

THE
CARTER CENTER



**Status Report on Yarmouk Camp
November 14, 2017**

Executive Summary

Following the capture of the Syria-Iraq border crossing near Abu Kamal, the Syrian government announced victory over ISIS in Syria. This announcement was made at a time when the Syrian government, supported by Hezbollah, Afghani Fatemiyoun, Iraqi Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and others, appeared poised to capture the border town of Abu Kamal – the last major population center held by ISIS in eastern Syria. However, the announcement ignored substantial ISIS strongholds elsewhere in Syria – including within the capital city of Damascus itself.

ISIS entered Damascus city in April 2015, when it advanced against Free Syrian Army (FSA) aligned opposition groups and pro-government paramilitary groups in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp on the southern edge of the city. Since then, Yarmouk Camp has been home to a ISIS, al-Qaeda aligned Jabhat al-Nusra (now known as Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham), FSA factions, local Palestinian factions, pro-government paramilitary fighters, and government troops, making it a microcosm of the broader conflict.

This report provides a brief overview of major events affecting Yarmouk Camp and profiles the major armed groups involved throughout.

Brief History

The Damascus neighborhood known as Yarmouk Camp hosted a thriving Palestinian community of approximately 160,000 Palestinian refugees until the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra captured the area in December 2012. Since then, clashes between various groups, air campaigns, and sieges have decimated the Camp's community and infrastructure. Less than 5% of the original population remains. Civilians suffer from severe food and water shortages even as they endure the constant threat of violence and displacement at the hands of the armed actors in the area.

With the help of Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS wrested control of 80-90% of Yarmouk Camp from the resident FSA factions and pro-government Palestinian groups in April 2015. In January 2016, relations between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra began to deteriorate amid rumors of an ISIS-government evacuation agreement. Brief clashes precipitated a major split in April 2016. In August 2016 ISIS besieged civilians in Jabhat al-Nusra territory. At the time of writing, Jabhat al-Nusra, now under the moniker of "Hai'yat Tahrir al-Sham" (HTS), controlled 30-40% of Yarmouk Camp. ISIS controlled 50-60% of Yarmouk, as well as much of the surrounding

neighborhoods. Pro-government Palestinian forces occupied around 10% of the northernmost area of Yarmouk Camp.

The de-escalation zones negotiated by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Astana do not include Yarmouk Camp. Ceasefires in the area have emerged separately. The “Four Towns Agreement” negotiated between the government, Ahrar al-Sham, and HTS in Idleb provided the framework for a nine-month ceasefire in Yarmouk camp, beginning March 28, 2017. The agreement sought to exchange the evacuation of two opposition-besieged Shia-majority towns in Idleb with evacuations of civilians and fighters from a handful of government-besieged communities, including Yarmouk.¹ In May 2017, government forces established a ceasefire with ISIS.

While the ceasefires between the government, HTS, and ISIS in Yarmouk Camp have largely held, the sieges continue and tensions remain high. The evacuations of Yarmouk have stalled as a result, postponing attainment of the government’s “reconciliation” goal and extending the plight of civilians still trapped there.

Status of the siege

The UN OCHA designated Yarmouk Camp as a besieged community. SiegeWatch, an initiative by PAX and The Syria Institute to monitor and report on besieged areas in Syria, classifies the siege in Yarmouk as Tier 1. Under a Tier 1 siege “very little is able to enter through smuggling or bribery, the UN can negotiate few if any aid shipments, and supplies that do enter are insufficient”.

Civilians in Yarmouk Camp suffer from a maximum risk for malnutrition/dehydration and a devastating lack of medical resources. Typhoid fever has ravaged the young and the elderly as a result of clean water shortages. Civilians dodge clashes along HTS/ISIS frontlines, even as they weather sieges from government forces and ISIS. All armed parties have prevented the evacuation of civilians and wounded fighters from Yarmouk Camp at different times.

Armed Actors

Many distinct actors inhabit the area in and around Yarmouk Camp. ISIS controls most of the neighborhood, and their grip extends east and west against FSA frontlines in surrounding neighborhoods, and south to cover the neighborhood of al-Hajer al-Aswad. HTS maintains a foothold in the North and shares no frontlines with FSA groups. government forces and pro-government militia encircle the entire area.

¹ Though initially named the “Four Towns Agreement” in reference to the opposition-besieged towns of Foah and Kafraya and government-besieged towns of Madaya and Zabadani, negotiations eventually grew to include more than four towns.

