it was announced that Damascus Governorate officials were exploring a number of reconstruction plans for Yarmouk. As in Daraa camp, it remains unlikely that Law 10 will be applied throughout Yarmouk—the camp was a mixture of land uses and

ownership models. Officials have intimated that some areas of informal housing in Yarmouk will be destroyed, while all those former residents with legitimate proof of ownership will be able to one day return. They have also said that the "Old Camp" will not see implementation of Law 10 and that former residents will be able to return to this area in the coming months.

Pro-government Palestinian actors, old and new, will likely be the ones benefitting from the reconstruction of Yarmouk and rehabilitation of a Palestinian community (in some form) there. Cruelly enough, it will be the people that contributed to the politicization and militarization of the camp, rather than the ordinary Palestinian former residents hoping to one day return home—whether from Damascus, Burj al-Barajneh, or Malmö. There are already signs that officials, militia leaders, and businessmen are looking to capitalize on their newfound status, having risen through pro-regime circles and their respective war economies, and take some stake in future reconstruction and service provision:

- Saed Abd al-Aal, who allegedly sold weapons to rebels in South Damascus in 2012, later became head of the Al-Aqsa Shield Forces, the armed wing of Yasser Qashlaq's Free Palestine Movement. There are some indications that the militia gained training and/or support from the Iranians and Hezbollah after taking a more prominent role on Yarmouk frontlines after 2015. Since then, Saed Abd al-Aal has himself taken on a more prominent role in pro-government Palestinian circles. Almost immediately after the end of the offensive on Yarmouk, Abd al-Aal was photographed meeting with Palestinian-Syrian civil society organizations, before opening a cultural centre and inaugurating a health clinic in Tadamon in the presence of a representative of the Iranian regime. He is far more visible than Qashlaq, and often appears with Qashlaq's political deputy, Abdelqader al-Haifawi. Without access to these personalities in Damascus, Qashlaq's role in Yarmouk is rather more opaque and harder to discern.
- Last year, rumours began to spread about a Palestinian businessman preparing to invest large sums of money into the reconstruction of Yarmouk. Several UN sources could not confirm the identity of this businessman. At the same time, given that areas of Yarmouk are set to be included in Law 10 developments just like other neighbouring areas of the Syrian capital, a whole host of pro-government business networks will engage in the reconstruction of the camp.

<sup>103</sup> O. Moussa and T. Rollins (2018), "With ISIS gone, Yarmouk civilians scour the rubble for homes, memories", *The National*, 24 May 2018, available at '<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/with-isis-gone-yarmouk-civilians-scour-the-rubble-for-homes-memories-1.733641>.' Last accessed on 14 January 2020. <sup>104</sup> T. Rollins (2019), "Syria plans to rebuild Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp near Damascus", *The National*, 22 November 2019, available at '<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/syria-plans-to-rebuild-yarmouk-palestinian-refugee-camp-near-damascus-1.941086>.' Last accessed on 26 November 2019.



– It is also important to consider how the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Palestinian Authority in Ramallah could benefit from the situation in Syria. In spite of an early intervention in 2011, when voices within the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah condemned the Syrian government's attack on al-Ramel camp in Latakia,<sup>105</sup> the PLO subsequently did its best to appear neutral regarding events in Syria. There is an argument to be made for this position, given how Palestinians were politicized vis-a-vis past conflicts and political crises in Jordan, Lebanon, and Kuwait (including by the PLO leadership themselves) and often suffered greatly as a result. Palestinian officials have, of course, taken on various behind-the-scenes roles throughout the Syrian conflict—particularly in Yarmouk. After the beginning of the siege of Yarmouk in mid-2013, the PLO sent emissaries from Ramallah to Damascus in order to mediate in ceasefire negotiations. A civil delegation was permitted to leave the siege in order to meet officials. According to one member of that delegation: “[PLO delegates] said the Syrian government was trying to bring in humanitarian aid, but those ‘terrorists’—and they used that word—were holding the camp hostage,” adding that the fact the PLO sent a relatively junior official “was a sign that they weren’t taking this seriously.”<sup>106</sup> The PLO has since come under intense scrutiny for not doing more—publicly or otherwise—to defend Palestinian communities inside Syria. Anti-regime Palestinian-Syrians have also been angered by the perceived positioning of some PLO figures actually in direct support of the regime. The Popular Struggle Front's Ramallah-based general-secretary, Ahmad al-Majdalani, later became the PLO's emissary between Ramallah and Damascus, and repeatedly echoed regime talking points about sensitive topics related to Yarmouk (and other camps). Then, after pro-government forces retook Khan Eshieh, a smaller Palestinian camp in the countryside south of Damascus, the PLO's political representative in Damascus, Anwar Abdel Hadi, reiterated the organization's commitment to “neutrality” but also thanked Syrian authorities for the “return of security” in Khan Eshieh.<sup>107</sup> Some observers suspect that the PLO, and Fatah in particular, hoped to improve its standing with the Syrian government through its quasi-neutral position during the course of the conflict, following years of alienation after the break with President Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s. PLO officials in Damascus have also taken a prominent role in discussions about the future reconstruction of Yarmouk.

