A Year On: The Palestinians in Syria

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As Syria witnesses what has evolved into an armed insurrection, and as the regime has shifted from a security to a full-scale military response, the specter of the mayhem and destruction that engulfed Iraq following the US invasion haunts the country. One of the resultant and looming threats that hovers over Syria is an impending, if not already extant, civil war, spelling disaster for the Syrian people and the people of the region as a whole.

The recent shifts in the positions of key international players could see the ongoing turmoil in Syria evolve into an altogether unforeseen direction. During these times of uncertainty, what is certain is that, a year later, it is the Syrian people and their demands for a better future that have been and continue to be the real losers of the entanglement of their aspirations with conflicting regional and international geo-political interests.

Against this backdrop, the Palestinians in Syria are in a particularly precarious position given their refugee status in the country. If this status is threatened within the context of increased instability or the descent of Syria into anarchy, which would have far reaching consequences for all segments of Syrian society, the fate of the Palestinians could potentially, in the worst case scenario, echo some facets of the fate of the approximately 30,000 Palestinian refugees from Iraq following the US occupation of that country.

This article examines how the events in Syria over the past year have impacted the Palestinians in the country and assesses the possible implications of the ongoing upheaval and uncertainty for this particular community. It concludes by arguing that the fate of the Palestinians, like that of the Syrian people and the country as a whole, not only remains uncertain, but is also particularly precarious given their refugee politico-legal status in Syria.

The Palestinians’ Presence in Syria

The half a million Palestinians in Syria are mostly descendants of refugees who arrived in the country during the 1948 Nakba and fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). They have enjoyed unparalleled rights when compared to other Palestinian refugees. These rights, granted by the Syrian state before the assumption of power by the Ba’th Party, include equality with Syrian citizens in all areas of life, bar the right to nationality and the right to vote.

The reality of these rights, coupled with the place of Palestine in Arab nationalist ideology and rhetoric, has allowed for the Palestinians’ unique civil rights and relative stability in Syria while shoring the regime’s Arab nationalist credentials. These credentials could play a dangerous role in a backlash against the community in the event of the descent of the country into the abyss of civil war. At the same time, these credentials are also not without contradictions, and it may ironically be these contradictions, along with the community’s relative strength in numbers, which could see it weather the worst case scenario storm of a violent transition in Syria.

These contradictions have historically manifested themselves through the challenge that Palestinian nationalism posed to Syria’s regional interests, and stem from what the dissident Syrian intellectual and writer Michel Kilo noted as the incongruity of Syria’s internal and external nationalist interests and policies (alliances and recent re-alliances in the “axis of resistance” notwithstanding). This incongruity, however, has been latent and less pronounced for the young refugees, who not only comprise the majority of the Palestinian population, but who have also had no direct experiences of the tumultuous relationship between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Syria.

This relationship, which unfolded through, inter alia, the clashes between the PLO and Syria during the Lebanese civil war, culminating in the eventual crackdown on Fatah cadres in the country in 1983, complicates the community’s relationship to the regime, especially for families who are still too reluctant to talk about this episode some three-decades later. Nonetheless, with the exception of those who were directly affected by the Palestinian national movement’s history in Lebanon and the Fatah crackdown at home, Palestinians in Syria, and their camps and places of abode, were not affected by the involvement of Syria in the Lebanese civil war in the
same way or to the same extent as their Palestinian refugee counterparts in Lebanon.

Marches of Return
The Palestinians in Syria were first pushed into the limelight when, on the sixty-third anniversary of the Nakba, young Palestinian refugees took part in what was dubbed “The Refugees’ Revolution”. A Palestinian refugee youth initiative inspired by the revolutionary fever that blew from the Maghreb to the Mashriq following the ousting of Zayn al-‘Abidin ‘Ali from Tunisia, the day saw unprecedented coordinated regional attempts by refugees to march to their families’ homes and lands under the control of the state of Israel. It was the Palestinian and Syrian youth on the border with the occupied Golan, however, that crossed the border and entered the Israeli-occupied Syrian town of Majdal Shams. One young Syria-born Palestinian man, Hassan Hijazi, travelled from Majdal Shams to his family’s home in Jaffa and defiantly made his symbolic act of return public on Israeli television.

The Israeli army was quick to blame “Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah”, and the Americans were as quick to decry Syria’s “incitement,” conveniently overlooking the fact that, although the march could indeed not have taken place without the state’s approval, it was nonetheless realized by young refugees, some who paid with the ultimate price of their lives for their free-willed political acts. When an attempt was made to repeat the event on the forty-fourth anniversary of the Naksa, during which the Israeli army outdid itself in killing even more unarmed demonstrators, Israeli government spokesperson and chief propagandist Mark Regev took the narrative further by accusing the refugees of constituting a “mob” of “enemy nationals” and armed Israeli soldiers as therefore entitled to the “defense” of illegally occupied Syrian territory against these “violent” incursions.

