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Revolution from Below

When we revolt it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.

Frantz Fanon[1]

It was called the Dignity Revolution. What does dignity mean? It means being able to feed your children.

Yassin Swehat[2]

We all suffered from the grip of the security forces. I was interrogated thrice before the revolution began, and I had nothing to do with politics. The revolution came from the people's will for democracy. At the start we only wanted reform.

Monzer al-Sallal[3]

March 15th was my birthday, and the first demonstration. It was the most wonderful moment in my life.

Basel al-Junaidi[4]

On 28 January 2011, in the north-eastern town of Hasakeh, Hassan Ali Akleh set himself alight in protest against the regime. His final act – which went largely unremarked – mirrored that of Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation six weeks earlier in Tunisia was the spark that ignited a transnational revolutionary uprising known as the Arab Spring. Unprecedented demonstrations erupted in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Oman and Morocco; they would quickly expand to Libya and Bahrain, and find international echoes in movements such as Occupy and Los Indignados. This mass revolt raged against state repression, elite corruption, poverty and inequality. The mobilisations were decentralised and spontaneous; they were neither led by political parties nor defined by the traditional narratives of socialism,

nationalism, or Islamism. They were 'creating a new geography of liberation, which is no longer mapped on colonial or cast upon postcolonial structures of domination', a 'restructuring [which] points to a far more radical emancipation'.[5] They united people (overwhelmingly young people) across class, gender and religious divides. The slogan 'al-Shaab Yureed Isqat al-Nizam' ('The People Want the Fall of the Regime') reverberated through the region's streets and squares. The moment of insurrection entailed the temporary suspension of absolutist ideology, and what exactly was to follow the regime was not articulated – but civil disobedience, strikes, protests and the occupations of public space spread, networks and alliances were built, and tactics of struggle shared, not least through social media. By the end of January, the 23-year regime of Tunisian dictator Ben Ali had indeed fallen, and around the globe, people watched live images of Cairo's Tahrir Square packed with hundreds of thousands chanting for Egypt's three-decade pharaoh President Hosni Mubarak to step down.

The Syrian revolution arrived in this context. According to Assaad al-Achi, 'It was a direct result of the Arab Spring. People started gathering around the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan embassies in Damascus. People travelled there from Aleppo and Homs. They got to know each other, and the question of "Why not us?" began to be asked. These gatherings were tolerated up to a certain degree.'[6] Calls were made for a Syrian 'Day of Rage' on 4–5 February, but no one showed up. 'People just wanted to see how the police would respond. Nobody protested, but the riot police came out in force. This was the first message from the state to the people that protest wouldn't be tolerated. People took a step back.'[7]

But something had changed in the public mood. On 17 February, 1,500 people gathered to protest in Damascus's Hareeqa – that central neighbourhood named 'Fire' since the French colonial bombardment – when traffic police beat up the son of a local trader.[8] 'The Syrian People Won't Be Humiliated!' they chanted. The Interior Minister was quickly sent to the scene. 'Is this a demonstration?' he asked testily. 'No, no!' the men replied – but it obviously was. A couple of plain clothes men shouted, 'We're at your service, Bashaar!' A few in the crowd joined in half-heartedly. Most didn't. That evening Syrians sat around their screens, some open-mouthed, wondering what it meant.

It clearly wasn't a call for revolution, but it was certainly something entirely new.

A second Day of Rage was called for 15 March. This time thousands gathered in simultaneous demonstrations across the country, in the central city of Hama, in Hasakeh in the north and Deir al-Zor in the east, and in Deraa in the south. In the Damascus Old City, 200 mainly young people chanted 'God, Syria, Freedom and that's all', a play on the pro-regime slogan 'God, Syria, Bashaar and that's all'. They also shouted 'Selmiyyeh, Selmiyyeh', or 'Peaceful, Peaceful', words that would soon be heard across Syria.[9] The response was anything but peaceful. The demonstration was violently dispersed, and the *mukhabarat* made several arrests.

The next day a protest calling for the release of political prisoners was held outside the Interior Ministry. It brought the families of the detainees together with activists known from the Damascus Declaration and the new human rights organisations. Among those gathered were Suhair Atassi, who would soon lead the General Commission of the Syrian Revolution, and Razan Zaitouneh, who would help found the Local Coordination Committees. The demonstrators were attacked and around 30 were arrested, including Atassi, who was detained for ten days – but the conversation conducted at the protest led to results which the state was unable to suppress. 'Most of the big names of the civil resistance were present', says Assaad al-Achi. 'And it was from this gathering that the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) were born. Everyone was charged with returning to their own area and starting a committee. So Anas Shughri returned to Banyas, Manhal Bareesh to Saraqeb, Omar Edelbi to Homs, Ahmed Tomeh to Deir al-Zor, Khalil al-Haj Saleh to Raqqa, and so on. Razan, Omar Aziz and Mazen Darwish stayed to work in Damascus.'[10]

Protests continued around the country in the following days, each met by assaults and arrests. The protestors' demands remained centred on the kind of reforms that people had hoped the Damascus Spring would deliver a decade earlier. According to Ziad Homsi, a tall, slight young man from Douma: 'We didn't ask for unrealistic things. We wanted a prisoner release, a repeal of the emergency law, a new parties law, and so on.'[11]

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It was the southern city of Deraa that would catalyse the revolution. The city's conservative Sunni population had traditionally supported the Baath, but suffered increasing hardship as a result of state neglect and the influx of drought refugees. The city was ripe for unrest. Again, it was police brutality that triggered it.

