

Voices of Yarmouk: Syria and Palestine, a common struggle

Tuesday 1 December 2015, by [DAHÉR Joseph](#), [Raed Abou Zeed](#), [Tareq Ibrahim](#) (Date first published: October 2014).

Three interviews conducted by Joseph Daher, activist and member of the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria and solidarités' movement in Switzerland, with Palestinians from the Yarmouk refugee camp (Syria), October 2014

From a poster: Freedom, a common destiny - Gaza, Yarmouk and the Golan- a pro Syrian revolution demonstrator on the Golan Heights occupied by Israel protesting against the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip · July 2014

Introduction

The refugee camp of Yarmouk is located eight kilometres south of the centre of Damascus, Yarmouk is defined by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as an “unofficial” camp (1). Created in 1954 by the Syrian authorities, which have kept the administration on it, the camp has witnessed a notorious urban development that makes it an attractive and dynamic area. Its population has evolved with regional conflicts and the Syrian rural exodus. In the 1970s, popular neighbourhoods are established around Yarmouk camp and connect it to the urban fabric of Damascus. Today, the Yarmouk Camp covers a space of two square kilometres. Prior to 2011, out of a population of 250,000 people, the camp housed about 150 000 Palestinian refugees, in addition to Syrians and some Iraqi refugees that settled in the camp after 2003.

With time Yarmouk became a centre of economic activities and is home to popular and small middle class categories with limited incomes (shopkeepers, teachers, etc.). Yarmouk is also a political pool in which the various political tendencies of the Palestinian political scene are present.

The Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk is today in a catastrophic humanitarian situation as a result of the strict siege imposed on it from summer 2013, with the prohibition of movement of persons and foodstuffs, to the rebel neighbourhoods south of Damascus by the Assad regime and the Palestinian organizations linked to it, especially the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), controlled by Ahmad Jibril (2).

There is currently still between 15 000 and 20 000 people in the camp.

1) The “official camps” were actually created by the United Nations in the aftermath of the exodus (Nakba) in 1948 follow a specific status and are under joint administration.

(2) This organization was created in 1968 following a split within the PFLP of a group led by Ahmad Jibril, former member of the Syrian army. The PFLP-GC is historically an ally of the Syrian regime.

Tareq Ibrahim, Palestinian activist from Syria, originally from the refugee camp of Yarmouk, currently in exile.

Joseph Daher (J.D): Firstly, let's start by your participation to the Syrian revolution that began in 2011. Why did you participate and what was your role?

I decided to join the civil organizations involved in the assistance to the Syrian refugees in Yarmouk camp and in several areas around the camp hit by the bombings of the regime.

JD: When did the mobilization in favour of the Syrian revolution in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus started? How did the young Palestinians inside the camp organised in favour of the revolution? How did the first contacts established with the Syrians protesters?

There was a group of young Palestinians who participated in the demonstrations outside the Yarmouk refugee camp (eg. in the neighbourhoods of Midan, Kfarsouseh, Douma and Harasta) at the beginning of the revolution before the establishment of the popular coordination committee of the Yarmouk camp. After the establishment of the popular coordination of Yarmouk, demonstrations began in the camp, but the Syrian security services and Palestinian groups linked to the latter, led by the PFLP-GC, also started their repression and strengthened their hold on the camp. This was my first contact with the Syrian revolution by coordinating activities with the youth of the popular coordination.

J.D: How did the situation of the Yarmouk camp evolved since the beginning of the revolution? How did the Assad regime react against the popular movement in this area? What is the relationship between the various Palestinian groups with Syrian revolutionaries, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamic forces, etc.? What was the role of the various Palestinian political parties inside the camp?

With the acceleration of the control on the camp by the Syrian security services and the PFLP-GC, this led to a situation increasingly agitated in the camp, including two very massive demonstrations after the protest of the "march of the return" in May 2011 to the Golan Heights and the second after the death of the first martyr murdered in the camp (the martyr Iyas Farhat).

