

New Zoning Plans for Yarmouk Camp

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The Damascus governorate approved on June 25 the preliminary new zoning plan for the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp just south of the Syrian capital.

The plan for Yarmouk, an area largely destroyed during the war, is now being displayed for the period of one month on the Damascus governorate council's public board to field potential objections from former residents. The committee in charge of regional planning, headed by Damascus governor Adel Al-Olabi, is to study any objections, address them, and then amend the study before sending off the zoning plans to the governorate executive office. The plans will then be submitted to the [Ministry of Public Works and Housing](#) to approve the maps and issue a regulatory decree in accordance with the planning and urban development Law No. 23 of 2015.

Situated about eight kilometres south of Damascus's city centre, Yarmouk Camp was once considered the capital of the Palestinian diaspora. In 2011, somewhere between 500,000 and 600,000 people lived there, including 160,000 Palestinian refugees. Since its founding in the 1950s, Yarmouk had become a vibrant urban area, and a natural extension of neighbouring Damascus districts. The presence of Palestinian parties and factions within Yarmouk gave it a semblance of cultural and political autonomy before the war, compared with other parts of Syria.

The director of technical studies for the Damascus governorate, Muammar Dakkak, announced last week that Yarmouk camp residents would receive zoning "shares" under the new plan, but would not obtain alternative housing as zoning for the area fell under Legislative Decree No. 5 for 1982, which also regulates urban planning. This contradicts a previous announcement by Damascus governorate authorities that the zoning plan had been issued in accordance with Law No. 23 for 2015, which requires the implementing party to provide alternative housing and pay rental fees for those who were evicted from their homes.

Dakkak meanwhile has said that authorities did not have the proper funding, which could have allowed for alternative housing under Law No. 23. He did not clarify any legal reasoning for incurring Decree No. 5 instead of Law No. 23.

The Yarmouk camp was established in 1954, when the General Administration for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR), which is under Syria's [Ministry of Social Affairs](#), handed over land southwest of Damascus to Palestinian refugees who had scattered within the city and its countryside. The camp spans around 200 hectares, a large portion of which was leased from the landowning Damascene Al-Hakim family before the state acquired it.

Last month's release of the new zoning plan for Yarmouk raises serious questions about property and housing. The land is owned by the state, which means that most Palestinian refugees from the camp do not have deeds for real estate. The possibility of camp residents proving their ownership or demanding compensation is complicated even in the best of times. Syrian law grants Palestinians the right to own property via a notary, but that ownership is not documented in the real estate registry.

Many Yarmouk residents were displaced in 2013 after regime forces besieged the camp. UNRWA, the UN's Palestinian refugee agency, has previously reported that it expects most former camp residents will not return, due to the difficulty of access and the sheer scope of material damage.

A large number of camp residents also became wanted by Syrian security forces due to pro-opposition activism when Yarmouk was still under rebel control. This impedes documentation of ownership, or submitting objections to the new zoning plan, as those now wanted by security

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services cannot safely access government institutions without fear of arrest. Proving ownership also requires a proof of payment of electricity and water bills for previous years and in some cases even hiring a lawyer to follow the procedures, adding even more prohibitive costs.

The biggest issue, however, is Yarmouk's long-time legal status as independent from the administration of the Damascus governorate. Instead, it was run for decades directly by the Ministry of Local Administration and the Local Committee of Yarmouk Camp, in accordance with Cabinet Decree No. 1141 of 1962.

That changed in November 2018, when the committee was dissolved, and Yarmouk was placed under the authority of the Damascus governorate. This move ended the camp's special status, treating it instead as any other Damascus neighbourhood.

The camp local committee had enjoyed relative freedom in running Yarmouk. It drew up zoning plans in accordance with its composition and geopolitical character, preserving its status as the largest grouping of Palestinian refugees outside Palestine. The passage of time also saw infrastructure develop in Yarmouk as it took on the urban characteristics of other Damascus neighbourhoods.

UNITAR, the UN's research institute, estimated that more than 60 percent of Yarmouk's buildings and infrastructure were destroyed before government forces recaptured the camp in mid-2018. The previous years of war had seen opposition factions and hard-line groups seize control of the camp.

Despite official government statements that authorities were working to rebuild Yarmouk and help Palestinians return there, fewer than 50 Palestinian families still reside in the camp, according to The Syria Report's source. They live alongside families of security and military officials, as well as pro-regime Palestinian militia fighters, who seized some homes in the western part of the camp.

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