The Syria Report

Demolitions Target Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lattakia

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Five people, including three Lattakia City Council members, stand when an unlicensed four-storey building collapsed in the informal Al-Dhorat neighborhood of Lattakia's Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi district after city authorities moved to demolish the structure on June 24.

Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi is an unofficial Palestinian refugee camp that sits along a waterfront stretch in the south of Lattakia city. Established in the 1950s by Palestinians who had fled their homes, much of the camp consisted of makeshift housing built without government permission. Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi was home to an estimated 10,000 Palestinians [according to](#) UNRWA, the UN's Palestinian refugee agency, although some estimates are lower.

The demolitions hit certain neighborhoods of Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi due to [informal housing and building violations](#). When municipal authorities implementing the law face opposition from residents, they utilise Company 215 of Military Security, a branch of the intelligence apparatus, which has a presence in all governorates.

Any building that does not obtain a construction violation of law, regardless of the property's legal category, in general, is considered illegal. *ashwaiyat*—or informally built "slum" areas such as Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi—are unable to obtain building permits through regular means. This is due to the legal description of the land, whether it is owned by the government or communally owned by several residents. Municipalities may refrain from granting building licenses pending zoning plans for the area in question.

Municipalities in Syria do not recognize real estate that is in violation of legal codes and since 2014 have been more strictly informing those who seek to purchase non-licensed real estate that their property will be subject to demolition, in an attempt to legally absolve themselves.

Demolition parents often sympathize with residents and do not go through with the demolitions, or accept bribes to only partially damage the targeted buildings, leaving them in a dilapidated condition. The Ministry of Local Administration recently tightened implementation of Legislative Decree No. 40 of 2012, which requires the destruction of buildings found to be in violation of the building code after the date of the decree's issue (May 10, 2012) no matter the type, location or usage. Implementation is often strict in neighborhoods considered to be anti-regime, including Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi in Lattakia. In 2018, the ministry removed four municipal heads from their positions in the Damascus countryside governorate, due to what it said was "negligence and failure to follow up on carrying out Decree No. 40."

Lattakia's Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi in particular suffers from high population density, with buildings crammed closely together. Only one main road, called the Sea Road, crosses through the district. Residents also suffer from a lack of public services.

Construction of the Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi camp began in 1952, when it was established as a camp by land made over by the Syrian government [General Authority of Palestinian Arab Refugees](#), a part of the Ministry of Local Affairs and Labour, on Property No. 1140, under Decree No. 2316. The camp takes up an area of 2.2 hectares, with an extension on the northern end, known as Al-Ramal Al-Shamali, inhabited by Syrians.

UNRWA does not recognize Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi as an official camp, but rather as a Palestinian "grouping" or community. The agency does still, however, provide some education, health, and social relief services, and runs two preparatory and primary schools. There is no real difference or services that UNRWA provides to camps that it recognizes and those it does not. The matter is related to the agency's administrative classifications. Also, since Palestinians left the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp outside of Damascus in 2015 due to the siege imposed by regime forces, UNRWA has been providing financial assistance to 18 registered Palestinian refugees from Syria wherever they are.

Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi has since become home to large numbers of impoverished Syrians, with the construction of unlicensed buildings expanding to beyond the boundaries of the camp's official property lines. The camp is now three times larger than its original area, despite there being only 8,728 Palestinian refugees still living there, according to statistics released in 2018 by the Palestine Liberation Organization's Department for Refugee Affairs. Some 450,000 total residents live in the camp.

Syrian security forces raze Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi as an anti-government hotspot, after residents joined early demonstrations against the government in 2011. At the end of 2019, the Lattakia governorate authorities launched a sudden campaign to demolish a number of homes in the district. The campaign came as news emerged that the governorate had signed contracts with Iranian companies to redevelop the beach that runs along Al-Ramal Al-Janoubi.

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