Palestinian organizations have not played a major role in the Syrian revolution, except the PFLP-GC led by Ahmad Jibril. This latter supported the regime and acted as a repressive force within the camp.

J.D: Do you think it is possible to build a third force: a democratic and progressive Front guaranteeing the initial objectives of the Syrian revolution, which is independent of the Assad regime and the reactionary Islamic forces?

Yes, I think it is possible to build a third force independent of the criminal regime and reactionary Islamic forces, because Syrian people came out for freedom and not for the benefit of regional and international forces. This third democratic and progressive force is the only way to change the course of the revolution and take out Syria from the current bloody impasse.

We must build a third democratic force to protect the revolution, and the Syrian people that were attacked by the authoritarian criminal regime and the reactionary Islamic forces.

JD: The Assad regime characterizes itself as a "resistance regime" or as the pillar of "the front of refusal" that supports the Palestinian cause, and this propaganda is relayed by

some sections of the “left” and organizations in “solidarity with the Palestinian cause” in the West. How do you respond to these organizations and the propaganda of the regime, you as a Palestinian from Syria?

Regarding the propaganda of the Assad regime on its so-called resistance, this is a huge lie and I'm tired of this propaganda, and other States also still play with the Palestinian cause for their own regional interests.

How can one claim to be resistant while the Golan front has been quiet for 40 years? Also, where is the resistance when the regime does not retaliate against the bombardments of Israel and the violations of its airspace? Where is the dignity of the resistance against these violations?

The regime claims that it protects the resistance, but this propaganda around the resistance is only a tool for negotiation, while at the same time hundreds of Palestinians living in Syria have been killed by the regime and groups affiliates with it, because they supported the revolution and the revolutionary Syrian people.

Many Palestinian civilians were killed, many others died, starved by the siege, which lasted more than a year in the Yarmouk refugee camp. The siege has exceeded the suffering of the Israeli siege of Beirut of 79 days in 1982 against the Palestinian “Fedayeen”. This regime is not faithful to its people and was not able to recover the Golan Heights. How would it therefore be faithful to the resistance and Palestine by attacking the Palestinian revolution “reservoir” that is the camp of Yarmouk ... in which each day martyrs die until now, either starved or bombed.

J.D: Do you think that there is a relationship between the mobilization of the Palestinian people in Syria for the Syrian revolution and the Palestinian cause? And generally speaking with the liberation of Palestine?

Yes the liberation of the Arab peoples, particularly Syria and Egypt, is the way to liberate Palestine.

Interview conducted in May 2014

Raed Abou Zeed, Palestinian activist from Syria, originally from the refugee camp of Yarmouk, currently in exile.

Joseph Daher (J.D): Firstly, let's start by your participation to the Syrian revolution that began in 2011. Why did you participate and what was your role?

My participation in the Syrian revolution began from the first days through the following of the popular movement in Deraa and accusations against the Palestinians of being responsible for the “terrorists” by the statements of the advisor of the Dictator Assad, Bouthaina Shaaban, speaking on behalf of the Syrian regime at the time.

I strongly believe and I support the right of peoples to self-determination, especially after years of repression and injustice in which Arab peoples and the Syrian people in particular lived. Furthermore, our belief as Palestinians is that the liberation of the Arab peoples is the way for the liberation of Palestine and the restoration of our usurped rights.

We therefore began to contact several friends of Deraa refugee camp, and when the popular

movement reached Damascus and its suburbs, we took the decision to participate individually in demonstrations and rallies in several neighbourhoods of Damascus as Midan, Hajar al-Asswad, al-Qadam (neighbourhoods near the Yarmouk camp).

JD: When did the mobilization in favour of the Syrian revolution in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus started? How did the young Palestinians inside the camp organised in favour of the revolution? How did the first contacts established with the Syrians protesters?