Fifteen schoolboys, all under the age of 15 and all from prominent families, had been arrested on 6 March for graffitiing walls with the revolutionary slogans they'd heard chanted on Tunisian and Egyptian streets. The children were tortured in detention, their fingernails ripped out. When their parents went to plead with the local head of political security, a cousin of the president called Atef Najib, they were told: 'Forget your children. Go sleep with your wives and make new ones, or send them to me and I'll do it.'[12] Several thousand family members and their supporters responded by gathering in front of the Omari Mosque in the city's Balad district on 18 March, demanding the children's release and the resignation of Atef Najib and the city's mayor.[13] Security replied with water cannons and live ammunition, killing at least four people, the first deaths of the uprising.[14] The next day, the funeral for the victims turned into a mass demonstration chanting 'He Who Kills His People is a Traitor'. More were killed. In a tactic which would become routine, security forces occupied the nearby hospital, and any wounded who arrived there were detained or shot. Residents used the Omari Mosque as a makeshift hospital instead.

Briefly, the regime adopted a conciliatory tone. On 20 March, Assad sent a delegation to offer condolences to the bereaved families and to promise that those responsible would face justice. On the same day, thousands gathered again at the Omari Mosque. Now their demands were somewhat more expansive: an end to corruption, the release of all political prisoners and the repeal of the Emergency Law.[15] This time 15 were killed, immediately proving the emptiness of Bashaar's words. The enraged protestors refused to be cowed. They set fire to the Baath Party headquarters and the SyriaTel building – SyriaTel was owned by Rami Makhlouf. Seven police officers were killed in the riot.

At last Assad took some remedial action, ordering the children's release and removing Faisal Kulthum, Deraa's governor, from his

post. But it was too late to erase the effects of the earlier provocation. Hundreds continued to gather in and around the Omari Mosque, its walls now plastered with posters of the dead.

On 23 March, security stormed the mosque with heavy gunfire. There were a number of deaths and numerous casualties; many of the wounded were abducted by the army. Still the protests continued. In the days and weeks that followed, hundreds were rounded up from their homes, the city's mobile phone coverage was cut, and military and police checkpoints were set up in the streets.[16] Two years later the ancient minaret of the Omari Mosque, built by Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab in the seventh century, would crumble under bombardment.

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The regime's violent repression outraged Syrians; as a result, the protests grew rapidly in numbers and in geographical spread. On 25 March, a second 'Friday of Dignity', tens of thousands protested furiously in Deraa; this time they tore down a statue of Hafez al-Assad. The nearby towns Jasim, Dael, Inkhil and Sanamayn also staged mass protests; in the latter, up to 20 were killed by live fire. Thousands gathered in Hama and in Homs, Syria's third largest city, as well as in the north and along the coast – in Saraqeb, Jableh, Amouda, Baniyas – and in Raqqa and Deir al-Zor in the east. In Lattakia, home to many regime figures, several protestors were killed. Demonstrations were also held in central Damascus and its suburbs, and in Aleppo too. Everywhere protestors chanted their solidarity with the people of Deraa.[17]

On the same day pro-regime rallies were held in Damascus, the first of a series of official shows of support. Many participants, wearing Bashaar T-shirts and kissing his image, seemed to be genuinely passionate in their love for the leadership; many others – schoolchildren and civil servants – were bussed in by the state for the occasion.[18]

From the outset, the regime's public response to the protests was couched in security discourse and conspiracy theory. At the start, as later on, it refused to acknowledge the existence of the popular protest movement. When state media reported the first deaths, it

spoke of 'infiltrators' and 'armed gangs' causing chaos and damaging property, of 'foreign parties' inciting riots, and of 'Salafist terrorists' aiming to establish an Islamic emirate.[19] When the Omari Mosque was stormed, state TV aired footage – denounced by locals as fabricated – of guns and ammunition supposedly found inside.[20] Clashes elsewhere were reported as the work of external agitators. Later names would be attached to these phantoms – Saudi Arabia's Prince Bandar, for instance, or Israel's Mossad. But the grainy images taken on mobile phones and shared on social media – of unarmed Syrians being beaten and shot – told an entirely different story.

