



**After taking control of eastern Al-Ghouta, the Syrian army launched a campaign to take over the southern suburbs of Damascus from ISIS. The takeover of these suburbs will continue to consolidate the Assad regime's control of the Damascus region**

April 22, 2018

## Overview

**On April 19, 2018, the information unit of the Syrian army announced the launching of the campaign to liberate the areas controlled by ISIS in southern Damascus.** After around two weeks of preparations, the operation began with **artillery fire and airstrikes** against ISIS's headquarters, outposts, weapons and supply routes **in the Yarmouk refugee camp and in Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood west of the camp** (ISIS's two main control areas). **After the preparatory bombardment, the Syrian army mounted a ground offensive** against several areas under ISIS's control south of Damascus.

► ISIS had prepared for the attack, estimating that at the end of the battle in eastern Al-Ghouta, the Syrian army would launch a campaign to take over southern Damascus. ISIS's preparations for the campaign included: **expanding the areas under its control** (taking over the Al-Qadam neighborhood west of the Yarmouk refugee camp); **fortification** (digging trenches, revetting positions and digging tunnels); **and (unsuccessful) attempts to join forces with other rebel organizations operating in the area** (the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the Free Syrian Army refused, apparently preferring to make their own arrangements for evacuation with the Syrian regime).

► Concurrently with the preparations for the attack, **ISIS negotiated with the Syrian regime to reach an evacuation agreement**, being aware **that it is at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the Syrian army in the southern neighborhoods of Damascus.** During the negotiations, it was proposed to evacuate the ISIS operatives **to the Bir Qassab area in the Syrian Desert** (east of Damascus) and later **to the Yarmouk Basin in the southern Syrian Golan Heights** (an area controlled by the ISIS-affiliated Khaled bin al-Walid Army). Following **the failure of the negotiations**, the Syrian regime gave ISIS 48 hours to leave the area south of Damascus for the Yarmouk Basin. At the end of this period, ISIS was given a further extension of 24 hours. **When no agreement was reached, the Syrian army mounted an offensive.**

► The southern neighborhoods of Damascus, mainly the Yarmouk refugee camp and the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood to its south, **have been under the control of ISIS for the past two years.** ISIS's forces in the area **include between 2,000 and 4,000 operatives subordinate to its Damascus Province.** ISIS's success in establishing itself in the southern neighborhoods of Damascus **compromised the governance of the Assad regime and the connection between the Syrian capital and southern Syria.** The takeover of ISIS's enclave by the Syrian army would constitute **another severe blow to ISIS** while at the same time completing the establishment of the Syrian regime in the Damascus area. **This would also place the Syrian regime in an improved starting point for the takeover of the area of Daraa and the Syrian Golan Heights and the Idlib area, the two key areas that are still controlled by the rebel organizations.**

### **The establishment of ISIS in the southern neighborhoods of Damascus over the past two years**

► Six months after the collapse of the Islamic State (early November 2017), ISIS's presence and operational activity in Syria are concentrated **in three areas. The most prominent of these is the lower Euphrates Valley and the deserts to the north and west of it,** especially the area between Albukamal and Al-Mayadeen. ISIS also controls **an enclave in the Yarmouk Basin in the southern Syrian Golan Heights** (the Khaled bin al-Walid Army) **and the area of the Yarmouk refugee camp and the surrounding neighborhoods south of Damascus<sup>1</sup>.** Unlike the Euphrates Valley, where ISIS enjoys considerable freedom of movement, the ISIS enclaves in the Yarmouk Basin and south of Damascus are surrounded by rival rebel organizations and by the Syrian army and forces loyal to it, **and are at a disadvantage.**

► **Since the spring of 2015, ISIS has managed to establish its control over the southern outskirts of Damascus: large parts of the Yarmouk refugee camp; the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood; most of the Al-Qadam neighborhood** (which was taken over by ISIS during the Syrian army's campaign to take over eastern Al-Ghouta); **and the Al-Tadamon and Al-Qadam neighborhoods.** In addition, **the Al-Zayn neighborhood,** south of the Al-Qadam

---

<sup>1</sup> In addition, ISIS forces are also present elsewhere in Syria, such as in the Idlib area, but they do not constitute a significant force and are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis other rebel organizations, primarily the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front). The area of the Yarmouk refugee camp in southern Damascus and the Yarmouk Basin in the southern Syrian Golan Heights are the only places where ISIS controls territory where it manages the daily lives of the (remaining) residents and constitutes the central authority.

neighborhood, is a friction zone between ISIS operatives and operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. In these neighborhoods, there is also a presence of other rebel organizations, including **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (whose operatives are located in the northwest of the Yarmouk refugee camp and in several other neighborhoods), but **ISIS is the most prominent**. According to the Syrian and Arab media, **ISIS has a few thousand operatives (between 2,000 and 4,000) in the neighborhoods south of Damascus**. These operatives are subordinate to ISIS's **Damascus Province**.



