Copies of Enab Baladi newspaper’s 45th issue among the debris of a destroyed building in the city of Daraya, rural Damascus (December 2013)

Photo credit: Enab Baladi
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To Enab Baladi Martyrs

Mohammad Anwar Kuraitem
One of Enab Baladi’s Founders
28-11-2012

Mohammad Fares Shihadeh
Daraya Reporter
16-01-2013

Ahmad Khaled Shihadeh
Managing Editor
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03-05-2015
Prologue
An Idea Called Daraya

By Joey Ayoub

By the time Huda was arrested by regime soldiers in 2013, the siege of Daraya, a suburb of Damascus, was entering its first year. Huda was arrested with two of her friends at a checkpoint and taken to a prison in Muadamiya, a town just south of the capital. This experience shaped her worldview, Huda told the Syrian media outlet Enab Baladi: “After being arrested I knew the meaning of injustice and I am more willing to ask for freedom”. Huda, like many other Syrians, reported feeling a sense of awakening upon witnessing the brutality of the Assad regime first-hand.

Fast-forward to August 2016. Daraya’s remaining people were forcibly evacuated after a deal was reached with the Assad regime to end the siege and return the town to regime control. They would follow the fate of the people of Homs before them and Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta after them. As the town was falling, a group of women from Daraya wrote an open letter stating: “We are demanding action from the international community” to prevent their forced displacement. No such action came, and so, Daraya fell.

Four years of siege by Assad’s forces and the Lebanese sectarian militia Hezbollah left this small suburb desperate for an escape. They knew what the regime had done to other liberated cities, a regime whose slogans of “Assad or we burn the country” and “kneel or starve” were applied with barrel bombs, sieges, and gulags. People gathered at the graves of loved ones, many of whom were killed during the siege, packed whatever they could, and left. Many of Daraya’s sons and daughters made it to Idlib, the city and area in the north of Syria where many refugees ended up. Of the approximately three million civilians currently in Idlib, around half are refugees from elsewhere in Syria.

Upon arriving in Idlib, Mohammed Abou Faris was told that he came from a special place. When he went looking for a job, a brick factory owner told him “you’re from Daraya, sir. You have everything. You’re our teachers”.

1 Originally published on Al Jumhuriya on 9th December 2018. Republished here with permission.
Even before 2011, Daraya had gained a reputation for its nonviolent resistance to the Assad regime. Razan Zaitouneh, the celebrated lawyer and activist kidnapped by the rebel group Jaish al-Islam in 2013, called the city “a star before the revolution and a star during”.

Decades of activism

This star shone in 1998 when, under Hafez Assad’s reign, some twenty youths were kicked out of a mosque by the cleric as their “lively discussions had veered too close to social change”. Among them was a then-18-year-old Yahya Sharbaji, who would lead non-violent protests again when Daraya’s time came thirteen years later in 2011. Their actions were inspired by a form of Islamic humanism influenced by the pacifist cleric Abdul Akram al-Saqqa, who in turn introduced them to the philosophy of Sheikh Jawdat Said, another influential advocate of non-violence. Their expulsion from the mosque may have been surprising for such young minds, but that didn’t stop them from continuing to question established dogma.

It shone again in 2003, when the US and UK invaded Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein. Daraya’s youth, including al-Saqqa’s son-in-law Haytham al-Hamwi, held a protest to stand in solidarity with the Iraqi people. The Assad regime, although officially opposed to the invasion, rounded the activists up and sentenced most of them to three to four years in prison. With the intense socio-political discussions generated by the ‘Damascus Spring’ intellectual revolt of 2000-2001, and with the fear that he would be next, Assad could not tolerate a resurgence of civic activity. At the same time, the Assad regime made itself available to torture ‘suspects of terrorism’ on behalf of the US government. This was made most notorious with the case of Canadian-Syrian Maher Arar, who was kidnapped by US authorities in 2002, sent to Jordan and then transferred to Syria to be tortured for eight months. To quote ex-CIA agent Robert Baer: “If you want people to be well interrogated, you send them to Jordan. If you want people to be disappeared, you send them to Egypt. And if you want people to be tortured, you send them to Syria”.

Daraya’s young men and women were of the generation that watched Bashar inherit the throne in 2000 and perhaps believed, as many did, that he would be different from his ruthless father. Bashar had even opened up space for activism and journalism, albeit within strict boundaries. He didn’t appear like his father who had built a reputation for crushing all dissent, controlling neighbouring Lebanon’s affairs and suppressing the Palestinian/Leftist/Nationalist coalition of the mid-1970s. He didn’t seem like his uncle Rifaat, Syria’s ‘Butcher of Hama’ who crushed a Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982 by slaughtering up to 40,000 people, mostly civilians. He wasn’t like his brother Maher, the Commander of the Republican Guard and the army’s elite Fourth Armoured Division, who had built a notorious reputation for his savagery. Nor was he like his other brother Bassel, who was Soviet-trained and handpicked by Hafez to be his successor before dying in a car crash in 1994. With such relatives around Bashar, no one could have been prepared for this mild-mannered ophthalmologist, married to a ‘respectable’ British-born businesswoman who spent her time championing charities for Syria’s many social issues (with the exception, naturally, of freedom of speech). Everyone believed that Bashar inherited the throne with significant reluctance.

But reluctant or not, Bashar outdid them all. Within a year of the revolution, he besieged Daraya and restricted all movement outside the city, and even significantly restricted it within. The regime’s daily barrel bombs and snipers positioned on the outskirts created a city where no man, woman, or child would dare roam freely. It even went on a three-day killing spree, killing over 400, in August of 2012. The town was almost emptied: the pre-war population of around 300,000 was reduced to around 6,000 within a year or so.

An extraordinary experiment

To understand why Daraya became the first town in Damascus to be placed under such a tight siege, we should look at the extraordinary experiment in direct democracy that was born there. In a country where the army and its Shabbiha, or sectarian thugs, served the interest of the few in and around the Assad family, Daraya’s Free Syrian Army rebels were under the authority of the Local Council. They embodied a model of governance that was antithetical to such a regime.

Abandoned by state services, Daraya resorted to self-governance and defiance, out of both necessity and conviction. As the British-Syrian writer Leila al-Shami wrote in her eulogy to this rebellious city, the Local Council grew beans, spinach, and wheat. A relief office held a soup kitchen. A medical office oversaw the field hospital under impossible circumstances. In the early days of the revolution, Daraya’s revolutionaries even confronted the army sent to shoot at them with chants of “the army
and the people are one”. Supported by the sound of church bells, these revolutionaries gained their image of peaceful protestors by handing out flowers and bottles of water to soldiers. They chanted for democracy and for equality for all of Syria’s religious communities and ethnic groups.

This experiment couldn’t survive in Damascus unless the regime ruling over this ancient city was to fall. And they knew that. This is why Local Coordination Committees were formed to coordinate protests across Syria. They were the brainchild of, among others, one of Daraya’s sons, a 26-year-old tailor named Ghiyath Matar. They were also the product of the Syrian anarchist thinker Omar Aziz’s conviction that the revolution could only succeed if it self-organised in ways antithetical to the regime’s authoritarianism.

In this city, a group of 40 young Syrian men between the ages of 21 and 30 even built an underground library. It had over 15,000 books collected from beneath the rubble of homes and from homes that would soon become rubble. They ranged from Islamic theology to Paulo Coelho’s The Alchemist and Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. The library housed a children’s section, and women who couldn’t leave their homes sent their husbands to pick up books from it. The young men even asked the books’ owners for permission whenever possible, and made sure to write their names in the books out of respect. In We Crossed A Bridge and It Trembled, Wendy Pearlman’s collection of Syrian testimonies, Wael, now a refugee in Sweden, spoke of how he thought of Daraya the first time he checked out a book in his new town: “A library means people will read, which means they’ll think, which means they’ll know their rights”. By the time the siege ended, the library’s fate joined that of Daraya’s people.

Ghiyath Matar was arrested on September 6th, 2011 and his mutilated corpse returned to his family days later. He was one of the first to go. In August 2018, the regime updated its records to list people who had died under torture in detention. The list included around 1,000 people from Daraya, including the Sharbaji brothers. Yahya and his brother Mohammed, known as Ma’an, were arrested with Ghiyath. Yahya was declared dead on January 15th 2013, Ma’an on December 13th of that same year.

They followed the fate of many Syrians who lost their lives in regime detention. In the notorious Saydnaya Prison near Damascus, up to 13,000 people were hanged between 2011 and 2015 (and it is still operational). Omar Aziz died under torture in prison on February 17th, 2013. The Palestinian-Syrian open software developer Bassel Khartabil Safadi was executed in October 2015 in Adra Prison, and his wife Noura only found out two years later. In Aleppo’s final weeks, the brutal four-year-long siege turned into another surrender. The de-facto capital of the revolution fell and the brutality of the town’s reconquest drew comparison with Guernica and Sarajevo.

I cannot list all of the dead, the ‘disappeared,’ the exiled. There are too many.

**An idea called Daraya**

This is the story of an idea called Daraya. Its people exposed the hypocrisy of a world that could let such atrocities happen, and only reluctantly welcomed a few survivors while leaving the rest to die. By doing so, the world exposed itself as criminal, through its inaction to protect the people of Daraya, Homs, Aleppo, Dara’a, and Eastern Ghouta. This is a testimony to an inconvenient fact: that long before Syrians turned into refugees and were being scapegoated on the shores of Fortress Europe, the revolution they were building under barrel bombs, snipers, and sieges had already been abandoned to its fate. The Local Council’s many appeals to the United Nations, including in the final months of its existence, went unanswered. As the council correctly noted in January 2016, UN Security Council Resolution No. 2165 of July 14, 2014, “authorises the delivery of humanitarian aid without requiring approval” from the regime. No satisfying answer was ever provided for why that humanitarian aid never came, why people were left to die from starvation or their inability to access medical treatment. No answer was ever needed for a crime so open for everyone to see in the age where massacres are live-streamed on Facebook and Twitter.

In the subsequent years since Huda was first arrested, the West’s self-declared gatekeepers of democracy watched actually existing democratic experiments die one after the other in Syria. And rather than speak of a European Crisis, the one that has so far allowed over 15,000 people to drown to death on its shores between 2014 and 2018 alone, we speak of a “migrant crisis”. To quote the everlasting James Baldwin, “what you say about somebody else reveals you”. The burden of proof has been thrown on the victims, on their mysterious ways, their darker skin, their cultural differences. In classical colonial arrogance in supposedly post-colonial times, the real crisis was avoided and, instead, the convenient scapegoats of the continent’s own structural crises were made to carry the cross.
Two weeks after Daraya fell, Bashar Assad went to the emptied town to pray in a mosque. Alongside him were high-ranking officials, including Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, known locally as the Mufti of Barrel Bombs for his sermons advocating the violent crushing of protesters. The Mufti was also named in an Amnesty International report as one of three officials deputized to approve the hanging of people in Saydnaya. The message was clear, again. Assad or we burn the country. Kneel or starve. They rejected Assad, so Daraya was burned. They refused to kneel, so Daraya was starved. Assad’s message was also addressed to the world: “Look what I can do to them”. He also wanted to tell his supporters that they can live a ‘normal’ life under his rule, as long as they behave. As the Syrian writer Omar Kaddour wrote: “As the regime applies its scorched earth policy and starves the population to bring it to heel, it insists on showing that in the regions it controls, life follows its natural course”. Those living under its control in Damascus could live a relatively ‘normal’ life. It’s why refugees tended to flee to regime-controlled areas a number of times. They knew that the regime’s barrel bombs wouldn’t fall from regime-controlled skies.

This is the story of an idea called Daraya. It is the story of a sick world, a world with a sickness that, in the words of the Syrian writer and former prisoner Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, “is aggravating our sicknesses, both inherited and acquired”. As more countries turn to increasingly authoritarian and xenophobic politics, those that were portrayed, against their will, as catalysts of that turn were made witnesses of the societies that produced it. As witnesses, they were forced to look at both Syria and the so-called ‘international community’ while being stripped of their agency to do anything about either. As for that community, it can exert its agency on Syrians and other marginalized groups without ever having to look at them.

Assad or we burn the country. Kneel or starve.
Stacks of Enab Baladi newspaper for distribution in Syria. Photo credit: Enab Baladi
Over ten months have passed since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. It has since gained momentum and the number of its participants increases day by day. Despite the suffering and sacrifices inflicted on its people, the revolution seems to show signs of imminent victory.

Our newspaper, Enab Baladi, started off in this context. It is the product of Daraya's own residents, people who love their country and wish to participate in the revolution to build a new Syria based on justice, freedom and dignity.

Why grapes?

Daraya is known for its history of grape cultivation. So, after much deliberation, the name ‘Enab’ (grapes) was chosen for its relationship to our city. The word is meant to symbolise authenticity and attachment to the land. And just as our grapes come in different types and varieties, so does ‘Enab Baladi’ represent our wide range of approaches and ideas. These grapes are ‘baladi’ (of our country) because they are produced by Daraya’s residents. Their cultivation depends on the dedication and efforts put in by the people of Daraya.

‘Enab Baladi’ is a type of newspaper which doesn’t restrict itself to just one area. In it, you will read about politics, the economy and much more. You will also find follow-ups on local developments in Daraya and beyond, as well as on detainees and martyrs. What’s more, you will hear the voices and reflections of the youth awakened by the revolution.

The ‘Enab Baladi’ family is a group of amateur writers with no prior experience in journalism, but who wanted to do their best to present another side of this multi-sided and blessed revolution nonetheless. We want to show how we participated in the liberated spaces created by the revolution, and set up a platform for our ideas and pens where we could express ourselves freely.

