

The Threat of Islamist Terrorism in Yarmouk

Horrors and chaos in the Arab world never cease. The continuing catastrophe of the brutal civil war in Syria has so far led to 210,000 deaths and 11 million driven from their homes. The latest horror is the siege and battle between Islamic groups taking place within that country in April 2015 in the Yarmouk refugee camp, a few miles from the center of Damascus, Syria.

Established in 1957, the camp was the home of an estimated 180,000 Palestinians, and some Syrians, before the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. It was the largest Palestinian community in Syria. It had its own schools, mosques, hospitals, health care centers, and public buildings. However, it was not an official refugee camp.

For more than three years Yarmouk has been under siege by blockade by the Syrian Assad regime, which conducted the initial assault in December 2012. More than 200 people died of hunger, malnutrition, and dehydration. The regime then fought against armed forces of the Free Syrian Army and the al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda affiliate. As a result many of the inhabitants were forced to flee.

No condemnation of that brutality by both sides of civilians and violations of human rights came from the UN Human Rights Council, the UN Security Council, or any other international organization, or from any Arab country. Noticeably, the Palestinian Authority failed to protect the Palestinians in Syria during the ongoing fighting.

On April 1, 2015, Yarmouk was invaded by 600 fighters of the Islamic Republic of Iraq and Syria (IS), apparently allied

with fighters from some brigades of the al-Nusra Front, which led to violence, looting, beheading of civilians, and destruction of much of the facilities of the camp. The situation is close to a humanitarian disaster. Insufficient food is entering the camp to meet the minimum requirements for the inhabitants.

The camp is now a devastated area, 70 per cent of which has been destroyed. About 18,000, of whom 3,500 are children, remain trapped in the camp, suffering from lack of food, water, and medical help. In callous fashion, even graves in a cemetery have been destroyed by the use by the fighting groups of barrel bombs, and innocent people are being used as human shields. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on April 9, 2015 called the Yarmouk situation the deepest circle of hell, beginning to resemble a death camp.

At last, the UN Security Council at an emergency session on April 6, 2015 called for the protection of civilians in the camp and for ensuring humanitarian access to the area. Pierre Krahenbuhl, head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) called the situation "beyond inhumane." The reality for the trapped Palestinians is one of survival. No official aid convoy has been able to reach the beleaguered inhabitants since December 2014.

The cruelty by all sides in this conflict is mixed with the maneuvering of the participants in a situation of complex and changing alliances of ally and foe. It is difficult to understand the machinations or the attitude of Palestinian groups who are divided or uncertain about their standpoint. In the Yarmouk fighting, some Palestinian groups fought against the Assad regime. More importantly, three Palestinian groups, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, the Palestinian Liberation Army, and Fatah al-Intifada, joined the fight against IS. To add to the confusion, the Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis group, affiliated with

Hamas, has been fighting with the Free Syrian Army fighters against government forces as well as against IS.

It is a sad commentary on the ineptitude of Palestinian organizations that they appear incapable or unwilling to help their own people when attacked by fellow Muslims. The lack of clarity is even more perplexing. The official Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) representative, Ahmad Majdalani, said that Palestinian groups had agreed to action by Syrian government forces to expel IS from Yarmouk. However, the PLO on April 9, 2015 officially announced it would not be drawn into the conflict.

The actions of the Assad regime are equally puzzling. It allowed IS to infiltrate the south of Syria and the area of Yarmouk in order to counter the moderate opposition to the regime, and to discredit al-Nusra. The Assad regime did not oppose the entrance of IS fighters into Yarmouk. While some brigades of al-Nusra helped IS, officially an enemy against which it had fought elsewhere in Syria, other brigades of the group did not do so.

The only explanation for the actions of Assad seems to be that IS, while building its Caliphate and expanding its territory, has not been hostile to the Assad regime, whereas the al-Nusra Front has always been an enemy of Assad. The Front is part of an alliance of an anti-Assad rebel coalition, called Jaysh al-Fateh, which is seeking to create an administration in the part of Syria that it controls. Nusra therefore has been and remains a direct and growing threat to the regime.

In the midst of the Yarmouk disaster, a number of questions can be raised. The first is essential: why are Palestinians still in a camp that has existed for 58 years, and why have they not been integrated into Syrian society? The comparison is startling between this Arab apathy and the resourcefulness of the State of Israel that has absorbed millions of refugees,

including more than 750,000 from Arab countries. Moreover, why have the Palestinians, grandchildren of those who claim to be refugees, been persecuted by fellow Arabs, first by the Assad regime and then by IS?

The hypocrisy on Middle East issues of supposedly humanitarian groups has long been notorious and remains appalling. Even now, the United Church of Christ, a Protestant denomination that claims 900,000 members, is planning to consider at its General Synod in June 2015 two resolutions calling on the Church to divest from Israel, and another Israeli actions towards Palestinians as apartheid. No resolutions are proposed by the Church on the "apartheid" of Palestinians in Syria, or elsewhere in the Arab world, or the inhumane suffering and violent removal of 90 per cent of them from their Yarmouk camp by fellow Muslims.

Yarmouk was the site of the famous battle in 636 between Muslim Arab forces and the army of the Byzantine Empire. The result was a decisive victory for the Muslims and the beginning of the Islamic conquests in the world. Today, for IS the capture of Yarmouk, so close to Damascus, is a major victory, militarily and symbolically. The Western democratic world, including the United Church of Christ, would do well to preoccupy itself with countering that victory, rather than squander its time and resources in pointless anti-Israeli resolutions in international organizations.

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