ISIS takeover of Yarmouk marks new stage in Syrian conflict

Jean Shaoul
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The right-wing Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has taken control of most of Yarmouk camp, a Palestinian enclave in one of the suburbs of Damascus. It is the first time ISIS has gained a foothold so near to the Syrian capital, the stronghold of President Bashar al-Assad.

The situation in Yarmouk, long dependent on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), is dire. It has been under siege by Syrian government forces for the last two years. While the government has sealed off roads to the north into Damascus, roads to the south are held by opposition forces that have signed truces with the government. Only 18,000 people remain, about 10 percent of the former population, with the rest having fled to neighbouring countries or internally displaced within Syria.

Since ISIS entered Yarmouk, fighting between ISIS, the various militias and government forces intensified. UNRWA has been unable to deliver food and basic necessities. There was no drinking water and food assistance was below the minimum needed. Last week, the only remaining functioning hospital was hit by a barrel bomb.

UNRWA spokesman Christopher Gunness told the BBC Friday, "The situation in the camp is beyond inhumane … a hell hole that shames the world and, in the last days, it had descended further." He had earlier described the situation in Yarmouk as "an affront to the humanity in all of us, a source of universal shame."

At least 20 civilians, including a 12 year-old child, have been killed since ISIS began its attack. The main fighting was between ISIS and Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis, which is linked to Hamas, the Islamist Palestinian group that runs Gaza, but this has largely subsided, although aerial bombardment by government forces continues.

On Thursday, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon raised the spectre of a massacre at Yarmouk at the hands of Islamic State and called for action. He added that residents, including 3,500 children, were being turned into human shields by armed elements inside Yarmouk and government forces outside it.

The danger now is that Washington and its regional allies will try and use the opportunity presented by the ISIS takeover of the Damascus suburb to press for a wider intervention to further their geo-strategic interests in the oil-rich region—juts as they did with the largely Kurdish town of Kobani on Syria's border with Turkey.

Founded as a Palestinian refugee camp in 1957, Yarmouk looked like any other impoverished Syrian suburb. It was until 2012 home to 180,000 Palestinian refugees and their families who fled in the wake of the 1947 UN partition of Palestine, the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian Arabs and the ensuing Arab-Israeli war in 1948. More Palestinians arrived after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Others have come from the Palestinian diaspora. Many came in the early 1990s when they were expelled from Kuwait for supporting Iraq's 1990 invasion of the sheikdom. Tens of thousands arrived after their expulsion by the Libyan regime in 1995 and 22,000 fled Iraq following the 2003 US-led invasion.

When the imperialist-sponsored "uprising" against the Assad regime began in 2011, Yarmouk, no less than the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, was bitterly divided among various Palestinian factions. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), long a client of the Syrian regime, supported the government, fighting and arresting opposition groups whom it handed over to

Syrian security forces. Some groups including Hamas opposed the regime, leading to the expulsion of the Hamas Political Bureau chief Khaled Meshaal, who sought refuge in Qatar. Factions affiliated to the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) have largely kept out of the conflict.

Most Syrian opposition groups withdrew from Yarmouk under a deal that left only the Palestinian groups opposed to Assad inside.

As elsewhere in Syria, there are a multitude of armed militias in conflict with each other, with fighters and militias constantly changing sides and alliances. All these militias have outside supporters.

The intervention sponsored by the imperialist powers, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf sheikdoms and Turkey aimed at securing the overthrow of the Assad regime, which is backed by Iran, Russia and China, has morphed into a series of proxy wars. These wars have in turn taken the form of a series of vicious sectarian and inter-communal conflicts that have led to the deaths of at least 220,000 people, turned nearly half of the Syrian population into refugees in their own country, neighbouring countries and further afield, and ruined the country.

Clashes between ISIS and Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis broke out after the latter arrested ISIS members operating in Yarmouk. But the advance by ISIS into Yarmouk was facilitated by the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front, which is backed by Qatar and controls several checkpoints into Yarmouk. According to a report in *Middle East Eye,* Al-Nusra, having previously worked with the Palestinians, appears to have switched sides after Aknaf Bait al-Maqdis failed to come to Al-Nusra's aid during a fight last month between Al-Nusra and the Syrian Free Army.

Al-Nusra stopped the Palestinians from entering Yarmouk and allowed ISIS in. Jaish al-Islam, a Saudi-backed faction operating in eastern Damascus, which could have entered from Hajr al-Aswad, stood back and refused to fight ISIS. So did Ahrar al-Sham, which also has links to Al-Qaeda and receives its funding from Kuwaiti donors.

For all the talk of the Gulf States joining the US-led coalition against ISIS, they would rather see the end of the Assad regime than fight ISIS.

Last week, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas sent a delegation headed by PLO official Ahmed Majdalani to Damascus to meet with 14 Palestinian factions. Speaking after the meeting, Majdalani stated that they would join with Syrian regime forces in a joint anti-ISIS operation, but it would be dependent upon the government taking action to protect civilian lives and infrastructure. He said, "We agreed that there would be permanent cooperation with the Syrian leadership and the formation of a joint operations room with Syrian government forces and the Palestinian factions that have a significant presence in the camp or around it."

Within hours, the PLO leadership in Ramallah—itself bitterly divided and doubtless coming under heavy pressure from Washington—flatly contradicted this, issuing a statement saying that it refused to "drag our people and their camps into the hellish conflict that is taking place in Syria."

It continued, "We refuse to be drawn into any armed campaign, whatever its nature or cover, and we call for resorting to other means to spare the blood of our people and prevent more destruction and displacement for our people of the camp."

A spokesperson for the Damascus-based Palestinian groups told *Middle East Online* that the Damascus-based factions would stand by the agreement with the Syrian government to drive the ISIS militants out of Yarmouk.

In the last two weeks, a coalition of militias including Al-Nusra Front took control of the northern city of Idlib, near the border with Turkey. Opposition fighters had controlled the towns and countryside around the city since 2012. Days later, another coalition, also including Al-Nusra, took control of Busra Sham, an ancient town in the south near the Jordanian border, and the last border crossing point with Jordan still remaining under regime control.

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