

Syria: The virtue of civil disobedience

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Last March 27, the independence flag was raised in different districts across the country [Mutasem Abou AlShamat]

Something is happening in Syria, away from the media spotlight. Last March 27, when Damascus woke up, the independence flag – symbol of the Syrian revolution – was raised in different districts, from Berzeh to Mezzeh, from school walls to bridges. Civil disobedience groups had successfully managed to coordinate the biggest anti-regime protests conducted simultaneously in different parts of the Syrian capital.

When you make Mutasem Abou AlShamat notice that raising the independence flag is nothing more than just a symbolic action – although beautiful – this Damascene in his 20s, smiles and calmly explains: “You have to look at what lies behind the action, not at its immediate content. Doing this simultaneously means that different non-violent groups are finally getting together and organising common actions. Achieving this degree of coordination should not be taken for granted in Damascus, where security control is tight, communications are either tracked or lacking and moving from one area to another is extremely difficult.”

“This is a step further to coordinate a much bigger operation that is in the pipeline,” he says, mysteriously.

Mutasem is a member of the Syrian non-violent movement. Together with many other groups, mostly based in Damascus and Aleppo, he has joined “Ayyam al hurryia” (Freedom days), a consortium of individuals and loose organisations which share a common goal: “To topple the regime through peaceful resistance and civil disobedience”.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/Vn4OGC7sD98>

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Signalling rebellion

Back in December 2011, they organised the general strike "Idrab al karama". When asked about the results of the initiative, Mutasem admits that "mistakes have been made and we have brainstormed a lot in order to not make them happen next time. But there is indeed a great achievement in having shown the people that a third way is possible: something that each of us can do, rather than join the demonstrations or just stay home [due to] fear."

Placing radio speakers in Damascus' central squares and playing revolutionary songs; painting the city's fountain water red to remind the martyrs' blood; distributing anti-regime leaflets that looked like Syrian currency notes – “everybody would stop to collect 1,000 Syrian Pounds on the floor!” – are some of the nuanced acts taken in defiance of regime.

Mutasem is an enthusiastic supporter of civil disobedience tactics. According to him, this is the only way to mobilise people in big cities like Damascus and Aleppo that are deemed to be regime's strongholds.

“We have to hurt the regime at its very heart, if we want to topple it. Civil disobedience sends a message to the people of Damascus and Aleppo who watch the violence on YouTube and are told by the official propaganda that there is nothing going on in the country,” the young activist says. “Our message is: The revolution is here, we are here, come and join us in any possible way you can.”

According to him, many people – who at the beginning would stay at home – are now helping the non-violent activists, providing logistical support, coordination, even actively joining the civil disobedience. Incidents of burning tyres blocking traffic in the middle of roads have been mushrooming in the past months, especially in Damascus.

“You know that something is successful when people adopt and repeat it. Most of the road blockings happening now are not organised by us, they are initiated by people we don't even know,” he emphasises.

Mutasem thinks civil disobedience is the only way to mobilise people in the Syrian capital. He is convinced that an armed response from the revolutionaries will not succeed, as the regime is much stronger on the military front. He also thinks that the latter's violence has increased since the formation of the Free Syrian Army.

Because of this, he embraces the model of civil resistance provided by Daraya, the cradle of Syrian peaceful resistance in Damascus where activists like Ghiyath Matar and Yahya Shurbaji were trying to win the soldiers' hearts and minds through non-violent and symbolic actions like talking to them during the demonstrations and distributing flowers and water. Recalling these scenes sounds like “longing for the bygone days”, as Matar was brutally killed and Shurbaji is believed to be still in jail.

Videos on non-violent struggle

But, while YouTube clips – allegedly recorded a week ago in Aleppo – are running on the screen, the young Syrian activist makes me notice that these protesters are still chanting “You are our brothers!” to the army, despite the fact that all media attention is catalysed either by the armed clashes between Assad's soldiers and the defected Free Syrian Army, or by the sectarian conflict allegedly going on between Syria's Alawi minority and Sunni majority.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/sYttYiOXkVw>

Syrian doctors speaks of horrors faced by civilians

Nevertheless, each week Ayyam al hurryia produces and posts videos, explaining the meaning of the non-violent struggle, its tactics and the patience to achieve results through peaceful resistance. Some videos address the pro-regime supporters too – the “*mnhibbakjia*” (“we love you”) crowd – dealing with the national unity issue and the necessity of reconciliation among Syrian people.

These videos are all made by Syrians inside and outside Syria, working as volunteers with Ayyam al hurryia. “It’s not a crowd of well-known artists and media makers. It’s Syria’s new generation willing to build a civil state,” Mutasem says. A savvy youth made up of professionals who were never given a chance to emerge in their diversity, as Syria’s cultural production – even in its most advanced forms of criticism and dissent – was managed by an elite group of producers closely supervised by the regime.

The workforce behind Ayyam al hurryia’s initiatives – whether those organising civil disobedience actions on the ground or those filming and editing the coloured educational videos on its YouTube channel – is nurtured by a Syrian grassroots movement and comes from within the country.

Mutasem smiles when I quote Gene Sharp and his 1993 handbook *From Dictatorship to Democracy* as an inspiration for their non-violent struggle. According to some conspiracy theories, the American scholar would have worked closely with US intelligence to help toppling regimes worldwide and would have supported anti-regime movements like Serbia’s Otpor in their political fight.

These theories enjoy a certain credit, especially when it comes to Syria, where everything happening on the ground would have to be engineered by foreigners, including civil resistance. Mutasem's smile now turns into laughter.

Syrians' non-violent struggle is indeed inspired by a Syrian scholar, Jawdat Said, who has been incarcerated many times for his writings on resisting oppression through non-violence. In 2001, he wrote: "We live in a world in which four fifths of its population live in frustration while the other fifth lives in fear."

Jawadat Said, born in 1931, lives in the Syrian Golan Heights and works as a farmer. I wonder what he thinks of these youth, engaged in their civilised struggle against Goliath, far away from media spotlight, maybe closer to their people.

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