## NEIRAB

Neirab never actually fell to rebel forces during the course of the war in Aleppo, meaning the camp was able to “maintain a semblance of normalcy.”<sup>108</sup> The militia project of Liwa' al-Quds has radically changed

the political and factional landscape in Neirab, though, which impacts the lives of local Palestinian civilians in a number of ways. Liwa' al-Quds is said to lord over local services as well as infrastructure projects—the militia was photographed last year assisting local authorities in laying new tarmac roads inside Neirab, and other accounts point to the brigade's involvement in electricity generators and other services. There is an argument to be made that Liwa' al-Quds is using its newfound access and assets to support a historically poor Palestinian community, however one should consider that, at the same time, allegations of war profiteering, repression, and corruption abound.

Liwa' al-Quds is not just influential locally. The group has become one of the largest and most significant auxiliary forces fighting alongside the Syrian army that has emerged during the course of the conflict—developing from a ragtag band of *shabiha* groups to a nationally prominent militia backed by senior intelligence figures as well as the Iranians and Russians.<sup>109</sup>

They might look promising now, but the future prospects of Liwa' al-Quds are by no means guaranteed. The faction relies on external support and its connections with several elements of Syria's intelligence and factional networks, and already encountered difficulties following the gradual withdrawal of Iranian support, which led to internal restructuring (this has been made easier, at least for now, through the increase in Russian support). However, fortunes could change depending on Russian policies in Aleppo in the future. Liwa' al-Quds figures like al-Saeed and al-Sayed will now also be navigating the complex, dicey world of pro-regime patronage networks—al-Saeed as an old hand, with pre-war connections to the Berri Clan and Air Force Intelligence, but al-Sayed with less experience and connections. Figures like al-Saeed will almost certainly seek to capitalize on war economy activities, real estate investments, and reconstruction projects in the future in Eastern Aleppo and areas surrounding Neirab camp. At the same time, the recent ‘anti-corruption’ campaign against regime crony Rami Makhlof is a reminder that few people are above the law. President Assad has already gone against militias in Aleppo in the past,<sup>110</sup> while the arrest of Liwa' al-Quds's Samer al-Rafea for illicit economic activity demonstrates that faction members are not untouchable in the eyes of the regime.

<sup>105</sup> A. al-Hardan (2012), “Uncertain fate for Palestinians in Syria”. <sup>106</sup> T. Rollins (2017), “Is the PLO helping or harming Palestinians in Syria?”, *Al Jazeera English*, 14 February 2017, available at ‘<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/plo-helping-harming-palestinians-syria-170125093017460.html>.’ Last accessed on 15 January 2020. <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>108</sup> N. Gabiam (2016), *The Politics of Suffering*, p. 155. <sup>109</sup> This was evidenced by a Damascus ‘*azza* (mourning ceremony) for the father of Liwa' al-Quds leader Muhammad al-Saeed in 2019. In a video shared to pro-government media channels, several prominent figures were seen to be in attendance. Syria's grand mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun enters the ceremony to find a who's who of post-war Palestinian-Syrian militia politics waiting to greet him: elderly Palestinian resistance fighters, senior PFLP-GC figures including Talal al-Naji, and new actors including Free Palestine Movement militia leader Saed Abd al-Aal. <sup>110</sup> A. Lund (2017), “Aleppo militias become major test for Assad”, *The New Humanitarian*, 22 June 2017, available at ‘<http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2017/06/22/aleppo-militias-become-major-test-assad>.’ Last accessed on 9 January 2020.

