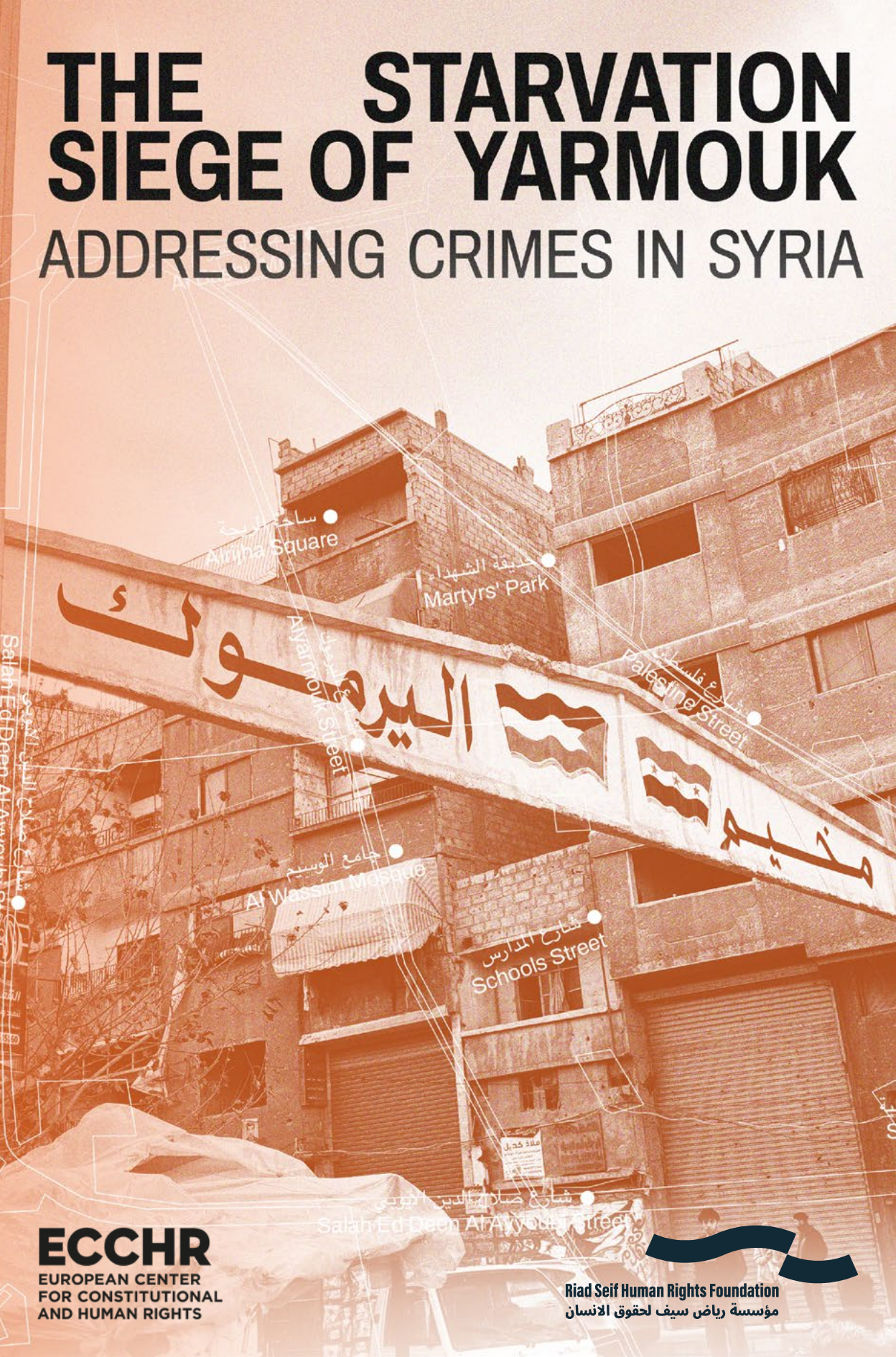
THE STARVATION SIEGE OF YARMOUK

ADDRESSING CRIMES IN SYRIA



ECCHR
EUROPEAN CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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SUMMARY

The Yarmouk camp in Damascus, Syria, often described as the “capital of the Palestinian diaspora,” came under attack during the Syrian revolution. Following a violent crackdown on anti-government demonstrations and heavy bombardment in December 2012, Syrian government forces and allied militias imposed a siege on the camp, cutting off the civilian population from food, medicine, and humanitarian aid. Many residents were left to suffer severe hunger and starvation. This publication examines extraterritorial prosecutions for crimes committed in the context of the siege of Yarmouk, focusing on the ongoing criminal trial of five defendants before the Higher Regional Court of Koblenz, Germany.

Against the backdrop of Syria’s changing accountability landscape after the fall of the Assad regime, this contribution takes the ongoing Koblenz trial as a starting point to ask what justice for crimes committed in Yarmouk can look like (Part 1). It revisits Yarmouk’s history, focusing on the siege and starvation of its civilian population (Part 2), before examining how universal jurisdiction has opened avenues for accountability abroad and what can be learned from earlier trials in Germany and Sweden (Part 3.1). Teresa Quadt then takes a closer look at the Koblenz proceedings, asking what it means to prosecute starvation as a war crime and where gaps in documentation, trial monitoring, and interpretation remain (Part 3.2).

Finally, drawing on discussions with residents and survivors in Yarmouk, Ayah Kutmah asks whether criminal trials can meet survivors’ demands for justice — or whether transitional justice must also address reparations, material needs, and the realities of those who, as survivors of past violence, have become survivors of the present (Part 04).

PART 01
INTRODUCTION

PALESTINIAN NAKBA

1948

Following the mass displacement of 1948, many Palestinians sought refuge in Syria.

YARMOUK CAMP

1957

Yarmouk refugee camp is established and gradually develops into the largest Palestinian community in Syria.



Almost ten years after the siege of Yarmouk, Syria, ended, the atrocities perpetrated there are being examined in a courtroom thousands of kilometers away from Damascus. In November 2025, the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany, began a new trial addressing international crimes under the Assad regime in Yarmouk, a predominantly Palestinian district in southern Damascus. For the first time, five defendants are facing trial for their alleged involvement in the violations that took place during the siege.

After a year of proceedings, it is time to reflect on the trial, its significance, and the questions of justice and accountability that it raises. The pursuit of accountability for what happened in Yarmouk cannot undo the neighborhood's brutal destruction, but it can make an important contribution to the search for truth, acknowledge the experiences of survivors, and help preserve a record of the atrocities.

1.1 THE STARVATION SIEGE OF YARMOUK ON TRIAL

THE SYRIAN UPRISING

2011

March

Syrian uprising begins. People fleeing violence from surrounding areas seek refuge in Yarmouk.



Image Credits Jafra / medico international

The five men on trial are accused of serious international crimes committed in Yarmouk between 2012 and 2014, including killings, torture, unlawful deprivation of liberty and the use of starvation against civilians as a method of warfare. Four of the accused are alleged to have been members of the Syrian militias Free Palestine Movement (FPM) and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), while the fifth is alleged to have worked for Syrian intelligence. According to the allegations, they were involved in the violent suppression of a peaceful demonstration against the Syrian regime on 13 July 2012 and on other occasions, as well as in the mistreatment of civilians in Yarmouk. At least six demonstrators were killed and many more severely injured during the July 2012 protest. Civilians were also allegedly subjected to repeated and severe physical abuse, including at checkpoints set up by pro-regime militias to control access to the neighbourhood.

