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CASE ANALYSIS

Palestinians in Syria and the Syrian Uprising

Salah Hassan | October 2012

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Series: Case Analysis

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Introduction¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were no borders between Palestine and Syria; prior to that time, there was economic and social integration between the Palestinian and Syrian peoples. The Syrians took part in the Palestinian revolution of 1936 and contributed in attempts to repel Israel's colonizing attack on Palestine's territories in 1948, resulting in the Nakba. After the Nakba, Palestinian's began migrating to neighboring areas, and Syria received a significant number of them as Palestinians found support from the Syrian people during their tragic crisis.

Since Palestinians migrated to Syria in 1948, Syrian authorities have legalized their residence in Syria, and issued laws and resolutions to organize their presence on Syrian territories² in a way that would guarantee them a reasonable standard of living and preserve their national identity. Under these laws, they became Syrians in terms of rights and duties, but remained Palestinian in terms of national identity, which paved the way for them to contribute to building Syria after its independence, on an equal footing with their Syrian brothers and sisters. Job opportunities were open to them just like the Syrians, so they were able to involve themselves with the economic life, with some having emerged as prominent businessmen, factory owners, and merchants, as well as professionals and entrepreneurs.³ The only sign of a separate Palestinian existence in Syria is the presence of camps, which were not imposed on them by the government, but were maintained at their own volition. A diverse population lives in the camps as they are not places for poor Palestinians, but open to all, not closed in on themselves or Palestinian ghettos; Syrians reside in them too, and they are integrated into their Syrian surroundings. It is important to clarify that there are more Palestinian refugees living in Syrian cities than there are in the camps.

¹ This paper was originally published by the Center in March 2012.

² To view these laws, refer to publications by the General Authority of Palestine Arab Refugees in Syria (GAPAR), such as the booklet "Palestinian refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: Laws – decrees – resolutions – services – data – statistics". It includes, most importantly, law number 206 that was passed by the Syrian parliament and issued by former Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli on July 10, 1956. The first article of this law states that "Palestinians residing in Syria as of the date of publication of this law are to be considered as originally Syrian in all things covered by the law and legally valid regulations connected with the right to employment, commerce, and national service, while preserving their original nationality." This law is still in force today.

³ Examples include: Freij Fashion, Assia stores and clothing shops, and Ammoura Aluminum Factory.

Palestinians are part of and have actively participated in Syrian political life, and having been encouraged by the fact that the liberation of Palestine was a central issue for the Syrian national movements, they became members of these movements without any discrimination. In fact, they occupied leading positions in movements such as the Baath Party, Arab Nationalist Movement, Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (Islamic Liberation Party), and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). They also contributed to the formation of policies and the different programs within these parties, and held senior positions in government departments, such as general director, department head, university dean, and minister, though to occupy these roles they were granted Syrian nationality in order to conform to Syrian law.

Palestinians also contributed to the building of the Syrian army in the post-independence stage. Syria received a group of 65 Palestinian youth from various districts and cities who had volunteered to be trained as officers in the "Palestinian Officers Academy" in Qatna, next to Damascus, which was opened after a decision from the Arab Salvation Army. They graduated from the academy after the Nakba, though many of them voluntarily remained in the Syrian army. The Syrian government granted them Syrian nationality under special decree number 1327 on August 17, 1950, signed into act by former Syrian President Hashim al-Atassi; after this time, Palestinians held important positions in the Syrian army.⁴

Within the framework of equality in rights and duties, Palestinians are conscripted to military service just like Syrians. They are also allowed to join the army and reach the highest ranks, and since special army regulations state that higher ranks are limited only to Syrians and not those under their rule (i.e., Palestinians), the Syrian authorities granted them Syrian nationality.

The Palestinian National Movement in Syria

Palestinians in Syria remained integrated into Syrian national parties until the mid-1960s, when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was established and resistance factions emerged. When the PLO formed the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), at the

⁴ For more information on this topic, refer to: Hasan Abu Raqba, *Flowers and Thorns: Memoirs of a Palestinian Officer*, 2nd edition (Beirut: Bahith Center for Studies, 2010).

request of Chairman Ahmed al-Shukeiri, the Syrians transferred most of the Palestinian officers that were in the Syrian army to the PLA (e.g., Abdel Aziz al-Wajih, Abdul Razzaq al-Yahya, Mosbah al-Badiri, Samir al-Khatib, Othman Jaafar Haddad, Mohammad al-Halabi, and others). From that point onwards, Palestinians in Syria began undertaking their military service with the PLA rather than the Syrian army.

From 1967 to 1970, the ruling Baath Party in Syria – under the command of what was known as the left wing and represented by Salah Jadid, Nouredine Atassi, and Yousuf Zuayyin – allowed resistance factions (except the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – PFLP) to operate and build military bases and training camps within Syrian territories. The Baath leadership at that time established the “Vanguard for the Popular Liberation War – As-Saiqa forces,” and the PLA established the Popular Liberation Forces.

There was disagreement within the Baath party’s leadership over Jordan’s use of force against the Palestinian resistance in Jordan in July 1970, with the majority of the leaders in favor of military intervention to support the resistance while the department of the defense minister, Hafez al-Assad, opposed direct military intervention. Assad started the Correction Movement between November 13 and 16 and took hold of power in Syria on November 16, 1970. This date marked a new phase in Palestinian-Syrian relations.