The areas under ISIS's control in the Yarmouk refugee camp (in the center) and in the surrounding neighborhoods, as reported by ISIS's Amaq News Agency (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, March 20, 2018)

## Preparations by ISIS and the Syrian army for the campaign over southern Damascus

### ISIS

► In the ITIC's assessment, ISIS believed that after the takeover of eastern Al-Ghouta by the Syrian army, its enclave in southern Damascus could be next. Therefore, **ISIS took a series of military and political steps in preparation for the expected attack:**

- ◆ **Expansion of the control area:** ISIS took advantage of the Syrian army's preoccupation with subjugating the rebel organizations in east Damascus to **expand its area of control south of Damascus**. In this context, it managed to take over the **Al-Qadam neighborhood** (west of the Yarmouk refugee camp) from the Syrian army.



**Right: ISIS operatives in the Al-Qadam neighborhood after it was taken over from the Syrian Army. Left: Syrian army tank destroyed by ISIS operatives in the Al-Qadam neighborhood (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, March 17, 2018).**

- ◆ **Entrenchment:** ISIS operatives dug **trenches and tunnels** in areas under their control (including the Yarmouk refugee camp and the Al-Qadam neighborhood). The purpose was to protect themselves against the expected airstrikes and to facilitate the movement of ISIS operatives from place to place.



**Right: ISIS operatives digging a trench in the Al-Qadam neighborhood (ISIS’s Damascus Province as quoted on the “Al-Yarmouk Camp in Our Hearts” Facebook page, April 7, 2018). Left: ISIS operative armed with a Kalashnikov assault rifle manning a fortified position in the Al-Qadam neighborhood (Nasher, April 7, 2018).**

- ◆ **Unsuccessful attempts to recruit allies:** When the signs of preparations by the Syrian army for the campaign over south Damascus increased, **ISIS proposed to the other rebel organizations to cooperate with it against the Syrian army but met with a refusal.** The rival jihadi organization, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, apparently preferred to try to rescue its operatives by means of an evacuation arrangement with the Syrian regime (so far without success). Another rebel organization, the Free Syrian Army, evacuated a force called Jaysh al-Ababil<sup>2</sup> to southern Syria following an agreement reached with the Syrian regime. On April 7, 2018, about 1,500 armed operatives were evacuated to an area some 40 km north of

<sup>2</sup> “The Army of Bird Flocks,” a phrase taken from a chapter in the Quran.

Daraa, where they joined the rebel groups encircling the ISIS enclave in the Yarmouk Basin (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, April 8, 2018).



**One of the buses that arrived to evacuate the Free Syrian Army unit from the Al-Tadamon neighborhood in south Damascus to the village of Jassem (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, April 8, 2018)**

◆ **ISIS's negotiations with the Syrian regime to reach an evacuation agreement:**

Aware of its basic inferiority vis-à-vis the Syrian army and its allies south of Damascus, **ISIS began negotiations to reach an evacuation agreement** similar to the arrangements reached with the other rebel organizations in eastern Al-Ghouta. Initially, negotiations were held regarding the transfer of ISIS operatives **to the area of Bir Qassab** in the Syrian desert (east of Damascus), where it will be easy for them to join forces with the operatives in the Euphrates Valley. Subsequently, Syrian and Arab media reported on negotiations for the transferring of ISIS operatives **to the Yarmouk Basin in the southern Syrian Golan Heights** (the area controlled by the Khaled bin al-Walid Army).<sup>3</sup> **When the negotiations for an evacuation agreement did not produce results, the Syrian army mounted an offensive.**

## The Syrian army

► During the first half of April 2018, in advance of the complete takeover of eastern Al-Ghouta, **the Syrian army began to transfer reinforcements to areas adjacent to ISIS-controlled territories.** The reinforcements included Syrian army forces as well as Palestinian military and militia forces fighting alongside the Syrian army: the Al-Quds

---

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it appears that the evacuation of ISIS operatives to the Idlib area, where most of the rebels from eastern Al-Ghouta were evacuated, is unacceptable to ISIS because it would place it under the threat of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (which is the dominant force in that region).