These acts represent only fragments of the broader assault on Yarmouk, its residents, and their lives and histories. Yet together, they offer a glimpse of the brutal destruction inflicted on the neighborhood and its people.

In the trial, for the first time, the use of starvation as method of warfare is examined in court as a distinct crime. According to the indictment, one of the defendants physically assaulted civilians on two occasions while aid was being distributed, in order to prevent food from being handed out. The charges were brought by the German Federal Prosecutor's Offic, *Germany's*

federal prosecution authority, under the principle of *universal jurisdiction.* This principle allows German courts to prosecute certain international crimes regardless of where they were committed.

To this day, much of Yarmouk still lies in ruins. Yet people are slowly returning to rebuild their homes and their lives. At the same time, efforts to investigate and bring to justice the crimes committed in Yarmouk are still only at the beginning, both in Syria and in Europe, despite Yarmouk being one of the most emblematic examples of the Assad regime's brutal conduct of the war and the systematic destruction of entire districts.

PROTESTS IN YARMOUK

2011

Summer

Anti-government protests emerge in Yarmouk camp, followed by the increasing repression by pro-regime forces.

While two criminal trials in Germany and Sweden have already addressed international crimes committed during the siege and starvation of Yarmouk, this case stands out for its scope: with five defendants on trial, it also covers alleged crimes committed over several years and addresses a broad range of international crimes, including killings, torture, unlawful deprivation of liberty, and starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.

Can this new trial adequately address the systematic violence and destruction inflicted on an entire district?

How can survivors and affected communities participate in the proceedings, and what does justice and accountability mean to them?

How can a trial in Koblenz – thousands of kilometers away from where the atrocities took place and where most survivors are still waiting for justice – contribute to the transitional justice process in Syria?

1.2 BUILDING A RECORD FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE

For years, proceedings based on the principle of universal jurisdiction have played a central role in the legal processing of crimes committed by the Syrian regime. Now, the fall of the Assad regime presents an opportunity to advance transitional justice efforts in Syria itself. Those can build on the precedents and evidentiary standards set by universal jurisdiction proceedings in third countries such as Germany. Thus, the case can help create an important historical record for Syria's transition, documenting atrocities of the past and contributing to a broader process of reckoning with them.

GERMAN STRUCTURAL INVESTIGATION

2011

September

Germany opens a structural investigation into international crimes committed in Syria.

International criminal law cannot undo past injustices, but it is incredibly important in the process of coming to terms with past crimes, such as those committed by the Syrian regime. Its significance for survivors, whose testimonies are heard and officially documented in court for the first time, for their families, and for Syrian society as a whole can hardly be overstated.



However, while criminal justice is an essential part of coming to terms with a violent past, it can never, on its own, deliver the justice and reconciliation that survivors and societies seek.

What is needed is a comprehensive transitional justice process, grounded in the needs and experiences of survivors and encompassing a broader range of measures to establish the truth provide reparations, ensure accountability, and help rebuild trust in society.

PART 02
“LITTLE PALESTINE” UNDER SIEGE

VIOLENT REPRESSION OF PROTEST

2012

13 JULY

Security forces violently suppress a demonstration in Yarmouk, killing several civilians.



Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

“

I will never forget the days of the hunger blockade. We were abandoned by the world. We cooked grass and ate cats. The hunger ate into our bodies – we practically vanished. Many died of thirst, from lack of medicine, from a winter without heating and electricity that lasted nearly a year. The fact that there is now a court case gives me hope for justice.

”

Aeham Ahmad

(Musician and survivor from Yarmouk)

MASS EXODUS AFTER AIRSTRIK HITS YARMOUK

2012

16 December

Regime airstrikes hit Yarmouk, triggering a mass exodus. Regime forces and allied militias impose a siege on the district.



Google Earth image of Yarmouk camp, 2011

Image Credits

Yarmouk, known as the "capital of the Palestinian diaspora," was officially founded in the year 1957 as a refugee camp for Palestinian refugees who fled to Syria following the 1948 Nakba. In the years since, the camp became an integrated, vibrant working-class district in south Damascus, housing some 150,000 Palestinian refugees. Palestinians in Yarmouk and more broadly in Syria were far from a homogeneous community, encompassing ***diverse political positions***, while nonetheless sharing a common experience of Palestinian refugeedom and displacement. Some were politically active within different Palestinian factions and throughout the Syrian uprising, whereas others chose to remain politically neutral, in part because their experience of being scapegoated made political alignment seem dangerous or undesirable.

Their status as Palestinian refugees, rather than Syrian citizens, became a particular source of vulnerability during the conflict, exposing them especially to displacement, violence and political marginalization.

YARMOUK – A TOTAL BLOCKADE

2013

JULY

The siege of Yarmouk is turned into a total blockade, cutting around 20,000 remaining civilians off from food, medicine and humanitarian aid.

When the Syrian revolution began in March 2011, people throughout Syria took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations, which the Syrian regime and allied militias violently suppressed. Many Syrians fleeing repression and fighting in areas surrounding Yarmouk, including armed opposition fighters, sought refuge in the camp. The population grew massively, while Palestinian organizations organized humanitarian aid for those fleeing conflict-affected areas. Many described Yarmouk as vibrant and relatively peaceful during the first months of the revolution, even as repression was intensifying elsewhere.

As with all officially registered Palestinian camps in Syria, security and policing in Yarmouk were largely in the hands of Palestinian militias. These militias were formally autonomous in Syria but, in fact, were directly subordinate to the Syrian security forces. In Yarmouk, this role was assumed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC),a political-military organization led by Ahmad Jibril, a former Syrian officer, as well as by the Free Palestine Movement (FPM).

Originally lightly armed and mainly carrying out community work in the camp, this organization transformed into a pro-

regime armed militia at the start of the civil war. Both groups took on security tasks in Yarmouk and acted as henchmen for the Syrian state security forces. At their checkpoints within the camp, people were repeatedly arrested arbitrarily and handed over to the secret service, where they were detained without charge and tortured. ***Anti-government protests*** erupted in Yarmouk in the summer of 2011 and continued thereafter. While some residents of the camp supported the Syrian regime or tolerated it as a reality of everyday life, often out of fear, others joined the popular protests that increasingly took place within the camp. This popular resistance was met with violent crackdowns. One such demonstration, during which several civilians were killed by armed forces on 13 July 2012 lies at the heart of the indictment in the Koblenz trial.

In December 2012, the regime bombed several places of refuge, triggering a mass exodus from Yarmouk. The bombing left a deep mark on the memory of those fleeing, and many describe it as a second Nakba – the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948. In response to rising tensions and the growing popular uprising, Syrian regime forces and allied militias, including the FPM and PFLP-GC, besieged Yarmouk at the beginning of December 2012. Members of both organizations, who were considered to be agents of the regime and its secret services, also repeatedly attacked the population in connection with the distribution of food.

In July 2013, a total siege was imposed on the population, trapping the remaining approximately 20,000 civilians and cutting them off from all food, medicine and humanitarian aid. Residents resorted to eating grass and scavenging for food.

UNRWA ENTERS YARMOUK

2014

JANUARY

UNRWA gains limited access to Yarmouk and distributes food.