Yarmouk refugee camp is the capital of the Palestinian diaspora and the fuel tank of the Palestinian revolution since its establishment. In the camp of Yarmouk was also located the largest Palestinian factions offices especially those loyal and supported by the Baath regime in Syria, which defected from the Fatah movement in the past with the support of Hafez al-Assad who tried to create an alternative to the PLO in order to confiscate the autonomy of the Palestinian decision making of the Palestinians themselves.

We mobilized in the beginning of the revolution in the surrounding areas of the camp and we were in contact with the popular coordination committees of these neighbourhoods.

Then we mobilized after the calls of Palestinian grassroots organizations throughout the region, following the overthrow of the dictator Mubarak in Egypt and the beginning of the Syrian revolution, to organize demonstrations (called "March of return") towards the borders with Palestine for Nakba Day May 15, 2011.

The organization of demonstrations took place in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian occupied territories. We had great apprehension of the exploitation by the regime of such a large movement, and especially after the refusal of some coordination committees to clarify their positions on the Palestinian issue. We tried to work on the organization of these demonstrations with the participation of the opposition. We made our position clear on the need to direct the compass of these revolutions towards Palestine. We also confirmed the link of the revolutionary movement with the liberation of the Palestinian and Syrian occupied territories.

We were surprised by the rejection of certain sections of the Syrian opposition, especially from the liberals and the Muslim brotherhoods (which are now present within the National Coalition and the Syrian National Coalition), to link the Syrian revolution and the Palestinian cause. They justify their refusal by the need to win the world opinion and not to mix the causes for not disturbing the USA. During the demonstrations on the day of the Nakba on the gates of the Golan Heights occupied by Israel, three young men from the Yarmouk refugee camp were martyred, while more than 350 Palestinians in various refugee camps in Syria were wounded by Israeli occupation bullets. On the second day of the funeral of the young martyrs, we witnessed the largest funeral in the camp of Yarmouk since the funeral of Khalil al-Wazir, Abu Jihad, assassinated by Israel in Tunisia in 1988.

The regime used these events as we expected, through very clear statements by Rami Makhlouf ("Israel's security is linked to the survival of Assad in power"), which is none other than the cousin of Bashar al Assad and the richest man in Syria.

J.D: How did the situation of the Yarmouk camp evolved since the beginning of the revolution? How did the Assad regime react against the popular movement in this area? What is the relationship between the various Palestinian groups with Syrian revolutionaries, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamic forces, etc.? What was the role of the various Palestinian political parties inside the camp?

After the demonstration of the “march of return”, the regime planned another demonstration on the day of Naksa (defeat of the Arab States during the 6 Day War 1967) on June 5, 2011. The Israel occupation army was prepared at the borders.

I was one of the representatives for the independent youth of the Yarmouk camp and we met with Palestinian factions almost every day. Popular coordination committees of the Syrian revolution informed us of what was being prepared and on the intentions of the regime and the PFLP-GC to use this movement to pressure Israel and present it as a threat to its security. But we could not stop mobilization.

The demonstration was a complete carnage, with the death of more than 38 martyrs killed by the bullets of the Israeli occupation and about 850 injured.

The next day, before the beginning of the martyrs’ funeral, an immense anger on the faces of people in all the camps was clear and noticeable. The funeral in the Yarmouk refugee camp quickly turned into a protest with slogans insulting the Syrian army, which was accused of failing to defend and retaliate following the killings of the Palestinian youngsters by the Israeli army. Insults for the first time were also directed against the highest officials of the Assad regime, including Bashar al-Assad and his brother Maher, and pictures of Bashar were also tore up for the first time. Finally, slogans against all the Palestinian factions that were involved in the disgusting game led by the Assad regime and especially the PFLP-GC of Ahmed Jibril, which had a big responsibility in this massacre, were also heard.