Following the funeral processions for those who lost their lives during the Naksa day march, conflicting narratives emerged around the shooting and killing of angry mourners or zealous youths, depending on the narrative in question, at the hand of the Syria-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) headquarters’ guards. These shootings reportedly followed the confrontations that began during the funeral processions by angry mourners/zealots who, according to eyewitnesses, confronted factional leaders in their midst about their involvement in the marches, and later surrounded the PFLP-GC’s headquarters, where the shootings took place, setting the building on fire.

In a press conference, PFLP-GC leader Ahmad Jibril denied the shootings of mourners, arguing that the PFLP-GC lost three men, while only one attacker and a bystander were shot. The attackers who descended on his faction’s headquarters, Jibril continued, were stirred up by Saudi Arabia and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud ‘Abbas, among other agent provocateurs, in order to forcefully drag the Palestinians in Syria into the ongoing events in the country. He also denied his faction’s involvement in organizing the buses that took the youth to the border on the day of the march.

Whatever the truth of what happened in Yarmouk Camp, a suburb of Damascus that is home to a third of the Palestinians in the country as well as poorer Syrians, at face value the shootings seem to corroborate the problematic Israeli and American narrative of Palestinian refugee youths as instrumentalized puppets, regardless of whether it was angry mourners or mobs of zealots who descended on the PFLP-GC headquarters. However, when the young refugees’ own political will and agency is taken into account, these tragic events could also be read as an expression of popular anger at a self-interested attempt to hijack and capitalize on a youth-conceptualized and -initiated event by the Damascus-based factions through the event’s facilitation, rather than instigation and orchestration.

The conflicting narratives surrounding the shootings agree that there were anti-factional chants during the funeral processions, with some reports of mourners chanting “the people want to bring down the factions,” playing on the famous Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionary chants. Thus, while the Israeli and American framing of events served to deny the young Palestinians as third- and fourth-generation refugees and as willful claimants of a legally enshrined right of return to their lands, what the killings on the border and the shootings in Yarmouk definitively underscored were the conflicting interests of all the parties involved in the marches, and a
clear instance during which the latent contradictions noted above came to the fore, precisely because of the crises in the country.

Early Accusations and Denials
Like the conflicting reports surrounding the shootings in Yarmouk, there have been conflicting reports about the extent of Palestinian involvement in the events in Syria. As early as March 2011, a report circulated in the Syrian al-Watan newspaper of “extremist Palestinians” in Dar’a who sabotaged the southern town through vandalism, rioting, looting and acts of arson.25 This report also carried a condemnation - and hence admission - of Palestinian involvement by a “senior” Palestinian source in Damascus, denied and contradicted a day later in the same newspaper by a member of the PFLP-GC’s political bureau.26 During the same week, in an interview with BBC Arabic, President Bashar Al-Assad’s advisor Buthayna Sha’ban pointed the finger at, among others, people from “a camp” who descended on the coastal town of Latakia and started burning and vandalizing shops, killing two security members and a demonstrator.27

Ahmad Jibril was quick to deny this alleged Palestinian involvement to al-Watan, noting that the official confusion stemmed from the fact that Latakia (al-Raml) Camp is adjacent to an area which houses Idlib governorate and other rural-urban migrants, the true culprits.28 This confusion, as his statement went, was similar to that around identifying the true culprits behind the Dar‘a rioting. The Dar‘a rioters, as it later transpired according to Jibril, were not Palestinians, but from the area adjacent to Dar‘a Camp, which houses internally displaced Syrians from the Golan. Internally displaced Syrian sources, it should also be noted, denied their involvement to the same newspaper early on. Complicating matters further, while Jibril was eager to disassociate Palestinians from involvement in the events - which other sources noted as Palestinians coming to the aid of wounded in the case of Dar‘a - 29 the coalition of Damascus-based factions, known as the Palestinian Powers’ Alliance (tahalaf al-quwa al-filastiniyya), including Jibril’s PFLP-GC, were also quick to deny UNRWA’s press statement that noted reports of heavy gunfire into Latakia Camp in August 2011.30

In his initial March denial of Palestinian involvement in Latakia, Jibril noted that a mere water stream separates the Palestinians from the rural-urban migrants living adjacent to Latakia Camp in the al-Raml neighborhood. Five months later, this early distinction begged the question of how heavy arterially could indeed discern this water stream, especially when the Director of the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor), the highest state body responsible for Palestinians in Syria, stated that “the issue” that was “tackled” took place in “the camp’s neighboring area” rather than in the camp itself.

At the same time, Ramallah pundits eagerly joined the chorus surrounding the events in Latakia. One pundit went as far as invoking memories of the “war of the camps” in Lebanon, a claim which overlooks the reality of the ethnically heterogeneous and open spaces that are Palestinian camps in Syria - often housing poorer Syrians at their edges and blurring into adjacent areas - as the flow of statements analyzed above indeed demonstrates. It also obscures from the scale of the events in a town that also happens to be home to a Palestinian refugee camp.31

Necessary Neutrality
These contradictory and polarized narratives on Palestinians in Syria, like everything else coming out of and pertaining to the country, tell us nothing about the real and material ongoing repercussions on the people of the two camps and the surrounding areas.32 What members of the Powers’ Alliance statements and press conferences over the past year do indeed tell us, when stripped off of all the rhetoric, is the factions’ desire for and emphasis on the Palestinians and their camps’ political neutrality, underscoring the dangers of embroiling them in the events (often speaking of hidden interests which would like to do just that).

