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**Volume 3, Issue 4, April 2015**

## **The Humanitarian Crisis in the Yarmouk Refugee Camp as seen on SNS**

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Since the eruption of the Syrian revolution in 2011, there has been a severe humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk, located on the edge of Damascus. This crisis intensified in the last two years, after the Syrian regime placed a curfew on the camp in order to weaken the power of the rebel militias there. [1] The famine afflicting the 18,000 residents of the camp prompted Palestinian and Syrian human rights activists to mount a protest campaign on social networking sites (SNS) aimed at increasing international awareness of this pressing issue. For example, in early March, they began an online campaign sharing videos and photographs documenting life in the camp with the hashtag “#I am hungry” (pictured). Activists placed responsibility for the tragedy on the Syrian regime, and demanded that humanitarian aid be sent to the camp. [2] The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNWRA) also attempted to promote awareness of the crisis using a campaign with the hashtag “#SaveYarmouk.” [3] However, the two campaigns were not particularly successful. Only in early April 2014 did the crisis in Yarmouk enter the consciousness of the international community, after approximately 80% of its territory was, without warning, conquered by ISIS. The establishment of ISIS in the camp, which it considers to be a forward base in conquering Damascus, provoked a murderous response by the Syrian regime’s air force, which dropped barrels of explosives on camp residents, rebels, and civilians alike.

ISIS's conquest and the intensification of the humanitarian crisis in Yarmouk camp stirred up lively conversation among Syrian and Palestinian users of SNS. This discourse expressed a lack of confidence in the ability of various Palestinian organizations to protect the refugees, as well as protests against the apathy that other Arab leaders have displayed towards the Palestinians' fate. One user wrote: "Only when they heard that ISIS – the demon of this world – entered Yarmouk did they wake up. Where were they when the Syrian regime imposed a curfew on the camp, and when people were dying of hunger?" [4] Palestinian users around the world expressed solidarity with the residents of the camp and called for an end to the tragedy. Some replaced their profile pictures with a picture of the camp and the caption "Yarmouk will never fall." [5] Others expressed a double revulsion, for both the Syrian regime and for ISIS, whom they described as two sides of the same coin, evil forces that both need to be contained.

Users from Gaza were prominent among those commenting on Yarmouk, perhaps because Hamas has attempted to use both SNS (including the Quds TV application that streams reports in real time) and traditional media to arouse concern for the situation of the camp's residents for many months. For example, students in Gaza launched a campaign entitled "YarmoukOurDignity" (pictured) and explained that the camp is now a prominent symbol of the Palestinian problem and of the national ethos that preserves the right of return to Palestine.[6] A Hamas activist on the Al-Aqsa satellite network tweeted that Yarmouk "kindles within us longing for return, and reminds Arabs of the wound of the Nakba and the pain of being far from Palestine..."[7] Similar voices were also heard in the West Bank, although to a lesser extent. A Fatah activist from Nablus wrote that eliminating the refugee camps would mean the elimination of the Palestinian problem, meaning abandoning the ethos of a Palestinian return to Palestine. Therefore, it could not be passed over in silence; rather, it is essential to defend the residents of Yarmouk without delay.

The discourse on SNS also represents the stormy debate between Hamas activists and supporters of ISIS, both Palestinians and non-Palestinians. The former describe ISIS as an evil, violent organization that fights against helpless, hungry people. One Hamas supporter wrote, "The world is silent in the face of ISIS's efforts to behead residents of the camp but the Palestinian nation rejects them." [8] Conversely, Palestinian supporters of ISIS claim that the accusations of ISIS's cruelty in Yarmouk are a fabricated PR campaign. Some use the hashtag "#Yarmouk embarrasses Hamas" for this purpose. Others claimed that even Iran, Syria, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, headed by Ahmed Jibril, are not interested in helping the refugees in Yarmouk, but rather are trading in their blood in order to maintain their political power despite the ascendancy of ISIS.[9] An ISIS activist noted, "The leadership of Hamas has died since the death of Sheikh Yassin, and nothing remains other than mercenaries concerned solely with their own interests." [10]