Just as the famed grapes of Daraya were distributed throughout Syria, this newspaper is a gift from us in Daraya, to our people throughout the country. We hope you will find it both special and useful. We send our tribute to the souls of the martyrs of the Syrian revolution and to the
sacrifice of the detained, the wounded and the activists. We salute all those who seek freedom for Syria, so that it may rise once again.

2- I Am in This Revolution for Many Reasons

Issue: 0
Sunday, 29th of January 2012

I am in this revolution for many reasons
But the most important of these
Is that I, like every woman, dream of a family... and of a child
I dream that my child will be the greatest boy or girl in the whole world
I want my child to live in their country as a human being whose rights are respected
I want my child to have a better education
I want my child to be creative, without being limited by ridiculous bureaucracy
I want my child to love their country, work for it and be proud to belong to it
I want my child to live freely, to think freely and to create freely
And if God does not give me children, then every Syrian child is my child
And for you, my child, I rebel :)
Chapter 2

Early Citizen Journalism from Daraya
Syrian citizen paging through Enab Baladi newspaper in the town of Binnish in rural Idlib, Northern Syria (May 2015)
Photo credit: Enab Baladi
On Friday, demonstrations took place at several locations in Daraya, despite the increase in security near the majority of mosques, especially Al-Bashir and Al-Uthman mosques, while (pro-regime) Addounia TV was filming worshippers leaving a mosque as if nothing was happening.

After explosions were heard near the Al-Khulani mosque, security forces made their way to the location, whilst a number of young people began chanting and calling for the regime to be overthrown.

At the same time, another demonstration, sweeping Al-Thawra street towards Al-Abbas Mosque, was met with fire. At the other end of the city, a demonstration was held near the Mus‘ab ibn Umair mosque, chanting slogans of freedom, and was soon dispersed by Jamil Hassan (head of the Air Force ‘Mukhabarat’ - Intelligence)’s militias with live ammunition.

The Air Force Mukhabarat also arrested Samir Sabri Murad today near the Mus‘ab ibn Umair mosque after midday prayers, as well as Ahmad Alon and his brother Mohammed near Taha mosque. Also arrested around the same time, were the young Imad Adnan Abu Kam, his cousin Ahmad Muhammad and Samer Fataf.

That evening, gunfire and explosions were heard near the railway, which also saw a massive deployment of security forces.
2 - Daraya: Evening Demonstrations Drain Assad’s Militias

Evening demonstrations continue to drain the regime militias led by Jamil Hassan, which are being mobilized daily to hunt down protesters demanding for the fall of the regime and the release of detainees.

The regime has used armoured vehicles and those mounted with machine guns. This led to seven injuries during last Wednesday’s protest, as the militias used bullets to disperse protesters.

This did not, however, hinder the perseverance of the revolutionaries who returned the next day with even more determination and resolve.

3 - Daraya: A Women’s Sit-in Protest for the Detainees

On Saturday afternoon, a group of Daraya’s women gathered in the centre of the city for a sit-in, aimed at raising awareness for the objectives and values of the revolution. For an hour, women demanded the release of detainees and called on their fellow citizens to refrain from sending their children to school, in solidarity with areas where children were forced out of school.

After the sit-in, they marched in a demonstration calling for the regime to be overthrown. Some of these women distributed leaflets during the demonstration, and others spray-painted phrases onto the ground such as “we want our children back”. The sit-in and demonstration ended with a women-led prayer calling for the release of all Syrian detainees.

The sit-in came two days after a similar event was held in front of Daraya’s courthouse on Thursday, 19th of January 2012. During the sit-in, photographs of the detainees were held up, while others attached their photos and names to the courthouse’s walls.
On the afternoon of Wednesday the 25th of January 2012, a student-led demonstration calling for the fall of the regime was dispersed by security forces using live ammunition. More than five students were arrested and released on the same day. At the same time, armed Shabbiha men were seen in front of the girls' high school, accompanied by a Chevrolet and camouflaged machine gun, which had already been used more than once against protesting students. Students reported feeling shocked at how this was becoming a daily occurrence.

4 - Daraya: Air Force Mukhabarat Used Machine Guns and Armoured Vehicles Against Student Demonstrations

Sunday, 29th of January 2012

I went out after last Friday’s prayers, to join a demonstration dubbed "Arming the Free Syrian Army" Friday Protest by activists, during which protesters chanted for freedom and for the fall of the regime. They also chanted for the wounded city of Homs and all besieged cities. Revolutionaries raised banners reading “Without you Baba Amr [District in Homs], we are all orphans” and “steadfast until victory, even if you [regime forces] break into Baba Amr”.

Both the army and Shabbiha brutally entered the city. Several security vehicles and buses loaded with soldiers entered Martyr Ghiyath Matar Street. At the same time, a heavy deployment of Jamil Hassan’s militias was also reported to be breaking into the city and erecting several checkpoints.

Checkpoints were set up near Al-Rahman and Al-Khulani mosques, manned by soldiers armed with machine guns. Another was erected in front of Al-Tawba Mosque, where cars passing by were searched. Security personnel was also seen wandering back and forth in Al-Thawra street.

The Mukhabarat stormed and ransacked one of the houses near Al-Bashir mosque after erecting yet another checkpoint in front of it.

Today, the skies of Daraya bore witness to warplanes flying at low altitude, and snipers stationed on the roofs of buildings. A sniper was seen opposite the Sadiq Amin mosque, and others on buildings on Martyr Talib al-Samra street (Old Corniche).

5 - Mass Demonstration and Heavy Security at the "Arming the Free Syrian Army" Friday Protest

Monday, 4th of March 2012
Author: Enab Baladi’s correspondent in Daraya

2 Ghiath Matar was a protester and organiser in Daraya. Matar was arrested and killed by the regime in September of 2011.

3 Talib al-Samra was a protester in Daraya arrested and killed by the regime. Al-Samra was arrested in September of 2011 and killed in October of 2011.
Daraya's people had not even had the time to celebrate the release of some of their children, among the hundreds who still remain in the darkness of a security cell, when the regime's brutal militias started a new campaign of arrests throughout the city on Daraya's finest youth.


Students took part in a huge demonstration in front of their school on Wednesday the 29th of February 2012, demanding the liberation of Muhammad Sharkas. The students moved earth and heaven, defying the militias and armed vehicles waiting for them outside.

Meanwhile, the convoy of Jamil Hassan's militias continued driving through the main streets of the city, placing checkpoints in different locations for short periods of time, before moving on to another.

On the same day, security forces raided several houses in search of activists, were seen in Hourriya (Freedom) Square, and an explosion was heard near the Al-Mustafa mosque.

Mohammed Sharkas is one of the first activists to remain in the Mukhabarat’s cells for more than seven months.
8 - Daraya: Near-daily Intrusions into the City by Shabbiha and Assad’s Forces

Sunday, 24th of June 2012

This week, the city has witnessed one of the most brutal escalations in its history, with repeated incursions by Assad’s soldiers and Shabbiha forces, and perhaps the most brutal use of warplanes to bomb civilian sites thus far.

On Monday the 18th of June 2012, large numbers of the regime’s army raided the eastern region of Daraya and the Al-Lawan area in Kafr Sousa. Gunshots were also heard coming from the New Corniche, and many new checkpoints appeared throughout the city.

In addition, Assad’s thugs, the Shabbiha, launched large-scale raids and mass-arrests in the city. They cut off certain roads leading to Damascus by positioning checkpoints at strategic crossings. Sources have also reported the presence of a tank on the southern side of the city. In response to this brutal intrusion, the people responded with a city-wide strike. We are also seeing an increase in women’s protests calling for national unity, as well as evening protests calling for freedom, and standing in solidarity with Eastern Ghouta. We are also seeing an increase in martyrs, the wounded and detainees.

On Thursday the 21st of June 2012, an incursion took place into the west of Daraya, near the city of Muadamiya. Reports from Muadamiya spoke of a rumoured split between Assadist militias during the raids in the area. Some honourable soldiers appear to have broken away and cooperated with the heroes of the Free Army instead, prompting the regime to respond brutally by bringing in reinforcements in the form of armoured vehicles, machine guns and BMP tanks. They also resorted to the use of helicopters indiscriminately shelling civilian homes, leaving a number of people dead and many more wounded. Clashes later took place in Martyr Ghiath Matar street and Abu Salah al-Samra street, where Assad’s militias shot indiscriminately at civilians. The Free Army tried to set up a checkpoint on the road leading to Damascus.

Security forces also erected a number of roadblocks in the city last night and opened fire on a car passing by, killing a young man named Mohammed Latifa. They arrested around six young people, including the young Mohammed Aliawi. In honour of the martyrs, a mass rally was organised after midnight with the support of the Free Army, who entered the city and blocked off access points to protect mourners from the Shabbiha.

Demonstrations are the oxygen of our Revolution

Our relentless heroes will not rest until they’ve reached their goal and fulfilled our promises to our martyrs. The afflicted cities must continue the revolution and not escape from it as the regime’s battalions continue their brutal escalation of violence against civilians demanding their freedom.

On Saturday the 16th of June 2012, the heroes took part in a morning demonstration in support of Eastern Ghouta and Douma, and condemned the international community’s shameful silence. On Monday, the rebels also came out in support of Douma the Resistant, following the news that Assadist forces had brutally opened fire on the city.

On Monday, the Free Army reportedly achieved an important victory in the city of Douma after Assad’s army had brutally shelled the city. Despite heavy security presence, a mass demonstration took place on Tuesday evening, and was broadcasted live on Orient News. During the protest, rebels chanted in solidarity with Homs, Douma and other affected cities. The rebels also devoted some of their chants to their Egyptian comrades, singing “hold your head up proud, you are Egyptian!”

Finally, in the afternoon of Friday the 22nd of June 2012, thousands took part in a mass demonstration to support affected cities and to honour the martyrs. They also called on the international community to put an end to the ongoing violations being committed by Assad’s forces. As though recalling the early days of protest, they symbolically gathered in Hourriya Square.

Our martyrs

In the past week, the number of people killed has risen:

1- Ahmed al-Hallaq: Killed on Monday the 18th of June, 2012, after security forces raided his house. When he refused to surrender himself, they shot him, causing him to fall from the fourth floor. He would rise again a martyr. The rebels came out that same evening to hold a mass funeral, despite the widespread presence of security forces, and the event was broadcasted live on several channels, including Al-Jazeera.


4- Abdul Rahman Nooh: Killed on Thursday the 21st of June, 2012.

5- Louay al-Saqqa: Killed on Thursday the 21st of June, 2012. All those
who died on Thursday fell victim to the Syrian Air Force’s indiscriminate shelling, which targeted western Daraya. The funerals for Al-Saqqa and Nooh were held the same evening.

6- Retired Lt. Col. Khairou Khulani Abu Muhammad: Killed on Thursday the 21st of June, 2012. He had been discharged from military service at the beginning of the revolution for refusing to open fire on civilians demanding freedom. According to a statement by the Saad Bin Abi Waqas battalion, he was killed by Assad’s forces in front of his house on Al-Thawra Street, where they shot him from a minibus and fled.

7- Ammar bin Mohammed Khaldoon al-Khatib: Killed on Friday the 22nd of June, 2012 by Assad’s forces.

8- Ahmed Abo Latifa: Shot by a gang of Assadists at a checkpoint on the evening of Saturday the 23rd of June, 2012.

Friday protest: Rulers are weak, where are the people?

Friday’s events began without any warning. Several explosions were heard close to the railway near Mus’ab ibn Umair mosque. Worshippers had barely finished Friday prayers when the shooting began to spread across the entire city.

In spite of this, several demonstrations took place that day. Demonstrations were held at the following locations in response to the regime’s brutality on that day and every other: Al-Uthman Mosque, Al-Bashir Mosque, Al-Ansar Mosque and Al-Faris Mosque. These demonstrations were met with live ammunitions leading to the death of young man Ammar bin Mohammed Khaldoon Al-Khatib, and leaving many injured.

Worshippers were also besieged in the Mus’ab ibn Umair mosque for more than three hours, during which Assad’s forces raided and looted nearby houses while shooting in all directions to cover the thefts, which continued on into the afternoon. In order to lift the siege on the mosque, the Free Army intervened and targeted one of the regime checkpoints within the city perimeter. There were heavy clashes in the city centre, along with heavy deployment of security forces, military vehicles, and snipers on government and high buildings shooting at anything that moved, while military helicopters flew over civilian areas.

9 - Our Women: Demonstration in Solidarity with Nour al-Tal

Issue: 20
Monday, 18th of June 2012

“Oh Nour, don’t worry...I’d sacrifice my blood and soul for you!”

These were the words voiced by the women of Daraya on Monday the 11th of June 2012, chanting for their detained friend Nour al-Tal.

They took part in a large demonstration through the streets of Daraya, demanding the immediate release of their comrade Nour al-Tal, who had been under arrest for over 15 days, committing no crime other than being a free Syrian woman.

They marched through the streets holding banners which reaffirmed unity between Syria’s Muslims and Christians. This was, in response to the regime’s attempt to ignite civil war between the different sects in the country, as well as its attempts to create conflict between the people of Daraya and Sahnaya. Thankfully, the demonstration was carried out peacefully without the intervention of the regime’s gangs.
The cruel experience of starving to death is a nightmare that the city of Madaya, a small town located in the countryside of Damascus, is witnessing, which haunts the people of Daraya today. This is happening as the city enters the fourth year of a siege imposed by regime forces, who have finally managed to separate the city from neighbouring Muadamiya (or Al-Muadamyeh al-Sham).

A 40-year-old farmer from the city, Ziad Abu Mohammad, says that: "The regime could not control the city without burning the land. The regime's starvation policy was put into practice in the city from day one, and involved preventing basic provisions for survival from reaching the city. Those not killed by explosive devices would just starve to death".