## POSTSCRIPT: A NEW PALESTINIAN-SYRIAN COMMUNITY?

It is increasingly said that the Syrian government has won the war. And while ongoing hostilities in Syria's northwest and the unstable malaise left behind by a 2019 Turkey-led offensive in the northeast call the claim into question, the Syrian government and its allies have—since 2016 in particular—regained control of a majority of the country.

The same goes for Syria's Palestinian camps. All of the 12 official and unofficial Palestinian camps found in Syria before the 2011 uprising are now back under government control, while at least half that number were in opposition-held territory or frontline areas during various points of the war. However, the conflict has decimated many of the camps. Meanwhile, the Syrian government is reportedly preparing controversial reconstruction plans that will likely dispossess large segments of the camps' original, pre-war populations when those plans are implemented—even though EU and US sanctions against prominent Syrian investors in reconstruction, and the passing of the US "Caesar Act" late last year, will likely delay the prospect of any wholesale reconstruction in Syria for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, all Palestinian camps require crucial rehabilitation of infrastructure and housing, and only a handful of the camps can be said to have survived the war relatively untouched<sup>111</sup>—Neirab being one of them.

Whichever way it is analyzed, Syria's Palestinian community has changed—and irrevocably. Just by looking at the three camps studied in this report, two of which—Daraa and Yarmouk—have been almost completely destroyed. Aleppo's Neirab managed to more or less remain out of the worst of the conflict. Although Neirab lived through a rebel-imposed siege in 2013, the camp is still relatively intact. It has also experienced lower levels of displacement compared with the pre-war populations of other communities.

However, the camps were always more than stone and mortar. The effects of the uprising and conflict have erased much of that.

A majority of Palestinians within Syria have been displaced, with most moving from one place to another at least once. Meanwhile, one fifth of the pre-war population have fled the country altogether. Vibrant civil society movements disappeared, as did the relief activists and humanitarian initiatives who first banded together to respond to the needs of civilians displaced by the uprising—such as the field hospital in Daraa camp, or the many Palestinian NGOs aiding displaced Syrians in Yarmouk before December 2012—followed by the activist networks, local farming initiatives, and violation monitoring groups. Solidarities that existed between Palestinian communities and their neighbours were often tested. Palestinians deemed disloyal by the regime were arrested, tortured, or killed, just as they were assassinated and executed by hardline Islamist groups such as ISIS.

But what future awaits the Palestinian-Syrian community? Until now, there has been too little focus on the dynamics within the Palestinian-Syrian community inside Syria, meaning that complex events that took place within these communities, and the yet more complex dynamics they have produced, are all too often misunderstood. Palestinian communities are now facing myriad challenges—some of them typical of the rest of Syria, others very much specific to the Palestinian-Syrian community. Here, the authors identify a few of those key challenges and what they could mean for the future of the Palestinian community inside Syria.

### COMMUNITY DYNAMICS

Although not always true in the more rural camps and gatherings (*tjama'aat*), Palestinian camps in urban areas were often so well-integrated into the surrounding Syrian body politic that it became almost unavoidable that camps would be politicized and militarized. Daraa camp developed close to the Syrian IDP camp of the same neighbourhood, and to a lesser extent was also seen as an extension of the city more broadly. Yarmouk was essentially an extension of Damascus—one where Damascene Syrians would go to shop, eat, and socialize. Neirab, on the other hand, was more socially and economically isolated, but would later become more integrated into the body politic of the Syrian regime's security apparatus with the help of Liwa' al-Quds. Geography proved to be a crucial dynamic, with the camps often acting as bridges between rural-urban hinterlands on the outskirts of major cities. They also became highly strategic sites within cities themselves. This meant the camps were seen as important ground to hold for advancing rebel groups, particularly with the mid-2012 offensive on Damascus that ultimately saw Yarmouk fall to the rebels, but also as strategic defensive positions for pro-government forces.

When the uprising first broke out in Syria, Palestinian camps were far from homogenous in their responses. Some quarters within Palestinian communities attempted to stay absolutely neutral, while others aimed for some form of neutrality by keeping anti-government protests outside of Palestinian camps and restricting the involvement of Palestinians to merely passive roles in solidarity with protesting Syrians. Others participated directly in events, as was seen in Daraa. Palestinian camps later became important host communities for IDPs fleeing the violence that

<sup>111</sup> Al-A'ideen camp in Homs and Jaramana camp in southeast Damascus were never dragged into all-out fighting despite frontlines often being very close by. However, like all camps around the country, both have witnessed forced conscription, arrest campaigns, and losses of family members to fighting, detention, and targeted killings carried out by both sides (but in greater numbers by pro-government forces).

markedly escalated after 2012. Eventually, the Syrian government came to distrust neutrality, and either punished it or interfered in the internal dynamics of camps by arming allies. Opposition groups, some of whom saw Palestinians as experienced political actors, at times became frustrated by Palestinian neutrality and also sought to challenge it in Yarmouk and the Aleppo camps.