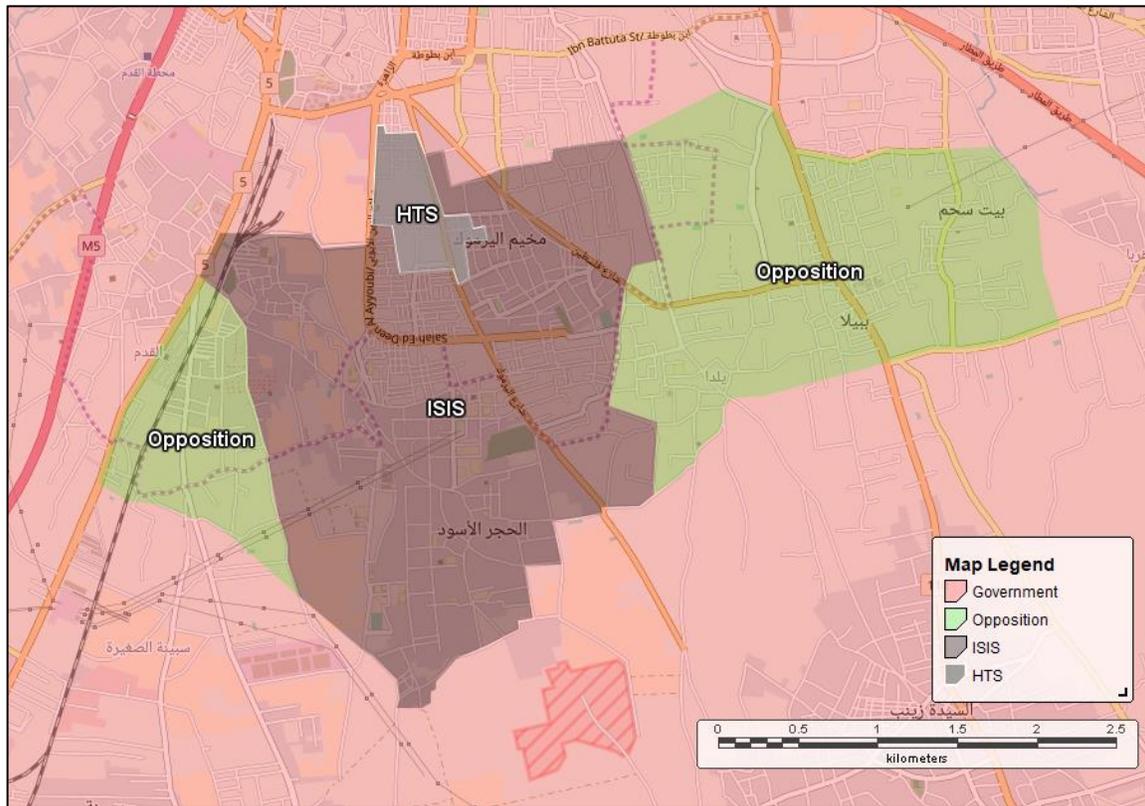


Figure 1. The Yarmouk Camp with FSA, ISIS, HTS zones of control, all three surrounded by pro-government forces

Pro-government forces:

Government and National Defense Forces (NDF) units hold territory on the outskirts of Yarmouk Camp but not within the camp itself. Past government actions in the camp have mobilized allied Palestinian militias. These pro-government Palestinian militias currently occupy the northernmost areas of the camp, sharing frontlines with HTS and ISIS. The largest and most influential of the groups are the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) and Fatah al-Intifada. They both claim to represent the interests of the Palestinian diaspora in Syria. Since 2015, defectors from a Hamas affiliate have supplemented the pro-government fighters.

The PFLP-GC started in 1968 as a splinter group of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and has steadfastly supported the Syrian government since the advent of the conflict. Canada, the UK, and US have designated the PFLP-GC as a terrorist organization. Fatah al-Intifada was founded in 1983 during the Lebanese Civil War with the support of the Syrian government as a splinter group of Fatah. Both groups are active partners in maintaining the government siege of Yarmouk camp.

Palestinian armed groups and community leaders have invested in the fate of Yarmouk Camp since the beginning. Pro-government Palestinian armed groups participated in the April and May negotiations with HTS and later with ISIS, establishing a ceasefire and evacuations commitment. In June 2017, Syria’s National Reconciliation Minister was documented meeting with the Palestinian groups.

HTS and its iterations:

HTS, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, controls between 30-40% of Yarmouk Camp and shares frontlines with the PFLP-GC and Fatah al Intifada in the north and northeast and ISIS to the east and south. HTS forces were estimated at 200 fighters in Spring 2017. Despite only few evacuations taking place, the deal reached under the Four Towns Agreement has heightened tensions with ISIS. Under the agreement, HTS would cede territory to the Palestinian groups which would greatly expand ISIS' frontlines with government forces in Yarmouk Camp.