By mid-March 2014, at least 130 people had died from starvation and dehydration, according to the Palestinian League for Human Rights-Syria (PLHR-S). The then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, said that Yarmouk was beginning to resemble a "death camp." Amidst the horror of the situation in Syria, he continued, the camp was "the deepest hell." Not only in Yarmouk, but across Syria, "siege, starve, surrender" became a method of warfare systematically employed by the Assad regime against hundreds of thousands of civilians living in opposition-held areas, while similar tactics were also used by non-state armed groups such as ISIS. An estimated ***2.5 million Syrians*** have endured siege or siege-like conditions, primarily imposed by the Assad regime and its allies.

The international community's response to the sieges was marked by a persistent gap between recognition and action. Despite

repeated UN resolutions demanding humanitarian access, the deadlock within the UN Security Council and Russia's role as both a participant in the sieges and a permanent Council member allowed the Syrian government to continue using the tactics of siege without facing consequences.

The lack of accountability for the sieges in Syria set a dangerous precedent, encouraging other actors to adopt similar tactics in campaigns of collective punishment.

The UNRWA was finally permitted to enter Yarmouk in January 2014, from which photos of thousands of emaciated residents standing in line for food garnered international attention. The regime almost completely destroyed the camp with barrel bombs in 2015, before ISIS took control of it. When they entered the camp, there were 12,000 inhabitants left. By 2018, a final regime offensive to take over the camp left most of the buildings and infrastructure destroyed and depopulated.

Today, more people are returning to Yarmouk. Yet, the situation remains dire: homes and vital infrastructure have been destroyed and remain buried under rubble; healthcare and education systems are still barely functioning; and many people feel abandoned, receiving little support from the interim government.

130 DEAD FROM STARVATION

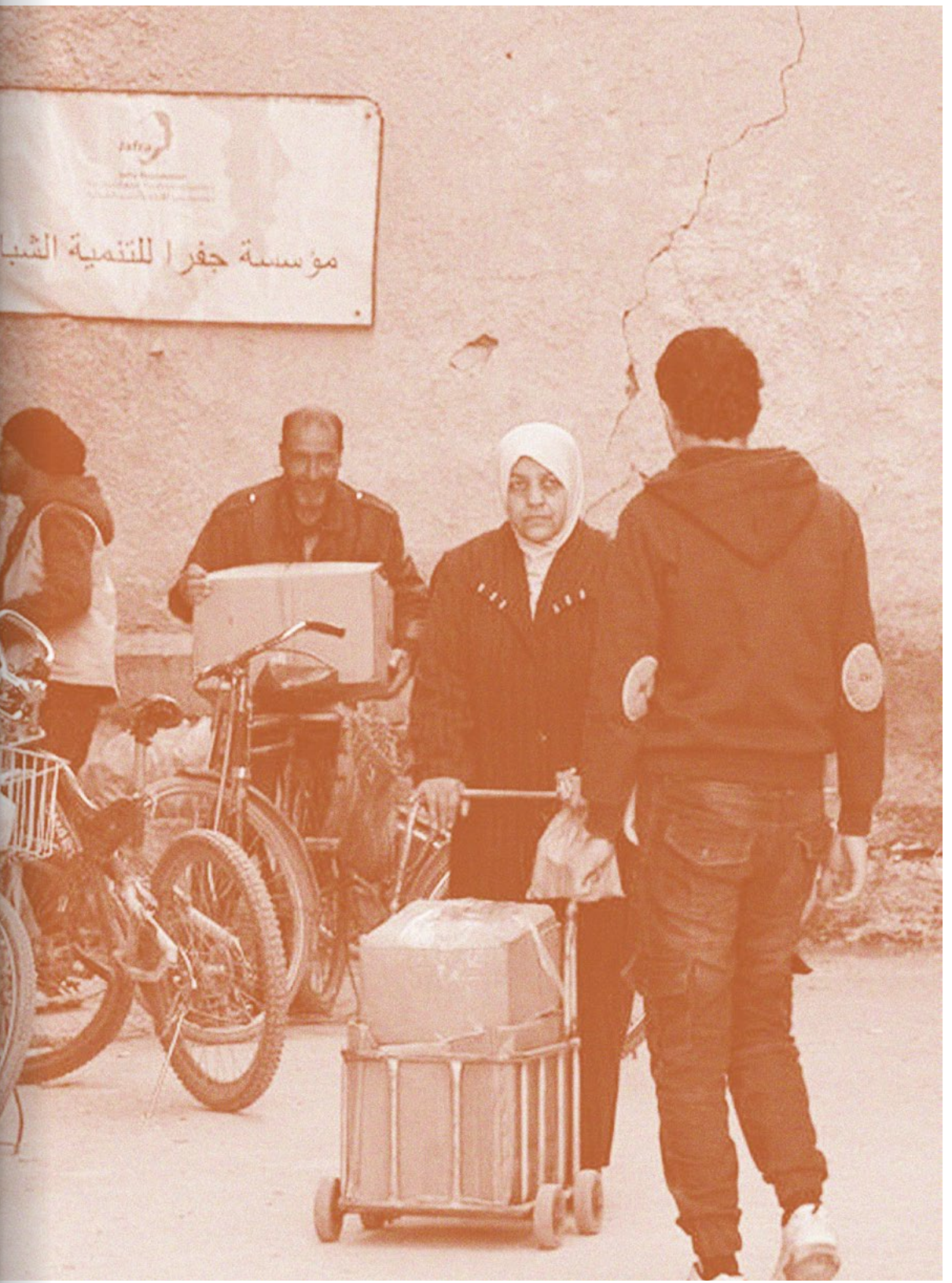
2014

MARCH

Up until this point, at least 130 people have reportedly died from starvation and dehydration.



Image Credits



Jafra / medico international

PART 03
A TRIAL ON CRIMES IN YARMOUK – IN GERMAN KOBLENZ?



Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

“

As one of the people who lived and resided in Yarmouk and testified in the Koblenz proceedings, I see it as a deeply humanitarian gesture of judicial institutions to ensure justice for us. However, it is important to know that many people similar to those currently being tried are still at large and remain free without having been brought to justice.

Their continued freedom, while others like them are standing trial today, is deeply painful and distressing to us. Just as the courts have done us justice, we feel it is our duty to return the favor by not remaining silent and by warning you of the danger posed by those who are still at large.

Anonymous
(Witness and co-plaintiff in the Koblenz trial).

”

ATTACK ON FOOD AID RECIPIENTS

2014

23 MARCH

Moafak D., a member of the pro-regime FPM, attacks civilians waiting for UN food aid in Yarmouk camp.



Image Credits



Ayah Kutmah

What role can a trial in Koblenz, thousands of kilometers away from the place where the crimes were committed, play in the pursuit of justice for survivors and affected communities?



Image Credits

Ayah Kutmah

ISIS AND AL-NUSRA TAKE CONTROL

2015

01 APRIL

ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra enter Yarmouk taking control of large parts of the camp.

For years, proceedings based on the principle of *universal jurisdiction* were central to efforts to establish accountability for crimes committed by the Syrian regime, often providing the only avenue through which survivors could pursue justice. Syrian and international civil society actors repeatedly called on prosecutorial authorities to adopt a strategic approach to accountability for international crimes committed in Syria and began filing criminal complaints in several jurisdictions.

UNIVERSAL JURISDICTION

Under the principle of universal jurisdiction (UJ), national courts can prosecute individuals for serious crimes against international law – such as crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide – even in situations where the perpetrator is not a national of the state that is prosecuting the crime, or when the crime was not committed in that state's territory or against its nationals.

UJ thus expands the traditional bases of criminal jurisdiction by invoking the principle that international crimes harm the international community and order itself as a whole. A national court can exercise UJ when the state in question has incorporated this principle into its laws. The definition and the exercise of UJ therefore varies considerably throughout the world.