As the uprising spread the regime worked carefully to control and manipulate the flow of information. Nationalist songs were played day and night in ministries and other public buildings. State TV interviewed pro-regime religious leaders and intellectuals alongside members of the public who praised the army and president and bayed for the blood of the 'terrorists'. When the struggle militarised, TV endlessly repeated pictures of regime 'martyrs' (later, when they became an embarrassment, it stopped highlighting, or releasing the numbers, of military deaths). Al-Dunya TV, meanwhile, a private channel owned by Rami Makhlouf, specialised in frequently absurd conspiracy theories to support the regime's narrative of victimhood. It claimed, for instance, that Al Jazeera had constructed mock-ups of Homs and other Syrian cities in the Qatari desert, where it filmed scenes to discredit the Assad regime. It alleged that Barcelona Football Club was part of the anti-Assad plot, and that player formations during a match against Real Madrid were a code providing information on arms smuggling routes to Syrian rebels.[21] Another memorable al-Dunya moment was the supposed discovery of thousands of LSD 'pills', each branded with the Al Jazeera logo. A less crude PR campaign involved the erection of billboards depicting a raised hand alongside the words: 'I am with the law'. Revolutionaries soon pasted up posters of their own with the same raised hand but with slogans such as 'I am with the law, but where is it?' or simply 'I am free'.

The presence and movement of foreign journalists was severely restricted. Many international media outlets pulled out as their reporters failed to have visas renewed or were otherwise pressured

to leave. Those permitted to stay were assigned a government minder and could only visit areas of unrest on state-organised visits.

White-skinned, red-haired Reem Haddad served as the regime's English-language spokesperson during the uprising's early days. When 10,000 refugees were driven across the Turkish border by the Syrian army in June, she claimed they were simply 'visiting relatives'. Her delusional comments earned her the nickname 'Comical Sally' (in reference to Saddam Hussein's 2003 spokesman Mohammed al-Sahaf, or 'Comical Ali'). She was later replaced by the much more effective Jihad Makdissi, until his defection (though he didn't join the revolution) in December 2012.

It was in this context – of shaping the narrative the regime would doggedly stick to in the years that followed – that Bashaar addressed the People's Assembly on 30 March.[22] His speech was eagerly awaited by Syrians. Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa, formerly a long-standing foreign minister and one of the more respected members of the governing elite, had prepared the way, promising that Syrians would hear things from the president that would please them all.[23] Many Syrians had remained on the fence until this point. 'Wait for Bashaar to speak,' they said, 'then we'll see.' People expected an apology for the killings and a declared intention to undertake serious reform. Some even thought the popular protests would be welcomed by Bashaar as ammunition in his presumed struggle against regime hardliners. After all, the man was genuinely popular. Perhaps – after allowing non-sectarian and non-ethnic parties to operate openly – he could even have won a real election, and gone down in history as hero of the democratic transition. For a moment, this seemed conceivable. Syrians inside the country and abroad, therefore, gathered around their screens for the televised address.

Less than an hour later, all wishful thinking had been dashed. Bashaar's speech demonstrated not only an unwillingness to compromise, but an absolute refusal to acknowledge reality. The president detailed the extent and depth of 'the continued conspiracy', which was aimed at Syria as a whole, not at his regime. He warned that Syria's 'enemies work every day in an organised, systematic and scientific manner in order to undermine Syria's stability'. Protests,

therefore, though some innocents might be mixed up in them, were treacherous. The threat to the nation came from countries near and far, as well as from fifth columnists who incited violence and sectarianism; already in this flagging of potential sectarian conflict the strategy of frightening minority communities into loyalty was apparent. The Syrian state was cast throughout the speech in the role of victim – although of course it was the state that held the absolute monopoly on violence.

The speech was broken up by waves of applause and chants of adoration from the tame MPs. Frequently one rose to his feet, shaking his fist and shouting a slogan; then the rest would join in. At one point the delegates burst into 'God, Syria, Bashaar, That's All!' 'To which I reply,' beamed Bashaar, 'God, Syria, my people, that's all.' The crowd went wild, as if divine wisdom had spilled from the presidential lips.

Worst of all were the giggles. Preserving his habitual monotone, Bashaar laughed at his own jokes. This was probably intended to demonstrate confidence; most Syrians read it as further worrying proof of the president's disengagement from reality, and as an insult to those killed.[24]

The speech was followed by triumphant waves and smiles. In the street beyond the Assembly, a woman rushed Bashaar's car – it wasn't clear if she was protesting or seeking to petition the president. Security dragged her away. According to Monzer al-Sallal, later the commander of a Free Army battalion, 'Bashaar himself created the Syrian revolution, in his first speech. Then the people who had hope in him despaired of him.'[25]

An enormous sense of anti-climax was followed by a surge of unprecedentedly open discussion in Syrian homes, workplaces and cafés. Previously apolitical people were suddenly politicised. On 'Friday of the Martyrs', two days after the speech, tens of thousands marched all over the country, and were again confronted by clubs, tear gas and live ammunition.[26] In Lattakia people expressed their disgust with the sycophants of the People's Assembly, chanting, 'The People's Assembly is Pathetic and Sick'.

