



## Wael Sawah

# The Question of Non-violence and the New Player in the Syrian Uprising

**T**he Syrian crisis has reached an impasse that is taking the entire country into the unknown. With 15,000 killed people, some 50,000 injured and an unknown number arrested, imprisoned and tortured, no one can really guess where the car is heading in Syria. The revolution that started peacefully 16 months ago has turned out to be a violent one, and the fear of a civil war is not as far off as it was last year.

The Syrian uprising came as a total surprise to all the Syrians: the government, the opposition, and also the people who started the uprising themselves.

When the uprising broke out, the Syrian opposition was loitering in the backyard of the political scene. The major opposition coalition, Damascus Declaration (DD), was suffering several problems. Since 2008, twelve of its leaders had been imprisoned for 30 months. The nationalist (pan-Arabs) and Marxist member-parties had suspended their membership and activities in the coalition. The Muslim Brothers did not have many supporters inside Syria, since Law 49 would sentence any member of the group to death, and their image had been blemished since they announced a truce with the Syrian regime in 2008, in appreciation of the Syrian position regarding the Israeli war on Gaza that time.

The government as well was taken by surprise. In an interview with Wall Street Journal on January 31, 2011, President Bashar al-Assad said that the protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen would not find their way to his country, as his anti-American positions and confrontation with Israel had left him in better shape to face the grassroots in his nation.

He was not right. Demonstrations broke out weeks after his interview. They started out peacefully. All the social and cultural actors and political parties took part in them. The slogans were general, calling for freedom and national reform. But the demonstrators felt that their

*Researcher and Journalist in Syria. Member of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. Political Advisor of the Syrian League for Citizenship. regular columnist at al-Hayat newspaper.*

battle was not on the ground only, but in the media as well. The government had expelled all the foreign media from the country, while its official media

portrayed the demonstrators as sectarian thugs that wanted to create chaos and establish an Islamic state. It is from the very need of the demonstrators to reach out to the media that a new phenomenon started to exist on the ground: the tanseeqiyat, a word that will, thence, refer to groups of young activists who participate in the demonstrations, document them by cell-phones, and reach out to the media. Spread across the country, these small groups of activists needed to coordinate their efforts together, to exchange information and find the best ways to reach out to the media. It was then that the tanseeqiyat joined their efforts in a broader group and called themselves the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), which was to become a major player on the ground, as it would contribute to organizing the demonstrations, coordinating the efforts of the activists, exchanging the information through a newsroom that they set up on Skype, and then reaching out to the media to provide them with news, videos, and eye witnesses to narrate the events on the ground.

But it was not only the tanseeqiyat: other players existed on the political scene, including new political groups, such as Building the Syrian State Current (BSSC) and civil society groups such as Nabd (Pulse), Mouwatanah (Citizenship), and Ma'an (together.). Other organizations that existed illegally continued their efforts, including the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, an entity that worked particularly on the freedom of speech but after the revolution started a number of activities: the most reliable documentation center, an observatory for human rights violations, and a working group for transitional justice.



These new activists were broadly peaceful and non-violent. And because they found themselves without legitimate fathers, they had to fill in the gap in several arenas, including the political one, which the opposition's idleness made it almost vacant. The LCC's statements were good examples of this. They drew up a simple political agenda for the emerging revolution, calling for stopping the killing, releasing all political prisoners, forming an independent investigation commission, disbanding the ill-reputed security forces, creating a special commission for reconciliation among all elements of the Syrian nation, and starting constitutional amendments that would guarantee free elections. The statements dumbfounded the government and traditional opposition.

In the meantime, activists grouped themselves in an endless number of small groups in Damascus, other major cities, towns and villages, to do what they could to contribute to the protests and help the demonstrators in the uprising areas.

In some areas, it was only a matter of peaceful uprising, but a matter of non-violence on principle. Daraya, a small town to the south of Damascus, has become a landmark in the Syrian revolution. Among the first class of activists of Daraya were two young men: Ghayath Matar and Yahiya Shurbaji. Ghayath is now dead and Yahiya is in prison. Ghayath came up with an idea to give every soldier among those who were occupying his town a rose and a bottle of water. The soldiers were puzzled at first, and demonstrators chanted, "The army and the people hand in hand." But this was received as an act of assault against the regime. Ghayath was arrested in an ambush; after 3 days, his body was given to his family. He was tortured to death. His partner in the water and roses campaigns, Yahia Shurbaji, is in prison suffering all kind of brutal torture.

But non-violence is not limited to Daraya. Razan Zeitouneh, 35, a leading member of the new political players, cannot repeat enough the necessity of hanging on to nonviolence, and she has repeatedly appealed to defectors to «leave their weapons and join the protesters in the street.» Yaseen Haj Saleh, a writer and activist close to new activist circles, supports this view. He believes that militarizing means narrowing its social base. The young male fighters will be in the first rows of the uprising instead of the peaceful demonstrators who take account of women, children, and elderly citizens. In addition, the

revolution will lose its moral superiority with no guarantee that it will mean the regime's defeat in the end, as in the court of arms and violence there is no doubt that the regime has supremacy.

Peaceful resistance groups have mushroomed across the country. They work in the field of relief for the displaced family and the injured, advocacy, defending prisoners, and spreading awareness of peaceful resistance. The Syrian League for Citizenship comprises some one hundred activists, including lawyers, university professors, writers, journalists; human rights defenders, and others. It works on four levels: awareness, capacity building, media and relief. Despite all the bloodshed, the league is still maintaining advocating the principles of democracy, citizenship, civil society, and human rights.