According to the farmer, the regime couldn't care less about civilians while shelling the city with barrel bombs. In fact, it is targeting civilian communities in order to put pressure on the Free Syrian Army (FSA). He adds: "why would Assad allow aid to get to the people he has intended to kill?" He blames "the failure of the international community to deliver even a single loaf of bread to hungry children".

The majority of people of Daraya work in agriculture, and civilians are only able to plant in small plots of land or the gardens of their own houses.

Soup is a main course and planted crops are not enough anymore

Soup has become the main meal for residents of Daraya, who add lots of spices to small portions of rice, in order to give it some colour and taste to help them feel full.

Abu Hasan Al Sous, 50 years old, tries to plant in what little is left of his destroyed garden. He says: "I am a man, drowning, clutching at straws. I know that what I have planted isn’t sufficient to feed my wife and two kids for more than two days, but there's nothing more I can do".

It has become common for most people to have just one meal a day. As Abu Hasan puts it: "the streets of the city came back to life with the ceasefire, but it has revealed the pain people were experiencing alone in the darkness of their cellars. I thought my case was the worst when I ran out of food supplies, but it turned out that all of my neighbours and people I know were living in even worse conditions".

The council stands helpless in trying to meet residents' requests, due to the lack of resources

The city’s Local Council Relief Office is unable to meet residents’ food needs, according to Haytham Abu Mostafa. He told Enab Baladi that: "we provide emergency meals for those most in need, but these meals are only enough for a few days, due to the long siege that has been suffocating the city and draining its resources". According to Haytham: "we’ve organised the resources available, in order to distribute them according to a well-studied plan which takes the difficulty of the siege into account".

Agriculture is considered by the Office director to be the most important tool against the siege, even if only to a limited extent. He points out that work in the field has been halted during military escalation on the city, as many crops were damaged, and many other fields were being shelled or in the snipers’ field of vision. With the beginning of ceasefire, the Office resumed its work by reclaiming new land and getting them ready to support residents in case the siege continued.

The director uses the expression "lacking all kinds of resources" to describe the situation in the city, as it has become very difficult to get seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. There has also been a lack of fuel needed to irrigate agricultural land, and damage to water pumps due to heavy shelling. Diesel fuel, used to run generators and water pumps, is almost impossible to find, forcing office staff and residents to use an alternative called “the mix”. This is essentially melted and refined plastic used to replace fuel. However, it is of bad quality, and causes engines to malfunction.

Abu Mostafa concluded by saying that the city’s residents are living "a very bad reality", and warned about the risk of a “humanitarian catastrophe if the siege continues, and if medical and relief aid is not delivered urgently”.

The city kitchen shuts down

The independent “Al Ataa’ Al Kheiri” [Charitable Giving] project has been very well received by the city’s residents over the past year and a half, but it unfortunately had to shut down early last March.
Mahmoud Abu Mojahed, one of the project’s coordinators, says that “the work began in the middle of October 2014 with the opening of a kitchen offering daily meals to residents. However, with the closing of the Muadamiya crossing, we had to reduce operations to three days a week, due to the lack of food supplies. When the regime separated Daraya from Muadamiya, we were forced to depend on resources we had stockpiled, until we ran out early last March and were forced to stop”.

The project’s coordinators have planted crops and bought some cows. Thanks to this, they are now able to distribute one litre of milk per week to families in need. Abu Mojahed confirms that “suffering is increasing at an alarming rate and the ache of hunger is creeping into the stomachs of every resident”.

**Human Rights Watch: The regime obstructs aid delivery**

In a report on the 4th of April, Human Rights Watch (HRW) confirmed that the Syrian regime is obstructing the delivery of aid to both besieged cities of the Ghouta region, despite its agreement with the United Nations on unobstructed delivery of aid.

Nadim Khoury, Deputy Executive Director of the Middle East division at Human Rights Watch, says the regime uses aid as leverage, adding that only some recent aid has been permitted to reach those who need it, and that it is still not enough.

Mohammed Shehadeh, a member of Daraya’s Local Council, told HRW that there is only one field hospital to serve the whole city. Yet, many surgical procedures cannot be performed there due to the lack of equipment. He points out that the lack of available resources means that they’ve been forced to use expired medication.

There are about 8,300 civilians currently living in Daraya, 2,150 of whom are under the age of 14, and 430 are young children. The city has been home to some 250,000 people, who left their homes as a result of the regime’s military operations and the siege that began in October 2012.
Scene from the movie titled "Tadmor" depicting Syrian detainees in Tadmor Prison.
Photo credit: UNAMI Documentation and Research.
The bleeding continues. The revolution is about to reach its first year, and the Syrian regime still struggles to survive, despite spilling the blood of martyrs and causing detainees to suffer.

According to statistics released by independent international, Arab and/or Syrian human rights organisations, more than 90,000 people have been detained in Assad's prisons in just ten months, and hundreds of them have lost their lives at the hands of executioners.

Friday of the Detainees of the Revolution

Local Coordination Committees documented 519 demonstrations at 455 protest points during the Friday protest dubbed ‘Friday of the Detainees of the Revolution’ during which dozens were either killed or wounded.

Over the course of the week, Arbin (town in southern Syria) and Harasta (north-eastern suburb of Damascus) were subjected to mass arrest campaigns, while in Douma (10 km north-east from the centre of Damascus) 12 people were killed in cold blood during a funeral, when snipers stationed on rooftops of nearby buildings shot at them.

Homs witnessed horrific massacres as demonstrators were shot with heavy machine guns and artillery, which also led to the collapse of buildings with residents inside in the neighbourhoods of Al-Rifai and Karam al-Zaytoun. This left dozen wounded, including women and children, who couldn't be rescued due to the on-going violence.

In Hama, security forces blocked all entrances and roads leading to Al-Assi Square in order to prevent residents from reaching it and cut off the city. The regime also launched a large-scale campaign of indiscriminate arrests of around 600 people, which was followed by the massacre of detainees who had already been severely tortured.

In Rif Dimashq, security forces stormed the city of Douma from several points and erected checkpoints to prevent entry to and exit from the city. This came after hours of clashes between regime forces and the Free Army in Arbin, whilst helicopters continued to fly over the city of Damascus and its suburbs.
In Dara’a, several neighbourhoods were infiltrated by the army and security forces, who opened fire on unarmed civilians. Several areas were overwhelmed with heavily armoured vehicles, leaving a number of people wounded.

**Everyone is a target**

Relief and medical workers were not spared by the brutality of the Syrian regime. On Wednesday in Idlib, security forces killed Syrian Red Crescent Director Dr. Abd-al-Razzaq Jbeiro, when he was on his way from Damascus to Idlib in an ambulance.

Religious figures were also targeted by the regime's savagery. Basillios Nassar, a priest in the Orthodox Diocese, was killed in the town of Kafr Buhum, in the Hama province, whilst trying to help some of the wounded in the neighbourhood of Al-Jarajmeh.

*Friday of the Right of Self-Defence*

The death toll is expected to rise to over 100 people following the massacres committed by security forces and Shabbiha during the “Right of Self-Defence” protest on Friday.

On Friday, despite the cold weather, 599 demonstrations took place calling for freedom and support for other affected areas. According to the independent Syrian Centre for Statistics, which provided data on the distribution of the protests, people gathered in 493 locations throughout different provinces.

They were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Protests</th>
<th>Locations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dara’a</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lattakya</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idlib</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

People were killed by the regime, throughout the country in the following locations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Number of people killed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rif Dimashq</td>
<td>38 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hama</td>
<td>21 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dara’a</td>
<td>15 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>14 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>10 people, including women and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idlib</td>
<td>3 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Syrian security forces also killed three of its own members, after they refused to shoot at demonstrators in Dara’a.

*Aleppo’s entry in the revolution’s arena*

In a remarkable development, Aleppo joined the revolution on the “Friday of the Right of Self-Defence” as several mass demonstrations took place in the city centre. This took security forces, who thought that Aleppo wouldn’t participate in the revolution, by surprise. They opened fire on demonstrators, leading to the death of over 12 people in the neighbourhoods of Al-Marja, Al-Fardous and Sayf al-Dawlah.

During the “Friday of the Detainees of the Revolution” and the “Friday of the Right of Self-Defence”, the total death toll reached 424 people.

*Al-Fardous is a small area located southwest of Bab al-Maqam in Aleppo, which was heavily attacked with barrel bombs since April 2014 as documented by Amnesty International’s report: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/circle-hell-barrel-bombs-aleppo-syria*
Is the Assad regime looking for justification for its actions, or does it not need it?

Did it need it when it invaded Hama in 1982? Did it need it when Hafez passed the throne on to his son? Did his son really need it when he invaded entire cities following the huge revolution against him?

In other words, does the Assad regime need justification for what it does, and does it need to buy loyalists and program them psychologically and ideologically, and make them neutral, or is it all outside of its calculations? Maybe the following examples will shed light on what we are trying to say.

**Legitimacy for entering Hama in 1982**

Before Hafez Assad began his war in the 1980s against the Muslim Brotherhood and anyone who stood up against him, as many Brotherhood prisoners themselves have said, he had no reason to declare war, and was instead waiting for the right opportunity. Unfortunately, when a number of assassinations were carried out by the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime chose to remain silent about it, despite the signs that pointed towards them.

These operations targeted security and military leaders, the most important of which was the artillery school incident when a large number of members of the Alawite community lost their lives. These operations against men of the regime fed sectarianism and consolidated the loyalty of many Alawites and beneficiaries of the regime, which in turn entrenched the conviction that the regime was only there to represent and serve the interest of one sect. This would, in turn, increase fear among many community members of the possibility of a Muslim Brotherhood rule.

Generally speaking, for almost a decade, Hafez Assad managed to make the Alawite community, as well as many of those who would not benefit from a Muslim Brotherhood rule, loyal to the regime. This particular group of loyalists was formed of traders and industrialists, and Hafez Assad knew how to woo them and serve their interests.

When Assad decided to declare his war on the Muslim Brotherhood and to invade Hama, he has been able to justify his operation. In other words, he found legitimacy and justification for his actions by accusing these gangs of being criminal agents taking orders from abroad. The Brotherhood, in turn, announced a military faction and in subsequent years carried out many killings and assassinations that threatened the stability of the country. Hafez Assad found broad support for his plan, because many had more interest in remaining loyal to the regime, and feared that the Muslim Brotherhood would threaten their status. Unfortunately, as is often the case with the Brotherhood, they were not politically aware.

**Legitimacy for inheriting the throne in 2000**

When Hafez decided to hand over power to his son Bashar, the People's Assembly (Syrian Parliament) was formally called in, and members voted unanimously to amend the old constitution in favour of a new one that would perfectly fit the new president. With all members in agreement, Bashar was crowned, and made Supreme Commander of the Syrian Army and the Armed Forces, as well as Secretary General of the Ba'ath Socialist Arab Party.

The question is: Why did this regime need to hold an urgent Parliament meeting for all of these laws to be issued? Was it not possible for the Assad regime to take these same measures without holding a session in Parliament?

Perhaps he could have, as we all suspect, and no one would have been able to stop him, but his real interest was to establish it legally, even if it was just a facade. Hafez wanted to show that the amendment to the Constitution was made by a legislative body (the Parliament) and no one else, even though everyone knew that the Syrian Parliament had no choice. He nonetheless needed this legitimacy for both internal and external appearances. It was, in fact, the Parliament who amended the constitution and raised this person two or three ranks overnight. It was the Parliament who made him Supreme Commander of the Syrian Army and the Armed Forces. And again, it was the Parliament who held a public meeting and voted unanimously on everything, without any pressure being applied!

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5 When Hafez Assad died in 2000, Parliament amended the constitution to lower the minimum age for a president from forty to thirty-four, in order to allow Bashar, who was thirty-five at the time, to inherit the throne.
Legitimacy for invading cities during and after 2011

Assad’s army did not have to invade any of the cities that were protesting in a peaceful manner. By ‘invasion’, we mean the complete destruction of infrastructure and residential buildings, as well as forced displacement, as with what happened to Baba Amr. Generally speaking, the regime should not invade a city that is protesting peacefully, as long as this city has not taken up arms against it. So, why does the regime do this, given that it is able to enter cities without tanks or armoured vehicles?

This criminal regime has pushed for the militarization of the revolution, because that is an arena it knows exactly how to operate within. It’s difficult for the regime or its cronies to continue dealing with peaceful protesters. Even if we don’t notice it, it’s happening behind the scenes: the killing and imprisonment of many officers and soldiers is a sign of many officers’ unwillingness to engage in the regime’s campaign against a defenceless population.

Such a criminal regime is very good at bombing cities, displacing their people and destroying their infrastructure. But these actions need a group that is fully prepared to do so. How can the regime guarantee its Shabbiha’s loyalty and handle the prospect of dissent within its ranks?

The regime is pushing security forces, Special Task Forces and the Shabbiha towards the cities, knowing that many of them will be killed. They know that each of these is worth more than dozens of ordinary recruits, but that their deaths send a message to their colleagues that they are in imminent danger, and that they must defend the regime with all their strength in order to survive, for the battle is one of survival.

We are talking about a widespread fear of annihilation, which then unconsciously entrenches their adherence to a murderous regime. The result is that those who become non-human are ready to do whatever the regime asks, regardless of its nature. They are not really defending the regime, but defending their very existence. To them, their lives are more important than the life of ‘their lion’\(^6\).

This is how the regime gains legitimacy and justification to remain in power and continue killing. If the regime had not ended up in direct confrontations (even at a later stage) with protestors holding weapons, the results would have been different for the revolution. Defections would have also increased, because human beings, even at their worst, cannot continue to kill indefinitely.

But the criminal regime takes legitimacy from its ability to derail the course of the revolution (i.e. the behaviour of its revolutionaries). Rather than the revolution gaining more and more support from those who had remained silent and those who still believed the lie that the regime was protecting minorities, what we are instead witnessing is that many groups view the regime as their saviour and protector.