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Violence continued to escalate through April, particularly in Deraa and Homs. On the 18 April, a funeral cortege of tens of thousands brought the corpses of protestors murdered in Bab Sbaa in Homs's Old City to the funeral prayer at the al-Kabeer Mosque. The Christian residents of al-Hamidiyeh threw rice down on the revolutionaries as the cortege passed through. After the burials, calls were raised to head for the central Clock Square, where the crowds only grew.

An eye-witness known as 'Ibn Homs' describes the diverse atmosphere at the square:

> More people flooded in. Freedom is like a magnet; it attracts the people that have been silenced for too long ... The chance is now available to speak up about the duty, to scream in the face of the suppresser, to prove all these identities that have been concealed by a tyrannical iron fist. Speeches were then delivered from the Clock's platform; a woman takes a turn, then an activist, then a sheikh, then an enthusiastic young man ... [at dusk] Preparations for another type of prayer began to take place, for a prayer very well done, for a Quran recited smoothly on the crowds ... All along the understanding of the true essence of freedom the way God the most almighty wants it, not like what tyrants want it.[27]

An engineering student known by the pseudonym 'Joly' corroborates the account. 'All the sects were present', she reports. 'People from all over the city and the suburbs ... until then people had been calling for the fall of the city's mayor. At the square they called for the fall of the regime. Of course the regime wouldn't tolerate it.'[28] As night fell, revolutionaries allocated tasks among themselves – food distribution, for instance, or banner preparation. They erected tents so people could stay the night and set up barricades to check those coming in. It seemed Syrians had managed to liberate a public space, that the Clock Square would become the country's Tahrir (indeed, they renamed the square so).

Military vehicles began to mass in nearby streets, and warning shots were fired. The protestors responded with chants emphasising their non-violence, 'Selmiyyeh, Selmiyyeh', as well as their anti-sectarianism, 'One, One, One, the Syrian People are One'. Religious leaders

succeeded in persuading some men and many women to leave. But thousands were still present at around 2 am on 19 April, when the sit-in was assaulted. By then Joly was back home in the suburb of al-Wa'er, but 'we smelled the weapons and heard the shots five kilometres away. It was a terrifying, terrible and a transformative moment. That night we didn't know how many were dead, but we heard of very many bodies on the ground in the square.'[29]

Deraa's central Balad district, meanwhile, was now under complete lock-down. Snipers positioned on rooftops and government buildings shot at anyone attempting to enter the neighbourhood. The 15,000 residents trapped inside were starting to run out of baby milk, food and even water as snipers shot holes in roof tanks. Electricity, telephone and the Internet were cut off.

At dawn on 25 April, tanks rolled into the city, firing indiscriminately, even into people's homes as they slept. They were accompanied by thousands of troops, most from the army's elite Fourth Division, commanded by the president's younger brother Maher. The same Syrians that Bashaar had accused of following treacherous foreign-led agendas were enraged to see these tanks, which had done nothing since 1973 to liberate Israeli-occupied territory, turning their guns on Syrian civilians. Deraa's courageous young men jumped from the shelter of alleyways to chant 'Maher, you Coward, Take your Dogs to the Golan!'[30]

Snipers prevented ambulances from reaching the injured. Soldiers arrested medical personnel, set fire to pharmacies and prevented medical supplies from entering the city. The power outage had disabled the morgue, so the accumulating corpses were being stored in grocery refrigerators run on generators.

There were reports of soldiers refusing shoot-to-kill orders and surrendering to the protestors; this was perhaps a factor in the extension of the crackdown to nearby towns and villages. Thousands of homes were raided, thousands were taken and held in makeshift detention centres including schools, stadiums and fenced-off football fields. Many were tortured; some were executed.[31] Some were later discovered in mass graves.[32] On 29 April, thousands marched on Deraa from neighbouring towns to try and break the siege. They carried food, medicine and olive branches to show their peaceful intent. Up

to 62 were killed, most shot in the head and chest. 'There were bodies lying in the streets', one resident reported. 'People were injured, we could see them from our home but we couldn't reach them because of snipers. They died alone in the street. We couldn't leave our homes, not even to go to the market. We couldn't bury the dead.'[33]

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While the state engaged in bloody repression, it also paid lip service to reform. At first glance, the nature of these reforms seemed to demonstrate that the regime had woefully misunderstood the causes and composition of the protest movement. Measures were taken in early April to placate two constituencies which had little to do with the developing unrest. First, 220,000 stateless Kurds were finally granted nationality.[34] Second, school teachers who wore the *niqab* (or face veil), and who'd been moved from teaching to administrative duties as a result, were reinstated. Damascus's casino was also closed (Islam forbids gambling).