After the beginning of the uprising, Palestinian communities witnessed an explosion in protest movements, solidarity initiatives, and civil society movements. A new generation of activists, civil society leaders, and human rights defenders who rose up through the ranks of the uprisings were then either targeted, detained and killed, or forced to flee the country. On the pro-government side, new community figures have often risen to positions of prominence by virtue of their collaboration with Syrian intelligence agencies and security branches, or through the war economy. These two dynamics have homogenized the Palestinian community. Whereas before, Palestinian camps were known for their developed civil society infrastructure and levels of political engagement among residents, the camps have since hollowed out.

### SOCIO-ECONOMICS

These days, Palestinians in Damascus tell stories of grave economic hardship—rising rents too expensive to pay, borrowing money from relatives in Europe, and families living on the brink of destitution. This has only been exacerbated by a Syrian economy in freefall, with the Syrian pound in crisis and prices on basic goods rising. Almost everyone is suffering—the vast majority of Syrians living below the poverty line—and Palestinians in Syria are no different.

A recent UNRWA survey found that more than 90 percent of the Palestinian-Syrian community still inside Syria live in “absolute poverty.”<sup>112</sup> Most Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) are almost completely reliant on dwindling UNRWA aid, a fact that is all the more concerning given that UNRWA last year cut assistance packages to PRS inside Syria in half as a result of the financial crisis after President Donald Trump defunded the UN agency. (US contributions previously made up the majority of UNRWA’s budget).

### RETURN

In the context of the Syrian conflict, Palestinians occupy a unique position as so-called ‘twice refugees.’ For many, there are two homelands—Palestine and Syria—meaning there are two forms of return. When asked which homeland a refugee wants to return to, the answer will often be different from person to person. Even so, there now exists a new generation of Palestinian refugees who dream of return to Safad Street in Yarmouk, just as their grandparents once dreamed of return to Safad.

Return to areas of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), or to areas in Israel (to where the majority

of Palestinian-Syrians trace their origins), is contingent on a highly unlikely change in the position of the Israeli government, which views the return of Palestinian refugees as an inadmissible existential threat to its survival. Notwithstanding the fact that all Palestinian refugees should be given the opportunity to return to their original or ancestral homes in Israel and the OPT, should they desire to, in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions, the question then turns to the admissibility of return to Syria.

For Palestinian-Syrians displaced from their homes during the course of the conflict, either internally within Syria (the majority) or outside the country’s borders to neighbouring countries and/or Europe (a sizeable minority), return is no easy feat. A majority of the pre-war Palestinian population have been displaced (many more than once), while one fifth have fled the country altogether, either seeking asylum in Europe or living uncertain lives in neighbouring countries where they remain vulnerable as a result of their pre-existing refugee status and statelessness.

There are currently some 438,000 Palestinian refugees still inside Syria, according to UNRWA figures,<sup>113</sup> (although some call into question the accuracy of those figures). And yet proximity to one’s home or camp does not necessarily mean that return is something that will happen soon. Just two of the camps that were dragged into the conflict—Sbeineh and al-Hosseiniyeh, in the Damascus countryside south of the capital—have been nominally reopened to civilians in an official capacity, and small numbers of Palestinian IDPs and refugees returned afterwards.<sup>114</sup> Camps that have been badly damaged or almost completely destroyed remain at the whim of the Syrian government’s reconstruction plans, which will likely deny the rights to ownership of countless refugees.