The dialogue around Yarmouk was an opportunity for supporters of Hamas to attack both Fatah (formerly the Palestinian National Liberation Movement) and the Palestinian Authority (PA), against the backdrop of the ongoing competition between the two movements, which currently centers on the rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip. Supporters of Hamas pointed an accusatory finger at the PA's failure to find a reasonable solution for the problems in Yarmouk, in order to present its leadership as weak and illegitimate. One lecturer from Gaza tweeted mockingly, "I want to inform Chairman Abbas [Abu Mazen] that the people of Yarmouk are human." [11] Another accused Fatah of collaborating in the crimes of the Syrian regime after the movement's delegate in Damascus allegedly agreed to transfer control of Yarmouk to the Syrian regime, while evacuating most of the people remaining in the camp to the surrounding villages and other places of refuge. [12]

Conversely, some Arab users – mostly from the Gulf states but also from Lebanese, Syrians, and even Palestinians – criticized Hamas. They claimed that until three years ago Hamas was a member of the Axis of Opposition, together with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, but more recently has shut its eyes to the crimes committed by the Syrian regime, and therefore it cannot shake off responsibility for the tragedy in Yarmouk. A user from the Gulf noted, for example, that Hamas is betraying its people and uninterested in collaborating with the PA to find a solution for the problem. Palestinian users from Lebanon expressed pessimism about the willingness of both Fatah and Hamas to translate their many statements on the issue into actual work on the ground. [13]

This discourse on SNS represents broad popular disappointment with both Arab and Palestinian leaders' inability to find a solution for the crisis in Yarmouk. Many consider the events in the camp to be a current reminder of the ongoing Palestinian problem, one that is especially relevant to the ethos of return. As a result, it is a test of Arab and international willingness to make the effort needed to solve the problem. Moreover, the discourse reflects the Palestinians' lack of confidence in the willingness and ability of the PA and Hamas leadership to solve the problem, while emphasizing the seemingly cynical considerations that each side brings to the issue for its political benefits and at the refugees' expense. Simultaneously, the activities of Hamas and its supporters are conspicuous as the principal leaders of the discourse on SNS, as part of their attempt to lower the standing of both the PA, its main competitor, and ISIS, which is emerging as a power potentially capable of undermining Hamas' standing in the intra-Palestinian arena. Beyond the rivalry between the various voices within Yarmouk, the discourse on SNS reflects the significance of the camp for Palestinians, who consider it a symbol of the Nakba, one that must remain part of the Palestinian national consciousness.

## **The “Plagues of Egypt” in Turkey: A Day of Darkness and Blood**

**Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak**

On March 31, 2015, two exceptional events occurred to make it an unforgettable day in Turkish history: a paralyzing power failure and the murder of a state prosecutor by terrorists. Together, these events fomented an agitated discourse that dominated the social networking sites (SNS). At 10:30 a.m., almost all power stations in Turkey stopped functioning, plunging the country into darkness for nearly the entire day (see picture). The only exception was Van province, which receives its power from Iran. After tremendous efforts, power was gradually restored, but on April 14, another blackout hit the country. Although smaller than the previous one, it was enough to keep the issue on the agenda.

The widespread power outage on March 31 did not prevent Turkish Internet users from using smartphones to post and follow updates on SNS. As the reports of power failures spread over SNS and the extent of the problem became apparent,[14] various explanations for the possible causes of the mysterious darkness began to spread. Many users recalled the explanation provided by Minister of Energy Taner Yıldız for the widespread power outages on March 30, 2014, when local elections were being held. At the time, Yıldız claimed that the problem was caused by cats who had broken into the power stations and caused short-circuits. This explanation was greeted with widespread criticism and derision on SNS, which featured a great variety of images in which felines played a prominent role.[15] Following the power outage on March 31, photoshopped images of cats alongside pictures of Yıldız (pictured) again went viral on SNS, in response to the weak explanations proffered by the minister, who had difficulty identifying the source of the problem, and limited himself to vague statements about a systemic failure of the electrical grid.