Today, investigations and trials under the principle of UJ concerning international crimes committed in Syria since 2011 are underway or have already taken place in such countries as Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States. Through the German Code of Crimes Against International Law (CCAIL), Germany adapted its national criminal code to the standards of international criminal law, in particular those established by the Rome Statute of the ICC. Germany has played a pioneering role in addressing the crimes of the Syrian regime, at least since the *Al-Khatib trial* before the Koblenz Higher Regional Court in 2020.

In 2011, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office opened a first structural investigation into crimes committed by state actors in the Syrian conflict. With a network of Syrian partners, consisting in particular of victims and survivors, activists and lawyers, ECCHR has fought tirelessly over the past 15 years for justice and the reckoning with crimes committed by the Syrian regime and other actors.

3.1 TRIALS ON SYRIAN REGIME CRIMES IN EUROPE

Significant progress was achieved through a ***patchwork of cases*** brought before courts in Germany, France, Sweden, the United States and elsewhere, as discussed in the ECCHR report ***Patchwork Justice for Syria?*** (2024). Yet, these proceedings were also marked by ***limitations and shortcomings.*** Trials held far from the communities affected by the crimes, and in languages other than Arabic or other languages spoken in Syria, remained difficult for the wider Syrian public to access and engage with.

Syrian and international civil society organizations tried to help bridge this gap by submitting crucial information to state authorities, helping initiate investigations through criminal complaints, and supporting witnesses and survivors by facilitating legal representation and psychosocial assistance throughout the proceedings.

Another limitation stemmed from the fact that many countries require defendants to be physically present before court proceedings can be initiated. Consequently, those arrested in Europe and subsequently brought to trial were predominantly low and mid-level perpetrators who had left Syria.

Nonetheless, crucial actions targeting senior figures of the Assad regime were initiated in their absence, including an arrest warrant against former intelligence chief Jamil Hassan in Germany, as well as proceedings against Ali Mamlouk, Jamil Hassan, and Abdel Salam Mahmoud in France. The latter proceedings resulted in their in absentia convictions and life sentences. These cases marked an important breakthrough in efforts to hold senior regime officials accountable, although extraditions remain distant. The resulting accountability landscape is therefore fragmented and incomplete, leaving ***a significant gap*** in terms of perpetrator prosecuted, crimes addressed and victim participation.

The trials also take place within a ***complex power dynamic*** between German judicial authorities and affected Syrian diaspora communities, leaving many Syrians feeling that they have little ownership of the justice process. This tension is further compounded by the limited victim-centeredness of the proceedings, persistent language barriers, and

discriminatory experiences with German authorities beyond the courtroom – from the police to immigration authorities – that many Syrians have encountered. Against this backdrop, the importance of self-determined justice processes becomes particularly apparent, including through meaningful participation in defining their conditions and frameworks. Nevertheless, these criminal proceedings marked a crucial departure from decades of impunity and demonstrated that those responsible for international crimes committed in Syria could, at least in part, be held accountable.

Several years since criminal proceedings were first initiated in Europe, the fall of the Assad regime following 54 years of dictatorship has opened up avenues for addressing the regime's crimes that were previously unavailable.

The Yarmouk trial in Koblenz is among the first proceedings in the post-Assad period addressing crimes committed by the Assad regime and its allied armed groups. It thus takes place at a moment of profound transition, as Syria begins to confront the legacy of decades of authoritarian rule and widespread international crimes.

The hope, therefore, is that transitional justice efforts in Syria can build on the ***precedents established through universal jurisdiction*** proceedings in countries such as Germany. At the same time, foreign national judiciaries should place greater emphasis on making such proceedings accessible to Syrian survivors and the wider Syrian public, both within Syria and abroad, allowing wknowledge, experience, and lessons learned from these cases to travel more easily and inform future accountability efforts. Ultimately, the way should be paved for accountability to be pursued within Syria itself.



Image Credits Andreas Schüller

JUSTICE FOR YARMOUK IN GERMANY AND SWEDEN

The current Koblenz Yarmouk trial is preceded by two other proceedings that addressed international crimes committed in Yarmouk: in February 2023, the Berlin Higher Regional Court (Kammergericht) convicted Moafak D., a member of a pro-Assad militia, ***of war crimes and murder in Yarmouk.***

FINAL ASSAULT ON YARMOUK

2018

APRIL - MAY

Syrian regime forces launch their final offensive on Yarmouk, heavily bombarding the camp and displacing its remaining population.

He had fired a grenade at a crowd of people waiting for UN aid packages at a checkpoint in the besieged neighborhood. The involvement of Syrian regime forces and affiliated Palestinian militias in crimes committed in Yarmouk as part of the siege was substantiated by several witness testimonies presented before the court. The ruling further affirmed ***their role in enforcing the siege*** at the Rejeh checkpoint. While the trial represented an important legal step towards developing

a detailed account of the siege of Yarmouk and South Damascus, it remained limited to a single incident of violence and therefore did not fully capture the systematic nature of the blockade. With the conviction of Mahmoud S. by the Solna District Court in Sweden, ***another Yarmouk trial*** concluded in May 2026. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for aggravated violations of international law committed in the camp in 2012 and 2013. Similar to the proceedings in Koblenz, the trial in Sweden focused on the attack on the 13 July 2012 demonstration, as well as violations at checkpoints where civilians were detained and transferred to Syrian security forces despite the known risk of torture and death.

The judgment is significant because it connects these individual acts to the broader pattern of violence against civilians in Yarmouk. The proceedings were the result of cross-border investigations and cooperation between Swedish and German authorities, demonstrating how such cooperation can help connect evidence and investigations across jurisdictions in the pursuit of accountability for crimes committed in Syria. Taken together, the trials form part of a dispersed but cumulative judicial record and archive on Yarmouk, with different national courts addressing different fragments of the same historical period.

PART 3.2 HALFWAY INTO THE PROCEEDINGS: TAKING STOCK

Teresa Quadt

Teresa Quadt, wrote her PhD in international criminal law and was leading the trial monitoring team at SJAC until July 2026, covering the Al-Yarmouk trials. Currently, she is a legal trainee at the Kammergericht Berlin and a board member at Amnesty International Germany. As a postdoc at the Humboldt University of Berlin, she will continue researching universal jurisdiction trials, starting in January 2027.

The trial began on ***19 November 2025*** in Koblenz and concerns ***the five accused*** Jihad A., Mahmoud A., Mazhar J., Sameer S., and Wael S., who are ***charged with crimes*** allegedly committed in the Yarmouk district in South Damascus between 2012 and 2014. The accused are alleged to have acted as members of, or in connection with, pro-government Palestinian armed groups – FPM and the (PFLP-GC) – and the Syrian Intelligence Services. By the end of July 2026, the court had heard at least 20 witnesses, including one co-plaintiff, eyewitnesses, survivors, police officers, one migration authority witness, and a German ***prosecutor*** on more than forty hearing days. Unlike the prior cases against Mahmoud S. in Sweden and Moafak D. in Berlin – two individuals previously convicted for Yarmouk-related crimes – the Koblenz case is more expansive. The ***charges*** in Koblenz include multiple crimes, such as murder and attempted murder, torture, and severe deprivation of liberty as war crimes and crimes against humanity under the German Code of Crimes Against International Law ***(GCCAIL)*** and the German Criminal Code ***(GCC)***.