UNRWA’s statements over the past year, on the other hand, paint a consistent picture of Palestinian camps and the surrounding areas where they also live as affected by the crackdowns on their respective towns, primarily through its suspension of relief services in May to Dar‘a, surrounding villages and Homs, 33 as well as the agency’s inability to access Latakia in August.34 The agency spokespersons have also consistently emphasized the potential catastrophe that can befall the Palestinians should they be become embroiled in the events in one
way or another, which in the worst-case scenario, could lead to their displacement yet again.\textsuperscript{35}

Hamas has also been extremely consistent until its recent departure from the country,\textsuperscript{36} albeit in another respect. The Damascus-based political bureau leadership maintained a position of strict silence on Syria, until Khaled Mish'\textasciitilde{}al’s late December 2011 Al-Jazeera Arabic interview.\textsuperscript{37} In the interview, he noted that Hamas would have liked to see the regime combine reform at home while maintaining its foreign policy support for the movement, and that Hamas is both loyal to the regime for its support over the years as well as to the Syrian people who embraced the movement.

This interview, followed by the departure of the movement’s leadership and the nod to the uprising by Hamas’s Gaza Prime Minister Isma'\textasciitilde{}il Haniya in al-Azhar in Cairo,\textsuperscript{38} has come amidst shifts internal and external to the movement that have unfolded in view of the changes to the political map of the post-revolutions Arab world. This saga of Palestinian national politics has also unfolded far away from the day-to-day interests and real dangers facing the Palestinians in Syria, whose presence in the country predates that of Hamas by about five decades. These interests and dangers not only include the threat of secondary displacement, but moreover, the more immediate increasing economic hardships that have resulted from the sanctions and the situation in the country, translating into rampant inflation, soaring prices and the ruin of small business owners.

\textit{An Uncertain Present and Future}

As Damascus and its surrounding areas, were three-quarters of the Palestinians in the country live, was generally spared the upheaval until recently, so too were the camps and the Palestinian gatherings in the capital and its surroundings. However, this has begun to change for the areas that constitute the Damascus and rural Damascus governorates, affecting all residents of these areas. Yarmouk has generally been spared, even though Palestinians are today a minority in the camp itself, while the areas adjacent to Yarmouk have seen tension.\textsuperscript{39}

Videos of contentious pro- and anti-regime demonstrations have been circulating since at least last summer,\textsuperscript{40} with several more as of late January 2012.\textsuperscript{41} These were followed by the denial of Palestinian involvement in the same newspaper that ran the earlier conflicting reports about Palestinian involvement in the early demonstrations in Dar\textasciitilde{}a and Latakia,\textsuperscript{42} and the attributing of the demonstrations to Syrians – purportedly from the camp’s edges, adjacent areas, and further afield - by Palestinian anonymous sources. In an ominous development, there have been reports of the mysterious killings of at least two Palestinian Palestine Liberation Army officers in Yarmouk.\textsuperscript{43} Recently, in March, a car exploded in one of the quietest thoroughfares of the camp on the same day that saw two bombs rip through downtown Damascus, killing those inside the car.\textsuperscript{44} Most recently, a former Hamas official was “kidnapped” and then “released” two days later by “unknown” kidnappers in Damascus.\textsuperscript{45}

As the situation on the ground continues to change, the fate of the Palestinians in the country, like the fate of Syrians and the country as a whole, remains uncertain. However, unlike their Syrian counterparts, Palestinians are refugees, and the recent reports of Jordan looking into a buffer zone on its border with Syria for Palestinian refugees after seventeen Palestinians crossed the border paints a troubling picture of what may come.\textsuperscript{46} One Jordanian Member of Parliament described Bashabsha (al-Ramtha) Camp, already home to Palestinian refugees from Syria, as more of a “detention” than a refugee camp,\textsuperscript{47} contrasting his government’s treatment of Palestinians with the hospitality granted to the 95,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan.

That another Arab state would close its doors in the face of Palestinians seeking yet another place of refuge is not without too many precedents. If this reading of the place of Palestinians in the events in Syria over the past year tells us anything, it is that beyond rhetoric, during times of turmoil and upheaval in Arab states, Palestinian refugees find themselves all alone and in a particularly precarious position yet again. This precariousness ultimately stems from the continued lack of recognition and restitution for their expulsion from Palestine during the establishment of the state of Israel and the Palestinians’ consequent six-decade old and ongoing statelessness.

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Syria.

9 Kilo, Michel, “Syria... The Road to Where?” Contemporary Arab Affairs 4, no. 4, (2011), pp. 431-444.

21 “Golan Martyrs’ Mourners Attacked Maher al-Taher.”


24 “Golan Martyrs’ Mourners Attacked Maher al-Taher.”


27 “President Bashar Al-Assad’s Advisor in Conversation on the BBC 1/2,” YouTube, 26 March 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsapBrL16_M.


41 “Damascus Palestinian Yarmouk Camp 30 January 2012 Palestinian and Syrian is One,” YouTube, 30 January