Lacking a reasonable explanation for the power failures, many users floated the possibility that they were caused by a cyberattack on Turkey. Some accusing fingers were pointed at the Syrian Electronic Army (SEA), a group of hackers loyal to the Assad regime, who were allegedly reacting to the hostility between Turkey and the Syrian regime. Other users chose to pin the blame on Iran, which they supposed was taking revenge on Turkey for President Erdoğan’s strident criticism of Iran’s activity in the Middle East generally and in Yemen in particular. Nor was Israel, a country with a reputation for sophisticated cyber-warfare, absent from the list of suspects. Against this backdrop, many users chose to highlight the fact that April 14, the day of the second blackout, was also the day when Turkey began building its first nuclear reactor, in Akkuyu, Mersin province. Users identified with the opposition did not miss the opportunity to

take advantage of the outages for political purposes, and used darkness as a metaphor for general attacks on the policies of the ruling AKP, claiming that it was returning Turkey to the dark times of the Middle Ages. Many users tweeted statements like “The AKP regime is the Lord of Darkness” or “It’s 2015 but this country is still dark.”[16] The symbol of the ruling party, a glowing lightbulb, only intensified the ironic expressions used by supporters of the opposition in their criticism of AKP.

However, the most sensational tweet related to the power failure came immediately after the blackout on March 31. It came from the Internet personality “Fuat Avni,” who is, apparently, a front for a network of activists that regularly leaks information from the innermost chambers of the Turkish government. Fuat Avni contended that the power outages were not coincidental, but rather the result of government planning. Furthermore, he claimed that – like the 2014 blackout, which many complained was used to conceal manipulations and forgeries of that day’s local elections – there would be three more comprehensive power outages in Turkey until the general elections on June 7, 2015. When this statement was published, many users cast doubt on it. Yet less than two weeks later, on April 12, there was another blackout. The fact that this blackout was smaller than the previous one did not detract from the apparent confirmation of Fuat Avni’s prediction. For his part, Avni repeated his claim that the government was using the power outages as a means for preventing a major defeat on election day.

As the tempestuous responses to the power outage on March 31 peaked, there was another event that shocked both SNS and the traditional media. Terrorists from the Marxist-Leninist DHKP-C (The Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front) broke into the offices of general prosecutor Mehmet Selim Kiraz in Istanbul. SNS responded in real time with many users claiming that the invasion was made possible by the blackout, although it quickly became clear that members of the DHKP-C had infiltrated the building using forged legal credentials. The terrorists barricaded themselves in Kiraz’s offices, and held him hostage with a pistol pointed at his temple. They accused him concealing evidence and protecting the policemen responsible for the death of Berkin Elvan, a young Alevi who died in March 2014 after nine months in a coma caused when he was hit in the head with a tear gas canister during the summer 2013 protests in Gezi Park.[17] Like many other radical organizations, members of DHKP-C demonstrated their understanding of how SNS can be used effectively. After capturing the prosecutor, they photographed him against a background of the organization’s flag and a poster reading “We demand Elvan’s murderers,” and distributed the pictures on SNS in real time. The SNS were also the main channel used for declaring their demands to the authorities. They demanded that the policeman who killed Elvan be named, confess to the killing on live television, and be brought to trial. All attempts at negotiations between the security forces, Elvan’s father and the captors failed. Special forces broke into the prosecutor’s office and killed the terrorists, but did not

manage to get Kiraz out alive. After the incident concluded, the large majority of users condemned the murder of Kiraz and claimed that the actions taken by DHKP-C did nothing to serve the case of Elvan. However, critics of the government tweeted that the official policy of protecting policeman from such accusations are to blame for the killing of Kiraz.[18] Many users repeatedly demanded that the authorities bring Elvan's murderers to trial and not evade the issue by pointing to the murder of Kiraz.[19]

[Caption: Prosecutor Kiraz to Elvan in Heaven, "I almost caught your killers but then..."]