SIEGE AND STARVATION IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

The use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited under international law and may constitute a war crime and, in certain circumstances, a crime against humanity. This prohibition is established within both treaty and customary international law and may therefore be binding even for states that have not ratified the relevant treaties.

Sieges are not unlawful per se. However, they may violate International Human Rights Law (IHL) where essential goods or humanitarian assistance are deliberately withheld in order to starve the civilian population. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (CoI) has concluded that the methods used to conduct sieges in Syria have violated both IHL and international human rights law (IHRL) and may amount to war crimes.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) recognizes starvation as a war crime in both international and non-international armed conflicts. However, the ICC currently has no jurisdiction over such conduct in Syria, as Syria is not a State Party to the Rome Statute, has not accepted the Court's jurisdiction, and has not been referred to the ICC by the UN Security Council. Accountability may therefore instead be pursued before domestic courts, including German courts exercising universal jurisdiction. To date, however, no German court has issued a judgment specifically addressing the use of siege and starvation as war crimes.

Establishing that the siege and starvation of civilians in Yarmouk, Syria, constituted core international crimes would therefore be significant for the development of German case law. Such a finding could establish an important precedent for future prosecutions involving siege warfare and starvation in other contexts.

SIEGE AND STARVATION ON TRIAL?

The historical and legal particularity of the proceedings lies, however, in the ***inclusion of the war crime of starvation*** of civilians as a prohibited method of warfare. Only Mahmoud A. is charged with this crime for allegedly causing the starvation of civilians by ***obstructing access of relief materials*** into the ***besieged*** camp. According to the indictment, he beat several women with a plastic pipe who had come to the checkpoint to collect food parcels. This charge is ***unprecedented*** and when committed in a non-international armed conflict, can only be prosecuted in a number of states – among others, in Germany. Despite the single charge against Mahmoud A., the case brings a form of violence before a domestic criminal court that was not peripheral to the experience of Yarmouk, but constitutive of it: the deliberate restriction of food, medicine and humanitarian relief. The hearings have so far oscillated between individual events and structural patterns of control over checkpoints and the movements of Yarmouk's civilian population. The court has predominantly turned to the 13 July 2012 demonstration as one of

the major incidents in the ***indictment***, hearing evidence concerning the alleged armed attack by the defendants on demonstrators, the recovery of bodies, and the subsequent pressure placed on relatives to accept official or ***false accounts of death.*** Survivor witnesses have testified about the location of checkpoints, the significance of militia-controlled streets, and the ways in which movement, access and exposure to violence were regulated. At the same time, the evidence has begun to ***situate the five accused within a broader apparatus***, including alleged links between pro-government Palestinian militias, Syrian intelligence and patterns of unlawful conduct. Witnesses recalled multiple instances of detention, including of ***medical personnel, killing, torture, intimidation*** and suppression of the civilian population.

The courtroom record is gradually assembling an account of Yarmouk as a governed space of repression, in which shootings, checkpoints, detention sites and the later siege appear as systematic means and policies under which civilian resistance was violently suppressed.

The proceedings are taking considerable time, as hearings are scheduled for only two days per week, and witness examinations often extend over several trial days. One of the main reasons for the detailed discussion of the facts in the courtroom is the principle of orality and immediacy that governs German criminal procedure. The facts on which the court bases its decision must be presented and examined in court, and the most direct source of evidence must be used. For example, a witness should generally be examined in person rather than having the record of a previous interview simply read aloud in court. The rights of the defense are also firmly embedded in the criminal trial and include, inter alia, the right to question witnesses and to make procedural motions.

However, despite – or perhaps because of – the detailed witness testimony concerning the 13 July 2012 demonstration, the question of whether the siege was ***unlawful under international humanitarian law*** and whether the withholding of essential goods from the civilian population crossed the threshold to the war crime of starvation remains open thus far into the trial. Eight months into the trial, only three witnesses have provided information or been questioned about instances related to starvation.

One witness testified on ***starvation in detention***, while another recounted how ***gunshots were fired into the crowd during food distribution***. A third witness alleged that Moafak D., the aforementioned former defendant in a separate trial, was ***responsible for attacks on civilians during food distributions***. It remains to be seen whether future witnesses will be heard exclusively on this charge.



Image Credits Jafra / medico international

MOAFAK D. TRIAL ENDS

2023

23 FEBRUARY

Berlin court sentences Moafak D. to life imprisonment for war crimes and murder.

Overall, the indictment provides a rare opportunity to examine starvation not merely as incidental suffering, but as a legally recognizable method of depriving and destroying civilians. Due to this unique charge and opportunity, ***civil society*** and scholars have argued that the proceedings are of historical significance and have filed a motion to audio-record the proceedings – one of the few means for civil society to actively follow such proceedings.

ARCHIVING THE YARMOUK TRIAL: A QUESTION OF ACCESS AND TRANSLATION

Where universal jurisdiction trials take place far from affected communities and in languages inaccessible to many survivors, civil society actors play an important role in documenting, translating, explaining, archiving and contextualizing the proceedings. They render the cases legible beyond the court room and partly compensate for the physical and linguistic distance that universal jurisdiction creates. In the Yarmouk trial, civil society participation has taken predominantly three interrelated forms.

First, civil society actors sought to preserve the proceedings by requesting the above-mentioned audio recordings – unfortunately, without success. Civil society organizations ***supported a motion*** by international criminal law scholars, which permits recording proceedings of an outstanding historical or scientific significance. The prosecution opposed recording.



Image Credits Andreas Schüller

Given the novelty of the starvation charge, the role of the Palestinian militias involved in the Syrian armed conflict, and the limited access of affected communities – especially those in Syria who have begun returning to Yarmouk – recording would not have been a mere technical accommodation, but would have acknowledged the trial's significance for future generations.

Second, civil society actors also accessed UJ proceedings through trial monitoring. Objective and impartial monitoring differs from passive attendance: it requires accurate note-taking, continuity across months of hearings, and the production of reliable reports for communities unable to attend. Such monitoring reports help preserve the proceedings for future generations and can play a crucial role in enabling societies to confront systemic injustices. This function is particularly important in the context of Syria's ongoing transitional justice process.

SJAC and the Centre for Victims of Torture (CVT) have monitored the trial in Koblenz, yet access proved fragile. SJAC has been previously ac credited in several trials in Germany and was likewise granted permission by the presiding judge in Koblenz. As a result, laptop use was initially permitted; however, this permission was later ***withdrawn following unsubstantiated allegations*** by the defense that a SJAC monitor had made audio recordings. In other universal jurisdiction proceedings, courts have increasingly recognized the role of monitoring organizations and ***granted meaningful access.***

The decisions by the Koblenz court, however, can be considered a setback in restricting monitoring rights. They are particularly problematic because the underlying decisions

cannot be legally challenged, leaving a ***persistent gap in legal remedies*** against such orders. Third, access to court-provided interpretation for non-native speakers has become a central question in UJ proceedings. While the ***Netherlands*** significantly advanced access to interpretation by providing ***livestreams*** with interpretation into several languages, Germany remains extremely reluctant. In Syria-related trials, interpretation is not a procedural luxury, but the condition under which affected communities, Arabic-speaking journalists, and civil society actors can understand proceedings that ***purport to address crimes committed against them.***

Taken together, these challenges suggest that the Yarmouk trial marks not only a legal advance, but also a test of institutional openness.

Universal jurisdiction has always carried a paradox: it promises accountability beyond territorial boundaries, yet it frequently relocates justice into spaces physically and linguistically removed from victims and survivors. Civil society organizations help to mitigate this paradox.

