

In Syria's war-scarred Yarmouk Camp, Palestinians begin long path to recovery

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Syria's largest Palestinian refugee camp was brutally besieged and almost entirely depopulated during the civil war. Now, returnees are starting to rebuild – but face extreme poverty and deep political uncertainty.

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In 2017, as Syrian regime forces besieged the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk in the southern outskirts of Damascus and food grew scarce, six Palestinian sisters devised a unique strategy for surviving the civil war: a small garden. Filled with flowers and vegetables, the garden provided sustenance, as well as camouflage for the house within the camp's narrow alleyways. But just as importantly, it provided a much-needed affirmation of life, and a symbol of their connection to the land.

"Those who visited our garden said that we made a small paradise in the middle of the war," Sabah Abdul-Mahmoud, one of the sisters, said with pride. "Whoever is able to preserve their house and neighborhood is able to preserve their country."

After their family was displaced from Haifa in 1948, Sabah and her sisters Hanan, Amal, Izdihar, Miso, and Umm Rami had lived in the same home in Yarmouk nearly their entire lives. Miso, Sabah, Amal and Izdihar managed to stay there throughout the war to save their home, seeing control of the camp shift between the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, and the government forces of Bashar Al-Assad.



Amal, the youngest of the six at 51, told +972 that she and her sisters "deeply love Palestine and are proud of their heritage," but their true sense of belonging is in Yarmouk. Now, in the wake of Assad's downfall, they are among those seeking to rebuild a future in the camp – which [remains devastated](#) from the war.



Two women walk on the street in Yarmouk, December 23, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

According to the Action Group for Palestinians in Syria (AGPS), approximately [60 percent](#) of the camp's buildings were damaged or destroyed in the war, during which [4,300 Palestinian refugees were killed and over 3,000 detained](#). Before the war, Yarmouk was home to 160,000 Palestinians; by 2018, a mere [200](#) had yet to flee the camp. Now, thousands of residents have begun to make their slow and painful return.

Walking through its streets, between rows and rows of bombed-out buildings, littered with holes from years of shelling, one cannot help but be reminded of images emanating daily from the Gaza Strip. It is even possible to find human bones amid the rubble: Bassim Haidar, a 72-year-old man, says that he often sees children playing with them in the streets.

In the Al-Quds school, now half-collapsed, a blackboard shows the last English class taught there in 2012, when the camp's inhabitants started fleeing for fear of getting caught in the crossfire. Most of the Yarmouk's schools [had closed their doors](#) by 2015, during the Assad regime's complete siege of the camp.



A child sits in the ruins of Al Quds School in the heart of Yarmouk, December 27, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

And yet, life continues amid the ruins and the trauma. In the remnants of an old shop, Huda Alazzeah, a 50-year-old Palestinian woman whose family came from Yaffa, set up an improvised food stall when she returned in 2023, before Assad's overthrow. "We're aware that our generation will never again see Yarmouk as it used to be," she told +972.

Her stall is one of several businesses to recently reopen in the camp. In many of them, owners use bed sheets instead of doors.

"We started to return a few years ago — the first ones came in 2020. But there is still a lot to do," said Tareq, a 65-year-old neighbor of Huda, lighting a cigarette. "Life here is unbearable, but we have nowhere else to go."



Tareq, a 65-year-old Palestinian refugee, sits on the remnants of a wall in Yarmouk, December 19, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

Open wounds

Founded almost a decade after the 1948 Nakba by displaced Palestinians, Yarmouk gradually

became a bustling suburb of Damascus and the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, with [160,000 registered Palestinians and 650,000 Syrian residents](#) in its heyday.

In the early days of the Arab Spring, many Palestinians in Yarmouk and across Syria resolved to [remain neutral](#) in the conflict — aware of their politically sensitive status within the country, and fearing the violence and bloodshed that some had experienced firsthand during the Lebanese civil war.