After the funeral of the martyrs, protesters continued to demonstrate outside the headquarters of the leadership of the PFLP-GC. Before reaching the building, the soldiers of Ahmed Jibril started shooting at protesters. 14 martyrs died that day by the bullets of the PFLP-GC and Syrian security forces. After this event, Yarmouk witnessed increased checks points and campaigns of arrests were then initiated at that time by the PFLP-GC and the Syrian security services.

The campaigns of arrests did not stop, and then at that point, the mobilization of young Palestinians increased dramatically in the regions close to the camp. They established at this moment the popular coordination committee of Yarmouk refugee camp for the Syrian revolution. The PFLP-GC and Syrian security services then started arming some militias composed of criminals who have been released from prison on a presidential pardon, and they were the “Shabiha” or “thugs” or “regime militias” receiving attractive salaries to repress protests and systematically murdered protesters.

Similarly the army of the Assad regime entered the region of “Tadamun” which overlaps the Yarmouk camp, populated by Palestinians and Syrians and committed a massacre against civilians in July 2012, as in other cities in which the regime had entered before.

The increase in the anarchy of weapons predicted a disaster and we agreed with all the opposition forces, the Revolutionary Command Council and the Military Council of the Free Syrian Army in the area to keep away the Yarmouk camp from the armed conflict to allow it to remain a haven for displaced civilians from nearby areas. Schools, mosques and houses were a refuge for displaced civilians who arrived in small numbers at the beginning and then exceeded the tens of thousands, even more than 100 000 at one point, from all the cities and regions of Syria.

J.D: Do you think it is possible to build a third force: a democratic and progressive Front guaranteeing the initial objectives of the Syrian revolution, which is independent of the Assad regime and the reactionary Islamic forces?

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, we look at the support for the political opposition in

exile, which is not nearly up to the sacrifices of the Syrian people on the ground. It was clear that the regime wanted to turn the revolution into a civil and sectarian religious war since the first statements of the regime to the use of military force and the daily massacres.

Meanwhile, Islamic jihadist currents developed for two main reasons, in addition to the elements mentioned above:

- The regime has released hundreds or thousands of Islamist and jihadist prisoners during the first months of the revolution while continuing to target and kill the Democrats and the youth.
- The direct support to the jihadist Islamic movements by the Gulf monarchies

These reactionary Islamic movements wanted and want to transform the revolutionary rhetoric in a religious and sectarian discourse chanting slogans that are not rooted or issued from the culture of the Syrian people. In addition these slogans by these reactionary Islamic movements have no connections with the revolutionary demands for freedom, dignity and social justice of the revolutionary Syrian people.

The need to build this third force independent of the regime and the reactionary Islamic forces is nevertheless a necessity and popular forces on the ground still represent the objectives of the Syrian popular revolution for democracy, social justice and equality.

JD: The Assad regime characterizes itself as a “resistance regime” or as the pillar of “the front of refusal” that supports the Palestinian cause, and this propaganda is relayed by some sections of the “left” and organizations in “solidarity with the Palestinian cause” in the West. How do you respond to these organizations and the propaganda of the regime, you as a Palestinian from Syria?

The role of the Baath regime in protection of the border with Israel was very clear to us from a long time, as we can see with the calm established in 1974 on the front of the Israeli-occupied Golan. The first arrest I experienced in Syria was in 2002 when I demonstrated in support of the Palestinian Intifada.

The Syrian regime has imprisoned hundreds of Palestinians without trial, while hundreds of others were murdered. The regime has also multiplied the attempts to divide the Palestinian ranks in all the phases of the Palestinian revolution by engaging in massacres against our people, and that from the period of the camp of Tel Zaatar in Beirut in 1976 to the Yarmouk refugee camp today and the unprecedented blockade imposed on it and in which 175 people died of hunger. Today the regime continues to shut off the water in the camp and this has been on going for over a month. We do not believe the lies of the regime, nor do we believe some of the so-called left forces following its propaganda in the world.