They translate the law into accessible language, return testimony to affected communities, and monitor whether the rights of all parties, including fair trial rights of the accused, are respected. Despite the persistent barriers, civil society participation helps to alleviate the inherent shortcomings by making proceedings publicly accessible.

Courts have legitimate concerns regarding witness safety, influencing of testimony, and the integrity of the trial – civil society organizations have legitimate claims to access, documentation, transparency and participation on behalf of communities structurally absent from the courtroom. Both sets of concerns can be reconciled through clear accreditation procedures, facilitated access to interpretation, transparent monitoring and publication standards that include a coherent methodology on redactions of sensitive information and proportionate decisions if restrictions become necessary. Such measures would also reduce the uncertainty that currently arises from court-to-court variation and foster meaningful communication between all parties.

FALL OF THE ASSAD REGIME

2024

08 DECEMBER

The Assad regime falls, ending more than five decades of dictatorship. Since then, former residents have gradually begun returning to Yarmouk camp.

Considering that universal jurisdiction cases are likely to continue ***despite the fall of the Assad government*** and the ***commencement of domestic criminal trials in Syria***, the role of civil society and the Syrian diaspora will shape the future of accountability efforts in Syria and beyond. As Germany is prosecuting these crimes on behalf of the international community, it also has a procedural responsibility to ensure that the proceedings are readily accessible and comprehensible to both the international community and Syrians affected by the crimes.



Image Credits Andreas Schüller

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I have faced numerous threats, foremost among them death threats ever since I began posting about war criminals in Europe on my Facebook page. I know many witnesses who have been subjected to the same threats and harassment which may hinder the pursuit of justice.

As for the state’s response, it was extremely disappointing. Legally, these threats were treated as mere threats that posed no danger and did not warrant protection or the provision of witness protection measures. Yes, there was some engagement from the investigators, and they showed clear concern for my safety, but it amounted to nothing more than verbal reassurances — nothing more, nothingless. The legal protections afforded to witnesses and plaintiffs must not be violated, and there must be legal and judicial consequences for such practices. Protecting witnesses and plaintiffs is important – just as important as prosecuting war criminals.

Ahmad Tupasi
(Witness in the Yarmouk criminal case in Sweden and Germany)

”

3.3 HOW WILL THE TRIAL CONTINUE?

The Koblenz court has scheduled hearings through the *end of January 2027*, but overall, the duration of the proceedings remains uncertain. Given the number of accused, the range of charges, the court's limited sitting schedule and the possibility that the starvation charge requires additional witness testimony, it may extend well beyond that date. Public access to reliable updates remains further limited, as the court publishes information only sporadically on its website.

YARMOUK TRIAL BEGINS

2025

19 NOVEMBER

Trial of five defendants over alleged crimes against humanity and war crimes during the Yarmouk siege opens in Koblenz, Germany.

Even after the Higher Regional Court renders its judgment as the court of first instance in cases involving international crimes, the judgment may not become final immediately. The parties may file an appeal to the Federal Court of Justice (BGH), challenging the judgment on legal grounds, such as *errors of substantive law or procedure*. The BGH may either uphold the judgment or return the case for correction, potentially prolonging the proceedings by several years.

Why do the Yarmouk trials in Europe matter for transitional justice in Syria?

How can universal jurisdiction contribute to accountability and truth-seeking in Syria – and how can legal records travel from Koblenz to Yarmouk and back?

What does justice for past atrocities mean for those living in the ruins of Yarmouk today?



Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

PART 04

BRIDGING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN KOBLENZ & YARMOUK: TRANSLATING TRIALS ABROAD TO SURVIVORS OF THE PRESENT

Ayah Kutmah

Ayah Kutmah is a Global Law Scholar at Georgetown Law, with a focus on critical approaches to international law, transitional justice, and human rights. Ayah has worked with human rights organizations and legal teams in the Middle East, Europe, and the U.S., where she dealt extensively with issues of torture, arbitrary detention, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Her current research engages fieldwork in Syria and Colombia to examine alternative transitional justice models offered by the Global South.

“

In my opinion, these trials are an important step towards combating impunity, especially if justice cannot be achieved within the country. They give victims and survivors the feeling that the crimes they experienced have not been forgotten, and that judicial authorities are seeking to achieve justice and hold those responsible accountable under the law.

They play a significant moral and legal role because they document what happened and document the victims’ right to justice, including the victims of the Yarmouk camp. But that alone is not enough. To achieve full justice, there must be a comprehensive national process that includes revealing the truth, providing reparations, holding all those responsible accountable, and ensuring that violations do not recur.

”

Ula Rashdan

(Head of the Vocational Training Department at the I’dad Foundation for Development in Yarmouk Camp)



Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

In a building damaged but not destroyed by the siege – a rare encounter in Yarmouk – a local community organization, Idad, recently refurbished a room with a screen, desk, and plastic chairs to hold programs for people from the camp. Almost all of Yarmouk's remaining population are displaced, living in precarious arrangements in neighborhoods nearby or further out in Damascus. The few who have returned to the camp live in hazardous conditions in structures not yet assessed for collapse, forced to extend their own electricity and water lines. But at least their poverty is not exacerbated by rent. At times an administrative bureaucrat will fine these individual reconstruction efforts according to the laws of the old regime. Here, the afterlives of siege persist in slower, structural, and less spectacular violence.

Each resident is a survivor not just of the past, but also of the present.

The distinction is an important one, for it adds another layer to the necessary interrogation of justice processes borne of their pain. In early August 2026, I worked with Idad to lead a workshop with survivors on legal accountability for crimes committed in Yarmouk and the recent universal jurisdiction trials in Europe.

The workshop focused on the ongoing trial in Koblenz, which, among other issues, examines the use of starvation as a weapon of war as an international crime, although only within a limited scope.

Despite this landmark legal achievement, a certain hollowness remains – one that was echoed by survivors in Yarmouk and by those in Germany participating as plaintiffs. After all, no criminal trial can undo the atrocities committed in Yarmouk or erase their continuing reverberations among the camp's residents. Nor is it yet known exactly how the Court will address the charge of starvation or to what extent it will consider its broader implications when examining the contextual elements of the charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

MAHMOUD S. TRIAL CONCLUDES

2026

04 MAY

Mahmoud S. is sentenced to life imprisonment in Sweden for crimes committed in Yarmouk.

Moreover, the trial takes place against the background of the continued use of siege and starvation elsewhere, most notably Gaza. For many survivors, the atrocities are contiguous. It seems easier for a court in Europe to proclaim, a decade after Yarmouk was besieged and destroyed by the Assad regime, that a crime was committed.

Among the twenty to thirty survivors who attended the workshop in Yarmouk, none had heard of the trials happening in Europe. For them, the trials were necessary as a matter of principle – to establish a legal recognition of their historical truth and hold perpetrators accountable – but remained undeniably distant from their lived realities.

For other advocates from Yarmouk and in Syria, universal jurisdiction trials could serve as a compass and catalyst for national transitional justice efforts. Taken together, they underline the same fundamental question: how do we critically interrogate justice tools to bring them closer to survivors themselves? The richness of the discussion in Yarmouk grounds this piece – it demands an examination that moves beyond aspirational principles to encompass the material and structural conditions of justice for Syria.