In 1974, al-Assad signed the Separation of Forces Agreement that followed the 1973 October War in which he agreed to stop military action against Israel on the Golan Heights front, an agreement still in force today. The Syrian authorities asked the Palestinian factions to adhere to the agreement and they agreed.

After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 1982, and Hezbollah took control of South Lebanon, thereby preventing the presence of Palestinian forces, the majority of Palestinian resistance forces concentrated their operations in Damascus. The exception to this was Fatah, which had been prevented from operating in Syria since 1983 after a dispute between al-Assad and Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the PLO.

Since the late 1980s, Palestinian factions in Syria have been limited to a political and media presence. Even though they were allowed to open offices and hold training camps for these purposes, the only weapons they had were for guarding offices or kept

in the training camps. Additionally, the number of weapons allowed was restricted and each item of weaponry was recorded and accounted for at Al-Dabita al-Fidaiyya (Guerrilla Control Bureau, a department of military intelligence). The Popular Front/General Command is the only faction that is allowed to have an armed presence in Syria.

Throughout the period of his rule, al-Assad worked to contain the Palestinian factions in order to be in control of the Palestinian situation, but he did not succeed in fully achieving this. After the PLO left Beirut and moved their headquarters to Tunisia and Arafat severed his political relationship with al-Assad, their relationship became one of rivalry and hostility. Assad allied with the Palestinian National Salvation Front (PNSF) during the internal Palestinian division over the Amman agreement. The gap between them further deepened when the PLO signed the Oslo Agreement in 1993 as a unilateral solution with Israel, similar to that of the Camp David Agreement between Egypt and Israel. The Syrian regime rushed to support the factions that rejected the agreement, forming an alliance with them parallel to that of the PLO's leadership, keeping the headquarters in Damascus; in this way, al-Assad tried to demonstrate that he controlled part of the Palestinian movement and that it would not be easy to reduce his influence.

Assad's policy to contain and control the Palestinians, which has been continued by his son Bashar al-Assad, was not a policy met with acceptance or pleasure by the Palestinians in Syria. They remember his refusal to intervene in support of Palestinian resistance to the Jordanian military campaign that attempted to remove Palestinians from Jordanian territories in 1970 and 1971; they also remember al-Assad's role in the destruction of the Tel al-Zaatar camp in Beirut, in addition to other battles. Importantly, he gave control of the rest of the Lebanon refugee camps to his Lebanese and Palestinian allies, divided national Palestinian alliances, and supported Palestinian infighting, to the detriment of the Palestinian national cause. There is also a negative feeling among the Palestinians in Syria that the Syrian regime does not have a principled relationship with the factions or the organization, but one of exploitation for self-interest to strengthen its position in the region.

The Syrian Uprising: March 2011

The Arab Spring revolutions had a role in the eruption of the Syrian uprising in March 2011; Syrians, like the citizens of other Arab countries, followed these revolutions and reacted to them. They were aided by the availability of social networks and satellite television that followed the revolutions and broadcast their events live. However, internal factors remain the main reason behind the inception and energizing of the Syrian uprising.

From the time Hafez al-Assad took power in Syria in 1970, he worked to consolidate his rule in his desire to remain unchallenged, seeking to "eternally" rule over institutions (Assad forever). Domestically, he worked toward building a police state, and in doing so established several bodies to tighten his control over citizens and government institutions, abolishing political life in society by prosecuting opposition forces of various ideologies and intellectual affiliations (e.g., leftist and Islamic). He succeeded in tightening his grip on the various aspects of political and economic life through the security services, as well as the Baath Party, as the regime's party, and the Popular Front, as his ally.

Assad's regime adopted patriotic and nationalistic slogans that would resonate with the ambitions of the Syrian people in building their country, calling upon them to be strong and united in the face of enemies who threaten and conspire against them; therefore, they backed the strengthening of the army in order to give support to the Palestinian and the Lebanese resistances, and endured what was required to prioritize these aims. However, the Syrian people have become frustrated with a regime that used these excuses to justify its authoritarian and repressive policies to tighten its control and perpetuate its rule. Despite all the promises, the regime has neither freed the Golan Heights, nor built a modern or united society. On the contrary, the regime prevented any armed action in the Golan Heights, emptied state institutions of any patriotic substance, and laid the foundations for underdevelopment in society.

The slogans that the demonstrators have used since the beginning of the uprising reflect the living conditions and the sufferings of the Syrian people. Demands for dignity and freedom were the primary messages from every demonstrator or protestor in the initial, peaceful demonstrations, clearly showing that Syrian citizens feel no dignity or freedom in their own country. The people are no longer convinced that the grand,

patriotic, nationalist slogans advocated by the regime require the repression and the tyranny that has been imposed on them for more than 40 years, in addition to the confiscation of public freedoms. They feel that these policies have simply been in place to perpetuate the family's regime rather than to enable the regime to achieve the grand objectives they claim to seek.

The regime dealt with the peaceful protests from the beginning with security forces, and rejected the protestors' demands. This showed the Syrians and the international community the true face of the Syrian regime and those who control it. The different forces and networks of interests and clientelism appeared, including a family clientelism the regime developed in order to reinforce its existence and survival in power. All of this combined allowed the regime to tighten its grip on all aspects of economic and political life and direct them according to its own interests.

