The Palestinian struggle in Syria

Gruppe Arbeitermacht Thu, 25/04/2013 - 15:12
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A member of the League for the Fifth International’s German section interviewed Mahmoud Nasar, a member of the Coordination of Yarmouk Refugee Camp, Syria’s largest Palestinian refugee camp, in Damascus. He escaped the camp, currently besieged by Assad’s forces, in December 2012

LFI: How is life in Yarmouk going now?
MN: There are 125,000 residents in Yarmouk, and it is under siege. The Syrian forces and the PFLP-GC [Ahmed Jibril’s Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine ? General Command] put Yarmouk under siege. They don’t let people get food, medicines, etc. Every day, they try to invade Yarmouk. The camp is under shelling every day. They set up checkpoints at the gates of the camp and arrest every activist passing them. The camp is in urgent need of food, medicines and doctors. We are talking about more than 100,000 people, and there are only two doctors inside.

LFI: How are Palestinian leftist organisations engaging in the Syrian revolution?
MN: The left doesn’t want to take either side, but the Palestinian population is different. The Palestinians [in Syria] are connected to Syrians through family, economy and culture. The leftist parties are led by Jordanians, Lebanese, Iraqis and West Bank Palestinians. It’s not in their interest to make a bridge between the Syrian and the Palestinian populations. They have their own interests, they have offices, cars and other facilities provided by the regime. Individual Palestinian leftists engage as individuals, without their organisations.

It’s a shame. When the regime’s airplanes are bombing Yarmouk, they do not say anything. But they accuse the Free Syrian Army (FSA) of bringing in Afghans and Chechens, which is a lie. It was Syrian and Palestinian rebels who entered Yarmouk. There were Palestinians in the FSA from the beginning. They are participating there, because they think it’s their own struggle to support the Syrian rebels. Then Jibril’s forces put the camp under siege, and their excuse? to do nothing was the foreign fighters.

On 16 December, the PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, not to be confused with Jibril’s PFLP-GC], Fatah and the FSA had a meeting. They asked the FSA not to enter Yarmouk. The FSA said “Okay, we won’t go into Yarmouk, but you should control Jibril’s forces, because they are attacking us and taking the dead bodies of our fighters to Yarmouk.? So they agreed to keep Yarmouk as a neutral zone, but PFLP and Fatah said that they couldn’t control the PFLP-GC. The FSA answered ?So what do you want from us??

Most Palestinians ? even before the revolution ? considered the PFLP-GC to be a branch of Syrian security rather than a Palestinian faction. Ahmed Jibril himself was an officer in the Syrian Army until 1965. In 1968, he left the PFLP to establish the PFLP-GC. Since then, everybody sees them as a Syrian government branch. Even Yasser Arafat and George Habash treated them as one. They are based only in Syria and Lebanon, not in Palestine.

Most of the Palestinian militant groups in Yarmouk are not with Fatah or Hamas or anyone else, they are sons and daughters of the camp. They refused to start fighting in Yarmouk from the beginning of the revolution. But the regime wants to enter the camp, and it will make a massacre. All the places they invaded, they made a massacre. So the Palestinians and the Syrians have the right to defend themselves.

LFI: How will the situation for Palestinians be changed after Assad?
MN: We have a historic relationship, we have been one family for hundreds of years. Before the Sykes-Picot agreement...
we were one country, and after this we are still one country. And after Assad, we will still be one country. We did our duty for the Syrians, because they hosted us like their brothers. We have the same rights, we are facing the same situation, and we will continue like this. The only thing we are afraid of is that the regime will remain in power and punish all the Palestinians. I am not afraid of the Syrian people.

LFI: One myth about Bashar al-Assad is that he is the only Arab leader protecting the Palestinians.

MN: The Syrian parliament gave us equal rights in 1956, before the Ba'ath party came to power, and before Assad. Right now I can name 10 massacres Hafez and Bashar al-Assad did to the Palestinians. In Tel al-Zaatar in Lebanon, the Syrian regime destroyed this camp in Beirut. They destroyed two or three camps between 1985 and 1988 in the ?War of the Camps?. This was done by the [Shi'a Lebanese] Amal movement and Jibril?s forces alongside the [Syrian] regime; they attacked those camps to remove pro-Arafat activists from there. In 1983, they put Tripoli under siege, and threw Yasser Arafat out of Tripoli. In the 1990s, the Assad regime arrested around 8,000 pro-Arafat Palestinians. Many of them died in prison.

So it?s a lie that Assad supports Palestinians. The Syrian-Israeli armistice line on the Golan Heights is the quietest border Israel has. When Israel invaded Beirut in 1982, nobody resisted them except for the Palestinians.

LFI: Syria has many minorities; as well as the Palestinians there are, for example, the Kurds and the Alawites. While the Kurds have been oppressed under Assad, Alawites have been recruited to his security forces. Both of them face the threat of reactionaries who want a civil war to continue after Assad. So it seems we need a post-Assad Syria to secure rights for all of them. Will Yarmouk end up like Homs?

MN: I believe the Kurdish people have the right to a homeland. For 500 or 600 years, somebody has stolen this right from them. They didn?t allow the Kurds to speak their language. But if you talk about Syria, I don?t think it will face a sectarian war. Why? Syria is among the first countries to establish civilisation, including all minorities. They have lived together in relative harmony for hundreds of years; they are open to everybody. After Assad is defeated, there will be a move to punish those inside the regime forces who committed crimes. But it won?t be sectarian, and we will all come together after this. ?Sectarian war? is an argument to do nothing for the Syrian people.

There are 500,000 Palestinians in Syria, yet the official Palestinian factions have left us alone since the Oslo Accords. After the revolution, we will remove all those factions, because they leave us alone with this criminal regime, while Yarmouk has been under siege for four months. Nobody gets bread or gasoline for us, but they [secularist Palestinian factions] are using the presence of Chechen and Afghan fighters as an excuse to do nothing. They are Islamophobic. In reality they save the Orientalist consciousness more than the Orientalist ?thinkers? did. They say we cannot get our freedom because our community is Muslim.