The first major test of that neutrality came in June 2011, when the [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command](#), a Palestinian armed group backed by the Syrian regime, opened fire on camp residents who were protesting the Assad government and the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights. The following months would see sporadic protests in Yarmouk in support of the opposition, although many Palestinian residents — along with several of the non-regime-aligned political factions inside the camp — [refused to take part](#).



A Palestinian fighter watches the crowd of Palestinians and Syrians at an event commemorating people killed in the Syrian civil war, in Yarmouk, December 27, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

August 2012 saw the first major massacre in the camp, when two mortar rounds exploded in [the busy Al-Ja'una street, killing over 20 Palestinians](#), including two children, according to the AGPS. Then came December 2012, when rebels from the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nusra gained a foothold in the camp. On Dec. 16, Syrian jets bombed the [Abdul Qader al-Husseini Mosque](#) in the heart of Yarmouk, where some 600 civilians had sought refuge from the fighting, thinking they wouldn't be attacked.

Mohammed Amairi, a 45-year-old Palestinian construction worker, spoke to +972 about the horror of that day near the remains of the mosque. "Men, women, and children were killed by Syrian government aerial bombing," he recounted. "Heads and hands were blown off everywhere." Dozens were killed in the strike — after which nearly 90 percent of the population fled the camp.

By the following July, Assad's forces had fully besieged Yarmouk, and for the remaining 20,000 residents, merely surviving became an ordeal. "We were alone," Izdihar recalled. During the siege in 2014, [over 150 people reportedly perished in the camp](#) from hunger and lack of access to medicine. "For nine months, we survived on leftovers, making bread with lentils," Miso said, with tears in her eyes. "If we found sugar, we made sweets and bread for the children, who were suffering from jaundice," Amal added.



Children run along the main street of Yarmouk, December 27, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

In the first months of 2014, one of the brief periods in which [humanitarian aid from UNRWA successfully entered the camp](#), the distribution of goods was often disrupted by heavy gunfire and shelling. On March 23, [29 people](#) were killed when a mortar shell exploded next to a food parcel collection point. “They wanted to starve us to death,” said Miso. “Many of the people who went to get medicine and food never came back.”

Over the course of the civil war, the camp became a base of operations for the Free Syrian Army, before being taken over by Jabhat al-Nusra, and by 2015, the Islamic State. But “the majority of the population of Yarmouk did not support any of these armed groups,” explained Mohammed.

As these groups vied for control of the camp, the six Palestinian sisters — whose home was located in a no man’s land, on the borders of factional control — would sit in their doorway overlooking the street to deter looters. “We stayed to guard our house and those of our neighbors,” Miso told +972, with a determined expression.

Shortly before government forces [retook Yarmouk](#) in 2018, the Islamic State’s sharia court, which had ordered women in the camp to wear a full veil, tried to force the sisters to evacuate their home. “We resisted with sticks and shoes,” Amal recounted, as her sisters laughed. “ISIS thought we were men, because we were so strong.”

But the return of regime control in Yarmouk would not bring an end to the suffering. As he spoke to +972, Mohammed clutched a photo of his brother Ahmed Amairi, a doctor who would regularly assist the wounded in Yarmouk during the first year of the war, evacuating them to the Assad University Hospital. Regime forces violently arrested him at his home in 2012 a few days after the Abdul Qader al-Husseini Mosque massacre; Mohammed would have to wait for any news until Dec. 10, 2024, when his brother’s body was found in the [notorious Sednaya Prison](#), where he had died of starvation.



Mohammed Amairi, a 45-year-old Palestinian construction worker, in front of the Abdul Qader al-Husseini Mosque in the heart of Yarmouk, December 19, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

Rebuilding the future

Sitting on a corner of the main avenue in Yarmouk, a group of Syrian and Palestinian bricklayers gathered before starting their daily work at one of the buildings in the area. “The buildings are badly destroyed, but we are doing everything we can, we have a long way to go,” Omar, one of the workers, told +972.