Is Baba Amr a model to follow?

Throughout a period spanning months, there were mutual battles between the regime and the Free Army in Baba Amr, resulting in victims on both sides. Baba Amr might as well be called the cemetery of security forces and Shabbiha.

Pressure was escalating on a daily basis among those preparing themselves for a regime invasion. Let these loyal people become more and more hated. Let them see that no one else is faithful to them. Let them say "Oh Assad, we are your Shabbiha forever". Let them see how they are the targets of both civilians and the military alike. When the moment comes, these so-called saviours become raging gulls, looting demons, and criminals who kill and rape. These militias do not differentiate between a man, a woman, a child, or an elder. We are all the same, and we can choose to either be killed or embrace our murderer.

For me, the important thing in the end is to remain true to myself and stay here. I am not going to die complicit in this regime. They are all replaceable. The members of the security forces, the Shabbiha and their families, they are all replaceable. I am the one who is not replaceable, I am the one who must stay forever, even if no one else does. Aren’t you the protector of minorities?

\(^6\) Translator’s note: the word used was `أسدهم`, which literally means ‘their lion‘, but in fact refers to Assad himself (Assad means Lion in Arabic).
Why would the regime bomb a place where one of its most important security headquarters (the notorious ‘Palestine Branch’) is located? What’s next? Where else will the regime attack those rebelling against it? The Presidential Palace? Perhaps the regime has begun to play its last card in an attempt to turn the tables and involve regional powers, whilst trying to convince allies of its own worthiness.

The regime tried with all its might to keep Damascus and Aleppo away from the revolution. But their inevitable entry, especially given Aleppo’s new role as the heart of the revolution, has forced the regime to carry out bombings in strategic places. This is something the regime has always tried to avoid, but knew it may have to resort to doing. This is what leaked documents from the Crisis Unit and private meetings between heads of government in Syria revealed. Every Syrian knew the regime would resort to these bombings if the revolution continued, but they were also hoping that the regime would fall before it could start implementing its hideous methods.

The regime’s limit was reached when, according to leaks, it started threatening the great merchants and manufacturers of Damascus and Aleppo on a daily basis, asking them to either support the regime or the revolution. The regime made it clear that, should they choose the revolution, it was prepared to burn the cities to the ground, starting with Damascus’ Souq Al Hamidiyya marketplace. The option of war was then on the table.

In other recent leaks, it was noted that the regime was trying hard to push Syrian society towards armament and its subsequent violent response, in an attempt to distort the people’s revolution in the eyes of the world, and turn it from a peaceful revolution against a tyrant into a conflict between armed parties. The source states that the regime’s forces could have protected the Shabbiha, but instead left them to their fate in order to strengthen the narrative of armed gangs and be able to invoke the rhetoric of fighting terrorism.

Leaks also seem to suggest that the regime was able to infiltrate the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and ranks of the Free Army, exposing their coordinates and activities. There have been many breakthroughs in recent days. The leaks continue, stating that all forms of peaceful demonstrations and protests must be eliminated and turned into fully armed manifestations, recognizing the inability to suppress or limit them until now.

We can’t dismiss these as mere leaks given the reality that corroborates them. Everyone agrees that the regime is dragging the revolution towards a military confrontation, and trying to distort and smear it with the label of terrorism. Finally, everyone agrees that the greatest danger posed by the revolution to the regime is its peaceful and civil nature, the most important manifestation of which are these protests. Therefore, these leaks are no mere leaks, but rather something that we should be taking very seriously.

What are our duties as Syrian people?

How do we Syrians protect ourselves from sliding into civil war, internal strife, and thus an unknown fate? We have to clearly define our position and study our next steps consciously. We must exploit the weaknesses of our adversary and be wary of its strengths.

The regime knows that we see with our own eyes that it is impossible for them to stop the demonstrations or limit their spread. This is our revolution’s biggest strength, and it reflects the civilisation and culture of our people. In contrast, we saw that the regime was able to win every military confrontation and turn it in its favour, which was enough to convince its allies and Shabbiha to keep the repression going. One of the revolution’s goals should be to force them to abandon the regime with time.

Our goal is to win this revolution and achieve its objectives. This will only be achieved through our commitment to the principles of the revolution. Promoting an armed alternative will bring down the existing regime and, with it, the Syrian state. This means that its history, geography and social and cultural cohesion could fall, or be in danger.

Syria will not benefit if the regime succeeds in luring us to its playing field. With all the slaughters and humiliations imposed by the regime, we have no choice but to drag it onto our doorstep, where it would be at its weakest and most vulnerable, both internally and externally.

We aren’t faced with two good choices or two equally bad ones, but rather with a choice between a scenario that will bring down the regime, and one that will bring down both regime and state. The first would mean lots of
killing and suffering, but for a limited time, and would end with the fall of the regime. The second, unfortunately, involves widespread killings, mischief, chaos and prolonged suffering that would continue even after the fall of the regime.

Fridays of protests are aimed at proving our existence and increasing our influence on the ground, and the revolution must be fully conscious of how important it is we do this. This is exactly what the struggle between demonstrators and the regime (both internally and externally), is about.

The more the revolution increases its presence on the ground through demonstrations, the greater the likelihood of overthrowing the regime and building the state becomes. On the other hand, the fewer the demonstrations, the greater the likelihood that they’ll be replaced with military action, and thus bring down both the state and the regime together.

What are the clear steps to be taken in the coming days?

Despite all the killing and oppression that our heroic people are being subjected to, we must focus on:

1- Continuing to mobilise demonstrations calling for freedom, dignity, justice, democracy and a citizens’ State.

2. Reorganising the way in which the days of gathering are called. Political goals must be spelled out every Friday, and last Friday was a good example of this. If, for example, last Friday was called “Friday of the Revolution Condemning Terrorist Operations”; we would have taken an excellent step for both our people, to whom the picture may not be clear, and for the international community, which is closely watching our revolution.

3. Motivating Syrian communities abroad to participate in protests on the same days and turning them into international Syrian days.

4. Being cautious of the revolution’s militarisation and the arming of all citizens. If Syrian people continue their struggle against this tyrannical regime, the international community will intervene, even if militarily.

The ball is still in the Syrian people’s court, and we are still able to avoid tragedies, provided that efforts are made and our vision is united on a strategy that takes into account one of the most important strengths of the Syrian revolution.

Once again, the Syrian regime renews its war against the Syrian people demanding freedom and dignity, by threatening them and declaring that ‘security’ is a red line at all costs. It also hinted at a new phase of repression and terrorism when Assad said that the enemy has now become internal. The slogan “it’s over!” was raised by his supporters and loyalists.

Bashar Assad’s latest speech in front of the all-applauding Council was a renewed declaration of war against his people, and a gesture for his Shabbiha and mercenaries to commit even more massacres against innocents throughout the country. This is exactly what happened in terrible massacres in the rural village of Al-Qubeir in the countryside of Hama, Al-Haffah in Lattakyia, Dar’a, and on and on, where the consequences of Assad’s orders were immediately manifested.

The joint Arab-International envoy, Kofi Annan, was ashamed to announce the failure of his initiative and six-part plan against the regime’s suppression and brutality. He instead said that the international community was unable to find a way to implement it, or to at least protect the Syrian people from the war machine. His task has instead become that of counting and documenting deaths!

Meetings on Syria are being held in Istanbul, Paris, Washington and elsewhere, with none of them leading to any result other than denouncing, condemning and agreeing on another meeting to discuss ‘the Syria issue’ and only focus on who is attending and who is not.

In the face of international failure and the regime’s on-going escalations, the free revolutionaries have no choice but to suffer with their wounds and pain, and to continue their revolution for freedom and dignity. Besides God, they can only trust themselves until they are victorious. The threats of Assad don’t frighten them, nor does Annan’s failure stop them, because they believe that the revolution can only be won by them.
Chapter 4

Women at the Frontline
Women from the city of Daraya holding a picket to protest against the Syrian regime's oppression (2015)
Photo credit: Daraya Media Center
Umm Ahmed found herself faced with two choices: to leave her home and city, or to remain under indiscriminate shelling and face certain death, yet die a free woman. Death lurks around every corner, and both of Umm Ahmed’s choices would leave a bitter aftertaste.

It has been over a month, and Daraya remains under siege and continuous shelling. Despite this, Umm Ahmed preferred to stay in her house with her husband, helping him as much as possible, because she couldn’t tolerate the cruelty of displacement and exposing her children to the hardships of homelessness. As Umm Ahmed explained, the suffering of women in Daraya is twofold: the bitterness of experiencing war, and the bitterness of daily suffering as mothers and wives living in conditions that lack everything essential to survive. Despite showing signs of fatigue, she explained: “I spend my days in the kitchen preparing food for my husband and his friends, as well as for some young boys in the neighbourhood, because they are the ones fighting and protecting us at night”.

She suddenly smiled and continued: “Sometimes young people feel that they need sweets because of the cold, so I try to make them what they want, despite the fact that it is very difficult to find any of the ingredients I normally need to prepare these dishes”. Umm Ahmed spends the rest of the day making gas masks using simple tools, in the event that the regime bomb the city with toxic gas. She can barely meet the household’s needs, often depending on what people have left behind, be it livestock or plants. “Food is scarce, and not enough for our needs. We rely on canned food that gets distributed”.

After meeting Umm Ahmed, we met with one of the activists working in relief, who told us more about the people of Daraya’s suffering. “People lost their provisions because of power cuts. There is nothing to eat at home. We can only distribute bread and food baskets containing canned vegetables, rice, bulgur and sugar”: he said. “Pasta is the best dish those still in Daraya could hope to get”.

Not only do women who remain in Daraya suffer from the scarcity of food or struggle protecting and caring for children, but some women are in direct contact with danger. Umm Hani is a mother of two. She works as a nurse in a field hospital. Her work makes her vulnerable to shelling and
snipers. She explained her dilemma by saying: "I am caught between my two dreams: my duty as a mother to my children, and my duty as a nurse. But the most important of all is my duty to the revolution. At the beginning of the siege of Daraya, I was with my children and I was worried about being called into work. I would continuously obsess over one question: "how could I leave them like this?" Nonetheless, with an increased number of people wounded and the nurse shortage, they asked for my help. So I decided to go, leaving the children with my husband, who works in the relief field distributing aid and medicine to those in need and helping the wounded. The children stay with him in the car during his tours, which gives me a certain sense of reassurance. However, I am always worried and afraid when I hear the sound of bombing or air raids, always wondering if, at some point I will see my children among the wounded I treat. These concerns would constantly occupy Umm Hani's mind and she only found peace when she sent her children to a safe place where her mother had settled. But the brief silence before she continued to speak gave away the fact that she is still worried regardless.

At this point, Umm Hani breaks down in tears: "When my daughter came to visit me, the hardest moment was saying goodbye. She had tears in her eyes, and I did too. It was as if this was the last time she would see me, and she said to me: 'Mama, I am only leaving you because you need to work'"

After this sad thought, she told us what she considered to be the most painful experience she had been through: "The most shocking thing for me was that my daughter's visit coincided with the time when Ansam Ziadeh, a girl about the same age as my daughter, was killed. The poor child was hit by shrapnel from a bomb while she was in her home. As the doctor tried to perform CPR on the little girl, I started to feel afraid for my daughter. The look in that girl's eyes... She was frightened. My children were far away from me and it made me feel such heartache. How could I be in one place, and my children somewhere else, so far away from me? What keeps me strong today is the knowledge that I do a wonderful work, and will continue doing so until we reach victory. This is my mission and duty, and I have to complete it".

Umm Hani doesn't care about how harsh and dangerous her working conditions may be. In some instances, her job requires her to follow patients after they leave the hospital. Sometimes, "we go out late at night to change an infected bandage or care for the patient. Snipers are scattered throughout the streets and we don't know exactly where they are. The car carrying us has been hit by sniper bullets in several places". But Umm Hani continues to do what is asked of her, which are often tasks fraught with other dangers, such as rockets or missiles falling only a few meters away from her. She looked confident, strong and secure. She told us: "Someone who is afraid would never enter this field of work, but I am not afraid because you can't hear the bomb that kills you".
Women at Work and Men at Home: Change of Roles Strikes a Hard Blow to Traditional Customs

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Author: Judy Salam

Becoming refugees has lead many Syrian families outside the country to change their traditional habits and customs. The most notable difference being that men used to work, provide the livelihood for and carry financial burdens of the family, while the wife would usually stay at home taking care of the children and household matters. However, this concept has clearly been changing among refugee communities as women are forced to work to secure a livelihood and cover the costs of rent. At the same time, men often face difficulties in finding employment and adapting to this new reality.

In this report, Enab Baladi reviewed cases of refugee families in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, where women have been forced to work. It studied the impact of this shift of family customs on the balance of roles and the psychological impact on both men and women.

Change of roles

Umm Mohammad comes from a prominent family in the countryside of Damascus. She is married with six children, the oldest of whom is in university. Today, she works in a school despite having only completed secondary school. “I work every day to pay for rent and food expenses”, she tells Enab Baladi. “My husband hasn’t found a job yet, which makes him depressed. He’s not used to sitting at home and asking me for money”. She added: “I am very careful about every word I say in front of my husband because he is so sensitive about it, about this feeling of inferiority”. I always try to say things that raise his morale, like: “Come on Abu Mohammed! You worked for 30 years and never left us wanting for anything. It’s my turn now to help you a little bit, and I’m happy to be helping”. She also pointed out that her husband’s family, originally from Binnish, a city in the countryside of Idlib, can’t accept the fact that she’s a working woman, and have caused her a lot of trouble because “we don’t have women working in Binnish”. Umm Mohammad added “but had they given us the money to pay rent, then I wouldn’t have to go out to work”.