The Syrian uprising is a popular movement seeking the dignity and freedom that the Syrian people have been deprived of since the al-Assad family took power in 1970 until today. This uprising is not motivated by a specific ideology or political program, but by public demands. It is not controlled or run by a party, an alliance of political forces, or a unified leadership committee, but by activists in the field who communicate to coordinate and cooperate in order to continue their uprising; to this end, each area, city, or town has formed a community organization with its own website.

Palestinians and the Syrian Uprising

The conflict in Syria has escalated since its conception and has expanded to include all areas of Syria. It has developed in such a way as to block the way for any political settlement by transforming from protests that demanded reforms and the return of confiscated rights to an uprising against the regime. Faced with a life or death situation for both sides, and a likelihood of a battle to the end, the following question arises: what position do Palestinians living in Syria hold toward this conflict?

The results of the ongoing conflict in Syria have reflected on the Palestinians and their national cause, so they are in many ways concerned about this conflict. Many issues impact Palestinians living in Syria and put pressure on them to determine their position within the conflict, including:

1. The regime's practices against Syrian protestors and those demanding its overthrow, including: mass murder, the destruction of neighborhoods where protestors are present or based, and the use of artillery weapons, such as aircraft (helicopters and jets), missiles, long-range artillery, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. These practices are being carried out against a people who have hosted the Palestinians since the Nakba in 1948, honoring them and letting them into their houses, villages, and cities that are now being destroyed.
2. In Syria, a people's uprising against a dictatorial regime and its police state is happening, and the people have risen up to gain their freedom and recover their rights. It is the uprising of a people who can no longer endure a life of humiliation imposed upon them by a security system with various branches and departments for over four decades, during which time these organizations have corrupted society and state institutions, tightening their grip on them by requiring everything a citizen may need to first obtain government approval.
3. The regime, on the other hand, has voiced the need for resistance and steadfastness in the face of Israel and the powers supporting it, particularly the US. In so doing, an alliance under the title "the axis of resistance" has formed, including Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah. Additionally, the regime supported the Palestinian factions that rejected the Oslo Agreement and negotiations with Israel, and allowed them to establish their presence; these groups refused to close their headquarters in Damascus, which became their only safe place of refuge.
4. The regime has continually put pressure on Palestinian factions in Syria to side with them against its people, as have other parties included in the axis of resistance, specifically Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). The regime pressured the groups while meeting with them, through spokesmen, or through its Iranian allies and Hezbollah, whose pressures on the factions are equal to that of the pressure exerted by the regime.

Based on these facts, the Palestinians and their factions cannot turn their backs on what is happening in Syria. Accordingly, Palestinians have formed a variety of positions.

PLO factions⁵

The common position of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) factions has been to keep the camps neutral and not get the Palestinians involved in favor of any side in the Syrian conflict. They see a political solution for the Syrian crisis, not an armed one, one that must be solved internally, not from abroad. They are also keen on maintaining a positive relationship with the regime and avoiding anything that might strain this relationship.

This neutral position – or self-distancing – appeals to Palestinians, while at the same time, their avoidance of confronting the regime, and holding it responsible, reflects their weakness. The regime has exposed the camps to artillery fire, resulting in the deaths of people and destruction of homes; it has arrested Palestinians and searched the homes of people living in the camps. This weakness is also reflected in the statements issued when the camps are exposed to shelling. For example, in response to the deaths, and wounding of dozens of people, in the Yarmouk refugee camp, which the Syrian regime forces opened fire upon when they entered it on Thursday, August 2, 2012, the factions issued a statement saying: “PLO factions in Syria condemn in the strongest terms the horrible and heinous crime that was committed against our people in the Yarmouk refugee camp on the eve of Thursday, August 2. We also condemn the perpetrators of this heinous crime who took the lives of dozens of martyrs and wounded.”⁶ In the same statement, the organization’s factions called on “all who have a grain of conscience to stop targeting Palestinians and trading with their blood [...]” They asked everyone “to stop tampering with the security and safety of our people and their camps through the futile recruitment of fighters that will only bring further woes to our people and contribute to weaken the unity and cohesiveness of their community.” Although the regime’s forces carried out the shooting, the statement avoided mentioning this forthright.

⁵ The factions that are active under the name of PLO in Syria are: Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestinian People’s Party, the Palestinian Democratic Movement (Fida), the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (led by Samir Ghosheh), and the Palestine Liberation Front (Abu al-Abbas).

⁶ PLO factions in Syria condemn the heinous crime against the Palestinian people in Yarmouk camp, Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultation, August 4, 2012

<http://www.alzaytouna.net/permalink/22042.html#.UHZvXy6TyHg>.

When artillery shelling of the Yarmouk refugee camp was repeated during the first week of September 2012, again leading to the death and wounding of dozens and the destruction of many houses, the PLO factions issued a statement that was similar to the previous one. They condemned and denounced the attack on the camp without specifying the aggressor, and said that they saw that the “attacks that occurred in several areas of the Yarmouk camp, are a failing attempt to involve the Palestinians in the internal Syrian conflict.”