Relief is a major field where the new civil society operates. Sources may differ in their assessment of the number of displaced families that had to leave their homes in the major Syrian cities and villages. But there is unanimity regarding how much pain these families are suffering inside and outside Syria. To that level of pain, the Syrians have responded in a remarkable way. They have done this individually but also in groups. The Syrian League for Citizenship did an excellent job in this regard. In its project "My Home is Yours", it managed to build a network of groups working on the ground to provide relief to the displaced families, especially those who had to leave their homes in Homs. Homs in our hearts is another project that shows how the new players responded to the tragedies of hundreds of thousands of displaced people in the country. It is the product of some 20 young men and women who collected two-truck loads of food and clothing and decided to take them to the city of Homs which was under shelling last March.

In April this year, just when the killing was accumulating, and the bloodshed was drowning the country, a young female activist shouted out a slogan that became the title of the peaceful struggle in Syria for months. "Stop the killing. We want to build a country for all Syrians." These were the words on the banner that Rima Dali held in front of the Syrian Parliament in Damascus on Sunday, April 8. She was arrested right after that. Following news of Dali's arrest, Syrian activists quickly organized a series of protest by planning to meet at the same intersection she had stood at, holding banners with the same slogan. Stop the killing is still an ongoing peaceful campaign that refuses all kinds of violence, wherever it



comes from, and all kinds of discriminating among the Syrian people in terms of sects or ethnicities.

But Syrian activism has not only been collective. Many Syrian activists have worked individually and done an outstanding job. The list is endless, but only as examples we can mention the names of Ibrahim Kashoush the singer, whose songs have enthused hundreds of thousands of Syrian activists. Yaseen al Haj Saleh, Omar Kaddour, and Salameh Keleh are excellent examples of writers and intellectuals who have dedicated their time to the uprising. But those who have risked their own lives to document the events, through filming are special cases. Most tragic was the death of a young filmmaker, Basel Shihadeh, who was killed last May. His documentary *Al- Waar: The Chant of Survival*, filmed secretly in the area of Al-Waar near Homs during Ramadan in 2011, features testimonies from several residents, including the goalkeeper of the Syrian national youth football team, Abdel Baset al-Sarout. Sarout led several anti-regime demonstrations and wrote revolutionary songs that were picked up by protesters everywhere in Syria.

However, this peaceful resistance is facing fierce defiance from two sides: the regime and the pro-armed opposition. The regime has treated the peaceful resistant activists even worse than it has treated armed rebels. Peaceful activists have been killed, arrested, and tortured for merely participating in demonstrations or providing assistance to the wounded or displaced. Dr. Jalal Nofal was arrested and severely tortured for providing psychological assistance to the victims of the regime's repression. Dr. Joseph Nakleh and his wife Mary Issa were arrested for providing medical assistance for the wounded in

their neighborhood. Salameh Keleh, a Palestinian writer, was arrested, tortured and deported to Jordan for writing articles in pan-Arab newspapers. And finally Father Paolo Dall'Oglio was ultimately given a one-way ticket out of Syria after inviting friends of filmmaker Shihadeh to the ancient Mar Musa Monastery he had rebuilt himself -- where they could freely pray and mourn Shihadeh's death after being barred from worship at a Catholic Melkite church in Damascus.

Unfortunately, this attitude by the regime is leading many peaceful resistance activists to give up their peacefulness. The massacres which were committed by pro-regime militias in the past months, including al-Houla massacre, where 108 people were killed, including children and women, inflamed most activists and made them reconsider their position.

Now, some peaceful activists have joined the Syrian Free Army. Others who do not approve any violent action have withdrawn from the streets and taken refuge in Facebook. Most severely, the peaceful discourse has become a source of sarcasm. In this regard, one can conclude that the Syrian regime has achieved its ultimate goal by giving the image of the Syrian revolution as a radical, violent rebellion with an Islamist agenda. The regime has been working on this goal from day one.

Has the regime succeeded in this? To some extent. Has the peaceful voice been completely defeated? Maybe not, as long as one can read in some media that LCC in coordination with a new media entity called "The Street Enterprise for Media" launched a festival entitled, "Our streets are colorful: the Syrian Day for Diversity," which was held in several areas not under the regime's control and celebrated Syria's colorful diversity.

### *Der Schrei nach Freiheit*

Als im März 2011 in der syrischen Hauptstadt Damaskus die ersten Demonstrationen stattfinden, erkennt die syrische Schriftstellerin und Journalistin Samar Yazbek sofort die Sprengkraft dieses ersten Aufbäumens gegen Korruption und Unrecht in ihrem Land. Nachdem sich die Protestbewegung, auf die das Regime mit gnadenloser Gewalt reagiert, schon bald über das ganze Land ausbreitet, will Samar Yazbek verstehen, was in ihrem Land geschieht. Woher die Menschen den Mut nehmen, auf die Strasse zu gehen. Wie es möglich ist, dass die Armee auf die eigene Bevölkerung schießt. Um die Wahrheit zu erfahren, reist Yazbek durchs Land, befragt Aktivisten und Journalisten, Polizisten und Soldaten. Als sie immer stärker vom Geheimdienst unter Druck gesetzt wird, entschliesst sie sich schliesslich, Syrien zu verlassen und ihre Aufzeichnungen der ersten vier Monate der syrischen Revolution im Ausland zu veröffentlichen. Das Buch ist vor wenigen Monaten auf Deutsch erschienen.

Samar Yazbek: *Schrei nach Freiheit*. Bericht aus dem Inneren der syrischen Revolution. (Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt von Larissa Bender; Zürich, Nagel & Kimche, 2012)