On the other hand, 38-year-old Umm Imad, from Damascus with three children, works in a sewing factory on a low wage. She says: “I’ve been working since I came to Lebanon and earn a low salary, but still, it’s better than nothing”. However, she faces another challenge: her husband. “My husband, who used to forbid me leaving the house in Douma, now sees me going out every day, shutting the door behind me, while he stays at home taking care of the kids until I get back. I’m sure my husband is uncomfortable and has doubts about everyone I work with” she said, adding that this has affected her husband’s mental health, as he “has become very nervous and has changed since we came to Lebanon. He looks for work every day but it’s all in vain”.

Exploitation and pressure

Enab Baladi also came across cases in which the situation was being made worse by husbands, such as in the case of Umm Osama. She works in a conserves factory, while her husband is struggling to find a job. “He became lazy and I had to handle all of our expenses. My husband used to smoke one pack of cigarettes a day, but now he is smoking two and asking me for money to buy them. He’s no longer interested in looking for a job and has thrown all responsibilities onto me, including things that don’t even require money, such as trying to enrol our children into school”.

Similarly, Huda, who is married but has no children yet, says: “On top of the difficulty of work and the hardship and pressure I face in the sewing factory, my husband blames me, as though I should feel guilty because I am working”.

Umm Samer, whose husband is detained, works to support her children but has been facing problems with her 12-year-old son, Samer. He “has grown up with the idea that I am the one who should work, so he has become lazy and indifferent to household chores. This will negatively affect his character when he grows up”.

Aiming for partnership

In an interview, Ms. Nour, Executive Director of the ’Women Now’ Centre in Chitaura, Lebanon, which works on women’s economic and social empowerment, pointed out that there are two side effects of women being the main breadwinners, as opposed to men: “women being exploited by their husbands, or rebelling against their family and not taking into
account their husbands' inability to find work", stressing that these trends cause greater problems, threatening marital life. Nour added that the goal is to achieve a "shared state of responsibility, especially given the difficult circumstances of Syrian refugees which cannot be faced by men alone”. Women also play a role in economic life “and contribute to the development and progress of society”.

Nour believes that “clarifying working conditions from the offset can ease tension between the two sides” while “prejudice by either side is among the most pressing difficulties to overcome, such as when the husband believes that his wife works to gain the financial capital to get away from him and not have to obey his orders, or when she believes that she has been wronged in having to work”.

Asmaa, a psychologist, explained that “the husband’s declining role in a household can result in a violent reaction against his wife, due to the loss of privilege and ‘destabilisation’, so he takes it out on her”. But despite the change of roles, “some traditions and customs are still the same. Women are required, in addition to their work, to manage the house and to bear the burden of society’s view of them as women who have broken taboos and dared to leave the kitchen!”

Asmaa added that women’s work “has never been something to be ashamed of or derogative. On the contrary, this role has contributed to alleviating the family's burdens. It’s the way of thinking which some husbands and wider society subscribe to, viewing women as not having a role in society, that has created this problem between the two sides”.

**Society’s perception**

Hamed, an Arabic teacher, isn’t opposed to women being employed and introducing this culture into society, but questions “the ability of our women to face these sudden changes without making mistakes”. He noted that “Lebanese culture is very different to that of Syrian people, and many women would not be able to accommodate these differences”.

Amer, a young man in his twenties, doesn’t accept the idea of women being able to work. He asked: “why do women find more jobs than men in Lebanon?” He attributed this to two reasons: “either because women’s wages are low, or because the employer enjoys the presence of women who work for him” which “makes us jealous, but we remain helpless and afraid for our women when they work outside [the household]”.

Maryam, a university student who teaches Syrians in Lebanon, believes that "women working is not a big deal in normal circumstances and there is no need to get into it". What’s new today is that men are unemployed and “this started spreading quickly. But our society will not accept men being left without work, including if women themselves work”.

In a report issued by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the beginning of July, entitled *Woman Alone: The Fight for Survival by Syria’s Refugee Women*, it was revealed that “more than 145,000 Syrian refugee families in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan are headed by women facing a lone fight for survival”.

The report showed that in every one in four Syrian refugee families in Lebanon, the woman is working to support it. And between the pressures of work and family, Syrian women find a way of being productive and breadwinner of the family, preventing it from collapsing amid deteriorating living conditions caused by the war, thus contributing to the construction of society and participating in its decision-making.
The Syrian regime uses the threat of detention to terrorise women, in an attempt to keep them away from the revolution. The fear of 'rape and the violation of their honour' is a concern for them, given the scandal it would represent within their community.

Umm Khaled, a woman from the city of Hama, told Enab Baladi: “Anyone who witnessed the events in Hama in the 1980s knows the extent of the regime’s brutality, and that women were raped in front of their relatives”. She insisted: “Despite my conviction that the regime is oppressive and unjust, and that the revolution is sacred, I prefer to distance my daughters and myself from activism. So, I prevent them from following what is happening in the country out of fear of arrest, especially as this city is fully controlled by the regime”. Umm Khaled, and those who think the same, cannot be blamed, especially as these stories are based on lived experiences and not just rumours.

The regime has cultivated fear and terror in the hearts of people. It tries to deter them from even thinking about participating in the revolution. This is called ‘psychological terrorism’. Thus, the regime disseminates the horrifying stories of those who were arrested by releasing some. This way, those who are released tell others what happened and plant fear in their hearts, even if unknowingly. Despite this, many have been able to overcome their terror, and have fought with strength since the beginning of the revolution. One of the female activists from Hama, who preferred to remain anonymous, told Enab Baladi that: “Since the beginning of the revolution, I have seen demonstrations throughout the city. It started with distributing water and vinegar to demonstrators and then turned into relief and media work”.

The activist participated in the revolution in Hama amidst an intense presence of regime forces. She added: “Even though I have been traumatised from my arrest, I would always tell myself that my honour is no more precious than the lives of the young people who were killed. Even if I am arrested and raped, I will consider that I have lost a part of my body and sacrificed my honour for the revolution.

“A patient of mine told me about her marrying off her eldest daughter, a 12 year-old girl, two years ago. She is now being accused of marrying off her 10 year-old, and waiting for her 8 year-old to grow up and get married soon”, Dr. Mahmoud said. He explained that the woman was unable to provide for and protect her girls following her husband's death three years ago.

A social catastrophe is growing in the Free Army-controlled districts of Aleppo, especially among female-headed households. Poverty and war are overwhelming them, and leading them to marry their daughters off before they even reach 14 years of age, in order to alleviate themselves of financial responsibility.

The problem is worsened by the lack of awareness among parents, and their lack of understanding of the risks of child marriage, in addition to the psychological and physical consequences of such a practice. Often, it is the man’s second marriage, and there is a large age gap between him and the girl, who did not even finish growing with her first family before finding herself in charge of starting a second. Such arrangements prevent her from completing her education and playing with her schoolmates, as she suddenly finds herself a mother, being told to raise children herself instead.

Aisha, who works at one of the hospitals in liberated Aleppo, tells us about one of these marriages: “One of the young girls got married and was abandoned by her husband after less than two months. He travelled to Turkey under the pretence of work, and she didn't hear from him for a whole year after that”.

As for the physical dangers, Aisha adds: “A 15-year-old girl got married a year and a half ago and she has not yet given birth. Due to the enormous pressure inflicted on her by her husband and his family for not yet being pregnant, the girl was given medicines to solve the problem. When examined by the doctor, it was confirmed that her uterus was not yet mature, and the large amount of medication she was taking could lead to uterine fibroids or even cancer in the future”. This is in addition to cases of large lesions and haemorrhages, which some of these girls are exposed to during childbirth at these ages, according to Aisha.
The Revolutionary Council of Aleppo launched an initiative entitled *Our Daughters Are our Collective Responsibility* to raise awareness among parents about the dangers of early marriage. They did so by distributing leaflets and holding women's seminars supervised by female psychologists and doctors on Thursday the 11th of June 2015 in the district of Salah Ad-Din, south of Aleppo.

Abu Mahiou al-Kurdi, spokesperson for the Revolutionary Council of Aleppo and a sponsor of the initiative, said: "The initiative also includes supporting poor and destitute families, especially those led by women. We have started to support families, with the help of young people in the Council, in an attempt to alleviate this phenomenon as much as possible. Following this, we will work on providing accurate statistics in order to give them proper access to financial sponsorship". Abu Mahiou confirmed that this phenomenon has decreased the average age of marriage among women and girls from 25 to 17.

Enab Baladi spoke with Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah Salem, former Head of the Aleppo Scholars Front and member of the Syrian Islamic Council, to get his view on the issue from a legal point of view, particularly as most people are arguing that there is no legal impediment if the girl is 'of age'.

Sheikh Muhammad stressed that there is legal evidence in the Quran restricting such marriages, such as the verse "And test the orphans [in their abilities] until they reach marriageable age. Then if you perceive in them sound judgement, release their property to them. And do not consume it excessively and quickly, [anticipating] that they will grow up. And whoever, [when acting as guardian], is self-sufficient should refrain [from taking a fee]; and whoever is poor - let him take according to what is acceptable. Then when you release their property to them, bring witnesses upon them. And sufficient is Allah as Accountant".

The phrase "reach marriage age" means that both husband and wife in the relationship are of an age which permits them to assume marital responsibilities. This gives a strong indication that there is an appropriate age for sexual activity. Though the verse does not make reference to a specific age, it is determined by custom and practice. This, according to the Sheikh, confirms that a such a young person in this day and age is not prepared for marriage and the responsibility of having a family.

As the Prophet said: "a virgin should not be given in marriage except after her permission". How can she give permission whilst knowing nothing? And even if her opinion is taken into account, does it mean she is eligible, given that she may only be 12 or 14 years old? As far as the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha is concerned, Sheikh Mohammed confirms that hers was a special case that can’t be compared to the modern day situation due to the difference in time, location, environment and people. This view was adopted by former scholars such as Andalusian poet and theologian, Ibn Hazem.

He concluded by saying that “the reality is that child marriage is spreading in conditions of poverty, ignorance and a lack of awareness. One cannot find it, for example, among the educated, religious or wealthy. As there is a lot of exploitation and an increase in the number of divorces, the argument that a girl’s husband takes care of her is very weak, and it’s her family members who should be taking care of her”. Sheikh Mohammad called for a deep review of each family before it allows the marriage of young girls even if all parties are in agreement. And if such a marriage existed in these conditions, would it be possible to accept if the family's economic situation is improved?
While the world is busy covering the war in Syria as it enters its fifth year, the Assad regime is violating women's rights by subjecting them to arrest and arbitrary detention, according to human rights organisations.

Yesterday, on Monday the 22nd of June, the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) published a report entitled Detention of Women in Syria: a Weapon of War and Terror, which documents violations against Syrian women who have been arbitrarily detained by the regime. The report points out that, during the first 18 months of the conflict, the Syrian regime targeted activists, launching large-scale campaigns of arbitrary arrests, while using state-owned media to label them as terrorists and thugs.

Nine in ten women has been subjected to sexual violence

The report presents the findings of interviews carried out by six researchers trained in cooperation with Syrian human rights groups between 2012 and 2014. It reviews the testimonies of 10 women, selected from a total of 53 interviews with Syrian women detained during the conflict. This was the result of a long-term investigation initiated by EMHRN in 2012 in order to support the efforts of Syrian human rights groups documenting violations.

Only one of the women interviewed was found not to have been subjected to sexual violence, including verbal abuse. Section II of the report provides the full testimonies of other women, detailing incidents of abuse in both official and secret detention facilities, including humiliating physical searches, deprivation, threats and solitary confinement, as well as multiple forms of torture such as rape and sexual harassment.

Although the report focuses on violations carried out by the Syrian regime, it recognises that Daesh and other armed opposition groups have also carried out serious offences. EMHRN notes that these violations have attracted the attention of the international community at large, whereas crimes committed by Assad's regime have been largely forgotten.

A bargaining chip for the exchange of prisoners

The report cited several examples of women being used as bargaining chips by the regime and armed groups in prisoner exchanges, shedding light on the corruption, which exists in trials of Syrian women in prisons. It also included testimonies of girls who were forced, under torture, to confess practicing “sexual jihad” with opposition factions. Their admission was then broadcasted on state-owned media without their knowledge.

However, women's suffering doesn't end once they are released from prison. The ostracism they are subjected to by their families and society has a significant social, economic and psychological impact on their lives, and could include dismissal from work, exclusion from educational institutions, divorce and even being disowned by their families and communities.

In the meantime, the international community is failing to act against the culture of “ impunity” prevailing in Syria, which is a key factor in the continued violations committed against women detained in the country, as well as the increasing influx of refugees to Europe and Syria's neighbouring countries.

Women's leading role since the beginning of the revolution

"Since the beginning of the revolution, women have played a prominent and influential role in organising demonstrations, peaceful sit-ins and media coverage, as well as relief and medical assistance" said Huda Ali, a researcher at the Syrian Network for Human Rights, in an interview with Enab Baladi. She noted that all of the above exposed them to different types of violations, "initially by the regime and later by all other armed factions".

More than 18,000 women were killed by regime forces, among them at least 31 were killed whilst being tortured in detention. About 6,500 women were abducted and detained, 255 of them under the age of 18, and some 2,500 remain in detention or forcibly disappeared, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

7 Translator’s note: This term refers to the practice in which women sympathetic to religious extremist groups offer or are forced to “marry” to jihadist militants, often repeatedly and in temporary marriages.
“After being arrested I knew the meaning of injustice and I am more willing to ask for freedom”, Huda said after experiencing the injustice of prison. Huda described the moments of her arrest, saying: “I didn’t expect to be arrested with two of my friends at the checkpoint. I told myself that we were going to be investigated and then released. But an hour later, they arrested us”.

