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Stateless and Starving

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Stateless and Starving

Yarmouk and the Palestinian-Israeli Peace Negotiations

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here is little by way of human cruelty that has not been visited on the people of the Levant over the past century. Iraqis, Israelis, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians have all faced massacres, terrorism, bombings, and a host of other atrocities, including what are probably the only two uses of chemical weapons since World War II. The most calculated starvation -- the deliberate policy of withholding food from suffering, ordinary people on a massive scale -- has very little history in the region. And that makes the situation in the Yarmouk camp just outside Damascus, Syria, where 18,000 Palestinian refugees are slowly and deliberately being starved by the Syrian dictatorship, all the more horrifying.

The Palestinians trapped there can do little to alleviate their plight. And humanitarian efforts by the United Nations and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) have so far been thwarted by pro-regime forces. But the PLO leadership and people should recognize that Yarmouk has urgent, if indirect, implications for the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations.

Every Arab state has tried, at one time or another, to manipulate the Palestinian issue for its own purposes. The Assad family's Baathist regime in Syria has been uniquely hostile to the mainstream Palestinian national movement. It has shown time and again that its official commitment to the Palestinian cause is a smokescreen for its own interests. It has never really accepted the idea that Palestine, or Lebanon for that matter, is a separate entity. Its primary concern has been to ensure as much subservience as possible to the Damascus dictatorship's ideology and interests.

Syria has always been ready to use force to keep Palestinians in check. It made war against the PLO in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, most notably in the siege of Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp, which is the analogy to today's crisis in Yarmouk. And although it poses as a bastion of "resistance," Syria has consistently avoided confronting Israel directly, even when provoked. Syria has repeatedly endured attacks from Israel without direct response and sometimes without complaint. If it stands up to Israel at all, it does so through proxy forces, almost always at the expense of others. Its support for Hezbollah has come at a great cost to Lebanon; its support for Palestinian proxy splinter groups as well as Hamas has come at a great cost to Palestine. The Palestinian refugee camp in Gaza suffered heavily from the catastrophic Syrian-backed war between Hamas and Israel in 2008 and 2009.

The ongoing atrocities in Yarmouk are only the latest example of the Syrian regime's manipulations. In the early stages of Syria's uprising, one of the regime's opening gambits was to distract the public's attention by twisting the Palestinian cause. On June 6, 2011 -- the anniversary of the 1967 war between Arab states and Israel, referred to by Arabs as Naksa Day -- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had hundreds of Palestinians, many from Yarmouk, bussed to the demilitarized zone in the Golan Heights region that borders Israel. They were encouraged, unarmed, to confront Israeli occupation forces, which predictably opened fire on protesters, killing many of them. It was a cold-blooded instance of political theater and a cynical exercise in human sacrifice.

Palestinians in Yarmouk were outraged -- at least as much at Assad as at Israel. When they protested en masse, Assad thugs affiliated with a group called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command attacked them, killing 14 and injuring 43. As the Syrian war intensified, so did the plight of Yarmouk. Syrian fighter jets and helicopters have repeatedly attacked Yarmouk, using missiles and notoriously indiscriminate barrel bombs. In December 2012, when opposition rebels entered the camp, the situation became dramatically worse. Yarmouk became the scene of intense fighting and a prolonged, and ongoing, siege. Efforts to deliver food and other supplies have been systematically stymied.

What was once a population of at least 200,000 Palestinian refugees has dwindled to a tenth of its former size. Anyone who could flee has already done so. Those who remain are slowly and cruelly dying. The UN Human Rights Observatory for Human Rights estimates that at least 100 people in Yarmouk have died from starvation and lack of medical supplies since last October. UN officials have expressed shock at what they have seen in recent visits to the camp. Filippo Grandi, a UN refugee official, said that the people he saw there last week had "the appearance of ghosts."

The Syrian government is responsible for this situation, and those who try to fudge the issue by blaming Israel are deliberately deceiving the public. The northern entrance to Yarmouk is under the control of pro-Assad forces, but the government has nonetheless insisted that all aid go through the southern entrance, which is very dangerous because it is a battle zone between regime and opposition forces. Although senior government figures

it, military forces on the ground reportedly admit that they are deliberately using starvation as a weapon against "enemies" in Yarmouk, including both rebels and civilians. This is a man-made disaster, and the responsibility lies almost entirely with the leadership in Damascus.

To those familiar with the relationship between Baathist Syria and the Palestinian cause and people, the tragedy at Yarmouk will not come as any surprise. But the Palestinian people as a whole should draw the obvious lesson: as long as they remain stateless, refugees will have no haven and no government to represent them. Atrocities will continue to take place, as they have wherever Palestinians have found themselves in the Middle East since 1948.

Some pro-Palestinian groups object to such a two-state solution, because it will inevitably involve significant compromises on the right of return for refugees to Israel. But Israel is simply not going to agree to accommodate millions of Palestinians returning from across the region, which would compromise the demographic makeup of the Israeli state. A unanimity of the Israeli political spectrum flatly opposes any such notion, and there does not seem to be any form of leverage or quid pro quo that could alter that.

But a Palestinian state has much to offer refugees short of the right of return to Israel. Among other things, an independent Palestine could help protect a long-suffering people against further massacre, siege, or displacement. Palestinians would finally be citizens in a state of their own and not stranded at the disposal of others who might, in the future, have, turned on them with a vengeance.

This is not to suggest that the Israeli government or the PLO is in any meaningful sense responsible for the tragedy at Yarmouk. Israel is not directly involved, and the PLO lacks the means and leverage to prevent such suffering, as it discovered when pro-Assad forces fired on an unarmed aid convoy it had organized.

But Yarmouk does stand as yet another harsh reminder to the Palestinian people and leadership of the urgent need to achieve independence through peace with Israel, despite the painful compromises that will be required of both sides. Palestinians should see in Syria yet another tragic life and death drama, another sign that they must mobilize to attain an independent state. Until they have it, Palestinians throughout the Middle East will be liable to find themselves in the next Yarmouk.

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