Brigade, the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA), and other Palestinian militias<sup>4</sup> (Zaman Al-Wasl, April 7, 2018). As part of the preparations, **a Russian delegation visited sites bordering on ISIS's control area in south Damascus**, in order to get to know the front lines with ISIS and assess the situation (Secrets of the Yarmouk Camp Facebook page, March 31, 2018).



**Reinforcements of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it heading to the Yarmouk refugee camp and the Al-Qadam neighborhood (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, YouTube, April 12, 2018)**



**Syrian forces en route to the Yarmouk refugee camp (YouTube, April 16, 2018)**

► As preparations for the attack were completed and negotiations for an evacuation agreement with ISIS did not produce any results, **the Syrian army launched a campaign to liberate the neighborhoods of south Damascus from the hands of ISIS**. This new campaign was announced on April 19, 2018, by the Syrian army Information Department. **The campaign was begun on April 19, 2018, by artillery fire and airstrikes at ISIS targets in the Yarmouk refugee camp and the Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood** (the two key neighborhoods in the areas held by ISIS).

---

<sup>4</sup> For information on the Palestinian forces fighting alongside the Syrian forces, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from March 19, 2018: "Armed Palestinian forces, militias and organizations handled by the Syrian regime in the Syrian civil war."

►The targets attacked included headquarters, outposts, weapons and supply lines. In addition, targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham were also attacked in those two neighborhoods. The airstrikes were followed by a ground attack. The main sites of the attack were apparently the northwestern part of the Yarmouk refugee camp, the Al-Qadam and Al-Tadamon neighborhoods. The Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade reportedly also takes part in the battles, as well as a force from Ahmad Jibril's organization.



**Right: Airstrikes and artillery fire against ISIS targets in the Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood (SANA, April 21, 2018). Left: Syrian army airstrikes against ISIS targets in the Yarmouk refugee camp (Euphrates Post Facebook page, April 20, 2018)**



**Artillery fire by a Syrian tank in the Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood (Syrian Army Information Unit, April 21, 2018)**

## **The demographic aspect: The Palestinian population in the Yarmouk refugee camp**

►The main site held by ISIS in the Damascus southern enclave is **the Palestinian Yarmouk refugee camp**, which until the outbreak of the civil war was the largest refugee camp in Syria (and a center of the Palestinian terrorist organizations). The scenes of devastation and the fate of the Palestinians, most of whom fled the camp, are expected to receive high-profile media coverage due to the sensitivity of the Palestinian issue. It seems that **the Syrian regime is well aware of that and is preparing to address the issue.**

- ▶ During the civil war, residents of the Yarmouk refugee camp fled from it en masse. In the beginning of the war, there were **about 160,000** residents in the camp (according to UNRWA), but because of the fighting and **the devastation, almost all of the residents left**. Today, only **about 6,000 Palestinians and Syrian citizens suffering from dire humanitarian conditions** are present in the camp. A question which remains unanswered is **whether after ISIS is removed, the Assad regime will agree to the return of the Palestinian residents**, at least some of whom are considered unreliable.
- ▶ It seems that, in order to ward off future criticism, the Syrian regime emphasizes **the role played by Palestinian military forces and militias in the takeover of the camp** (the Al-Quds Brigade, the Palestinian Liberation Army, Ahmad Jibril's organization, and additional Palestinian militias). In addition, **the Syrian regime began to prepare for addressing the issue of the Palestinian population**. In relation to this, it was reported that the regime had appointed **Mohammad Sa'id, commander of the Al-Quds Brigade** (the most significant Palestinian military force supporting the regime), as the person in charge of taking care of the Palestinian refugees in south Damascus (ivansidorenko1@ Twitter account).

## Appendix A

### The Yarmouk refugee camp



The Yarmouk refugee camp (Google Maps)

► **The Yarmouk refugee camp is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Syria.** It is situated about 8 km southeast of Damascus and is included in the municipal boundaries of the Syrian capital. During the civil war, **the camp has turned into a battleground.** Almost all of its residents left it, **and it was devastated.** A year after the civil war broke out, UNRWA estimated that there were about 160,000 residents in the camp. Since then, about 140,000 residents have fled the camp, many of them following ISIS's takeover. **About 18,000 residents remained in the camp under dire conditions** (UNRWA website). Today (April 2018), **about 6,000 Palestinian and Syrian civilians remain in the camp, suffering from shortage of food and medical services.**

► **In the spring of 2015, ISIS took over most of the camp,** setting a precedent of a Palestinian refugee camp being held by a jihadi organization. Due to the sensitivity of the Palestinian issue, ISIS's takeover of the refugee camp led to the convening of the UN Security Council (April 7, 2015). Subsequently, the camp has turned into a battlefield between ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and between the two jihadi organizations and the Syrian army, supported by Palestinian militias loyal to it.