The women were transferred by car in the mountains of Muadamiya whilst being verbally and physically abused. “I was scared getting into the car with the security agents. We were taken to the mountains by the Fourth Division, with a tremendous amount of insults and beatings. They couldn’t stand us not only because we are women, but being from Daraya only increased the amount of insults as well”.

Huda and the other detainees were not just afraid of being arrested. Huda’s main concern was the wellbeing of her daughter and husband. She had not yet realised that the hardest part was to come. “When I entered the prison, I fainted and it felt as though I was in a dream. The room was underground, dark and putrid, with over 30 detainees. We were in a room of two metres squared in size”.

Huda described the detainees’ poor health conditions. Most of the time, they were not provided with any kind of treatment or the option of going to hospital. “I got sick and they didn’t treat me or send me to the hospital. I stayed in prison despite my health condition, and it started deteriorating when I entered the detention centre. I also got lice”. Huda was tortured for seven straight days: It was “physical torture. I was beaten with a stick, and they stretched me more than once during the investigation, which made me collapse”.

She paused for a moment before continuing: “There is something far worse than the physical torture, and that’s the psychological torture. I don’t like to remember or talk about it. Harassment, touching our bodies in a shameful way, threatening us with rape, and then there were the screams of men being tortured with electric shocks that made their voices reverberate through the whole prison. We could hear it all”. She adds that, despite everything, she always remained hopeful and optimistic, continuing to believe that she would soon be released, which saved her from despair. In Huda’s words, the walls of the prison that “restricted my body are not going to limit my spirit and mind”.

Huda’s detention lasted for two months due to fabricated accusations. She said: “We used to spend our days in prison reading the Quran with other detainees. When I was transferred to Adra Prison, I learned how to knit with wool. One of the girls there taught me how. I got to know people from different regions. They all have different characters and ways of thinking, and this has contributed to me gaining some life experience and patience, but I do wish that I had learned that elsewhere”.

"You Can Never Besiege My Mind!"
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Author: Baylasn Omar
Translated by: Ruba Al Jarf
The woman, who asked to be called "R.A.", did not know what fate awaited her as she was pushed violently by her captors, dozens of members of Daesh, who had vowed to kill and crucify her.

According to activists in the area, this appears to be a widespread issue among the women of Deir ez-Zor, and other areas under the control of Daesh. Women who are imprisoned are not informed of the charges against them, whether or not they have the right to a fair trial, or even the extent of credibility of the judges presiding over their cases. It is left to activists to ask: Has this woman been given any chance to defend herself before the verdict was issued?

Girls kidnapped into slavery

Mohammed, a witness to R.A.'s arrest, told Enab Baladi that several cars raided her house in the Deir ez-Zor countryside, arrested and blindfolded the woman. She was accused of collaborating with the Assad regime against the organisation, leading "many people to insult her and call for her death. Such forceful reaction pushed her family to leave the area" he said.

Mohammed explained he wanted to "expose the practices of Daesh and reveal what women were subjected to in environments where extremist factions prevail". Omar (a pseudonym) is one of R.A.'s relatives. He told Enab Baladi that R.A.'s kidnapping had had serious consequences on her reputation. He added: "She was at the mercy of the organisation to satisfy its members' every whim, although the charges against her were nothing but a pretext used to arrest her".

Omar said that women and girls "are kidnapped to be turned into sex slaves in the houses of foreign fighters". He described what was occurring as "painful and shameful". Another of his female relatives was arrested over a year ago in the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside. Despite all she had endured and rumours of her death, R.A. spoke to Enab Baladi about her imprisonment which lasted up to two months ago, when she finally arrived in Turkey. She said she was transferred along with hundreds of Syrian women between different prisons in the cities of Mayadin, Abu Kamal in the Deir ez-Zor district, and Al-Shaddadah in the district of Hasaka, adding that some were transferred to Mosul to "become slaves in Daesh's guesthouses".

Secret arrests and unknown fate

Although many people know of the existence of special prisons for women in different cities under Daesh's control, Ramez, a displaced person from the city of Deir ez-Zor, said that the phenomenon was not linked solely with this organisation. "Most of the armed factions, whether in the city or countryside, have secret prisons, including the Shari'a authority and the Nusra Front". The young man told Enab Baladi that the city of Deir ez-Zor housed more than ten prisons belonging to different factions.

He added that "most of the prisoners were working as sabaya for the factions". Ramez said that the title "sabaya", used to describe an enslaved woman, is not only connected with Daesh, and that slave markets had spread throughout the area. He added that "other organisations were doing the same thing. Daesh was unique in openly declaring and revealing it publicly".

Abu Khaleed, a fighter for one of the factions in the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside reported that areas like Mayadin and Al-Shaddadah had witnessed the arrival of dozens of female prisoners that Daesh, and the Nusra Front before them, had offered to foreign fighters. He added that the kidnapping affected predominantly Arab women of the Sunni faith, including those captured during raids of villages in eastern Syria.

Sabaya working in guesthouses and military bases

Abeer, a nurse in the Deir ez-Zor countryside who was displaced to Raqqa, told Enab Baladi about the time she spent working in Daesh-controlled areas. She said she was told about the situation of a number of women captured in different areas of Syria.
The nurse said: “Some of those women were coming to the hospital. Most of them were working in houses, guesthouses or even in military bases". She said that “more than once I had to treat them after they had been subjected to severe violence, or perform abortions” and described what she had witnessed as "shocking scenes". The nurse spoke of the lives of these prisoners, saying: “You would find semi-naked women before you, wearing nothing but shorts, serving Daesh’s fighters and being beaten and insulted”.

The missing stories of the Arab “Sabaya”

Unlike the Yazidi “sabaya” taken by Daesh, whose situation has found broad international attention with media publishing stories on their torture, the stories of Arab sex slaves have remained shrouded in darkness, prisoner to the concepts of honour and reputation.

Social researcher Taha al-Taha, who studied the cases of Arab women and girls suffering injustice equivalent to what the Yazidis endured, said Daesh does not distinguish among them in terms of ethnicity, religion or language. He added that many of the stories on the Arab sabaya had been kept secret and denied by families and society, as well as primarily by Daesh.

“These women and girls are oppressed twice: firstly in being captured and made into sex slaves, and secondly when society refuses to acknowledge their suffering and give them justice” Taha said. He added that the concept of justice "is not only about exposure or restitution, but is connected with reputation and the way these women, who have fallen into forced captivity and made by their imprisoners to do things they are not responsible for, are viewed". He concluded by saying: “We should consider them fighters and symbols of resilience”.

Dozens of girls and women remain imprisoned by Daesh, and their stories are no less tragic than RA’s. To this day, their fates are still unknown.
We met Umm Abdullah in the Labour Office in Istanbul. It did not take a stranger long to gain her trust, and she soon began to tell her story. Her words, spoken in haste, hid dozens of answers to questions she had long waited to be asked. “In 2014, Syrian security forces arrested my husband in front of me on the Syrian-Lebanese border”, says Umm Abdullah, describing the moment that marked a turning point in her life.

She was one-month pregnant and had only been married for three months. She returned alone to Damascus after having been “banned from travelling”. In the summer of 2014, she was forced to travel illegally to Turkey due to security harassment linked to the arrest of her husband. She spent the next few years of her life moving between her relatives’ houses and collective housing for young women.

“I now live with my father and sister in this big city, and we have no one to rely on but God”. Umm Abdullah skimmed over core events of her life in the past three years to talk about her current situation. “I worked in a number of places and each time, I had to leave as I was being exploited by my boss. Many of the people I worked for refused to pay me, because I refused to give them what they wanted. I was verbally and sexually harassed because I was single, without any man to protect me”.

During our meeting, Umm Abdullah didn’t say anything about the possibility of remarrying, but her story was enough to prompt us to ask her about that. Her only reply was that the reports of her husband’s fate after his arrest were contradictory. Many of those who were with him in detention and were released told her that “he may not come out again”. She no longer sees any point in waiting.

Umm Abdullah has applied to a Shari’a court in Idlib to obtain a fatwa, allowing her to separate from her husband. She previously consulted Syrian clerics in Istanbul, but was not given a clear opinion on her status. She also refused to resort to the Syrian regime’s courts that usually give a woman the right to separate from her husband after one year of absence. She preferred to resort to Shari’a scholars in Idlib who have dealt with hundreds of similar cases and issued dozens of fatwas allowing wives to separate from their absent husbands.

Given the lack of a standard unifying fatwa concerning separation between wives from their absent husbands, the opinions of Islamic clerics vary. A former Shari’a judge in Idlib, Ayman Mohssi, believes that a woman who “has no information about the whereabouts of her detained husband must wait for four years, according to the Maliki doctrine, unless she faces significant harm, in which case the wife can ask for separation after her husband has been absent for one year”.

Mr Mohssi’s opinion is consistent with the decision of the Islamic Fiqh Council of the Muslim World League, issued in Mecca during its 11th session in 2013. This decision confirmed that a wife is entitled to request a separation after a period of absence of no less than one year, and no more than four. However, Sheikh Mujir al-Khatib, a former teacher at Islamic institutes in Damascus, points out the “absence of a hadith sahih (authentic saying of the Prophet Muhammad), determining the fate of the wife of a missing person. There are only jurisprudential interpretations and the words of the Sahabah (companions of the Prophet Muhammad). The Hanafi and Shafi‘i schools of thought state that “the wife of an absentee has no right to annul the marriage contract until the death of his peers”, and that waiting for four years before separation can only be justified in cases of war.

Even though most Shari’a judges in liberated areas issue fatwas allowing separation once the husband has been absent for one year, Umm Mohammad, who Enab Baladi met in the city of Idlib, confirmed that although her husband has been detained for almost six years, she has never thought of separating from him or getting married to anyone else: “Children are the most important thing in a woman’s life. She can rely on herself to earn a living for her children, defying all the economic obstacles to finding a job and all the pressure from family members”.

On the other hand, Umm Abdullah confirms that her two-and-a-half-year-old child is the main reason that she was pushed to consider separating from her husband and remarrying. She experienced huge difficulties in exile and realised that, unless she “achieves stability and feels safe”, she cannot provide a decent life for her son.

While children are Umm Mohammad and Umm Abdullah’s main concern, other women prioritise their own interests and leave their children to face an uncertain fate. Umm Nader }, a grandmother who lives in the city of Idlib, confirmed to Enab Baladi that the wife of her detained son left her five children in Umm Nader’s care, before leaving to marry another man in Lattakya. Umm Nader added that the children’s mother had claimed ownership of the family’s property, and hired a lawyer for that purpose.

Sociologists and psychologists tend to support the right of women to separate and remarry due to the absence of their husbands. Psychologist Dr. Omar al-Nimr believes that women have physiological and psychological

\[ \text{Watch the interview with Umm Nader here:} \quad \text{https://youtu.be/5SYWA-31VE} \]
needs that make living alone “a huge burden” for them, as well as forcing them to bear responsibilities that they cannot undertake without support. Umm Abdullah, who is waiting for necessary procedures to be completed in order for her to obtain her right of separation in liberated areas, believes that psychological, social and economic justifications represent only a small part of the reasons for requesting separation. She emphasised that the need to guarantee her son’s future, which she cannot bear on her own, is the reason why she needs to obtain a separation, which may enable her to start a new life.

Wives’ fate as uncertain as their husbands’

When public demonstrations against the Assad regime started in 2011, campaigns of raids and arbitrary arrests left behind wives and children who would be waiting years for detainees to return. Some fathers were arrested from their homes in front of their families. Others were arrested alone in the street without their families knowing anything, other than the fact that they had gone missing.

Hoping that their husbands would return, most of the wives of those missing and detained organise their lives according to a set routine, constrained by the customs and traditions of a conservative society in the face of the most difficult economic and security conditions, without a breadwinner and “guardian”.

Wives condemned to endless waiting

The wives of detainees find that they are treated with sympathy by those around them, although this sympathy gradually fades as their husbands’ absence grows longer, and with the absence of any news of their fate and eventual loss of hope that they are still alive.

Due to the Syrian regime’s policy of torturing and killing detainees, and concealing their whereabouts from their families, most people now assume that if there is no news of a detainee’s whereabouts for a long time, it means that he is most likely dead. If he were alive, the detainee would usually find a way to send news to his family through one of the few who are released by the regime.

Syrian authorities prevent detainees from communicating with a lawyer, or any of their relatives, and they are held in the intelligence services’ prison cells without trial. For this reason, during initial years of widespread detention, it was common practice for a detainee’s family to pay thousands of dollars to security officers, with the aim of finding out the detainee’s location, and whether or not he was still alive. However, this is no longer possible, since many security officers were interrogated and punished by their superiors, although there are some exceptions.

Today, it has become difficult for wives to find out which security branch their loved ones are being held in. The luckiest wives are those whose husbands are moved to Adra’s Central Prison, in the Damascus countryside, where detainees are allowed one visit per month. However, these cases are rare and do not include “political” detainees.

Numbers and statistics

While there are no official statistics, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented the existence of 117,000 Syrian detainees. However, estimates suggest that the number exceeds 215,000, 99% of whom are in Syrian regime prisons. There are no statistics or estimates regarding the number of spouses of those who are detained or missing.

Human rights networks face huge difficulties in counting the number of detainees, because their families refuse to give their names as they are afraid that this will expose them to grave danger or torture. Most of the information these networks obtain is from former detainees.

These figures emerged to fill the gap left by international human rights organisations and the United Nations, which are unable to force the Syrian regime to reveal the number of detainees in its prisons. When families of detainees or international human rights organisations request such information, the Syrian government often denies carrying out arbitrary arrests or kidnappings.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Republic Studies Centre conducted a study which revealed that, up until the end of 2015, there were more than 110,000 Syrians missing in “mysterious” circumstances, which may include kidnapping and extrajudicial killings.

