

The Palestinian dilemma over Syria
By Sharif Nashashibi, The Guardian
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Palestinian leaders, organisations and officials were generally silent at the start of Syria's revolution, mainly out of concern for the fate of the half million Palestinian refugees in the country.

However, that has now changed, and not in President Bashar al-Assad's favour. Attacks on Palestinian camps by Syrian forces loyal to him – most recently last week against the Yarmouk camp – have resulted in killings, injuries, and the displacement of thousands. This has angered Palestinian refugees, many of whom are now openly supporting the revolution, as well as taking in Syrian refugees.

This is particularly damaging for the Assad regime because it has long regarded itself as a guardian of the Palestinian cause.

In an obvious reference to Palestinians, Jihad Makdissi, the Syrian foreign ministry spokesman, wrote on Facebook that "guests" in Syria "have to respect the rules of hospitality" or "depart to the oases of democracy in Arab countries". He later removed his comments following an outcry.

The regime's supporters often cite the fact that Palestinian refugees in Syria are treated far better than in other Arab countries. What they overlook, though, is that the law enshrining the rights of these refugees was enacted well before the Ba'ath party took power.

While several Palestinian leaders have now broken their silence about Syria, attitudes vary. Yasser Abed Rabbo, the PLO's secretary-general, described an attack by Assad's forces on a Palestinian camp in Latakia as "a crime against humanity." On the other hand, Nour Abdulhadi, the PLO's director in Syria for political affairs, later said Palestinian refugees "will remain as supporters of the Syrian government" – a claim seemingly out of step with the facts.

One major blow to Assad has been Hamas's stance. Not only did it refuse a request to hold pro-regime rallies in refugee camps in Syria, but it also allowed residents of Gaza to stage protests against him.

Its senior leaders left Damascus earlier this year, with political leader Khaled Meshaal – who reportedly twice turned down requests to meet Assad – now living in Qatar.

Several statements from Hamas's top echelons have unequivocally supported Syria's revolution. In the Washington Post, Karin Brulliard described this as a stark break between the former allies – one which, according to Fares Akram in the New York Times, strips the regime "of what little credibility it may have retained with the Arab street."

"The policy shift [of Hamas] deprives Assad of one of his few remaining Sunni Muslim supporters in the Arab world and deepens his international isolation," a Reuters report noted.

Hamas is the only member of the "axis of resistance" (grouping the Palestinian movement, Hezbollah, and the Iranian and Syrian regimes) to denounce Assad's crackdown. Although Hamas's decision is in line with polls indicating that Palestinians support the Arab spring, it has come at a significant price. A subsequent drop in Iranian aid to Hamas – which has been a lifeline for the movement in recent years – has yet to be filled by other sources.

However, this may change as the new Egyptian president is from the ideologically similar Muslim Brotherhood, and Gulf Arab states may reward Hamas for turning its back on what they view as an alliance of regional Shia threats. Furthermore, Hamas has probably secured an important ally in post-Assad Syria which Iran and Hezbollah will lose when Assad goes.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command's support for Assad has also caused a backlash among Palestinian refugees in Syria, who have attacked the movement's offices.

The Syrian revolution will fundamentally affect the Palestinian struggle, though in what way is difficult to tell at this stage. While the destinies and struggles of the Palestinian and Syrian peoples are in many ways intertwined, the cause-and-effect interaction between them is complicated and fluid.

Many people have no love for the Assad regime but are fearful of what will follow – particularly regarding civil war, security, human rights, democracy, the status of minorities, and the role of Islam and secularism. This is perfectly understandable, given the difficulties faced in other Arab spring states.

However, a minority do support Assad in the belief that overthrowing him would be a blow to resistance against Israel and the US. This has led to some ridiculous claims, such as a headline on the World Socialist Web Site saying: " Hamas aligns itself with US imperialism against Syria, Iran."

I strongly disagree. First, to Israel, Assad is "the devil you know" who (along with his father) has kept the Syrian-Israeli border quiet for decades, and helped the US in its "war on terror".

Second, it is misguided and offensive to view the suffering of Syrians in terms of whether or not this benefits Israel, the US or the Palestinians.

Third, there has always been strong support among Syrians for the Palestinian struggle – and this wasn't created by the Ba'ath party or the Assads.

A post-Assad Syria will likely reorient itself away from Russia, Hezbollah and Iran, but that will not translate into abandoning the Palestinians and cosyng up to Israel because it would be domestically and electorally disastrous.

However, just as Yasser Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein during the invasion of Kuwait catastrophically affected Palestinians in Kuwait and the wider Gulf region, so might divisions in Palestinian reaction to the Syrian revolution breed suspicion.

The only certainty at this stage is that axes of power and alliances will be redrawn. However this happens, and whoever benefits, should not be the priority. The rights of Syrians are paramount. If Palestinians and their supporters want the world to view their struggle as one of universal human rights – and rightly so – they should practise what they preach, and do so in unison.

While most have stood by the Syrian people, some seem more interested in being anti-Israeli and anti-American than standing up for universal human rights. This is as harmful to the Palestinians as it is to the Syrians.

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