

Murdering Palestinians By Starvation

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There isn't much the Palestinian people haven't suffered. But the use of enforced starvation against them by the Syrian dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad at the Yarmouk refugee camp breaks new ground in cruelty. Hundreds are said to be facing imminent death by starvation, lack of water and medical care, and the loss, for almost a year now, of all heat and electricity.

Last weekend, at least 41 Palestinian refugees were reported to have died as a result of food and medicine shortages, and all the evidence suggests this account is a low estimate. The numbers continue to grow daily.

Rights groups said that today eight more Palestinians in Syria have died from malnutrition, including an 80-year-old, Jamil al-Qurabi, a 40-year-old, Hasan Shihabi, and a 50-year-old woman called Noor. Meanwhile 10-year-old Mahmoud al-Sabbagh and two 19-year-olds, Majid Imad Awad and Ziad al-Naji, were killed while protesting the blockade of the camp. Muhammad Ibrahim Dhahi is reported to have been tortured to death by regime forces, while Hasan Younis Nofal was killed by one of Assad's now-notorious barrel bombs.

Yesterday a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) convoy of trucks loaded with desperately-needed food and medicines were fired on by pro-Assad forces, most likely the so-called PFLP-GC, as they tried to enter the camps and were unable to deliver the urgent relief.

The PLO says it is still trying to negotiate with "Syrian officials and [pro-Assad] militants in Palestinian camps in Syria in order to reach a solution and create a safe passage for the entry of relief supplies to Yarmouk." They are, in effect, begging for the lives of innocent Palestinians suffering a siege that, while significantly smaller in scale, is without doubt much crueler and more arbitrary than anything imposed on Gaza by either Israel or Egypt.

"All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war," blandly observed Chief Jeremiah Obafemi Awolowo, Nigeria's then-Minister of Finance, who is widely blamed for overseeing the use of famine as a technique in the suppression of the Biafran separatist movement. And, he reportedly added, "I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder." Quite.

During the 20th century, starvation was used as a weapon in numerous conflicts around the world, but has rarely been seen in the Middle East. There was a dreadful famine, partly caused by the Ottoman Empire, both before and during the First World War, and the Sudanese government is widely accused of using this tactic in Darfur. But the Arabs, Israelis, and Iranians have no real track record of such practices. Until now.

Brutality has been commonplace in the Middle East since at least the Second World War, but deliberate starvation has been much less common than shootings, bombings, massacres, and even the use of chemical weapons against civilians.

Palestinians have been driven from their lands, forced to live in squalid refugee camps, murdered en masse by various hostile forces, suffered under decades of occupation, and besieged. For a time being, they were even "placed on a diet" by Israel, which apparently actually calculated how many calories each Gaza resident would be allowed at the height of the blockade. As a people, they could well be forgiven for thinking they had seen it all, short of outright genocide.

But against all odds, the savagery of the Assad regime has managed to discover a form of suffering new to even the Palestinians: starvation as a weapon of war. I suppose for a people who had suffered almost everything else, it was only a matter of time that Palestinians would actually be starved to death.

The crucial thing is not simply that Assad and his allies – Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia – must be held fully and completely responsible for this outrage. It must also be noted that the international community and the Arab world are not doing enough to respond to it, practically or politically. They have done virtually nothing as Yarmouk's pre-war population of 250,000 has shrunk in the past three years to 18,000 famished, cowering, and shivering souls.

The Palestinians are, predictably, among the most vulnerable of victims in a merciless conflict in which Syrians, especially their own government, have turned on each other with breathtaking viciousness. If little is being done to help the Syrians, how, then, could Palestinians hope to be spared?

More than merely apathy and indifference – or in the case of some actors, a real focus on trying to deal with both Assad and al-Qaeda but not helping the Palestinians in Yarmouk – there is a deep sickness in some Arab political discourse and in a part of the Arab soul. To be fair, most Arabs are appalled at the Syrian war and feel deeply for the suffering of the Yarmouk refugees. But not all, by any means.