Kurds and Islamists were the traditional sources of subversion and popular unrest, but not in this case. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the protest movement at this time was its ability to unite people across religious, sectarian and ethnic boundaries. The language of protest was neither religious nor secular; the demands as expressed on the street were for political rights to be applied in general, not to specific groups. In retrospect, however, it seems the regime's appeal to Islamist and Kurdish constituencies was a wilful misinterpretation rather than a simple misunderstanding. In the years to come, the regime would stick to reading the revolution through ethnic and religious categories; largely as a result of its own efforts, these categories would indeed eventually grow in importance until they dominated the field of struggle. The regime's priority was to refuse any recognition of the non-Islamist civil activists, because these represented the greatest threat. There was nothing about them that could terrify minority communities or secularists; nor would their spectre encourage Western support for Assad. Even as security pulled these peaceful activists from their beds, and tortured many to death, a series of amnesties for political prisoners favoured Islamists, including

the violent Salafist extremists who would come to dominate the armed uprising.

As for the Kurds, the regime was perhaps speaking over their heads, directly to the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrator, or PYD), which would later inherit control of Kurdish-majority areas. At the same time it moved to foreclose potential Kurdish–Arab alliances. On 7 October, Kurdish leader Meshaal Temmo, recently released from prison, would be shot dead by masked men. Temmo had described the Kurds as 'an inseparable part of the Syrian people', opposed negotiating with the regime and was organising anti-regime protests in Qamishli when he was murdered. The regime was most likely responsible.[35]

In March the regime had awarded a pay increase of up to 30 per cent for around two million civil servants. Then, on 16 April, in a televised address to his newly formed cabinet, Assad pledged the lifting of the Emergency Law alongside further economic reforms to tackle unemployment and the problems of the rural areas. He spoke too of steps to tackle corruption and reform the media, and called for dialogue with 'trade unions and organisations which represent professionals and interests throughout the country'.[36] On 21 April the Emergency Law was actually cancelled, and the hated Supreme State Security Court abolished. But the decisions were immediately rendered meaningless by two new pieces of legislation. The Emergency Law was substituted by a Counter-Terrorism Law which would soon be used to detain tens of thousands of activists, and the Supreme State Security Court was replaced by a special Counter-Terrorism Court. Also on the 21 April, a decree was issued which seemed to allow peaceful protest so long as permission was sought in advance.

The next day – named Great Friday by protestors, for the Christian Easter – a lawyer asked permission to hold a protest in Hasakeh. He was detained. Large demonstrations went ahead without permission in every region of the country, and at least 88 people were murdered by security forces. Once again, regime rhetoric was shown to be entirely unrelated to realities on the ground.

After weeks of abuses, people were increasingly demanding the fall of the regime; soon they'd be chanting 'The People Want the Execution of the President'. Young Syrians were refusing to be silenced as their

parents had. 'The Syrian People Won't Be Humiliated' and 'The Syrian People Won't Be Insulted' were two of their most widespread slogans. 'I'm not an animal!' one protestor declared to camera, his face shocked, as if it were a new realisation. The recording was uploaded and shared on the Internet, as they all were. Perhaps this was one reason for the persistence of protest in the face of such violence – people didn't (yet) feel alone; their hopes and sufferings were immediately shared across the country and internationally. But the regime was behaving as if this were the 1980s.

The Canadian Ella Wind was living in Damascus at the time. 'The nonchalant dismissal by Assad of the people's suffering,' she wrote later, 'the arrests of friends and family members and an inexorably expanding awareness of the grim reality of Syrian prisons, as well as the deaths of popular and beloved civil society figures, all contributed to the rapid downturn in Assad's popularity. No conspiracy theory is required to make sense of the speed with which Assad went from being one of the most popular leaders in the Arab world to being so despised by his own people.'[37]

Why did the regime resort so immediately and wholeheartedly to violence? Why, once it became clear that violence only redoubled popular outrage, did it not change tack? According to blogger Yassin Swehat:

> The response seemed stupid at the time, but it was in fact very clever. They'd learnt lessons from Eastern Europe – for instance from the Solidarity organisation in Poland. Solidarity was allowed to survive and to work, and the end result was the fall of the regime. If the protests in Syria had been safe, everybody would have joined them. There would have been a real public space, and the expression of anger would have transformed into political dialogue. This is what the regime didn't want. They know how to play politics with foreign states, but not with the Syrian people.[38]

The regime was a long-standing expert in one form of domestic politics – the stirring of communal tensions for divide-and-rule purposes. Regime propagandists (and some commentators abroad) made much of the fact that most demonstrations started from mosques. This was

indeed true – because places of worship were the only spaces where people were permitted to gather. Revolutionary Christians, Alawis, Druze and atheists had begun attending Friday prayers with the sole purpose of joining the protest afterwards. In any case, activists were doing their best to diversify the protest locations. People tried and failed – as in Homs – to lay claim to public squares, and students also mobilised on campus. On 11 April, Fadi al-'Asmi was the first student to be killed at Damascus University when a combination of security and Baathist students attacked around 500 protesting at the Faculty of Science.

