**Catastrophic destruction as Syrian regime pounds Palestinian refugee camp**

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Amid scenes labeled “apocalyptic” and a “crime against humanity,” the Syrian regime continued its offensive on Sunday to retake the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, a neighborhood in south Damascus.

Most of the area is held by Islamic State and tens of thousands of Palestinian residents fled years ago, but thousands remain under a brutal siege.

The scenes from Yarmouk on Sunday looked like Stalingrad in 1942 or Berlin in 1945, during the Second World War: bombed-out buildings as far as the eye can see; roads turned to rubble; alleyways turned into canyons of destruction, gutted, gray and slumping from air strikes. There doesn’t appear to be anything left of many city blocks that were once a thriving community, the home of more than 200,000 people in 2011 when the Syrian civil war broke out. Now only a few thousand remain. Those who do are reported to be starving under the regime’s siege.

Since the middle of May, the regime has focused its firepower on the stronghold. It signed agreements with the local rebels so it could focus on destroying ISIS in southern Damascus, in an area held for years by the extremists. With support from Russia, according to numerous online accounts, the regime has sent tanks and planes to root out what remains.

There have been intermittent attempts to get the ISIS fighters to leave, but it’s not entirely clear where they would go. In the other cease-fire deals the regime has signed, the rebel fighters have been bused north to an area of Syria controlled by rebels and the Turkish Army. But no one wants ISIS members.

Nevertheless, busloads have been shown leaving Yarmouk, destination unknown. Rumors say they will be sent to the “Syrian desert,” which would mean the Euphrates Valley.

The last time the regime signed a deal to ship ISIS fighters from the Qalamoun Mountains near Lebanon to the Euphrates in August 2017, the US targeted the convoy in order to stop the fighters from reaching an area near eastern Syria. The US is still carrying out offensive operations against ISIS alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces in the country’s east, so it’s unclear how the coalition will react if the regime seeks to dump the fighters in the “Syrian desert.”

There is a lot of outrage online over what has happened in Yarmouk. There are also accusations that world silence is part of a hypocrisy regarding the Assad regime’s brutalities.

Idrees Ahmad, an academic and frequent commentator on the Syrian conflict, wrote on Thursday that what is happening in Yarmouk requires people to be outraged. He accused people of hypocrisy for saying Israel’s actions in Gaza were crimes while ignoring Yarmouk.

However, activists who support the Syrian regime have accused Israel of being the “spokesperson for ISIS. ISIS took over Yarmouk, and Assad and Palestinian PFLP are fighting against it!”

Syrian President Bashar Assad is “liberating” the area, claim Assad supporters.

The UN for its part calls for allowing civilians safe passage out of what remains of the camp. The area under the control of ISIS now spans several large city blocks, or about 1 square kilometer.

On Sunday, Syrian state media denied a report that insurgents had begun leaving in a withdrawal agreement.

The recovery of the enclave south of Damascus would mark another milestone in Assad’s war effort, crushing the last besieged rebel enclave in western Syria.

Swaths of territory at the borders with Iraq, Turkey and Jordan, however, remain outside state control.

Syrian government forces and their allies have been battling to recover the enclave south of Damascus since defeating rebels in eastern Ghouta, also near the capital, in April.

The area is centered on the al-Hajar al-Aswad district and adjoins the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, the largest in Syria.

The month-long battles have been the toughest fought by the Syrian Army and its allied forces this year against opposition forces in pockets around the capital, defense experts say.

Despite extensive use of air power that has left many parts of the area leveled to the ground, troops and allied militias have sustained heavy losses as they encounter tough resistance from die-hard militants waging a battle to the end.

In a live broadcast, a reporter with Syrian state TV said the Syrian army operations in the Hajar al-Aswad area were nearing their end and insurgent lines were collapsing as columns of smoke rose from the area behind him.

Syrian state news agency SANA said troops were about to close in on militants holed up in a small area of high density buildings north of Hajar al-Aswad.

“The fighting skills of the army are foiling all the efforts by the terrorists to prevent the army from completing the liberation of the area,” SANA said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights earlier said buses had entered the enclave after midnight to take out fighters and their families. They had left toward the Syrian Badia, a sparsely populated expanse of territory east of the capital that extends to the border with Jordan and Iraq, it said.

Islamic State militants had torched their offices in the Yarmouk enclave, the Observatory said.

Negotiated withdrawals have been a common feature of the Syrian war in recent years as the government, aided by the Russian military and Iran-backed forces, has steadily clawed back territory.

The rebels have mostly been given safe passage to northwestern Syria. In the last two months alone, the United Nations says 110,000 people have been evacuated to northwestern Syria and rebel-held areas north of Aleppo.

The opposition has called it a policy of forced displacement amounting to demographic change to drive out Assad’s opponents. The Syrian government has said nobody is forced to leave and those who stay must accept state rule.

While Assad has vowed to win back “every inch” of Syria, the map of the conflict suggests a more complicated time ahead from now on.

The US military is in much of the east and northeast, which is controlled by Kurdish groups that want autonomy from Damascus. It has used force to defend the territory from pro-Assad forces.