In response to the incident, the Turkish government made two significant decisions. First was the passage of President Erdoğan's "internal security package," which gives unprecedented authority to police forces, including the right to search citizens' homes without a court-issued search warrant, lengthening the detention period of suspects, and more. This package, which is a clear retreat from accepted legal norms, set off a storm when it was proposed to the parliament last October and remained pending until the government approved it in April. Many users on SNS objected to the new law, but the Internet protest did not spill over into the streets, nor did it lead to any changes.[20] In addition, the government blocked access to YouTube and Twitter, claiming that DHKP-C had been using them as platforms for publicity, and said that access would not be restored until the harsh pictures of Kiraz being held captive against the background of DHKP-C flag were removed. As they did when the authorities blocked these networks last year, many users offered their friends advice on how to bypass the barriers, again demonstrating that it is no longer possible to stop the flow of information, as it was in the pre-Internet era. Be that as it may, Turkey removed the blockade after Twitter blocked access to these pictures from Turkish territory. Turkish users who want to see them can still do so by using software that reroutes their IP address to one seemingly located in another country.[21]

In conclusion, both the intensive efforts of SNS users during the power outage and DHKP-C's use of SNS demonstrated the networks' advantages as a source of information that can bypass governmental censorship. Furthermore, the reverberations of the extensive blackouts and the murder of the general prosecutor again highlighted the deep divisions in Turkish society and the lack of trust that many people have in the traditional media and the government. Many Turks are inclined to understand events as a performance staged by the Turkish government so that it can run the country as it wishes. It would be hard to claim that the Turkish government is doing anything to refute this contention, especially considering the way it utilizes incidents like those described above to achieve goals that, for whatever reason, it has otherwise delayed implementing, including limitations on individual freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International accused the Syrian regime of war crimes in the Yarmouk camp. See [http://www.amnesty.org.il/\\_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/SyriaBriefing.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org.il/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/SyriaBriefing.pdf)

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- <sup>2</sup> Arabic. See, for example, the PR video on the subject, titled “Siege”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr69XEBUdWU>
- <sup>3</sup> Arabic. #SaveYarmouk
- <sup>4</sup> Arabic.
- <sup>5</sup> Arabic.
- <sup>6</sup> Arabic. <https://www.facebook.com/YarmoukOurDignity>
- <sup>7</sup> April 1, 2015 <https://twitter.com/RajiHams/status/583366659982786560>
- <sup>8</sup> Arabic. #Yarmouk\_will\_not\_fall
- <sup>9</sup> Arabic. <https://twitter.com/ALMALAK68/status/589568025495482368>
- <sup>10</sup> April 6, 2015 <https://twitter.com/wracom2323/status/585036810318807040>
- <sup>11</sup> April 1, 2015 <https://twitter.com/uesawi/status/583367369638187008>
- <sup>12</sup> Arabic.
- <sup>13</sup> Arabic.
- <sup>14</sup> #BuradaElektrikYok #YaşıyorumBuradaElektrik #elektrikkesintisi
- <sup>15</sup> Hay Eytan Cohen Yanaracak, “Can the Cat Guard the Cream? Deepening polarization in Turkish society in light of the municipal elections,” *Beehive*, Volume 2, No. 4, April 2014  
<http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/beehive%20April.pdf> [Accessed May 3, 2014].
- <sup>16</sup> KaranlığınEfendisi AkpHükümeti #AdımAdımKARANLIĞA #Yıl2015ÜlkeHalaKaranlık
- <sup>17</sup> See also, Hay Eytan Cohen Yanaracak, “Social Networks, Released Generals, and Loaves of Bread: Where is Turkey heading?” *Beehive*, Volume 2, No. 3, March 2014  
<http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/Beehive%20English%20final%20March%202014.pdf> [Accessed May 3, 2014].
- <sup>18</sup> #MehmetSelimKiraz #ÇağlayanAdliyesi
- <sup>19</sup> #BerkinElvan #Okmeydanı #BerkininKatilleriAcıklansın
- <sup>20</sup> #İçGüvenlikPaketi
- <sup>21</sup> Turkey #TwitterIsBlockedIn #TURKEY #ErişimYasağıKaldırılın #ErdoganBlocksTwitter