From the very start, the regime also resorted to a campaign of rumours and false-flag operations to divide Sunnis from Alawis on the Syrian coast, the home region of top regime figures and at least half of the total Alawi community. In March, armed gangs were unleashed on the port city of Lattakia. They drove around shooting from their cars, screaming threats of rape and murder. In Sunni areas they declared themselves as vengeful Alawis; in Alawi areas they posed as vengeful Sunnis.[39] These thugs were *shabeeha*, a term with several etymologies, but certainly connected to the word *shabah*, meaning 'ghost', after the Mercedes Ghost, a car popular with the *mukhabarat*. Before 2011, *shabeeha* used to refer to the smuggling gangs based in the Alawi mountains who worked for lesser members of the Assad family. During the revolution, the term came to refer to the substate thug militias, financed by Rami Makhlouf and other pro-regime businessmen, to which much of the repression was subcontracted. (Later on, revolutionaries and rebel fighters would often attach the label pejoratively to anyone fighting for Assad.) In most of the country the *shabeeha* comprised paid goons of all backgrounds; in some regions, however, they had an exclusively Alawi or Shia composition. The massacres committed by these men at a later stage would play a key role in sectarianising the conflict.

Local communities very often acted to minimise the effects of such provocations. The Alawi writer Samar Yazbek describes an example from Jableh, her home town, where in an atmosphere formed by days of anti-regime protests met by pro-regime marches, and of *shabeeha*-spread rumours that each sect was about to slaughter the other, dirt barricades were thrown up between their respective neighbourhoods.

At this point activists and elders launched a mediation effort, and even succeeded in organising a demonstration in which members of both communities (including religious leaders) chanted 'Sunnis and Alawis are One'.[40]

But the most basic and frequently used weapon in the regime's arsenal could be named 'shock and awe'. On 3 June the UN reported that 1,000 people had died in the first three months of the uprising.[41] Nearly 3,000 (at a very minimum) had been detained.[42] More horrifying than the actual numbers were the details. Increasingly, the corpses of activists and protestors were returned to their families bearing the marks of horrific torture. Children were not spared. Videos were either smuggled out or deliberately leaked of *mukhabarat* taunting, whipping and electrocuting even primary school-aged children.[43]

On 25 May, the mutilated body of Hamza al-Khateeb, a pudgy 13-year-old from rural Deraa, was returned to his parents. Hamza had been arrested by Air Force Intelligence during the 29 April march to break the siege of Deraa. His parents posted pictures on the Internet – in his final hours the boy had suffered gunshot wounds, broken bones and cigarette burns. His penis had been severed.[44] Hamza's case provoked intense outrage. On 3 June, dubbed 'Friday of the Children' – the names of protests were now being chosen by vote on Facebook – there were still larger demonstrations. Scores more were murdered.[45]

The Syrian population was shocked, but not awed. 'Bashaar al-Assad is the leader of the revolution', remarked one young Damascene. 'Every time he kills someone, every time he tortures, he creates ten more men determined to destroy him.'[46]

But the horror was not evenly applied. Kurds in the north-east were rarely met by bullets, and demonstrations in central Damascus were dispersed by clubs and tear gas rather than live fire. The sons and daughters of the rich, and areas with large minority populations, were treated more gently. In the years to come, this pattern would greatly contribute to Sunni resentment.

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AbdulRahman Jalloud, an activist in his twenties, was arrested on the very first Day of Rage. He was held in the capital's State Security Branch

251, and spent 53 days in solitary confinement. He was tortured every day. His first session began when an officer declared, 'I want to see blood on the walls'. This triggered a beating with a nail-studded club. Other torments included being hung from his wrists for hours on end, and being beaten while pushed inside a tyre. Often he was woken by a bucket of cold water followed up by an electric shock. The beatings and shocks were concentrated on his left knee and left shoulder. Over three years later, he still suffers pain and stiffness in these joints. He believes his torturers were on Captagon – an amphetamine-type drug very popular today among fighters on both sides. The worst torturer was called Abu al-Mowt, or Father of Death, and this man was clearly enjoying himself. But AbdulRahman found the psychological torture of solitary confinement the most difficult to deal with. He shivered in his underwear (these were the bitterly cold winter months), under a permanent strong light which broke his sleep. 'After a while you feel the torture is just your daily work. I used to spend an extra minute in the toilet so they'd punish me with torture – I wanted to be tortured to have a break from solitary.'

Later he was transferred through a series of group cells. One was two metres by one, in which 13 people were crammed; another was four metres by two, and fitted 30 to 50. On Fridays – protest day – he was held in a six metres by four cell with up to 200 others. It was forbidden to speak, and a *mukhabarat* mole was always with them. They could tell who he was quite easily – 'He was the only one who was clean and healthy. Who is clean and healthy in prison?'

The usual food – always dirty – was boiled potatoes and bitter olives, two things he's unable to look at now. But one guard was kind. When the other guards were absent he passed him small gifts – salt to gargle when his throat was infected, once a falafel sandwich.

One day he was summoned to meet an officer. Genuinely interested, this man engaged him in a four-hour conversation on the causes of the protests. AbdulRahman learned some of what was happening outside from their discussion. Later on, when there was a huge influx of new prisoners, and continuous sounds of torture in the distance, he understood a revolution was underway.