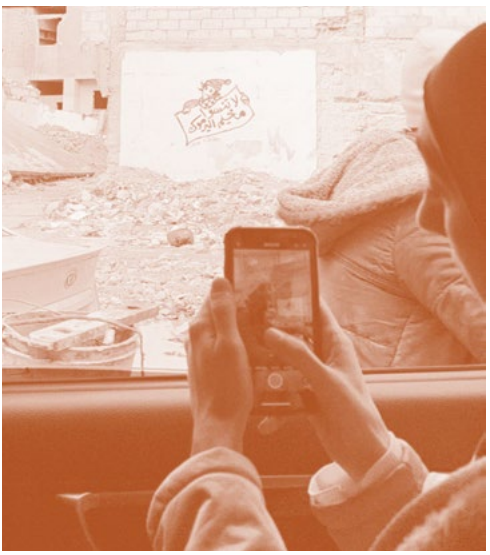


Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

Palestine Street, where protests unfolded in 2012

Map Credits: Ahmad Al Salhi



4.1 A CRITICAL INTERROGATION OF UNIVERSAL JURISDICTION: FOR WHOM?

Universal jurisdiction is widely heralded as a vital and necessary tool to fight impunity for the most serious international crimes. In the Syrian context, universal jurisdiction emerged as the only available forum for Syrians to challenge the abject impunity enjoyed by the Assad regime in the face of mass atrocities and systematic human rights violations. The legacy of the *Al-Khatib trial,* the first case to recognize a systematic state policy of torture and sexual violence, highlights the potential for universal jurisdiction to subvert a political status quo of impunity and expand the boundaries of accountability.

Much of this work was done *outside of the courtroom* through interventions and campaigns launched by survivors, family members, activists, and civil society. *Trial monitoring* by rights groups memorialized a contemporaneous and historical public record. These interventions sought to

vernacularize the German legal proceedings to a broader Syrian and international audience, reclaim a political narrative of the Syrian revolution, and return the stated promise of international justice to its original rights-holders.

In the years and cases that followed, however, the contradictions and limitations of the principle of universal jurisdiction emerged more clearly, sparking greater *disillusionment* among Syrians, including *survivors* who participated in the trials. Knowledge hierarchies embedded in the procedural structure of universal jurisdiction *emphasize* exclusionary dynamics between legal actors and survivors within the courtroom, *exacerbate* language barriers, limit public



Image Credits Andreas Schüller

access, and prevent survivors from meaningfully participating in the proceedings.

These dynamics are not static, however; they are continuously *mediated and resisted* by survivors, civil society, and international rights groups. Their achievements through public interventions and advocacy have deepened the debate on survivor-centered justice globally.

Universal jurisdiction is also limited as an extraterritorial tool of criminal accountability for international crimes. The logic of criminal trials, which requires the adjudication of individual guilt, is limited in its ability to capture state responsibility or account for the systematic dimensions of mass atrocities. Moreover, as a principle left for states to enforce, universal jurisdiction becomes entangled in national and international political considerations. The proscription of starvation as an international crime, with its obscure and vigorously *debated* intent requirement, demonstrates the confluence of historical contingencies and individualized criminal logics.

The Yarmouk trials in Germany and Sweden are especially emblematic of which international crimes are defined by whom and for whom.



Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

In previous cases relating to Yarmouk, the German and Swedish courts *narrowly focused* on discrete war crimes committed by individuals, thus limiting a structural examination of the siege and starvation of the camp. The ongoing Koblenz trial, which goes further to *include* the charge of starvation among other war crimes and crimes against humanity in the indictment, still limits the charge to the acts of one of the defendants.

The difference is not peripheral to the harms suffered by the population of Yarmouk, but central to and constitutive of them. Recognizing siege starvation as a systematic practice, rather than treating it as an isolated incident, rejects the atomization of orchestrated violence into discrete acts attributable to individual perpetrators. While the examination of individual incidents is inherent to the logic of criminal trials, the systematic nature of the starvation of Yarmouk should be accounted for wherever legally possible. Beyond the scope of the trial, the *underrecognition* of starvation calls for a more systematic assessment of its past and present use by Western and non-Western powers alike.

The discursive effects of these legal judgements are significant because they go to the heart of the right to narrate a historical truth. This requires us to take a step back from the narrow question the court will evaluate: whether the evidence against the individual defendants is sufficient to prove the legal elements of the crime of starvation, specifically the heightened element of intent. An analysis of the legal judgment may be relevant to practitioners and scholars, including those critical of how the crime is defined, but the distinction is meaningless for survivors and society at large. Whether the crime of starvation is ultimately found by the Koblenz court will not change it as a historical truth, but

it does question the utility of universal jurisdiction to consecrate a more accurate legal record. It also asks whether such a question should be left for a court in Europe to decide. Similarly, survivors point to the need to explicate the symbolic significance of a legal finding of starvation from its material consequences.



Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

The Yarmouk trials establish important legal precedent for other national or international courts to build on – but from which geography?

What would it mean to bring these questions and judgments to the communities who experienced the violence?

How could a tribunal on siege and starvation look like from Syria?

4.2 CAN MEANINGFUL COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN UNIVERSAL JURISDICTION AND NATIONAL TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE EFFORTS EXIST?

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Transitional Justice (TJ) refers to the full range of processes, mechanisms and frameworks employed by a society as it grapples with legacies of large-scale violence and human rights violations. Four pillars traditionally define the terrain of transitional justice – Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-recurrence. Without meaningful attention to these principles, lasting peace and a successful democratic transition in Syria will remain out of reach.

Criminal accountability remains a key demand, which is inseparable from other transitional justice efforts, including determining the fate of missing persons, truth-seeking efforts, survivor support, reparations and memorialization. On 17 May 2025, the new Syrian government announced two national commissions on transitional justice and missing persons. In August 2026, Syrian courts issued their first verdict against senior Assad-era officials, including Bashar and Maher Al-Assad to death in absentia. Human rights lawyers have raised serious concerns about the fairness of these trials and the use of the death penalty. The proceedings have also begun without a clear legal framework for transitional justice.

This raises important questions: Will a future transitional justice law apply to trials that have already begun? How can accountability be ensured for crimes committed by all actors, not only the former regime and its allies? And ultimately, how can a transitional justice process effectively break with the legacy of state violence?

While delivering justice in Syria remains the ultimate goal, universal jurisdiction proceedings in Europe will continue to play an important role in addressing gaps in accountability. They can advance ongoing investigations, contribute to the development of case law, establish the historical and factual circumstances of crimes at trial, identify perpetrators who may have fled to Europe, and support the national and international mechanisms needed to address the scale of international crimes committed in Syria.

Many practitioners have discussed the *complementary role* universal jurisdiction can play in transitional justice efforts in Syria. Universal jurisdiction can fill an important impunity gap until, and even after, accountability mechanisms are available in Syria. As scholars have argued, universal jurisdiction trials *prefigure* as a strategic mode of transitional justice. Cases perform an important normative function, build legal precedent, preserve documentation, and transfer knowledge to Syrian civil society and legal institutions. Universal jurisdiction can also be leveraged by Syrian civil society and rights groups to advance national transitional justice efforts in the face of domestic political intransigence. They remind domestic political actors and society that the fight for justice will continue, irrespective of geography. At the same time, universal jurisdiction should be pursued in tandem with the plurality of transitional justice processes that are now possible in Syria, even if they are not yet a reality.

Visions of complementarity that flow in one direction – from Europe to Syria – risk replicating the contradictions that mar universal jurisdiction in practice. Meaningful complementarity should be careful not to confuse a national transitional justice project with the discrete individual criminal legal proceedings

that define universal jurisdiction. Universal jurisdiction was created as a limited tool of last resort; even at its most expansive, it remains circumscribed to a small class of international crimes and individual perpetrators that fall under its mandate.

