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Five Years since the  
Displacement of the People  
of Old Homs: Ghost City  
Without People or Hope

## Five Years since the Displacement of the People of Old Homs: Ghost City Without People or Hope

*By Safwan al-Jandali*

In May 2014, the last of old Homs' civilians left 13 neighborhoods in the heart of the Old City, after a siege that lasted almost three years. Throughout this time Assad's forces tried and failed to forcibly enter these neighborhoods. As the take-over took place, the regime ramped up its propaganda that this was "the beginning of restoring the normal life" in these areas. And then, less than a year ago, the regime took the city of al-Qusayr, the villages of Zara and Qal'at al-Hosn, and surrounded and besieged al-Wa'r neighborhood, preparing to remove the remaining opponents.

Today, after all this time, with the fifth anniversary of the displacement, one wonders where are the displaced people who left their city, forced out by the regime? And what is the reality in areas where the regime "restored the normal life"? And what such life was like before the revolution?

In the middle of last year, a member of the leadership of the Baath Party, Fahmi el-Talib, and a member of the former Syrian People's Assembly, Abdul Qader al-Jaour, managed to obtain an exception to return to their homes in the heart of al-Qusayr. Obtaining such exceptional permission in a relatively short time asked for the two men to invest in the relations with some regime's soldiers. They entered the city accompanied by some workshop staff to clean and maintain their houses. It took nearly twenty days to restore these houses to be habitable again. A day after the departure of the cleaning staff men, the two houses were burned down by unknown arsonists.

Owing to their positions and connections, these two officials have been able to obtain permission to return to their homes in al-Qusayr city, but thousands of city-dwellers currently displaced in the areas controlled by the regime or in the Ersal camps at the Lebanese-Syrian border, have not been able to obtain such permission. Hezbollah has been preventing anyone from returning to al-Qusayr city and its surroundings, while keeping a handful of old families to maintain a presence in the heart of the city. And even they are not allowed to come out on the street except at specific hours.

Al-Qusayr is an exclusive military controlled by Hezbollah, designated for a change of its demographic structure, so that even supporters of the regime

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are not allowed to return to their homes even if they have permission from the Assad's regime itself.

Al-Bayadah neighborhood, Al-Khalidiya district, Al-Qusour district, Jouret Al-Shiaah area, and Qarabis are large areas extending from the east to the west of Homs City. They had a population of more than 200,000 people. Their homes have of the areas' infrastructure, including sewage, water and electricity supply. Dozens of families have returned to register their 'formal residence' in the area, but not to actually live there. A person walking through these neighborhoods by night can easily see that it is a ghost town where only rats thrive on the rubbish and rubble in the area.

The village of Zara in the western countryside of Homs is not in a much better state. The homes are still destroyed. The only new thing that has been built in the village in the last five years is the "tree shrine," built by the Iranian Shi'ite clerics, laying the ground for a demographic change in the area.

Despite the local authorities' efforts to restore the streets and major markets, and despite what can be seen as illegal efforts by some international organizations (such as the United Nations Development Program), the largest market in the Old City is still completely closed. Some 10-20 shops are open intermittently in the old roofed market that previously housed hundreds of shops.

Again, a person walking in the old neighborhoods of Homs would easily see that most of the rubble has not been moved yet, and nine out of every ten houses are exactly like they were on the day when their owners left years ago. The demolished homes are the silent narrators of the tragedy that took place.

Some days ago, the local authorities held a festival to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the "liberation of the old city." Some 25 cyclists took part in a parade in the heart of the old neighborhoods on their bicycles. Nevertheless, the cyclists found it hard to navigate the streets due to the accumulation of rubble on most of the roads, forcing them to carry their bicycles for part of the way. A young woman punctured a tyre on her bicycle's tire as the fragments of the rockets that bombed the city for years before the displacement of its population in 2014 are still all over the place. The young woman could not find a bicycle repairman in all of the old Homs (a Beskilittati guy as the people call him in that area). According to an eye witnesses, she was forced to go back to home without completing her race. A telling story illustrative of the state of affairs in the Old Homs.

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The city today suffers from the all-pervasive corruption, compounded by a crippling economic crisis and breakdown in services. Extortion of civilians by the organs of the security system and their associated gangs is on the rise, in addition to myriad humiliations facing Syrian citizens when they have to go from one place to another to take care of their daily affairs.

The regime is unable to provide any solutions despite Iranian support, which is primarily focused on implementing the demographic change in the city and elsewhere in Syria. The city suffers from a huge decline in the proportion of youth and skilled labor. General businesses are nearly paralyzed after the displacement of about 60-70% of the original people of the city. They constituted the bulk of the middle class and the working class, which were the real engine of the city's economy and society.

Homs can be seen as a model for the areas controlled by the regime: demographic engineering, confiscation of property, financial extortion, forced recruitment in the army, paralysis in services and economic struggle. There is little hope or aspiration for the people stuck in the city, especially its youth.

The people of Homs are clear about their demand to return to their city. However, the conditions and the security grip over the city imposed by the regime prevent the displaced people from returning. The huge majority of Homsis who are still displaced, who did not return over the past five years, despite the difficult circumstances they have experienced in their displacement, some suffering displacement more than once, will never return unless their conditions and stipulations are met. These conditions are to be fought for, and thus fulfilled, by the real stakeholders themselves - the people of Homs. When they are fulfilled we will all return to Homs. And we will return as a community, not as individuals.

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