Finally he was moved to Adra prison, where he met people from all over Syria, from every sect and ethnicity. 'The regime's biggest

mistake was to bring us all together', he says. 'The prison was full – at least 11,000 people inside. Riad Seif and George Sabra were there. So was Meshaal Temmo.[47] Meshaal learnt news of outside from Kurdish guards and relayed it to us. He also organised us. So for instance I taught computer skills to those who didn't have them. We memorised each other's phone numbers.'

AbdulRahman was released in July. He immediately chased up his prison contacts, and they began working. 'We blocked roads with fire and ran. When they shot at us, we decided to resist. We bought 300 slingshots and distributed them to the fastest runners. We spread information to revolutionaries in other areas – how to make and throw Molotovs for example.'[48]

* * *

The protests were growing exponentially. In July some of the biggest were in the city of Hama, scene of the Muslim Brotherhood's 1982 armed uprising and of the regime's retaliatory slaughter of between ten and twenty thousand. Hama had been traumatised for a generation by that episode. The 2011 protests grew slowly in the city, then more quickly after tens of protestors were shot dead. But by July the army, security forces, police and even traffic police had withdrawn, and activists were declaring Hama liberated. Checkpoints and barricades were thrown up to prevent security from re-entering, and neighbourhoods began to organise themselves, directing traffic, allocating drinking water and collecting waste. Activists distributed leaflets calling on the people to shun sectarianism and violence, and to avoid damage to property. During these days, no armed gangs emerged from the shadows to terrorise and loot. Christians and Alawis were not rounded up and shot. Nobody was whipped for wearing an un-Islamic haircut. All that happened was that demonstrations day and night swelled into crowds of hundreds of thousands – men and women, adults and children.[49] There was a festival atmosphere of song and dance. US ambassador Robert Ford travelled to Hama on 8 July and witnessed that day's protest – much to the chagrin of the regime (and of some activists too, who knew the regime would use the American presence to discredit them). It was 'the Friday of No Dialogue', and

protestors were expressing their rejection of negotiations with the regime until it ended its military and security crackdown.

Perhaps Hama's governor, Khaled Abdul Aziz, was the reason the city was left alone. By the end of the month he was replaced by Anas Naim, and the army returned. Ramadan was coming; many Syrians hoped increased mosque gatherings in the holy month would finally bring down the regime. On Ramadan's eve, a new nationwide crackdown saw hundreds killed across the country, at least 100 in Hama alone. Hospitals overcrowded with dead and wounded were beginning to run out of supplies.

* * *

In comparison, Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's largest cities and economic centres, had remained relatively quiet. There were two reasons for this. The first was the intense security presence. Always thick with informers, the capital's streets were suddenly crowded by even more plain clothes men. As a result, protests in the city centre lasted only a few minutes before the *mukhabarat* and *shabeeha* turned up.[50] A massive police presence, and the positioning of snipers on roofs, meant that Damascenes were unable to occupy public spaces as the Egyptians had done (and the people of Homs and Hama too, briefly), though crowds from the eastern suburbs tried Friday after Friday to reach the central Abbassiyeen Square, at the cost of many lives.

Beyond that, many of the most influential Damascenes, particularly the merchant and industrial classes, had benefitted from the regime, either directly (through bought loyalties) or indirectly (through neo-liberal reforms). While they may have resented their exclusion from power, they remained nervous of an uprising that was raging most fiercely in disadvantaged rural areas and working class suburbs. The capital, by contrast, had been prioritised by the centralising Baathist regime in terms of resources and infrastructural development.

Although predominantly Sunni, the city contains many Alawis living in government housing and employed in the military or security services. Many (though by no means all) bought into the regime's sectarian propaganda and were fearful of losing their perceived privilege or, worse, falling prey to revenge attacks if the regime

collapsed.[51] Damascus has a sizeable Christian community too. Less vehemently supportive of the regime than the Alawis, Christians in general shared their suspicions. The hierarchies of the various churches, like the best-known Muslim clerics, had long been co-opted by the regime, and advised their flocks to remain loyal. Even among the Sunni working and lower middle classes, there were many for whom the famous 'fear barrier' never broke. 'Um Bassam', a pseudonymous hijab-wearing retiree from Damascus, put it like this: 'These people aren't going anywhere. The young people don't understand that. They'll kill millions of us before they go. There's no use in protesting. At the end, we'll all be dead, and they'll still be on top.'[52] If protests in Damascus had gained a critical mass in 2011, events might have swung early in the revolution's favour, and the apocalypse predicted by Um Bassam might not have come to pass. But central Damascus and Aleppo didn't slip regime control, even as war flared elsewhere.

Yet claims that these cities didn't produce courageous and daring protests in the first few months are simply untrue. For a start, revolutionary Damascenes avoided the security in the central zone by travelling to protest in the suburbs; those originally from outside Damascus returned to their home towns and villages.[53] Even so, protests were sometimes held in the centre, including at the Umayyad Mosque, the fourth holiest site in Islam. Protests in the centre usually happened at night, or were flash mobilisations lasting just a few minutes but repeated again and again in different locations to exhaust security and *shabeeha*. Later on large protests were held in the Meydan and Kafr Souseh neighbourhoods.