This is not to say that people are not going back. Neighbouring countries have recorded small numbers of Palestinian refugees heading back across the border into Syria, and there have also been initial attempts at organized returns from Lebanon to Syria with the coordination of the PLO. Under the PLO-led scheme, Palestinian-Syrians in Lebanon were offered cash incentives if they voluntarily returned to Syria—and while names were being registered and then reviewed by the Syrian government, the authors understand that no such returns have taken place thus far.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> T. Rollins (2020), “‘Poverty everywhere’: Palestinians in Syria living in desperate conditions”, *Middle East Eye*, 20 February 2020, available at ‘<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/more-90-percent-palestinians-syria-living-absolute-poverty-says-unrwa>.’ Last accessed on 13 March 2020. <sup>113</sup> UNRWA, “Where we work: Syria”. <sup>114</sup> Sbeineh was seized by rebels in 2012, and then retaken by pro-government forces in November 2013, after which the camp remained closed until 2017. Al-Hosseiniyeh was reopened in 2015 after being shuttered in late 2012. <sup>115</sup> R. Ahmad, N. Hourani, and T. Rollins (2018), “Displaced Yarmouk residents doubtful of return home despite fresh assurances: ‘Where will people return to?’”, *Syria Direct*, 8 November 2018, available at ‘<https://syriadirect.org/news/displaced-yarmouk-residents-doubtful-of-return-home-despite-fresh-government-assurances-%e2%80%99where-will-people-return-to-%e2%80%99/>.’ Last accessed on 13 March 2020.

That said, refugee returns are, in part, coordinated by Syrian intelligence agencies and security branches, meaning that many of the approximately 120,000 PRS displaced outside Syria may be reticent to return in the short to medium-term (and beyond). At the same time, PRS also face extenuating challenges in accessing durable solutions as refugees, which could force those in neighbouring countries and even Europe to consider return to a situation in Syria that is still neither safe nor secure. There is already evidence that this is happening, sometimes with tragic consequences: families from Syria now in Germany have recounted stories of relatives disappearing into detention after going home as part of a voluntary return programme offered by the German government (through which refugees who agree to voluntarily go home receive a financial stipend).<sup>116</sup>

### RECONSTRUCTION

Arguably, no issue stands in the way of return of Palestinian refugees more than reconstruction.

Palestinian communities have been devastated by the war, with several camps badly damaged or even completely destroyed. Historical experiences of reconstruction of Palestinian camps, for example in Nahr al-Bared in Lebanon's Tripoli, suggest that these camps will take years to rebuild—and likely even longer given the current state of the Syrian economy and UNRWA's own financial situation (following the defunding by the US government). In the short term, gaps may be filled by a range of actors inside Syria—the PLO, government-affiliated businessmen, militia figures, and those

who have risen up through the war economy—but there are structural problems with the reconstruction plans themselves.

The Syrian government's reconstruction plans threaten to legally dispossess countless Palestinian refugees of their homes. Although Law 10 for the year 2018 has garnered the most attention in international discussions around reconstruction in Syria, the Syrian government has passed more than 45 pieces of HLP legislation since 2011 that can be applied to demolish buildings, clear rubble, block residents' access to an area, expropriate housing, and rezone a given area entirely.<sup>117</sup> In fact, because of the range of ownership models in Palestinian camps, the Syrian government will likely implement a range of legislation in different areas of the same camp—meaning that families from the same camp may have radically different experiences in the future. There are also still some legal grey areas regarding how Palestinian residents will be treated under Law 10 given that Palestinian property ownership was governed by a separate decree than Syrian citizens. Concerningly, that decree requires property ownership to be verified by a male head of household with a list of specified documents—something the conflict may render impossible for large numbers of families because a male head of household is no longer present (due to death, detention, or displacement) or because the family no longer possesses the relevant documents. For example, a 2016 Norwegian Refugee Council survey, based on interviews with refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, found that 70 percent of refugees lack basic identity documents.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>116</sup> A. Vohra (2019), "A Deadly Welcome Awaits Syria's Returning Refugees", *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2019, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/06/a-deadly-welcome-awaits-syrias-returning-refugees/>. Last accessed on 13 March 2020. <sup>117</sup> S. Smiley, N. Hourani, and R. Ahmad (2018), "A new Syria": Law 10 reconstruction projects to commence in Damascus, backed by arsenal of demolition, expropriation legislation", *Syria Direct*, 19 November 2018, available at <https://syriadirect.org/news/%E2%80%98a-new-syria%E2%80%99-law-10-reconstruction-projects-to-commence-in-damascus-backed-by-arsenal-of-demolition-expropriation-legislation/>. Last accessed on 13 March 2020. <sup>118</sup> S. Aburass (2017), "Syrian refugees' documentation crisis", *Norwegian Refugee Council*, 26 January 2017, available at <https://www.nrc.no/news/2017/january/syrian-refugees-documentation-crisis/>. Last accessed on 26 November 2019.

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