



## SYRIA ALERT XV

### #SaveYarmouk

13 April, 2015

*With the ISIS attack on Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, the already inhumane situation in the camp became, in the words of UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness, “beyond inhumane.” A population of around 18,000 people, including 3,500 children, who had been living under a tight siege since July 2013 and without running water since September 2014, are now stuck in the middle of fighting between ISIS, armed groups (including Aknad Beit al-Maqdis) and the Assad regime. Although the situation in Yarmouk is generally presented as a humanitarian crisis, it must be kept in mind that this is a man-made and intentionally inflicted disaster. While the remarks by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and of EU High Representative Federica Mogherini on Yarmouk emphasise the humanitarian disaster, it is imperative that the crisis receives the highest political priority from all member states of the UN Security council to stop the massacre in Yarmouk.*

#### SUMMARY

In this Syria Alert PAX argues that the humanitarian crisis in Yarmouk, as in all of Syria, is man-made and political and should therefore be addressed through political strategies.

- The international community should immediately take diplomatic action to secure a humanitarian corridor to get people and aid into and out of Yarmouk. The UN Security Council should mandate such a corridor with a resolution and Special Envoy de Mistura should negotiate with the conflicting parties on the basis of that mandate.
- Such a corridor, meaning the evacuation of people from Yarmouk and delivery of food, water and medicine into the camp, should be monitored by UN or ICRC observers, so as to secure the protection of civilians.
- Of specific concern is the protection of aid workers and civil society activists who are still present in the camp and are in direct danger from both ISIS and the Assad regime.
- As the capital of the Palestinian diaspora, Yarmouk has a high emotional, social and symbolic value. If evacuation of the remaining inhabitants is necessary to protect them against fighting, planning should immediately start for scenarios that allow their return to the camp

#### UNREPRESENTED AND UNPROTECTED

The Palestinian refugees in Syria suffer from a lack of representation and a protection gap. Formally, UNRWA is responsible for their well-being and it does whatever is in its power to provide aid, but it does not have a protection mandate. Palestinian refugees in the countries where UNRWA operates are excluded from UNHCR protection.

The PLO, which is the political body established to represent all Palestinians, including the Palestinian refugees in Syria, has greatly disappointed the people in Yarmouk by not being able to improve their situation. While the Palestinians in Syria have consistently managed to stay out of the fighting, the PLO has taken insufficient action to protect and support the Palestinians caught in the fighting. The Palestinian political factions in Syria are hopelessly divided, which contributed to the catastrophic situation the people of Yarmouk are in today. After negotiations between the factions last week, PLO Executive Committee member Ahmad Majdalani announced the factions would work together with the Assad regime on a military strategy to remove ISIS from the camp. This announcement was met with great opposition from Palestinian civil society activists for fear of a massacre of civilians and a day later the PLO in Ramallah announced it would not get involved in the fighting.

The Syrian government, which also has a responsibility in protecting the Palestinian refugees, has been besieging, starving, torturing and bombing them over the past years. ISIS has reportedly started campaigns to arrest and execute people inside the camp. To summarise, a civilian population is totally

left on its own, with nobody except local civil society and UNRWA taking responsibility for their protection and defending their rights towards the relevant political actors.

### **ESTABLISHMENT OF A HUMANITARIAN CORRIDOR NEEDED**

Palestinian human rights and civil society activists PAX that works with emphasise the urgent need for a humanitarian corridor: a safe entry of aid into the camp and evacuation of people out of the camp must be secured. People are stuck in their homes because of the fighting around them and have run out of food and water. Medical services can barely be provided as there is neither medicine nor supplies. The Palestinian hospital has been bombed by the Syrian regime. People who are wounded cannot be evacuated. Families with children are trapped and cannot be evacuated. The fighting has been compounded by shelling and bombing by Syrian forces.

Since the ISIS attack, the Assad regime has reportedly attacked the camp with multiple bombs, airstrikes, and mortar shelling, including barrel bombs<sup>1</sup>. Therefore the most urgent step to be taken by the international community is to pressure the Assad regime, which controls the main entries to the camp, to allow the establishment of a humanitarian corridor for people to be evacuated and for aid to get in. UNRWA have pointed out that almost 100 civilians, including 20 children, were evacuated from the camp on 5 April, so there is no reason why more of Yarmouk's residents cannot be escorted to safety<sup>2</sup>. Pressure should preferably be supported by a UN Security Council resolution, thus Russia will have to play a key role in facilitating such an international mandate. UN Special Envoy de Mistura can subsequently negotiate and coordinate the steps to be taken by different sides.

### **CONCERNS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS**

Civil society activists and aid providers in the camp are wanted by both ISIS and the regime. They are in immediate danger of being targeted by the fighting parties. On 23 February 2015, Mr Firas al-Naji, a member of the Palestinian League for Human Rights, was assassinated in the camp<sup>3</sup>. On 30 March 2015, Mr Yahia al-Hourani, a volunteer at the Red Crescent Society, was killed on his way to work<sup>4</sup>.

There are concerns that aid workers and civil society activists may be arrested in case of an evacuation into a regime-controlled area. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the evacuation is coordinated and monitored by an international organization such as the UN or the ICRC.

According to PAX's estimations, at least 50 activists and aid workers are in direct danger. Additionally, monitoring of the evacuation and access of international aid agencies would also be needed to protect the civilian population from Yarmouk, as the Assad regime cannot be trusted to protect them given the track record of collectively punishing populations of besieged areas. For example, there are currently concerns about the situation of a group of 200 people from the camp who were evacuated to a school in Tadamon. They have been provided with aid, but are not free to move.<sup>5</sup>

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF RETURN TO AND THE PRESERVATION OF YARMOUK**

Yarmouk camp is called the capital of the Palestinian diaspora. Before its siege, it was a political, cultural, economic and social center for the Palestinian refugee population outside Palestine. This important centre of the Palestinian identity is being destroyed at the moment. For many Yarmouk residents, becoming a refugee for the second time is an extremely painful fact. It is also the main reason for many of the remaining inhabitants to refuse to leave. To that background, while evacuation is necessary to protect people against ISIS and the armed conflict, this evacuation should be only temporary. The international community and the PLO should start work from now on to develop scenarios that enable the return of the inhabitants to the camp as soon as possible.

### **POLITICAL STRATEGIES NEEDED**

Over the past two years, the international community has failed its responsibility to protect the people in Syria. In spite of UN resolutions demanding humanitarian access, the political will to enforce

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 36 barrel bombs were dropped on the camp since 4 April 2015, see <http://syriahr.com/en/2015/04/36-explosive-barrels-on-the-yarmouk-camp/>

<sup>2</sup> The Palestinians of Yarmouk and the shameful silence when Israel is not to blame, Guardian, 12 April 2015

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/28430/action>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> PAX interview with an anonymous civil society activist from Yarmouk



humanitarian access to those in need has been lacking. At this moment there is a population of 18,000 people in urgent danger in Yarmouk camp. The world cannot afford to fail again. A massacre has to be prevented.

The international community should study the feasibility of and conditions for an air lift to deliver critical aid, in case the Assad regime and/or other parties in the conflict continue to obstruct the establishment of a humanitarian corridor for people and goods into and out of Yarmouk. The humanitarian crisis in Syria is caused by political strategies and should therefore also be addressed by political strategies, in combination with humanitarian and, under strict restrictions and as a last resort, military strategies as to prevent large scale human rights violations and mass atrocities.

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