► During the two years that passed since the takeover of the camp, ISIS has managed to take over most of its territory. Its forces number 2,000-4,000 operatives, subordinate to ISIS's **Damascus Province**. ISIS operatives holding the camp are local Palestinian residents along with additional operatives who arrived from Damascus's outlying areas (Al-Alam, November 30, 2017). The northwestern part of the camp is held by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Mukhayyam Al-Yarmouk News, April 20, 2018). In addition, the Yarmouk refugee camp and the neighborhoods surrounding it consist of forces of rebel organizations which are not jihadi and would not be enthusiastic to fight against the Syrian army.

### The Yarmouk refugee camp



Right: The Yarmouk refugee camp. Left: Fighting in the camp (Orient News, March 13, 2018)



Right: The Yarmouk refugee camp. Left: ISIS operatives in the camp (Syrian TV, March 22, 2018)



Right: Execution of ISIS operative who collaborated with the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 6, 2017). Left: ISIS operatives making a street sign ordering women to cover themselves up with a complete body garment (Haqq, April 21, 2017)

## Appendix B

### Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood



Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood, south of the Yarmouk refugee camp  
(Google Maps)



Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood  
(YouTube, March 13, 2018)

- ▶ Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood is situated south of the Yarmouk refugee camp. According to Syrian estimates from 2004, there were **85,000 residents** in the neighborhood. Today, **their number is estimated at about 60,000** (Wikipedia).
- ▶ During 2015, the neighborhood had served as a launching pad for ISIS operatives for their attacks against the Yarmouk refugee camp. **Today, ISIS is in full control of the Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood.** ISIS operatives in the neighborhood are **local Syrian residents** who impose Sharia law (as interpreted by ISIS) on the neighborhood residents.



**Cutting off the hands of two people accused of theft in the Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood (Nasher, March 23, 2018)**

► In March 2018, during the campaign against the rebel organizations in eastern Al-Ghouta, **the Syrian Air Force carried out airstrikes against ISIS targets in Al-Hajar Al-Aswad.** These attacks may have been intended to pave the way for a ground operation at the end of the campaign in eastern Al-Ghouta.



**Syrian Air Force airstrikes in the Al-Hajar Al-Aswad neighborhood (YouTube, March 13, 2018; Smart News, March 18, 2018)**

## Appendix C

### The Al-Qadam neighborhood



Al-Qadam neighborhood, west of the Yarmouk refugee camp  
(Google Maps)



Al-Qadam neighborhood (Orient News, March 13, 2018)

- ▶ The Al-Qadam neighborhood is situated west of the Yarmouk refugee camp. **The main highway, M-15, leading from Damascus to Daraa in southern Syria**, passes on its western outskirts. Before the civil war, **the neighborhood numbered about 150,000 residents**. Following ISIS's takeover of the neighborhood (2015), most of its residents fled and it sustained heavy damage. Since then, the number of its residents is estimated **between several thousands and a few tens of thousands**.
- ▶ Until recently, the neighborhood was controlled by the Syrian army. ISIS took advantage of the fact that the Syrian army was concentrating on its campaign in eastern Al-Ghouta and

took over the neighborhood (March 17, 2018). **Thus, ISIS expanded its control areas south of Damascus in advance of the expected attack by the Syrian army.**



The center of the Al-Qadam neighborhood before the civil war (top) and in December 2015 (bottom) according to Google's satellite photos. The devastation is clearly evident (Rabia Al-Thawra, December 23, 2015)



Right: ISIS operative in the Al-Qadam neighborhood. Left: ISIS operative digging a trench in the Al-Qadam neighborhood (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 15, 2018)



**Right: ISIS operatives in the Al-Qadam neighborhood after clashes with Syrian army soldiers.  
Left: Syrian army tank destroyed during the takeover of the Al-Qadam neighborhood (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 17, 2018)**