Alliance of Palestinian Resistance Factions:⁷

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Hamas has tried to maintain its positive relationship with the regime, while maintaining its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria; however, it has not succeeded in doing so because neither side accepted this stance. Through its officials and allies in Iran and Hezbollah, the regime tried hard to put pressure on Hamas to side with it since Hamas is a key party in the coalition of steadfastness and resistance, which the regime maintains is being targeted. However, Hamas’s leadership did not respond to these political pressures and chose to disengage from its relationship with the regime without fuss; the group quietly left Syria and no longer participated in this coalition’s meetings. By doing so, it maintained its popularity with the Syrian people. This position also received praise and respect from all spectrums of Syrian opposition because it was not an easy decision, particularly as the regime had provided Hamas with a safe haven since its inception, allowing Hamas to enjoy facilities and privileges for remaining in Syria.

It might be true that Hamas took its stance on the basis of its ideology, not on its immediate interests and political alliances, but Islamic Jihad maintained its close relationship with the regime and its alignment with it by remaining party of the coalition of steadfastness and resistance factions that support the regime. Additionally, the special relationship between Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and Iran largely affects its current position toward what is happening in Syria.

⁷ This alliance was formed from factions allied to the Syrian regime, Iran, and Hezbollah, and it is one of the parties of the steadfastness and resistance forces (known as the mumanaa camp, a term that means in Arabic passive non-military resistance), including: Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah al-Intifada (Fatah-Uprising), PFLP-GC, the Palestinian Revolutionary Communist Party, the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (led by Khalid Abd al-Majid), and the Vanguard for the Popular Liberation War – As-Saiqa forces.

As for the PLO factions, the position of the PFLP swings back-and-forth, both standing by the Syrian people and supporting the regime. According to its official statements in Syria, the PFLP stands with both sides as it supports the Syrian people in their demands and the regime in their confrontation of the external conspiracy that it is being subjected to.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) has acted on behalf of the regime in the camps since the beginning of the uprising, confronting demonstrations and strikes or any semblance of solidarity with the Syrian people. To this end, it has tried to form a joint security force with other factions to control the situation in the camps for the benefit of the regime, even though the factions did not agree with their demands. The leader of PFLP-GC, Ahmed Jibril, declared that his faction will make the move individually, saying: “We have decided to take the responsibility alone, to take the lead in protecting the camps, and to arm our people in order to protect our children, women, and possessions, particularly as these gangs are trying hard to enter our camps in order to drag them back to the furnace of conflict and turn them into exploding wastelands.”⁸

The Intelligentsia

The Syrian uprising has not made any major changes or new alignments among the Palestinian intelligentsia in Syria; in fact, all alignments have virtually stayed the same. Palestinians who were part of the Syrian intellectual movement in what was called the Damascus Spring,⁹ and the subsequent activities and attempts to continue this mobility, have sided with the Syrian people’s uprising from the beginning. The Palestinians in support of the regime and their foreign policy placed foreign issues above domestic issues, and supported the regime’s resistance against Israel. They also criticize the opposition forces for their relationship with the US and the West in general because these entities support Israel and support its policies in the region.

⁸ The speech was made during a PFLP-GC commemoration event for one of their cadres on July 31, 2012, in Al-Khalissa gathering place in the Yarmouk refugee camp. It was attended by a crowd of influential people, sheikhs, and dignitaries from Yarmouk, as well as a number of representatives of different factions (as noted in *Ila al-Amam*, Issue 2420, August 2012).

⁹ The Damascus Spring is the period of intense opposition activism and tentative political liberalization that followed the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000. It was time characterized by demands for political, economic, and legal reforms.

These intellectuals ignore the fact that the Syrian uprising has purely internal justifications and motives unrelated to the foreign policy of a regime that supports the resistance forces. They ignore that it is an uprising of people who can no longer endure the dictatorial/familial regime that has been imposed on them for 40 years. The uprising is one that involves various social groups, political trends, opposition forces, and mixed ideological and intellectual movements. Thus, it is not right to take a stance toward the uprising based on a negative view of some of its groups and influential activists because the correct stance should be taken on the basis of the objectives and demands that caused the flare up of this uprising (i.e., freedom and dignity), especially if they are not against supporting the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance or the resistance's approach, in general, to recover rights and the occupied territories.

Intellectuals are still trapped by a nationalist and leftist ideology that has been in need of revision for decades, with its archetypes being those active under the umbrella of the General Secretariat of the Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists in Syria, the most outspoken of whom work in the mass media.¹⁰ They want a tidy and controlled revolution that has a political program and revolutionary tool, and is compatible with their ideologies from A to Z. These intellectuals believe that it is enough for the regime to take a theoretical, nationalist stance toward the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Palestinian cause, and highlight the cause as the essence of this conflict.

This category of Palestinians is in harmony with its Syrian counterpart in that it directly or indirectly gives a political legitimacy to what is being done against the protestors: killing, harassment, arrests, and humiliation of the Syrian general public, in addition to the destruction of their cities, towns, and neighborhoods where revolutionary action is taking place.

The Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA)

The PLA leadership declared its support for the regime, and has stood by it in face of the external conspiracy and foreign reliance on internal agents. During the uprising, unidentified groups assassinated many PLA officers, with the most hideous incident being the killing of a group of national service recruits near the city of Idlib.

¹⁰ This would include information officers in the PFLP-GC, such as Anwar Raja, Tahsin al-Halabi, and those working in the Syrian media, including Ahmad Sawan.

