
SYRIA: Palestinians being drawn into the fight

BERLIN, 14 August 2012 (IRIN) - When mortar shells slammed into Yarmouk, Syria's largest Palestinian camp, in early August, killing at least 20 people, many Palestinians in Syria saw it as a wake-up call.

"It was the third time Yarmouk was attacked, but the casualty number has never been so high," said a Palestinian activist who gave his name as Moh Abu Eyad. "The problem is that Yarmouk is so crowded. If you fire one bullet, you'll hit three people."

As fighting in Syria intensifies, those trying to stay out of the conflict are increasingly getting caught in the crossfire. Many of the country's half-million Palestinians say they may not be able to keep their camps from getting engulfed in the violence.

Seen as collective punishment

Yarmouk, a poor, dense area in the Syrian capital Damascus, is home to 150,000 Palestinians. It is wedged between the districts Tadamon, Yalda, Hajar al Aswad and Kadam, all of which have seen heavy clashes since the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) advanced into the capital about a month ago. As the conflict drew closer and thousands of displaced families took shelter in Yarmouk, fighting began spilling into the camp.

The FSA rebels has repeatedly infiltrated Yarmouk to ambush checkpoints, and regime forces shelled the Palestine Hospital twice in the week preceding the mortar assault, residents and activists in Yarmouk said.

The number of Palestinians killed has been rising dramatically, said Ammar Hassan*, who runs a Palestinian human rights organization in Yarmouk. "Two hundred fifty Palestinians have died during the uprising, half of them in the last four weeks," he said. "I think the mortar attack was a message from the regime: 'You have to keep quiet because we can shell you any time.'"

The regime and rebels blame each other for the mortar attack, but many Palestinians see it as collective punishment by the regime for providing humanitarian aid to rebel sympathizers. The number of the displaced accommodated in the camp's schools and homes has reached 20,000, according to local activists, and wounded Syrians from nearby rebel strongholds have been brought to the Palestine Hospital for medical treatment.

"We opened our camp to those trying to escape the violence," said Jafra, an activist who fled Yarmouk to an Arab Gulf country a month ago. "This has made the authorities very angry with us."

Struggle to remain neutral

Since the start of the uprising against the government of Bashar al-Assad last year, the Palestinians have struggled to remain neutral - a stance that is far from unanimous. "Most young people support the revolution," said the activist Abu Eyad, "but the older generation, which dominates the political parties, says we should not take sides because we may end up getting killed or become refugees again."

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The Palestinians in Syria are descendants of those displaced during the 1948 creation of Israel or during later wars in the Middle East. The mortar attack has highlighted the precarious situation of their community, which has more civil rights in Syria than in other Arab countries. For example, they can hold government jobs, own property and attend state universities for free.

As the protests against the government morphed into violent clashes, impartiality became harder to maintain. There are signs that the military violence has pushed Palestinians' allegiances further towards the rebels, with demonstrations in Yarmouk increasing since 10 protesters were killed by regime forces on 13 July, Palestinian activists say. "Since that day, we have understood very well that staying on the sidelines is no longer an option," Hassan said.

"By taking a neutral position, Palestinians have not found safety," said Hilal Khashan, a political science professor at the American University Beirut. "Instead, they have drawn the wrath of the regime and of the opposition."

The issue is particularly sensitive because the Assad regime has portrayed itself as a champion for Palestinian rights.

"There is very little doubt that Assad has lost the hearts and minds of the Palestinians," said Jonathan Schanzer, political analyst at the US-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies and author of the book Hamas vs. Fatah: The Struggle for Palestine. There are reports that some Palestinian have joined the FSA, but their numbers and motivations are unclear, Schanzer said.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians face growing hostility from the regime and rebels alike. In February, the Islamist group Hamas broke its alliance with the Syrian regime, endorsing the uprising. In late June, the body of Hamas operative Kamal Ghanaja was found in his Damascus home, bearing marks of torture. In mid-July, 16 conscripts in the Palestine Liberation Army, the Palestinian unit of the state army, were reportedly kidnapped and killed near the city of Aleppo. The details of both incidents remain murky.

Support for the regime

Not all the Palestinian parties have shifted their alliances. The Palestine Liberation Organization, the official representative of the Palestinian people, has condemned the attack on Yarmouk but insists that the Palestinian position is to not interfere in Syria. Other parties, especially the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), the largest Palestinian organization in Syria, which is listed as a terror group in the US, support the regime.

"The PFLP-GC has given out machine guns to guys who are now patrolling the streets," said Hassan. "They help the Syrian security forces to suppress demonstrations. They carry out raids and arrest people, handing them over to intelligence branches afterwards."

By siding with the regime, the PFLP-GC is increasing tensions within the camp. "The youth of Yarmouk want to fight the regime alongside with the Syrians, but our political leadership refuses to take a position," said Jafra, the activist from Yarmouk. "They say they are there to protect the camp, but in reality, everybody knows they are executing the orders of the regime. They are using our own parties against us."

The impact of heightened Palestinian involvement could reach well beyond the camps in Syria. "In all likelihood, the Palestinians will remain divided, with some joining the fight, some on the other hand not joining, and we will see many of them run for the borders," Schanzer said.

An exodus of refugees, he argued, could cause spill-over instability in neighbouring Jordan and Lebanon. Lebanon's Palestinian camps are considered notoriously volatile, and Jordanians are already resentful of Palestinians, who make up 80 percent of the population. "The Jordanians and the Lebanese are nervous," he said. "It looked worrying from their perspective to begin with, and now the situation is becoming more and more complicated."

*not a real name
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