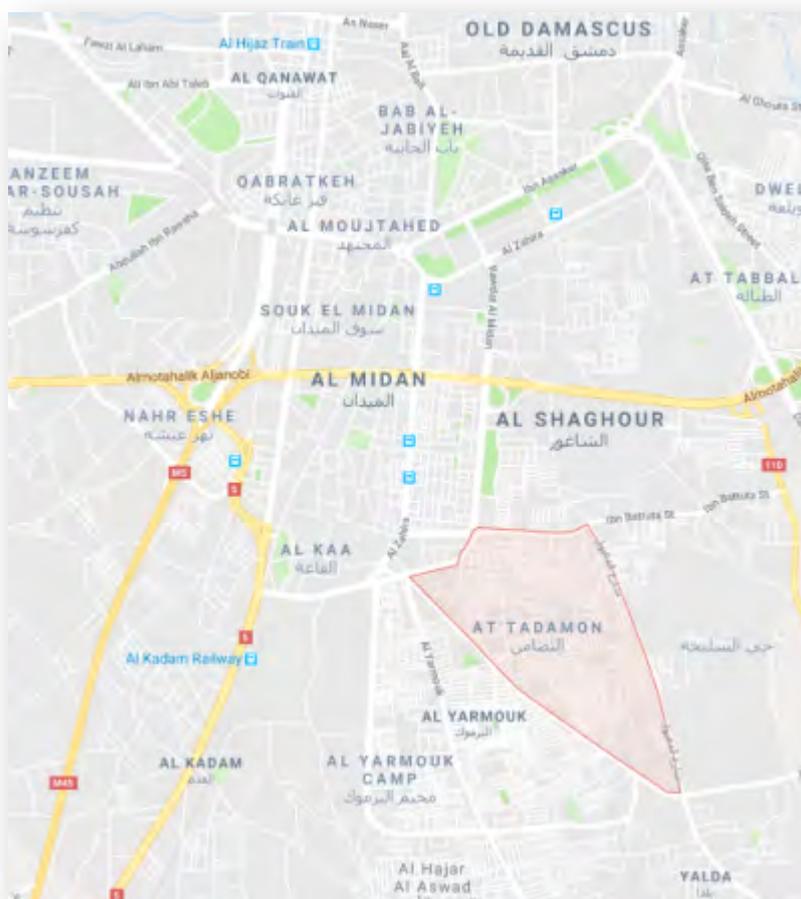
**During the battles in the Al-Qadam neighborhood, the Syrian regime forced the local population remaining in the neighborhood to evacuate.** The population was confronted with two options: evacuate the neighborhood or face the fighting and its repercussions. On the other hand, ISIS operatives ordered the residents not to leave the neighborhood and in fact serve as a human shield for them. In reality, an unknown number of residents left the neighborhood on the eve of its takeover by ISIS and were evacuated to the regions of Idlib and Aleppo. The question of **whether the residents will be allowed to return to their place of residence at the end of the fighting, or whether the Syrian regime will transfer population loyal to it to the neighborhood, is left open.**



**Evacuation of residents from the Al-Qadam neighborhood by bus. Will the residents be allowed to return to their neighborhood? (Orient News, March 13, 2018)**

## Appendix D

### The Al-Tadamon neighborhood



**Al-Tadamon neighborhood, east of the Yarmouk refugee camp  
(Google Maps)**

- ▶ On the eve of the outbreak of the civil war, **the neighborhood numbered about 200,000 residents**. Most of the residents are residents of the Golan Heights who fled to the neighborhood after the Golan Heights were taken over in 1967 (damPRESS.net, May 12, 2015; Enab Baladi, March 13, 2015). It is estimated that **about half of the neighborhood residents left it during the civil war**. Those who remained there are suffering from dire humanitarian problems due to the siege imposed by the regime on the southern part of the city. **The Syrian regime prevents the return of residents who wish to do so to the Al-Tadamon neighborhood** (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, February 18, 2018).
- ▶ In November 2012, the Free Syrian Army took over the neighborhood (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, November 7, 2012). In 2015, the Syrian regime attempted to take over the neighborhood, and the battles that ensued **caused great damage to infrastructure and buildings** (Enab

Baladi, March 13, 2018). **In December 2017, ISIS took over parts of the neighborhood.** Today, **it claims to control the entire neighborhood** (Syria News, March 13, 2018; Enab Baladi, March 16, 2018).



**Right: Al-Tadamon neighborhood in 2015 (Enab Baladi, March 13, 2015). Left: Devastation in the Al-Tadamon neighborhood in December 2017, following ISIS's takeover (alghadalsoury.com, December 14, 2017)**



**Right: ISIS operative when ISIS took over parts of the neighborhood (SAMA, December 14, 2017). Left: ISIS operatives in the Al-Tadamon neighborhood (Haqq, December 15, 2017)**

## Appendix E

### The Al-Taqaddom neighborhood



**Al-Taqaddom neighborhood, south of the Yarmouk refugee camp  
(Google Maps)**

- ▶ The Al-Taqaddom neighborhood is situated south of the Yarmouk refugee camp. The number of its residents is estimated at 10,000.
- ▶ In December 2012, the Free Syrian Army took over the neighborhood (al-Arabiya, December 16, 2012). **During the recent two years, ISIS is in control of the neighborhood.**