Since the early 1970s, the PLA in Syria severed its relationship with the PLO, and became part of the Syrian army, following its general staff, who then appoints PLA's general staff and the leaders of its units. Additionally, the Syrian army arms and finances the PLA and classifies it as a special unit, training and arming members on this basis. However, in 1976, the PLA entered Lebanon as part of the Syrian army. When a conflict occurred between the Syrian leadership, the PLO, and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) over the future of Lebanon, the Syrian army interfered in support of Lebanese isolationist forces (led by the Lebanese Phalange Party, and later by the Lebanese Forces) against the Joint Forces (LNM forces and the PLO); during this time, most of the PLA elements joined the Joint Forces.

The PLA remains cohesive and has not been subjected to internal fragmentation along the lines of what happened during its presence in Lebanon in the 1970s. This has been prevented by the fact that it has not yet been forced to confront the uprising. If this happens in the future, the PLA will likely fragment and many of its members could split from it in favor of the Syrian uprising, especially since most young people who are performing their military service have nothing to do with the position of the PLA general staff or its leaders. The PLA in Syria remained in their barracks until August 2012 when one of its battalions was moved to Tishreen Thermal Power Plant in Harran Al-Awameed area, near Damascus, to protect it. Another battalion was transferred to the Adra Treatment Plant of Sanitary and Industrial Sewage near Damascus for the same purpose.

When the Daraa camp was surrounded and shelled, many national service recruits split from the army and joined the Free Syrian Army. However, these were individual cases and have not, so far, represented a phenomenon. However, if the situation remains the same, significant splits in the PLA will remain a low probability.

The Palestinian People

Excluding the Palestinian circles that support the regime who are limited to parties whose fates are linked to the regime, such as the PFLP-GC, the leadership of the PLA and Palestinian intelligentsia under the umbrella of the General Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists in Syria (parties that have no grassroots support), Palestinians as a people reacted positively to the Syrian uprising in different ways.

Socially, those who have capital, or the bourgeoisie, and have built a relationship with the leaders of factions connected to the Syrian regime are confused and scared more

than other social groups connected to the regime. They depend on the factions to protect them and facilitate their businesses, and commit to the political stances of these factions. The bourgeoisie are aware that being linked to the stances of the factions who are siding with the regime is not in their interest; therefore, their connection with them has become a burden.

The bourgeoisie in Syria, including the Palestinian bourgeoisie, generally try to avoid siding with the regime, while at the same time avoiding any clashes with it. They realize that the demise of the regime would be in their interest because they would be rid of many of the restrictions that are imposed on their movement, as well as many of the bribes/fees they must pay to facilitate their businesses. This is why many of them provide assistance to the displaced and those affected as a result of the current events.

Among Palestinians, two main opinions reflect an alignment that is not governed by a certain class situation or an affiliation to a faction or political party. Both opinions are held by people from all social classes and political and factional affiliations, and they are:

Neutrality and self-distancing

This opinion is based on a point of view centered on the fact that the Palestinians are guests in Syria, and that what is happening is an internal Syrian matter. People hold this belief based on the results of previous regional incidents in which the Palestinians took the side of one party in the conflict, or were seen to be on that side, such as when Iraq invaded Kuwait, which had terrible consequences for them. With this position they are trying to avoid what they could be subjected to if they are seen to have aligned with any party in the Syrian conflict. This position has been adopted by the PLO factions in Syria, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, up to a point; it is the official position of the PLO. When asked about the official Palestinian position after the Daraa refugee camp was bombed and the Yarmouk camp was shelled, the Palestine ambassador in Syria, Mahmoud al-Khalidi said: "We are sticking to the position of the neutrality of the Palestinian camps and not to be involved in the Syrian crisis."¹¹

¹¹ Mahmoud al-Khalidi, "Hamas left and Islamic Jihad will remain in Damascus," *Dunia al-Watan* online newspaper, August 4, 2012, <http://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2012/08/04/304727.html>.

This position put the factions under two pressures; the first is from the regime and its allies (Iran and Hezbollah) to support their position, and the second is the pressure exerted by the public opinion of the majority of Palestinians residing in Syria, who back the uprising of the Syrian people. This is what makes it difficult for the factions to take the neutral position they would prefer. An analysis of the statements the Palestinian factions have issued reflects the awkward situation they are in as they can be biased toward neither the regime, nor the Syrian uprising. The developments on the ground have only increased the depth of their dilemma.

As the conflict has developed and escalated between the Syrian regime and those rebelling against it, in addition to having reached the camps, the factions have tried to remain committed to the position of neutrality and self-distancing that they have promoted and called for. After the incidents in the Daraa, Lattakia, Homs, and Aleppo refugee camps, the incidents at the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus making the factions rethink their choices. The factions' confusion became visible when they held a meeting to discuss the situation in Yarmouk, after which they issued a statement on behalf of the Palestinian factions in Syria. This was their first statement since the uprising began, calling upon "all who hold the Palestinian cause and the rights of the Palestinian people dear to them, to honor the security and safety of the Palestinian people and their camps, to avoid exposing them to any danger, and to avoid involving Yarmouk and the other camps in the internal Syrian situation."¹²

The importance of this stance lies in that it conflicts with the calls from some of the Palestinian factions to take the regime's side, or those who are arming their followers in the camps in order to act as the regime has asked of them. Neutrality and self-distancing means that weapons should not be brought into the camps under any pretext and that the camps retain an equal distance from both the regime and the uprising, thereby making the camps a safe place for Syrians to seek refuge. The official position of most of the Palestinian factions and the PLO has a significant effect on the Palestinian public and keeps the situation calm because it is more or less non-hostile to any of the parties in the Syrian conflict, and is accepted by Palestinian and Syrian activists in the uprising, as well as the Syrian opposition in general.