Omar, who emphasized his status as a Palestinian refugee (“that’s what it says on my ID,”) worked alongside 57-year-old Tamer. The two were both part of a Palestinian leftist group during the civil war in Lebanon. Exiled in 1987 from Lebanese territory for their involvement in the war, they returned to the camp in 2019, witnessing war on both sides of the border.

Work conditions for laborers in Yarmouk — many of whom are below the age of 18 — are appalling. Before the fall of the regime, they earned \$4 a day to reconstruct buildings destroyed in the war, with no personal protective equipment whatsoever. “Now our pay is no more than 50,000 Syrian Pounds a day (\$2),” explained Ahmed, another worker.



Omar, a 54-year-old Palestinian refugee, shows the location of his family village in Palestine, in Yarmouk, December 23, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

A young worker by the name of Abdullah said that he was detained several times by the Assad regime before he fled Syria for Turkey and then Germany. Upon his return to Syria in 2022, he was jailed at the notorious Branch 215 and Branch 235 (also known as “Palestine Branch”) prisons for supposedly aiding the Free Syrian Army. He was later transferred to Adra prison, where he was held until 2 a.m. on Dec. 8, when rebels released him alongside the other prisoners.

After his release, Abdullah returned to Yarmouk in hope of finding work and rebuilding his life. He was joined there by his family who returned at the end of 2022 due to the high cost of living in Damascus. Today, he and five relatives share a home in Yarmouk with no windows, doors, or heating in the middle of the harsh winter.

Indeed, most of Yarmouk’s returning residents are part of the nearly 70 percent of Syrians facing extreme poverty — a result of high inflation, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the deadly earthquake of February 2023, international sanctions against the Assad regime, and other factors. As fuel prices rise, most families in Yarmouk are unable to afford to stay warm, and hunger is a ticking time bomb.



Huda Alazzeah, a 50-year-old Palestinian woman, near her food stall in Yarmouk, December 19, 2024. (Santiago Montag)

At the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) — one of the few organizations providing psychological support, education, and vocational training workshops to the residents of Yarmouk — Fatima Sadiqi, a 30-year-old volunteer worker, described the hardships faced by people returning to the camp.

“There has been no water for six days, no electricity, and no food,” she told +972 on Dec. 23. “We are looking for funds to provide solar panels and generators, so that there is electricity at night. The camp sinks into darkness when the sun goes down.”

To make matters worse, since Assad’s downfall, accusations of supporting the regime have run

rampant among those who have returned to Yarmouk — now between 5 and 10 percent of the camp's prewar population, according to PRCS estimates.

"During the Assad regime, the [unpopulated and peripheral] areas [of the camp] were very insecure, because smugglers and the thieves [who] were related to the government [operated there]," said Abu Ali, a 48-year-old resident. After the evacuation agreement in 2018, the camp remained officially closed and, according to several residents, the government sent members of the army to loot what remained of the houses. "Some people who stayed during the war are being marked as Assad supporters and they are facing threats to be expelled from their homes," Abu Ali added.

Now, the rapid rise to power of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Islamist rebel group that has become the dominant force in the country, has brought much uncertainty to the camp.

Recently, the new HTS-led government [ordered all Palestinian factions in the camp](#) to hand over their weapons, primarily those that have had links to Assad. But it is not yet clear whether the factions will oblige, and what this process will look like.

Nor does the new government in Syria, which Fatima carefully described as "neutral," have any concrete plan to help Yarmouk's returning residents. "[They have to] rebuild their homes with their own hands," she added.

The people of Yarmouk hope for a new beginning — but they share a common apprehension about the future under an HTS. "We experienced firsthand what the Assad regime did," as Fatima put it, "but we also know the crimes of the Islamic State, [Jabhat] Al Nusra, and the other factions."

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P.S.

• +972. January 10, 2025:

<https://www.972mag.com/yarmouk-syria-palestinian-refugees-recovery/>

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• Santiago Montag's articles on *972:

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• Our team [+972] has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

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