Those who still worship at the altar of the false idol of "resistance" and see Assad, Iran, Hezbollah, and their allies as the embodiment of the Arab cause are not simply disingenuous or delusional propagandists. Their thinking – not even, but especially, if it is sincere – is profoundly sick.

This demented attitude has been put on full display by the Lebanese shill for Hezbollah and Iran, Ibrahim al-Amin, editor of the *Al-Akhbar* newspaper that is wholly devoted to those two faithful paymasters. With absolutely no sense of decency or shame, Amin writes, "the unfolding events [in Yarmouk] are 100 percent a Palestinian responsibility."

He claims that "Palestinians in Syria enjoyed advantages that their counterparts were deprived of in every corner of the world," untrue certainly of Jordan and Western states, arguably of Israel itself. Being Lebanese, Amin may even believe this, since Palestinians in Syria have indeed historically been treated well in comparison to those who have suffered under Lebanon's virtual apartheid policies, or in the clutches of the Israeli occupation.

Amin blames Hamas for the crisis – as there is no honor among thieves, neither is there among formerly-allied extremists – and makes an overtly sectarian argument against Sunni, but not Shiite, Islamists. Worse, he accuses the Palestinians – who except for the brutal and tiny pro-Assad factions have made every effort to stay out of the conflict, remembering the lessons of Lebanon – of "contributing to the war in Syria." This may be the first time in a decade I have defended Hamas, but of this, they are not guilty.

Amin claims that either 27, or maybe 70, Palestinian salafis from Gaza (he cites both figures) have joined the fighting in Syria. Not Hamas members, mind you. Assuming this is true – and it would be a small number compared to the Sunnis fighters from other parts of the Arab world, and miniscule compared to the Shiite combatants that have rallied to help Assad murder his own people, especially Amin's Hezbollah cronies – who is to blame?

According to Amin it is, believe it or not, the Palestinian refugees in Yarmouk themselves. "What are these Palestinians doing?" he thunders. "Why are they doing it? Who can stop them or convince them that their battle is elsewhere? Palestinian refugees are the ones called to conduct an overall review." Really? What were the dying, starving, and wretched refugees in Yarmouk supposed to do about this? Has even Israel ever come up with a more cynical argument in favor of the collective punishment of innocent Palestinians for the actions of a tiny few over whom they have no control?

Like all Arab demagogues, Amin knows just who to blame. On cue, like the broken record he is, he concludes, "The one who seeks to liberate Palestine doesn't join a bunch of murderers who work under US command to serve one occupier and one criminal: Israel."

If justifying murder is a sin, Amin is deeply damned. If being boring and predictable is a crime, he's a *capo di tutti capi*, even if his real rank is no better than a major in Iran's *Pasdaran*. According to him, if Palestinians are being starved, shot, and tortured to death by the Assad regime, they have only themselves to blame. But the worst sickness is not Amin, who is an ideological hack and a paid stooge. His cynicism comes with a price tag.

The deeper problem is those Arabs who are willing to put up with his rationalizations for extreme cruelty. And, more deeply, it also lies with those who, in the past, were beguiled by the transparent lie – whether they have begun to doubt it yet or not – that there is an "axis of resistance" that includes the Syrian dictatorship, the Iranian theocracy, and Hezbollah; those, including Palestinians, who, either now or in the past, would drop everything to run to hear the latest ravings from "Sayyed Hassan." They know who they are, and there is no need to name names. But if they look back on their former attitudes whose shame, most of them show no sign of it. The same mentality continues to operate, with slight adjustments, on significant parts of the Muslim religious right and the Arab political left.

Even assuming they reject what is happening at Yarmouk, and are repulsed by Amin's brazen exercise in blaming the victims, if the events of the past three years nonetheless haven't prompted deep introspection and caused them to rethink their whole political worldview, they remain trapped in an ideology that led directly to the tragedy of Syria, and particularly, that of the defenseless Palestinian refugees being starved and murdered at Yarmouk. And, therefore, even if their symptoms are now presenting differently, the deeper sickness remains undiagnosed, unacknowledged, and, most importantly, untreated.