Although universal jurisdiction proceedings can provide for more meaningful victim participation, strengthen human rights principles, and shed a light on the structural dimensions of mass atrocities, they are not designed to deliver transformative or transitional justice.

By reducing the expansiveness of transitional justice to solely individual criminal proceedings, survivors and society are denied the plurality of mechanisms that could offer a more meaningful justice.

The dangers of conducting criminal proceedings in the absence of a broader transitional justice framework are manifold, and some are already apparent, as evidenced by the recent domestic criminal trials of senior Syrian regime officials. The verdicts, including the ***in absentia*** *sentence* of former-dictator Bashar Al-Assad, were celebrated by a public demanding accountability and criticized by others for its procedural *shortcomings.* The latter critique, though critical to realizing fair trial standards and a robust judiciary, risks *misplacing* substantive transitional justice for procedural justice. It is not merely that the trials were not fair enough.

Rather, and as many have pointed out, the trials were impoverished from the start because they *lacked* a clear transitional justice framework. They were neither connected to recently established mechanisms, such as the *national commissions* for transitional justice and missing persons, or *laws* defining transitional justice. Rather than function as a public tribunal engaged in the reconstruction of the crimes of the Assad regime, the trials were largely ad hoc, *circumscribed* by an outdated penal code, and marginalized victim participation to mere tokenism.

4.3 CO-CONSTITUTING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AS A LIVING, BREATHING PROJECT

Transitional justice for Syria must be understood as a living, breathing, and constantly evolving project that will span generations. Processes that are narrowly legalistic, formulaic, dependent on binaries – i.e. 'victims/perpetrators,' 'before/after'– or lack local ownership will fall short in providing meaningful justice to survivors. Similarly, a national transitional justice project cannot stay untethered as a set of ideals; it requires a comprehensive legal framework that sets the boundaries and expansiveness of its aims. The magnitude of the task ahead is rife with challenges and tensions, but as engagement with local communities demonstrate, justice remains an inviolable right and demand.

Our role as practitioners engaged in transitional justice efforts must be co-constitutive with local communities. Although this is commonly framed as local ownership or a 'survivor-centered' approach, co-constitution emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between practitioners and communities that suffered harm. In Syria, where the role of survivors is often reduced to tokenism or paternalism by institutional entities, a co-constitutive approach recognizes survivors' role in shaping the design and outcomes of justice processes.

Reciprocity between practitioners and local communities begins with engaging in a justice vernacular that seeks to translate existing legal frameworks to local communities and to take up survivors' own articulations of harms and remedies to create new frameworks. Workshops are especially illustrative of this approach. In Yarmouk, for example, survivors discussed whether a framework for legal accountability could be created where survivors played a role in deciding sanctions for perpetrators. This model is not new: Colombia's transitional justice tribunal serves as one important, even if imperfect, *example* of victims' participation in designing sanctions against perpetrators found to be responsible for grave violations. Our discussion, then, included a comparative examination of Colombia's model and the ways

it could be particularized to the Syrian context. In another example, survivors in Yarmouk emphasized reconstruction, housing, land, and property rights as their most immediate transitional justice need. They pointed to the enduring nature of these violations, which continue as fines imposed against informal reconstruction efforts according to laws from the old regime. In these discussions, we could work towards a common understanding of transitional justice needs and the legal remedies that could be created to address them. This emphasizes a second point reiterated throughout the workshop held in Yarmouk – justice must be made material.

Legal accountability needs to be materially engaged in some form with the lives of those who suffered violence.

Truth is one example, as is reparations. The pillars of transitional justice – accountability, truth, reparations, reform/nonrecurrence – are meant to encompass an expansive vision of what meaningful justice should be.

Materiality, though, is not so abstract: survivors articulate them clearly as psychosocial support, housing assistance, access to education, the vindication of certain rights, or the preservation of historical memory, among others.

Transitional justice efforts should be careful not to separate legal accountability from material conditions. As survivors made clear, reparations are integral to actualizing a comprehensive justice. This point is not new to the global transitional justice *debate* and there are many examples of models that incorporated reparations to *varying degrees* of success.



Image Credits Ayah Kutmah

Finally, as the workshop in Yarmouk emphasizes, transitional justice in Syria is not a question of the past, but the present.



Image Credits

Ayah Kutmah

As in all transitional contexts, there is no clean break between temporalities of the 'old' and 'new' or in the violence that persists in the present. This precarity, however, should not be dismissed by ignoring enduring violations or waiting for ideal conditions to materialize. Rather, international and domestic efforts must grapple with Syria *as it is* and transitional justice *as it ought to be*, recognizing that the horizon is a long one that can only be achieved if it is responsive to the needs and demands of local communities.

4.4 TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE FROM BELOW

If we were to broaden our justice imagination for Syria, we would find an incredibly rich ecosystem of *'transitional justice from below.'* Across localities in Syria, dozens of survivors and victims' associations have organically mobilized to document their own harms, preserve evidence, assess the needs of their membership, and mobilize mutual aid efforts. Joined by Syrian *civil society*, they have launched numerous *public memorials*, *artistic interventions*, *truth tents*, and *media campaigns* that center victims as necessary co-constituents of any national transitional justice framework. They preserve the demand for justice and accountability or all Syrians.

The workshop in Yarmouk illustrates the vast distance between legal proceedings in Koblenz and the lived realities of survivors on the ground. It need not, however, be an unbridgeable one. Already, there are man efforts by human rights groups, documentarians, activists, and civil society to bring the trials closer to Yarmouk and tie it to local demands for justice.

Lawyers and activists from Yarmouk point to the role universal jurisdiction can play in emphasizing non-impunity for the atrocities committed, sharing knowledge between jurisdictions, and fostering a stronger human rights culture within Syrian public institutions.

Moreover, as the workshop discussion in Yarmouk camp demonstrated, our role as practitioners should be to engage with local communities in the translation of legal proceedings and frameworks, even when it requires exposing their contradictions, to co-constitute new justice imaginations. These imaginations are not abstract – they articulate the specific needs that inform where resources and expertise should be funneled. They may, for example, point to the filing of property rights cases as the most immediate transitional justice need, to psychosocial support as a form of reparations, or to amending housing laws as institutional reform.

'Transitional justice from below' echoes an articulation made by many Syrians who argue that transitional justice, like the revolution, belongs to the streets of Syria.

Rather than wait for an international or national process to be initiated, transitional justice is already being built from the bottom-up.

In Yarmouk, the conversation is a vibrant one, even as it is marked by the legacy of mass atrocities. It did not end in the classroom after every plastic chair was packed up; in the kitchen, an elderly man continued the discussion with a younger volunteer. Later that evening, a new youth-led community organization, *[RE]vive,* passed out seeds during their opening ceremony, asking us all to join them in planting a new future for the camp.

“

We are ready to support the trials in Europe with the information and testimonies we have. Especially since what we had hoped for regarding trials in Syria has not materialized. Many feel that trials in Syria are selective, merely performative, and ultimately devoid of any real meaning.

Yarmouk needs everything – literally everything. The level of destruction is enormous. The schools need rehabilitation, and almost all clinics and schools have been destroyed and are no longer usable. There is hardly any electricity, functioning sewage system, or access to clean water. Regarding human rights organizations, they need both moral and financial support in order to continue their work on the ground.

Abo Salma Khalil
(resident from Yarmouk)

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