Concerning Syrian wives who are refugees, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducted a study in 2014 entitled Syrian refugee women fight for survival as they head families alone, in which it revealed that more than 145,000 Syrian refugee families are headed by women who are “fighting to keep their children alive” alone. The report covered
135 refugee women who have taken on the responsibility of caring for their entire families due to their husbands’ absence; be it due to arrest, disappearance or death.

**Wives with no breadwinner treated unfairly by society**

Syrians are experiencing poor economic conditions due to rising prices and the decreasing value of the Syrian Lira, but the impact of the economic crisis is greater on wives of detainees, due to the absence of the main breadwinner. It is often difficult for a detainee’s wider family to be able to support his wife and children, as is also the case for the wife’s family. Thus, women are forced to work in order to support children and to reduce, in part, the burden on both their husband’s family and their own.

In the absence of her husband, a woman may receive marriage proposals, which she must think carefully about before making her decision, given that she is still married to another man. What makes her reject these proposals are society’s views and deep-rooted customs, which blame her for thinking of separating while her husband is suffering within the walls of a detention centre. They accuse her of seeking her own “happiness”, and disregard her suffering in the absence of her husband. Conservative Syrian families often refuse to encourage their daughters to request separation from their absent husbands, preferring instead to comfort the women, and encourage them to wait for their husbands’ return.

**Article 109 of the Syrian Personal Status Law**

From a legal point of view, article 109 of the Syrian Personal Status Law discusses the conditions of separation between wives and absent husbands. Under article 109, the wife has the right to request separation after a year of her husband’s absence, on the condition that there are witnesses from both the husband’s and wife’s families to confirm his absence has lasted at least one year.

Enab Baladi spoke to a lawyer in regime-held areas, who asked for her name not be revealed for security reasons, to learn more about the rights a wife has after having completed the legal procedure for obtaining a separation. The lawyer confirmed that the wife can take all the muqaddam (the unpaid dowry) through taking over her husband’s property and auction it and that children of childbearing age may be kept by their mothers. However, if they are over the age of custody, they should be placed in the care of their paternal grandparents.

**Psychological consequences**

To explore the psychological aspect of the issue, Enab Baladi interviewed Dr. Omar al-Nimr. He said that wives have psychological, physical and economic needs, and their lack of fulfilment could lead to the loss and fragmentation of the family unit.

Among other things, Dr. al-Nimr mentioned that social norms often restrict the wife of a detainee, since she fears the gossip that may spread if she seeks out a separation. This causes her to endure hardship in every aspect of her life. He pointed out that these customs often take precedence over Shari’a and state law, constituting a legitimate reason for the wife to ask for separation. Finally, he called for an increased awareness of this issue within society, through well-designed programs highlighting the difficult conditions faced by the wives of detainees, and encouraging people to be more understanding towards these women when they ask to separate from their husbands.

**What should the wife of a missing person or a long-term detainee do?**

Enab Baladi ran a poll on the situation of the wives of long-term detainees and missing persons. Participants criticised the social customs that undermine a woman’s right to remarry when her husband is absent. Enab Baladi’s correspondent in Idlib, northern Syria, interviewed a number of people to ask for their opinion on the issue. An online survey was also conducted via the Enab Baladi website, which posed the question: “what should the wife of a detainee or a missing person do?”

The poll revealed that 50% of participants agreed that a wife in such a situation should wait for her husband until he is released. Umm Salama, one of the participants in the survey and the wife of a detainee, shares this opinion and advises other women not to rush into requesting a separation. She said: “a woman should be patient, hope for the release of her husband and devote herself to raising her children”. She warned against the consequences of marrying another man, as doing that would risk having her children taken away from her. However, the rest of the participants from the city of Idlib believe it depends on the circumstances each wife finds herself in, as well as her personal beliefs, pointing out that remarrying is not “wrong” under Shari’a and state law.

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10 Listen to Enab Baladi’s interview on what should women do here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYTwA6Jgw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYTwA6Jgw)
Shari’ā allows what society forbids

The issue remains ‘unresolved’ as 31% of respondents on the website replied, “I don’t know” when asked what the wife of a detainee should do. Umm Adnan, who spoke to Enab Baladi’s correspondent in Idlib, confirmed that the most common opinion is the idea that social customs and fear of gossip are the main barriers for women when making a decision to separate from their husbands. According to Umm Adnan, "wives are granted the right to remarry by Shari’ā, but social norms are so strict on women. The same expectations are not applied to the opposite sex. A man is allowed to marry just a few days after the death of his wife".

In addition, 19% of respondents said that a wife should request to separate if her husband is absent for a long time. Ayman Nabaa, a resident of the city of Idlib, believes that “the wife must wait for her husband according to the period specified by Shari’ā. After that, she should remarry because she has financial and physical needs”. Most respondents agreed that the husband’s family must support the wife if her husband left her with no source of income. Umm Abdul Aziz, who spoke to our correspondent, encouraged every wife who has a husband in prison to bear the responsibility and to “rely on herself to support her children, without resorting to help from others, by finding a job suited to her abilities”.

Survey participants said that the main reason forcing a woman to ask for separation from her absent husband is a deterioration in her financial situation, and the absence of the family’s main breadwinner. Umm Yazan, the sister of two prisoners, asserted that the wife’s “poor” relationship with her estranged husband and his family may also convince her to ask for separation. Umm Mohammad, the wife of a prisoner, said “I really love my husband and can’t imagine being married to another man, even if I have to wait for him my whole life”.

Women’s associations provide psychological support

Civil society organisations and women’s associations in the liberated areas of Syria have paved the way for Syrian women to participate in various activities and express themselves in doing so. They also play a role as the main source of psychological and financial support for women. These associations have focused much of their energy on the wives of detainees and martyrs, due to their lack of a breadwinner and, in turn, financial support. These organisations try to offer support by employing them in small-scale projects, or providing direct financial assistance. They also provide psychological support and educational lectures.

Roula Shehadeh, Director of the Women’s Committee for Empowerment of Women and Children in Idlib, told Enab Baladi that the conditions of the wives of detainees and martyrs are among the most sensitive cases dealt with by women’s associations. She pointed out that these associations cannot assist women in matters relating to separation or divorce. According to Shehadeh, the Committee provides support to around four thousand women with detained or missing husbands, through psychological and religious educational programs. The Committee also aims to psychologically prepare women to face decisions affecting their families and social conditions that go against their preferences.

The director also explained that 90% of the wives of detainees and missing persons who are supported by the association were able to legally separate from their husbands after submitting a request to a Shari’ā judge. However, she noted that most of these women have not registered the divorce in the regime’s official civil courts, which means that according to official records, they are still married to their first husbands.

According to Shehadeh, only 1% of women covered by the Committee’s activities receive a “reversible divorce”, which enables them to return to their first husbands, should they return. Most of these women marry older men, often becoming second or third wives, while a few prefer to wait for their absent husbands, defying social pressures.

Hayat al-Eid, director of Fajr al-Maraa al-Souriya Hawa, a women’s association in Dara’a, said that women who apply for separation in the Shari’ā courts are often young and have children, which exposes them to family pressures forcing them to divorce and avoid being judged by society.

These associations cannot completely resolve the issue of the wives of detainees and missing persons. However, the methods of psychological support they provide are important tools for empowering women to face society. Women’s associations can provide these women with job opportunities, which may be a start to finding a solution to a crisis that is directly linked to the difficult economic situation of women bearing the responsibility of supporting entire families.
Syrian women have never been absent from the workplace alongside men. However, this issue has received varying levels of attention and acceptance according to the historical context and the economic and educational situation in the country. After the Syrian revolution, the security situation in areas controlled by opposition factions, experiencing continuous shelling and poor economic conditions, have resulted in the restriction and decline of women’s role in society.

Although there are many civil society organisations whose programs contain ideas that promote the role of women and enhance their contribution to and position in society, this role has not progressed significantly, and has even witnessed a relative decline. This is linked to widespread conservative thinking in most of these areas, as well as shrinking opportunities in specific occupations, which women need in order to support their families.

While most doctors and teachers are still working in their field, a broad range of educated and specialised women in various fields (law, engineering, economics and applied sciences) have lost the opportunity to work in their fields of study, and most have switched to teaching or other professions.

While most doctors and teachers are still working in their field, a broad range of educated and specialised women in various fields (law, engineering, economics and applied sciences) have lost the opportunity to work in their fields of study, and most have switched to teaching or other professions.

Syrian women keep their jobs despite the war

Dr. Ikram Habboush 11 speaks quickly, often pausing to catch her breath, while telling us about the exhausting conditions she has to endure. The dark bags under her eyes tell the story of her city, which only recently gained freedom, for which it paid with the lives of its people. A small movement on the ultrasound display pushes her to continue working, burdened with responsibilities that do not end come nightfall, and which she feels she cannot carry out to the best of her ability.

Enab Baladi interviewed Dr. Habboush in her small clinic in a medical complex in Idlib, following several failed attempts due to lack of time and the large number of female patients at the clinic. It is normal that Dr. Ikram has no time to talk about the difficulties of her work or about anything other than a due date, the need for a caesarean section or the uncertain future of a child without a father.

“We are responsible for people’s lives. There is no room for error in our work, and this increases the pressure on us”, says the doctor, who has had several responsibilities from an early age. Despite being a recent graduate, a wife, and mother to several children, she found herself facing a professional duty that she is obliged to fulfill, while at the same time confronted by a society which pressures women, and a family requiring her care and attention.

While most women in the city of Idlib, where society is still relatively conservative, want to visit a female doctor for examinations, only four female doctors, including Ikram, are still working despite conditions of bombing and displacement, and in defiance of a society that, although not completely opposed to women working, does not want women to be away from their homes for long periods of time.

“We all know the saying, “a woman is half of society”. According to statistics indicating a decline in the number of men in comparison to the female population, women now represent more than half the population in areas controlled by opposition factions. This often occurs during war, a time when women’s influence and contribution often increase. German women are credited with rebuilding Germany after the Second World War, paving the way for a country with solid institutional foundations and a strong economy.

In Syria, however, despite many efforts to strengthen the role of women, it continues to be below the level expected. According to the Head of Idlib City Council, Ismail Andani, women are reluctant to participate in many roles, both on a professional level, and at administrative and governmental levels.

Pragmatically speaking, Syrian society is drawing on women to meet practical needs, while depriving them of a large portion of their interests and ambitions in areas controlled by the opposition. While a proportion of workers in the medical field still practice their profession (such as doctors, pharmacists and nurses), the majority of graduates from fields such as economics, natural sciences and engineering have switched to teaching, as confirmed by Idlib’s Health Manager, Dr. Mundhir Khalil. He points out

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11 Watch Enab Baladi’s interview with Ikram Habboush: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3126Ng1xYc
that women make up 30% of workers in the health sector. This percentage is considered "good", and it exceeds the percentage of women in other sectors many times over.

From the point of view of Dr. Habboush and other women who have decided to work despite war and living in a society full of restrictions, "social pragmatism" opens the door for women from one side while closing it from the other. The restrictions they face do not seem to be worth stopping work for, even though they represent an additional burden. Dr. Habboush says that motivation is what makes her resist the desire to stop working. Her love for the experience, and belief in the necessity of giving push her to increase her workload and contribute to establishing a charity for orphans as well.

Other women managed to circumvent restriction and adapt themselves to the general needs of society in order to achieve their goals. Hala al-Shami, an engineer, was able to join the Projects and Planning Department at one of the local councils in Eastern Ghouta after having been forced to work in teaching around four years ago. She says she pays no attention to "awkward looks from men" that seem to ask: "What's a girl doing here?". Hala believes that being a woman in a predominantly male workplace requires a strong personality, in order to face the repeated rejection of projects she proposes, and having her work devalued "just because she is a girl!". This leads women to rethink their decision out of necessity, and renders the very idea of work "arduous".

The war has exhausted Syrian women, with some choosing a life of homelessness and displacement, and others facing a life where they have no power to decide their fate. However, it has also provided a very limited opening for some women who want to work in fields that had just begun to move beyond male domination at the end of the last century, and which are once again being monopolised by men following the start of the Syrian revolution.

"May God help working and non-working women", says Dr. Habboush, with a long sigh that carries the fatigue of someone who is both a mother and a working woman. It is clear that the daily problems women face in liberated Syrian territory amount to a struggle, under the gaze of a society plagued by war and still scrutinizing women’s every move.  

How has women’s labour participation changed in opposition-controlled areas?

Since 2011, Syrian women have found opportunities to strengthen their role in economic life during the ongoing conflict, assisted by the deterioration of the economic situation in the country, and the massive waves of displacement that have disrupted custom and tradition.

Regardless of whether women are forced to work to support their families, or driven by the idea of empowering women in Syrian society, economic life has witnessed remarkable growth in their active participation, as advocated for by Syrian women’s organisations for years under the guise of "gender".

Women’s work depends on the presence of organisations

Local relief associations and civil society organisations have been active during recent years of the war and subsequent displacement, providing both moral and financial support to those who have been affected by the conflict in various parts of Syria and who lack basic necessities.

In order to prove their ability to meet the pressing needs of society, Syrian women have become involved in working for these associations, which now require female candidates to hold a university degree for certain positions. Data reveals that civil society organisations operate not only in regime-controlled areas, but also in liberated areas controlled by the opposition. The total number of these organisations, which are providing health care, social and educational services, has increased to over one thousand. Of these organisations, 91% became active after 2011, according to statistics provided by the organisation Citizens for Syria, which focuses on the work of Syrian associations.

According to the study Syrian Civil Society Organisations: Reality and Challenges, carried out by Citizens for Syria, 44% of organisations operate in opposition-controlled areas, which represents the largest proportion when compared with all other regions. The number of organisations operating outside Syria comes in second (23% of organisations), followed by 14% that operate in government-controlled areas. The remaining organisations operate in the Kurdish areas of "autonomous administration". Civil society organisations have therefore broken the monopoly held by the provinces of Damascus and Aleppo, and have spread throughout all Syria’s provinces, except for Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, which are under the control of Daesh.