¹² All Palestinian factions apart from Hamas attended the meeting; the statement that resulted from the meeting on July 7 included the names of all 14 factions who participated in it.

Solidarity and participation

This opinion is promoted and called for by two primary groups: youth groups formed at the beginning of the Syrian uprising and political intellectuals and activists, mostly leftists and Islamists, who count themselves as part of the Syrian uprising and participate in its various civil and military events and activities. The PLA includes a significant number of young Palestinian people, especially in the Yarmouk camp and its surroundings. Their views are reflected in their messages in newspapers, on websites, or on their personal social-networking pages. They hold this opinion based on the integration of the Palestinians in Syria for the past four decades, seeing that they are no longer guests in Syria, but part of Syrian society and Syrian life.

Tajammu Ahrar Mukhayyam al-Yarmouk wa ma Hawlaha (The Assembly of the Free People of Yarmouk and its Surroundings) published a statement that was signed by several community organizations from several camps and Palestinian groups, saying, "We declare our clear support for the Syrian revolution and announce that we are joining it in all its elements because it is a revolution of a people who are rebelling for their rights, and our mission as young Palestinians in Syria is to return the debt to the Syrian people who have embraced us for 64 years and considered us as part of their country [...] one, one, one, Palestinian and Syrian are one."¹³

Several organizations exist in the camps and Palestinian communities similar to the community organizations in Syrian cities and towns, such as *Tanseeqiyyat Mukhayyam Filasteen al-Thawra as-Souriyya* (Palestine Camp Organization – Syrian revolution),¹⁴ *Al-Tajammu al-Filasteeni li Nusrat al-Thawra as-Souriyya* (The Palestinian Assembly to Support the Syrian Revolution),¹⁵ and *Shabab Filasteen li Dam al-Thawra al-Souriyya – Abna Mukhayyam Jermana* (Young Palestinians in Support of the Syrian Revolution –

¹³ For the text of the statement and the bodies that signed to it, see: <http://www.facebook.com/yarmook.free>.

¹⁴ This group can be found at: <http://www.facebook.com/PALESTINACAMB>.

¹⁵ Palestinians in Syrian Situation: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Palestinians-in-syrian-situation/309385155817477>.

Jermana camp).¹⁶ Several news websites concerning the camps were also built to cover the events and developments of the Syrian uprising inside them.¹⁷

The Palestinian Public's Solidarity with the Uprising

Palestinians in the camps have reacted positively and spontaneously to the Syrian uprising since its beginning as a principled, moral stance, without any incitement or direction from anyone, and without fear or hesitation. Since the start of the uprising, the Syrian people have been subjected to all kinds of suppression by the regime, and with the escalation of the uprising and all that the Syrian people have suffered from as a result, including all that have been noted throughout the paper thus far. Of additional importance, however, is how the regime has used all types of weapons to impose its authority, depending on armed groups that have a sectarian loyalty (e.g., the Shabiha) to do the work of terrorizing and intimidating the people, giving them the freedom to do anything that would result in this goal.

The Palestinians living in Syria have not only witnessed these practices, but have also been subjected to them along with the rest of the Syrian people. Those who have any sense of humanity or conscience reject these practices; it is the same for the Palestinians who have ties of brotherhood and love with the Syrians, who have supported them through thick and thin in the different circumstances and tribulations that they have all experienced. They shared bread and shelter between them, and took up arms together to confront their common enemy, Israel.

When the Syrian forces surrounded Daraa, young men from the Daraa refugee camp sided with the people of Daraa, and demonstrated in support of them, demanding that the siege against them be lifted. The Syrian forces opened fire on them and some were killed. The camp's residents supplied food, water, and medication to the besieged and housed the wounded. When some Daraa residents who were wanted by the Syrian security forces took refuge in the camp, the camp refused to hand them over. In

¹⁶ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/>.

¹⁷ This would include the Yarmouk Media Network, *Ittihad Shabakat Akhbar al-Mukhayyam al-Filasteeniyya* (the Association of Palestinian Camps News Networks), Yarmouk Camp News, and *Mukhayyam al-Yarmouk al-Hadath* (Yarmouk camp – the event).

August 2012, the Syrian forces shelled the camp and destroyed it, forcing its residents to leave.

This has also been the case in the Homs and Latakia camps, which have also provided a safe haven for anyone who seeks refuge. Many of the residents of the Baba Amr neighborhood fled to the Homs refugee camp nearby. The camp's hospital became a place to treat the wounded from nearby neighborhoods, particularly after the residents of the camp succeeded in preventing the Syrian security forces from removing the wounded from the hospitals at the beginning of events.

Ultimately, Palestinian reactions to the uprising became clearer after a number of incidents and realizations, including those relating to important Palestinian memorials, unrest in the refugee camps, and the youth's desire to provide aid.