ISIS

ISIS currently controls 40-50% of Yarmouk Camp in addition to the adjacent neighborhoods of Hajar al-Aswad, al-Asali to the southwest, and Taqadom to the east. Estimates of ISIS fighters reach up to 2000 but ambiguity surrounds the question of whether that number applies to Yarmouk camp alone or if it describes all of ISIS territory in southern Damascus. Of all the groups in the area, ISIS has the most active frontlines. Clashes and artillery exchanges with HTS happen with relative frequency. To the east, infrequent fighting between Jaish al-Islam and ISIS still occurs. Additionally, pro-government and government forces target ISIS with artillery strikes on occasion.

ISIS fears pro-government expansion into HTS zones of control as agreed to in April 2017. Despite reaching its own evacuation deal with the government in May, reports detail ISIS fortification efforts along HTS frontlines. On August 2, it declared a new "military zone" along its border with HTS, forcing the evacuation of dozens of families as it converts homes into military positions.

FSA

FSA groups control the areas of Yalda, Babila, and Beit Sahem to the east of Yarmouk Camp. Jaish al-Islam maintains the active frontlines with ISIS, but other groups include Sham al-Rasoul Brigades, Jaish al-Ababil, Martyrs of Islam Brigades, and the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union. Indicative of Jaish al-Islam's influence in the area, representatives of the group reached an agreement in June 2017 with the Russian and Syrian governments to establish a de-escalation zone for the communities of Yalda, Beit Sahem, and Babila.

Evacuations Stalled

Yarmouk Camp has been the site of multiple offensives and counter-offensives since December 2012 when FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra forces seized the area. Pro-government Palestinian groups have maintained a strict siege since July 2013. While the siege has successfully contained opposition and ISIS forces, evacuation and reconciliation negotiations have repeatedly failed.

Both the agreements to evacuate HTS and ISIS from Yarmouk Camp have stalled. Only a small number of wounded HTS fighters and family members have evacuated under the agreement to date. An article published on July 6 by the "Palestinian Refugees Portal" cites a source in Yarmouk Camp claiming that the evacuation of HTS to Idleb stalled because Ahrar al-Sham demanded inclusion in the negotiations. Tensions and infighting between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham throughout Idleb and northern Hama during the month of July likely contributed to

preventing implementation, in addition to ISIS objections. Ahrar al-Sham's loss of territory and influence in Idleb as a result of the July clashes could ease the negotiation process moving forward.

The government has commented multiple times on the issue. The Secretary for the Alliance of Palestinian Revolutionary Factions, Khaled Abd al-Majid, acts as a regular government source for developments in Yarmouk Camp. He issued a statement on July 29 explaining that complications in the areas where HTS and ISIS evacuees would go made postponement necessary. But he reiterated that the agreements were still valid. An earlier statement from the head of the National Reconciliation Committee, Mazen Sirghani, signaled frustration over discussion about the destination of ISIS evacuees, as the government would not permit travel to Raqqa or Deir Ezzor in light of the governments advances in those regions. Another government official blamed the stalling on continued fighting between HTS and ISIS as indicative that the groups are not committed to the agreements.

Recent Updates

In September, the Syrian government and HTS struck a deal to allow simultaneous aid deliveries to Yarmouk Camp in exchange for allowance of aid to enter the opposition-encircled towns of al-Fo'ah and Kefraya in Idleb (the Shia majority towns of the Four Towns agreement). On September 7, the Arab Red Crescent entered Yarmouk Camp protected by PFLP-GC fighters. Simultaneously, seven aid trucks delivered relief to al-Fo'ah and Kefraya in Idleb. This development would indicate that despite the delays in agreement implementation, communication channels between actors remain open and strong incentives to make deals exist.

In early November, under pressure from the Syrian government, opposition factions controlling areas on the eastern border of Yarmouk Camp closed the crossing into ISIS-held central Yarmouk Camp. Due to strong connections between the citizens in the eastern neighborhoods and ISIS-held Yarmouk Camp, however, opposition commanders were forced to re-open the crossing shortly after public protests.² In response, Syrian government forces closed all crossings into the entire besieged area on November 12.

###

² Hamou, Ammar, and Madeline Edwards. "A 'war of crossings' in south Damascus as checkpoint closure cuts off encircled districts." Syria Direct. November 13, 2017. Accessed November 14, 2017. <http://syriadirect.org/news/a-%E2%80%98war-of-crossings%E2%80%99-in-south-damascus-as-checkpoint-closure-cuts-off-encircled-districts/>.