

US, Arab allies call for intervention in Syria after bombing of Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp

Jean Shaoul
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Newspapers reported this week the Syrian air force's bombing of buildings in Yarmouk, the Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, on Sunday and Monday.

The bombardment killed at least 25 people, wounded several dozen more, and caused thousands to flee the camp and seek refugee status in neighbouring Lebanon. Thirteen other Palestinians were killed elsewhere in Syria.

All reports stressed the claim that the Syrian government was guilty of a crime against the Palestinians and would pay a political price.

The *New York Times* wrote, "For many Yarmouk residents—refugees from conflict with Israel and their descendants—the attacks shattered what was left of the Syrian government's claim to be a champion and protector of Palestinians, a position the Assad family relied upon as a source of domestic and international legitimacy in more than 40 years of iron-fisted rule."

The *Guardian* cited Palestinians as saying that it marked a "historical moment" that "shattered the regime's claim to be a patron of resistance against Israel".

It was only later that the media even sought to locate the bombardment against the backdrop of a camp divided between pro- and anti-Assad factions.

Such reportage is part of the campaign of media disinformation that has been the hallmark of the 21-month-long civil war provoked and sponsored by Washington's allies in the region: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel. Portraying the Palestinians as victims of the Syrian government is intended to turn the Palestinians and the entire Arab working class against the Syrian regime and to stoke international support for a "humanitarian" intervention.

Yarmouk, a few kilometres from downtown Damascus, was established as a Palestinian refugee camp in 1957. It is home to 150,000 registered Palestinians who fled or were driven out of their homes in what is now Israel in 1948 and their descendants. It is the largest concentration of the 500,000-strong Palestinian community in Syria.

Yarmouk has evolved into a mixed neighbourhood of Syrian and Palestinian professional workers, day labourers and street vendors. It is home to more than 1.5 million people.

The opposition forces have in recent months focused their attacks on Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, capturing air bases and military installations around the capital, Damascus. Their offensive against Yarmouk led to the deaths of at least 21 people in August. It is one of a number of such offensives aimed at taking control of Damascus.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Syrian opposition forces announced in October that they had begun arming sympathetic Palestinians, who would form a group called the Liwa al-Asifa (Storm Brigade). This unit would fight the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), which has backed Bashar al-Assad, and take its Yarmouk stronghold. The PFLP-GC was formed in 1968 and is based in Syria.

Last month, following armed clashes, Liwa al-Asifa fighters critically injured a senior PFLP-GC leader and killed four other leaders of the Palestinian popular committees, formed to defend the camp against the insurgents, in a car bomb attack in Yarmouk. Since then, there have been weeks of heavy fighting, with more than 1,500 armed thugs operating in the

neighbourhood. According to Palestinian sources, more than 30 people were killed in clashes in the camp.

A Yarmouk resident told the Associated Press that the clashes between the armed oppositionists and the PFLP-GC broke out on Friday, when they tried to take over the PFLP-GC's headquarters in Yarmouk. The Free Syrian Army claimed to have "liberated" the camp from militias supporting the Assad regime. The control of Yarmouk would link opposition-held areas in the east and south of Damascus.

One of the Palestinian leaders told the Lebanese paper *al-Akhbar* that the "situation is extremely dangerous. The FSA has taken over large parts of the camp, including areas that once belonged to the General Command, forcing many of our fighters to retreat."

He added that the living conditions in the camp had collapsed. There was no possibility of sending in supplies and medical aid, and the whole area was without electricity. "If the camp falls under the control of the FSA and the jihadi Islamists," he said, "it will become a launching pad for military operations, and it is the camp residents who will pay a heavy price."

The UN's Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) said that at least half of Yarmouk's registered Palestinian population of 150,000 have fled the violence.

According to a PFLP-GC statement, all the opposition forces were members of the Al Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda-linked group the Obama administration has blacklisted. This has not prevented the media from condemning Assad's regime, while saying nothing about why a military intervention was mounted. While international media presented the bombing as an attack on the Yarmouk refugee camp, the PFLP-GC said that the government forces had intervened to prevent a massacre of the Palestinians.

One of the Palestinian leaders, Anwar Raja, pointed out that the Syrian government had no reason to attack the Palestinians. He asked why Palestinians suddenly, after 20 months, would want to start a revolt. If there were a real conflict between the inhabitants of Yarmouk and the Syrian government, there would have been resistance from the onset of the chaos in Syria.

Palestinian Authority officials, who serve as Washington's stooges in Ramallah, lashed out at Syria. Palestinian Liberation Organisation official Yasser Abed Rabbo said: "We condemn in the strongest terms

the crime of Assad's regime in Yarmouk refugee camp, and call on all international parties, including the states that still back this regime, to act immediately and stop these massacres against Syrians and Palestinians in Syria."

Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas called on the United Nations and the Arab League to protect the Palestinian population in Syria. He said that he was ready to take in Palestinian refugees, and that he had asked UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon to help bring the refugees to the Palestinian territories. This is an empty gesture, as any transfer of refugees into the West Bank needs Israel's consent.

Hamas, the ruling faction in Gaza, also condemned the bombing. It too has supported the Western-backed opposition in Syria, moving its headquarters from Syria's capital Damascus to Qatar, and re-orienting itself towards new patrons including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf and Turkey.

Arab League secretary general Nabil El-Araby condemned the bombing of Yarmouk camp, calling it "a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law".

UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon for his part declared that reports of government warplanes bombing a Palestinian refugee camp were of "grave concern".

Israel's main ally, the United States, cynically posed as a defender of the Palestinians, with the State Department declaring: "Those who are responsible for atrocities against the civilian population must be held accountable."

There was no such call, of course, when Israel bombed Gaza last month.



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