The Khalisa Building (June 6, 2012)

Before the beginning of the uprising in Syria, Palestinian youth groups from different regions were communicating with each other in order to prepare for the March of Return to commemorate the Nakba on May 15, 2011. These groups agreed that the rallies in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan would head to the borders with Palestine. The youth groups in Syria that were part of this action were aware that in past years the Syrian authorities had denied the demands of the committees for the right of return when they had asked to be able to commemorate the Nakba in Quneitra and Ain al-Tina in Golan Heights. Therefore, they doubted they would be allowed to do this during the uprising. These groups were discussing possible alternatives so that Palestinians in Syria would not be outside the general Palestinian action to commemorate the Nakba.

Rami Makhlouf, a wealthy businessman and maternal cousin of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, made a statement in which he linked the security of Syria to Israel in an attempt to use the license to march toward the border as a threat mechanism. This opened a new level of discussions for youth groups in Syria: do we still march toward the border in light of this statement?

The youth activists organizing the rally were split, some demanding that the march be canceled because of the current circumstances in Syria. They felt that after Makhlouf's statement was made public, the march would be used to serve the regime by shifting attention from what is actually happening in Syria to other topics and would be used

politically. The second group was in favor of the march, but as part of a special program, separate from the regime and its agents' schemes for this event. The common denominator between the two groups was their support for the Syrian people's uprising and hostility toward the regime.

The rally's activists surprised everyone when they clashed with Israeli soldiers by throwing stones; the soldiers' return of live fire into Syrian territory was also unexpected since both of these events are unprecedented. They were also able to enter the occupied city of Majdal Shams, and remain there until the evening. This unexpected development confused the Syrian regime, which was unable to use the incident as planned.

The second march happened 20 days later to commemorate Naksa Day on June 5 (the day of the setback),¹⁸ and the consequent results. This march created an explosion of anger against the factions and the Syrian regime that had not been seen on the Palestinian street before. The funeral for the martyrs of the march on June 6, 2011 turned into a demonstration against the regime and the Palestinian factions that support it, based on the chants and banners that were paraded during the demonstration. This resulted in no Palestinian or Syrian officials joining the funeral procession as in the first march. In fact, when a member of the political bureau of the PFLP, Maher al-Taher, tried to join the mourners after they reached the Martyrs Cemetery, the mourners demanded that he leave. When he insisted on attending the burial of the martyrs, he was assaulted, and he fled under the protection of his bodyguards, as someone fired shots into the air.

After the mourners were finished burying the martyrs, some of the participants shouted for everyone to head toward the Khalisa building (the headquarters of the PFLP-GC). Most of the leaders of the PFLP-GC were in the building, including Ahmed Jibril, the leader of the faction. They had come to attend the funeral, but when they were informed that the atmosphere among the crowd would not permit them to, they went to the Khalisa building. Hundreds of angry young people (estimated to be between 700 and 900) congregated at the Khalisa building and besieged the building from five o'clock in the evening until after midnight, shouting slogans against Jibril and

¹⁸ Commemoration of the displacement that accompanied Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai in the 1967 Six-Day War.

demanding that he meets with them outside. After Jibril's guards tried dispersing the crowds with gunfire, killing a few, the crowds attacked the guards and set fire to the building, adding to the tension. The protestors besieging the building insisted on burning the building with people still inside it. The gravity of the situation increased as gunmen in the building opened fire and the protestors tried to enter the building. Faced with this situation and the failure of all attempts and appeals to lift the siege and enable the trapped people to exit, the leaders of the PFLP-GC brought in a military force of their own sometime after midnight, lifting the siege and freeing those trapped inside, including Jibril.

The funeral of the martyrs on June 6, 2011, its transformation into a demonstration against the regime, and the besieging of the Khalisa building reflect the position of the Palestinians toward what is happening in Syria. At the beginning of the funeral procession, there were chants against the Syrian regime and the Palestinians who support it, alongside chants of praise for the Syrian people and their demands for freedom and dignity. The reason behind the siege of Khalisa building was that, in the opinion of the Palestinian general public, Jibril is the leading official of a security branch of the Syrian regime called the PFLP-GC, not one belonging to Palestine, apart from the fact that its members are Palestinian. Its policy and mission are not Palestinian, and the group has supported the Syrian regime since its inception. It fought on the Syrian side in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War in the second half of the 1970s, when it committed the Tel al-Zaatar massacre, prompting those young men who refused to condone this act to split from the PFLP-GC and form the PFLP. The PFLP-GC also supported the regime in its dispute with Yasser Arafat, and participated in the siege of the camps and their bombing in Lebanon in the 1980s.

Yarmouk Camp Unrest

Yarmouk camp is of particular importance to the Palestinians in Syria. Besides being the largest out of all the refugee camps in terms of size and population (around a quarter of them and many times as many Syrians live there),¹⁹ it serves as their political capital. The factions are concentrated inside the camp, which is the center for any Palestinian activity, containing the Martyr's Cemetery. Administratively, it is seen by the Syrian

¹⁹ According to a statement by UNRWA on the recent developments in the Yarmouk refugee camp on August 3, 2012, Yarmouk camp is: "A densely populated suburb in Damascus inhabited by 150,000 Palestinian refugees and nearly a million Syrians from all backgrounds." This statement can be found at the following link: <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=1410>.

authorities as one of the neighborhoods of Damascus, characterized for years by its commercial market, which competes with the ancient markets of Damascus.