And protests raged in the overcrowded and impoverished suburbs where migrants from other regions settled alongside Palestinian refugees and those forced by high rents to leave the city centre. Places like Douma and Harasta in the eastern Ghouta, Moadamiya and Daraya in the western Ghouta, and Tall in the hills north of the city, were protest hubs which suffered a militarised response very quickly.[54] As early as April, security forces had surrounded Douma, setting up checkpoints and raiding homes, arresting dozens. Similar raids were launched in Moadamiya, Daraya and Barzeh. Ziad Homsi describes his experience:

On 25 April there was a huge detention campaign in Douma. The roads were closed. I'd been told at the internet café that my name was on their wanted list. They arrested me at home. They smashed our possessions and beat me in front of my parents; they beat me and shocked me with an electric prod as they dragged me down the stairs. In the car I was blindfolded and my beard was ripped out. Someone held a knife to my throat and told me he was going to kill me. He ordered me to say the *shahada* [the Muslim profession of faith], but I refused ... My little brother was also arrested. They used to torture me in front of him and him in front of me. They threw us into walls, and beat us, and used electricity.[55]

Aleppo was a similar story.[56] Syria's largest city and industrial centre accounted for more than half of the country's manufacturing employment and an even larger export share.[57] The city's merchant and business classes had benefitted from Bashaar's economic liberalisation as well as from the trade opportunities afforded by proximity to Turkey. They didn't want to upset the stability on which their prosperity depended. Workers feared losing their jobs, or worse, if they protested.

Yet the rural periphery, an agricultural region ravaged by drought and now a source of cheap labour, was raging, as were working class city neighbourhoods such as Salahudeen, Fardous, Sakhour and Marjeh, where factory and office workers, shopkeepers, street vendors and minor civil servants lived. Students also demonstrated on campus and within 'the University City' where the dormitories are located. (In 2012, the regime would close the University City, leaving thousands of students homeless just before the end of term exams, and in January 2013 Aleppo University would be targeted by a regime airstrike.) And Aleppo's lawyers protested too, holding a sit-in at the Palace of Justice to condemn the state's violence.[58] By 2012, shortly before armed revolutionary forces took control of half the city, protests in the centre were growing inexorably.

* * *

Now the street has spoken. The young revolutionaries have spoken. Those who have created the events have spoken. It is the people who

> *have emerged from their silence today, and undermined the walls of the kingdom of silence.*
>
> Riad al-Turk[59]

Many Syrians speak of their first protest as a moment of personal liberation. Joly, for instance, the engineering student from Homs:

> At first I was scared to join in. But one day there was a very big demonstration which came from two directions – from the old part and the new part of al-Wa'er. When I heard the chanting – The People Want ... – and the singing, I started crying. Suddenly I was filled with courage, and I picked myself up and walked out to join in. My mother tried to stop me, but I went anyway. It was a beautiful experience. I felt at last I was participating in the effort to lift the oppression off us. Before that I used to be scared to talk even in front of my friends. I even cheered for Bashaar at the university, during his first speech to the People's Assembly. Can you imagine? It's something I regret very much now.[60]

And Yara Nseir, a Christian from Damascus:

> There was such a positive atmosphere. It sounds incredible, but suddenly everyone had good ethics. People stood together. Their slogans were very beautiful. Remember this is a people who'd been brainwashed and kept apart for decades, the victims of a failed education system, a failed social system. In this context, what the people did was amazing. I went to Meydan to protest. It's a conservative Muslim neighbourhood, and I was wearing a skimpy top. One young man asked me, politely enough, to dress more appropriately when I came next, but his friend said, 'No, sister, you wear whatever you like; we're here for our freedom, after all.' We really were ready to transform into an open society. We had great momentum.[61]

Syrians were discovering themselves, and their country, anew. They were learning the names of towns and villages they'd never previously heard of – places like Kafranbel, which produced such witty banners,

slogans and cartoons each week – and seeing familiar places in fresh ways. Homs (though it is ancient Emessa) used to be a nondescript city beside an oil refinery, and the butt of a thousand jokes; now it was the capital of the revolution, a noble city to be praised and emulated. Competition and resentment between cities and regions was the old normality; suddenly people in one place were chanting their solidarity with others. 'O Homs,' they sang (or Deraa, or Banyas, or Deir al-Zor), 'We're With You Until Death.' And Arabs learned the Kurdish word for 'freedom' – *azadi*.

In an endless spiral, protests were met by gunfire which led to funerals, which led to larger protests, which led to more funerals. Everybody on the streets now called for revolution, not reform. Protestors were seen raising their right hands to swear to continue the struggle until the regime was toppled, no matter what befell them. By attending protests and speaking out, hundreds of thousands had burned their bridges with a regime brooking no dissent. By principle, and for reasons of survival, millions were committed to the system's destruction, by peaceful means if possible. What remained was to build an alternative.