They do not know our causes, nor the lives of Palestinians in the camps and in the occupied territories and of the Palestinians fleeing Syria and the Assad regime who die in the Mediterranean Sea.

For my part, I now live in one of the European capitals, and this so-called “left” that defends the regime’s propaganda makes me laugh.

J.D: Do you think that there is a relationship between the mobilization of the Palestinian people in Syria for the Syrian revolution and the Palestinian cause? And generally speaking with the liberation of Palestine?

Now we await the developments taking place throughout the region. Freedom for us as Palestinians is indivisible of the revolutions. These revolutions will, sooner or later, go towards the liberation of Palestine.

I'm still somewhat pessimistic about how the Syrian opposition in exile, from the liberals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, unlike the revolutionary Syrian people, play with our rights as Palestinians and put more emphasis in their relationship with the West. This comes in addition of the use of some opposition figures of discussions of a future of a false peace between the peoples of the region and Israel.

Interview conducted in October 2014

Salim Salameh, Palestinian activist and blogger

J.D: First, please present yourself and why you participated in the Syrian revolution?

I think that many of those my age and I as well belong to a generation that grew up in a form of crisis of ideals, a form of negative stability, routine and with limited options on many levels, beginning with our everyday life to the study and the future. I began my studies at the University of Damascus in law in September 2007. I already felt at the time a deep will for change among many students, a will of course rarely publicly expressed, a will that bypassed religious communities and tribal, provincial and territorial affiliations. At the outbreak of the first popular protests in Tunisia, the revolution began, for me and for many others of my generation. I participated in the popular movement in Syria at the time of the departure of Ben Ali in Tunisia, which was a historic moment for me. I remember the first historical slogans of the Syrian revolution, "Ben Ali fled," and "the Syrian people will not submit" were fundamental pillars in my personal involvement in the movement. This may seem like a romantic explanation, but this justification has always been there for me in all my choices since March 15, 2011, since the beginning of the Syrian revolution. So why did I participate? I was involved from the beginning because I wanted to get some of me in Syria, a part of me that wanted to express my views and my right not to die anonymously. As to my role in it until I left the country, I, like many, participated in the demonstrations and rallies since the beginning in 2011. Subsequently, we developed as individuals and groups into broader organizational steps within the popular movement that included the University of Damascus and throughout the capital Damascus.

2) When did the mobilisation in favour of the Syrian revolution started in Yarmouk refugee camp? Why? And how did you organize inside Yarmouk?

I was not of those who were active in Yarmouk, most of my contacts and activities were outside, for logistical and security reasons, including also by accident. But I can confirm that the camp was following each new step of the evolution of the situation in the country. The camp is actually a geographical and human extension of Damascus. It is part of the city. I think the popular mobilization in favour of the Syrian uprising in the camp began on two essential points: the first was in May 2011, when the Syrian regime and the Palestinian organizations allied to it exploited the Palestinian mobilization for the "march of return", which was popular and massive, for the commemoration of the day of the Nakba, filling the buses of young Palestinians and transporting them to the border with the Israeli state. On that day, we witnessed the terrible slaughter by the Israeli State causing the death of many youth of Yarmouk. I think that at that moment people

realized, resulting in a whole different vision of the situation. I can't say how the change was profound, but anger over the massacre was very important. The other point that has been instrumental in the position of the camp during the Revolution was the arrival of displaced Syrians from Midan district, and on the eve of the brutal attack of the Assad regime during Ramadan 2012 of another neighbourhood, which was only a few minutes walk, not far from the camp.

3) How did the situation Yarmouk camp evolved since the beginning of the revolution? How did the Assad regime repressed the mobilisation in Yarmouk? What were the relationships between Palestinians and Syrian revolutionaries, with the Free Syrian Army, Islamist reactionary forces? What was the role of Palestinians factions inside Yarmouk?