Yarmouk camp saw several small and scattered demonstrations in support of the Syrian uprising until the disappearance and death of a group of PLA national service recruits from the Neirab and Handarat camps in Aleppo. On July 12, 2012, several demonstrations started in Yarmouk refugee camp to condemn this crime and hold the regime and its agents responsible. The chants of the demonstrators highlighted the unity of the Syrian and Palestinian peoples. When the Syrian security forces intervened to disperse the demonstrators, the situation worsened and shots were fired, killing several and wounding others. An atmosphere of tension and concern prevailed when Syrian army tanks entered the camps to impose calm.

On the following day, the largest demonstration took place, involving at least 30,000 people according to the lowest estimates. The demonstrators filled the camp's main streets and stayed for about four hours all the while chanting against the regime and its Palestinian agents (i.e., Ahmed Jibril). This demonstration did not differ from any other demonstration in Syrian cities in terms of chants and slogans.

Relief and Assistance

Since July 2012, Syrian regime forces conducted the fiercest military campaign against Damascus and neighborhoods of nearby towns, such as the neighborhoods of Al-Tadamun, Al-Qadam, Al-Assali, Al-Maidan, Qaboun, and Barzeh, as well as the towns of Yalda, Babila, Al-Hajar al-Aswad, Medmah Sham, Jdeidet Artouz, Al-Tall, Zamlaka, and Arbin. The campaign was to eliminate Free Syrian Army elements there, and tighten their control over them because they were seen as pockets of uprising. The regime besieged these neighborhoods with tanks, security forces, and Shabiha, and warned the residents to evacuate within a few hours. Next, they bombed the neighborhoods with all kinds of heavy weapons, including missiles and helicopter gunfire, for hours at a time over several days, forcing the residents of these neighborhoods to flee.

The residents of the Yarmouk and Khan al-Sheikh camps received, and still do, thousands of displaced people from these surrounding areas. The youth of the camps have rushed to open schools, mosques, and homes in order to provide shelter, and the residents have volunteered to assist them and accelerate the provision of aid. The

young people have formed special committees to cater to the needs of their guests and provide the necessary aid to support and alleviate their plight.

The residents of the Palestinian camps who have given shelter to thousands of Syrians fleeing murder have shown great appreciation, love, and solidarity with their plight. All aid workers in the camps are young volunteers, doing whatever is necessary to provide for the displaced. It is important to point out the special role of Islamic Jihad in the relief efforts, as well as Hamas and the Palestinian Charity Association, in addition to the active role of many other Palestinian civil organizations in continuously and tirelessly serving the displaced.²⁰

Conclusion

What has been happening in Syria since March 2011 is not a civil war that the Palestinians can take a neutral stance against and distance themselves from, nor is it a foreign conspiracy against the regime for its policy of supporting the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance forces. What is happening is a popular uprising against a dictatorial regime that has its foundations in corruption and oppression. The uprising involves many social groups, political trends, and ideologies, with its backbone being young people who are ambitious and have a desire to build their country to ensure a prosperous future for their people. This will be achieved through realizing the demands of the uprising – freedom, dignity, and justice. For this reason, Palestinians should take the side of the Syrian people and their uprising; additionally, the interests of their people and their cause are organically linked to the interests of the Syrian people, especially because the Palestinians are integrated into Syrian society and have become part of its fabric at various levels.

The Palestinian people have a historical responsibility toward the Syrian people to stand in solidarity with them in their quest to depose the oppressive regime that has been imposed on them for more than four decades; if they do not, they cannot ask the Arab people to stand by them and support them in their struggle to recover their land and freedom, to restore their dignity. In the framework of solidarity with the Syrian people and giving support to their demands, the Palestinian factions and intelligentsia should

²⁰ The leading active organizations in the Yarmouk refugee camp are: Basma Social Institution, Palestinian Boy Scouts and Girl Guides Association, Jafra Foundation for Relief and Development, the Palestinian Refugee Camps Civil Committee, Al-Quds Charity Association, and Ithar for Relief and Development.

be concerned about clarifying the truth about the policy of steadfastness and resistance that the regime has pursued among Palestinians, as well as its role in their struggle since the 1970s.

The right choice for Palestinians in Syria is to support the Syrian people and their uprising. From a moral point of view, it is essential that they are in solidarity with the Syrian people as they are subjected to killing, destruction, and genocide. From a political point of view, the principle position necessitates that they also stand in solidarity with their demands to build a new political system that would give them back their dignity and freedom. The level of assistance remains subject to developments in the Syrian uprising, the regime's practices, and the situation of the camps; furthermore, it is necessary for them to emphasize their support of the Syrian people and to translate it into practice through:

1. Affirming that the reason behind the Syrian uprising was the regime's internal policy, not its policy of steadfastness and support for the resistance;
2. Rejecting the regime's exploitation of the Palestinian cause to reinforce its position in its conflict with the Syrian people because supporting the resistance and confronting the enemies of the Arab nation does not require a dictatorial system or a police state that confiscates citizens' freedom and spreads corruption;
3. Isolating the Palestinian groups that are entrenched with the regime, particularly the PFLP-GC and the PLA since they are factions with military capabilities that can be used by the regime to help it in its suppression of the rebels; and
4. Making the camps a safe haven for displaced Syrian families who seek refuge as they flee the oppression and tyranny of the regime.