As I said earlier, the camp is an integral part of the urban structure of Damascus. There have been numerous attempts by Palestinian writers to convince the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk to remain neutral. Many accusations were exchanged between Palestinian forces on the camp's involvement in the movement, particularly in light of the humanitarian disaster that occurred, like many other Syrian regions, with 450 days of blockade. In my personal opinion, it was not possible to keep the camp outside the framework of the conflict because the decision to participate in the popular movement was mainly the result of the Assad regime, which angered and provoked popular feelings in Palestinian circles since the failure of the Nakba day in May 2011 and the deaths that occurred on that day, not to mention dozens of shells fired randomly that fell at the periphery of the camp since the first months of the insurgency.

Regarding the treatment of the Assad regime of the popular movement in the camp, it was no different from the repressive security measures on other Syrian regions.

I will not address the relationship between the Palestinian factions and Syrian revolutionaries because I am currently in a difficult position in exile to discuss it. But I can speak with great knowledge and certainty of the destructive role of the Palestinian organizations that have offered nothing to the Palestinian people in Syria, on the opposite. Ahmad Jibril's forces of the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC) are until today, October 13, 2014, standing alongside the Syrian army in starving the camp, while the camp was without water for 34 days in arrow. The rest of the Palestinian organizations did not play a significant role in the Syrian issue. Hamas has turned his back on everyone, once again demonstrating the pragmatism of Islamic forces, while we can't rely on the Palestinian leadership represented by Mahmoud Abbas and the PLO, which negotiates with the Israeli occupation. There has been much recently, particularly since last April, around the truce initiatives sponsored by the PLO, the delegations sponsored by the PLO and the dozens of delegations composed of members of various Palestinian factions who came to Damascus repeatedly. I have written before on the site of the Carnegie Institution for peace building that any peace process, truce or cease-fire, whatever they are called, cannot take place without an agreement on how to proceed. What is a cease-fire when you leave the soldiers of the regime violating the process more than a thousand times a day? What does a truce mean if you do not let children get basic food products? We are constantly threatened with death, like the Syrians as a whole, except that we are less fortunate than them regarding the international legal protection, being excluded from a number of international conventions for the protection of refugees.

4) Do you believe it is possible to build a third progressive force guaranteeing the objectives of the revolution (Democracy, Social Justice and No to sectarianism) that is independent of the regime and the Islamist reactionary forces? And if yes why is this important to build this third progressive force.

Again, I do not think I am in a position to give predictions, especially as I am abroad in a safe situation, but I would like to remind that at the end of every tunnel, there is hope. Other peoples

have suffered horrific violence but have risen again. Death is not permanent and should not be.

5) The Syrian regime presents itself as a resistance regime in support of the Palestinian cause, and some sections of the left and pro Palestinian organisations in the West also promote this idea, what do you answer to these organisations as a Palestinian and the propaganda of the regime about its support to the Palestinian cause?

I think that three and half years after the beginning of the revolution, more than two thousand Palestinian martyrs killed by the regime, more than 150 martyred dead of starvation because of the blockade imposed on Yarmouk camp, according to our numbers of Palestinian League for Human Rights in Syria, in addition to the martyrs of the past winter in 2013 because of the cold ... I think it is humiliating for us as Palestinians in Syria, to deal with this completely distorted propaganda that portrays the regime as "resistant" and part of the "refusal" front. This regime has kept the Golan's front safe and silence for Israel for 40 years. I am very disappointed of a section of the left who believed and promoted further propaganda of the Assad regime and denied the popular aspirations of the Syrian people.

6) Do you think there is a relationship between the mobilisation of the Palestinian people in Syria on the side of the revolution and the Palestinian cause? And more generally with the liberation of Palestine?

The liberation of Jerusalem begins with the liberation of Damascus; I say this as a Palestinian who grew up in Syria and half Syrian by my mother.

Interview conducted in October 2014

P.S.

* Posted on February 12, 2015:

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2015/02/12/voices-of-yarmouk-syria-and-palestine-a-com-mon-struggle/>