You can watch a related video by Enab Baladi here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkEss8EzNo
Is women’s role being strengthened or limited?

According to data collected by Citizens for Syria, over 25% of organisations consider women to constitute a “vulnerable” group in society. Thus, more women are hired, in those organizations, to cover women-only positions as they are more able to enter private social lives and interact with women and children.

However, in other organisations, women’s employment opportunities are the same as men’s, despite their absence in strategic and leadership decision-making roles at a rate of 88%, according to a study carried out by “Her and I” organisation in March 2016.

As for women’s participation in liberated areas, many organisations such as Rakeen, an organisation in Idlib focusing its work on women and children in the city, told Enab Baladi that most of the women working in these areas are mainly involved in relief organisations and associations, as well as working as teachers and nurses. Opposition-held areas have a real shortage of female specialists in medicine, engineering, IT, accounting and other disciplines and official positions, which reflects the gender gap.

Restrictions still in place

Mr Andani told Enab Baladi that women are notably absent from political life and specialised professions, such as the fields of medicine, accounting and engineering, in areas controlled by the opposition. “Both women and official authorities need to do more. We need female specialists. We need female doctors, engineers and teachers. However, there are certain moral and religious constraints and regulations that apply”, he said.

Andani explained that the city council opened the door for women to participate in the council’s founding elections, which were held last January. However, women “refrained” from standing as candidates and voting, amid the absence of support for them to engage in political life.

He explained that in the aftermath of the elections, Idlib City Council introduced a new office called the Office for Assistance to Women, in order to promote the role of women and represent them in the council’s departments and institutions. Despite the “limited” openness to women working in liberated areas, customs and traditions still constrain their ability to enter more specialised fields and to take on decision-making roles.

Nada Samee, director of the organisation “A Glimpse of Hope”, which focuses on women’s affairs in Idlib, says that women in the liberated areas “have to work in all fields, but within the prevailing customs and traditions and the framework of religious and moral codes”.

The "civilised woman" in the eyes of the regime

In its attempt to convey a civilised image of its areas of dominance, the Syrian regime has opened new opportunities for women to work. The regime has made different roles in social and political life accessible, such as appointing Hadiya Khalaf Abbas as Speaker of the People’s Council, making her the first female to have held this post in Syria’s history. Due to security conditions, women have entered professions previously restricted only to men, such as working in restaurants, selling from food carts and specialised administrative and official occupations.

The current situation in Syria has seen the proportion of women and girls increase to reach 65% of the total population. Companies and institutions are keen to stabilise their own operations by recruiting women instead of men, in order to avoid having their employees called up for national service (which is obligatory for males), as this leads young men to either travel abroad or enrol in the army. In spite of all this, a large proportion of women in regime-held areas work as teachers. The results of a competition to select teachers run by the Faculty of Education showed women to be outperforming men by far. Of the graduates from the teachers’ college specialising in primary school level, 89% were from Damascus and of the teachers, 85% were from the province of Homs, according to data from the Ministry of Higher Education.

Exceptions highlight the "limited" role of women

Syrian women in the liberated areas also enjoy prominent leading roles, as the appointment of Bayan Rehan as head of the Women’s Office by the Local Council of Douma shows. The council’s initiative was the first of its kind compared to local councils in other regions.

Rehan told Enab Baladi that the number of women working in liberated areas has not diminished, but has instead been “concentrated” to specific areas, namely the educational, medical and NGO sectors. Still, women play

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You can watch a related video by Enab Baladi here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-ib7yjtkNw and find their Facebook page here: https://www.facebook.com/barktamal/
no "effective" role whatsoever in political life. She added that the work of women in Ghouta "has been restricted to the field of teaching", with "even graduates of the Faculty of Economics working as school teachers". Rehan attributed the absence of women from political life to their lack of qualifications in this field, and their inability to break the rules that prevent them from working in official positions.

Women have also had a prominent role in the media since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. Many female journalists have appeared in liberated areas and have gained a large following among women, according to Sawsan al-Saeed, a board member at A Glimpse of Hope, who spoke to Enab Baladi. "There are many female journalists who have entered the media sector, many more than their male counterparts, because they are more able to delve into the hidden aspects of social life".

The Syrian Civil Defence Force, also known as the White Helmets, has also witnessed the participation of women in the fields of nursing and medical assistance. The number of female volunteers in liberated areas has reached around 200 out of 3000 volunteers, which amounts to 6.6% of the total number of volunteers.

Gender

The term "gender" refers to the relationships, social roles and values defined by society for both sexes (men and women). These roles, relationships and values change according to space and time, due to their intersection with other social relationships such as religion, social class, race and others.

Gender is a relatively recent concept, emerging in the 1980s as a prominent term used in feminist vocabulary, first in North America and then in Western Europe. Gender differs from the concept of equality between women and men. In fact, it aims to enhance the role of women in accordance with their potential, ability to contribute to a particular area and be present in a particular place. It aims to avoid creating competition over roles between women and men.

In accordance with the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the term 'genderisation' refers to the need to adjust the social and cultural behavioural patterns of men and women, with a view to eliminating prejudice, customs and all other practices based on the idea of inherent inferiority or superiority of either sex, or stereotyped roles of men and women.

In Syria, the term gender, or genderisation, has only recently begun to be used. Its spread can be linked to the number of local and international civil society organisations that have increased in presence following the Syrian revolution. The prevalence of the term has also been linked to the need to strengthen the role of women in light of the deteriorating security situation in Syria. It has also been linked to the tendency of some regions to adopt forms of religious extremism which prevent women from participating in various social roles and working conditions, in addition to the need to enable them to make a greater social contribution in the post-war phase. Of those interviewed, 46% said there is a lack of job opportunities for Syrian women.

You can read the rest of the report on the [Enab Baladi website](https://www.enab-baladi.com).
The phenomenon of removing the headscarf has recently become more common among female activists in Syria. They believe that this represents a "revolution of customs and traditions", while others accuse them of "atheism" and "betraying the Islamic faith".

Enab Baladi presents here the cases of a number of activists who have chosen to remove their headscarves, and the reasons that have led to this movement gaining momentum.

The role of extremist groups

Maryam, an activist from Damascus using a pseudonym, told Enab Baladi that she had been wearing the hijab since the age of 15. At the time, she liked wearing the veil, despite not being convinced that it was the right thing to do.

Maryam added that she had gone through a period of commitment to Islam, and attended religious lessons in Damascus. She then travelled to Europe to complete her postgraduate studies and continued wearing the headscarf there, despite the difficulties in studying and working due to the French government preventing women from wearing the hijab. She said "I challenged this decision, because it prevented me from exercising my freedom in a country that preaches democracy".

But her conviction on the veil began to fade during the Syrian revolution, especially when "some groups speaking in the name of Islam started committing violations in the liberated areas". She removed her hijab because she didn't want to "be associated with these groups". She added that "it is incredible that showing my hair is haram, while no one pays any attention to what happens in my country at the hands of Islamic groups" she said. Finally, she noted that "the way we treat each other is who we are, not the hijab".

Maryam stressed that the revolution served as "a strong motivation to make the decision", and one which she didn't have at 15. While she faced criticism from her father and friends, other friends considered it "a courageous choice and one that would start to challenge society's restrictions on women".

Lack of conviction

Dima, another activist from a conservative family in Damascus, took off her hijab 11 years after her father, who had forced her to wear it, passed away. She grew up with the "lessons of [the preacher] Amr Khaled", and completed her studies at the Omar bin al-Khattab al-Sha’ria school in Damascus.

At the same time, however, she did not change her way of dressing because she was a "fashion girl", as she puts it. She remained veiled until she began working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), amid an "atmosphere of mixing with other people". She began to deal with humanitarian crises during the war in Iraq and subsequent sectarian strife, and then began to reconsider basic religious doctrines until she began to contemplate removing the veil. As soon as the Syrian revolution began, Dima decided to remove the hijab "once and for all", feeling that she would be a "different person without it".

Dima told Enab Baladi that after her family travelled to Jordan at the beginning of Ramadan in 2012 to flee the difficult conditions in their region, she was forced to sleep at her friend's house when the shelling intensified. She met one of her friend's brothers and decided to take off her hijab, because she was "not convinced by its imposition". She wondered why she was veiled in front of the young man.

Dima said she called her family to tell them: "My mother was saddened by this news and so were my brothers. They thought that what I was saying was inappropriate". However, this only lasted until the end of Ramadan, when "relations between us went back to normal, as if nothing had happened": Dima, like Maryam, says that "the revolution gave me space to make the decision and then the war accelerated it". She says that she "respects those who are committed to the tradition of the hijab," but feels "very comfortable without it".

Commitment and consistency

On the other hand, Ghada, a human rights activist who wears a niqab covering most of her face, rejects the idea of taking off her veil. She said: "I attended several training courses on international trials and human rights, and although I wore the veil, I did not notice any resentment or surprise at my presence, even though the lecturers were mostly Europeans": She added "On the contrary, the lecturers were shaking hands with everyone, and when they approached me, they would smile and nod".
Ghada, her being treated this way “shows that the West respects the veiled woman’s identity, while the civilised and educated Middle Eastern man looks at the veil with contempt”.

Hanan, a graduate of the Faculty of Education currently specialising in Psychological Support and Children’s Rights, said that her commitment to the hijab is an essential part of her identity and personal principles, and she doesn’t feel like it’s an imposition. She’s “totally convinced of this”, adding that her commitment to a specific and consistent identity contributes to stability and possibilities for her daughters in light of the vast societal changes created by the war.

**Marriage opportunities**

Abeer, a civil society activist based in Turkey, recently removed her hijab and told Enab Baladi that one of her reasons for doing this was that “a woman who is not veiled has more chances of getting engaged and married than a veiled woman”.

Umm Shafiq, one of the most famous “matchmakers” in Damascus, says that the idea that removing the headscarf brings marriage opportunities was widespread even before the revolution, adding that this is due to the environments in which girls live. For example, some of them wear a “manteau” (a type of jacket worn by conservative women) in conservative areas without being personally convinced of its significance, only because it increases their marriage opportunities.

**The fragility of religious affiliations**

Asma, an activist and psychologist, attributed the issue of removing the headscarf to the fact that “Syrian society is one governed by fear of other people’s judgements, customs and traditions, more so than by the fear of God”. She asks: “How fragile must our beliefs, ideas and religious foundations be to change so quickly!?”

She added that the situation “is linked to the fact that people have lost everything”. This makes female activists “look for a way to unload,” especially after a breakdown in traditions caused by displacement and other sudden changes in society, which lead to the adoption of new ways of existing, without really giving them much thought. Finally, the social environment has also changed, creating some indifference, so when an activist takes off her hijab, it doesn’t “count anymore”.

**Society’s perception**

Among conservative circles, which are some of Syria’s most widespread, most people view the issue as some form of “moral degeneration”, accusing activists of “atheism and betraying religion and society”. They often blame the revolution for the phrase, “she is the freedom you want for yourselves”.

Hussam, a relief activist in Damascus, said: “Bashar [Assad] did not prevent them from taking off their hijab. Why are they doing all of this revolution?”

Najla, an activist working on women’s empowerment who wears the hijab, calls for people to stop looking down on female activists who choose to wear the hijab, stressing that it is wrong to place a value on women based on whether or not they wear a headscarf. That it is up to God, and not man, to judge.

Umm Emad, a veiled woman from Daraya, says that the choice to wear the headscarf “must be based on true conviction and understanding of the religion. If the girl is forced to wear it, or is not committed to what the garment represents, it should be removed”.


Often, the biggest loss is something that cannot be seen by the eye, nor can it be quantified with a number. Syria's biggest loss after six years of war may not be reflected in the numbers and statistics released by news agencies, but rather the less obvious losses which run deeper, such as Syrians’ social relationships and their disintegration.

An alienating distance

"I don’t know anything about my cousins, even though they were once my friends", said Maria, a 30-year-old woman now living in Turkey. Her words summarise the state of her family relationships: "Today I am in touch with only one close friend, and apart from that, all of my relationships have unintentionally come to an end".

Maria attributes the disintegration of most of her relationships to geographical factors, and says: "We used to meet weekly at my grandparents’ house, and this simple ritual breathed new life into our relationships, even the superficial ones. We’d listen to one another’s news and exchange updates". However, the large family that once lived together in one city has now been dispersed across cities, countries and even continents. This has played a central role in reducing communication between family members, before contact eventually trailed off entirely. Maria added: "My grandmother died two years ago, and we don’t know whether rockets have destroyed her house or if it’s still standing. What I am certain of, though, is that distance is alienating, and it is distance that has broken our family ties, to the extent that I no longer know anything about the lives of people I used to see every week".

Loss of character

For Safaa, a housewife living in Lebanon, the increased proximity to her husband’s family has been a constant source of distress: “My mother died ten years ago and when I got married I found a second in my husband’s mother. I used to call her ‘mother’ and I honestly loved her and thought she loved me. The situation lasted until we were forced to live in one house in Damascus after we all left Ghouta. Then, problems started to float to the surface”.

Safaa said that, in her experience, “the war has brought out the worst in people,” and “revealed hidden truths”. She adds: "I did not expect my mother-in-law and her daughter to treat me this poorly. I hoped for death on a number of occasions because of the humiliation I was enduring at her hands. Anyone who entered the house and saw me would have thought I was a servant. This had an impact on my relationship with my husband. The problems were exacerbated by my request to live separately from his family. It ended with a divorce and me moving back to my brother’s house in Lebanon”.

Unshared concerns

As one of the forms of war imposed on Syrians, siege has produced new complications in the relationships between those under it. For example, Mahmoud, an academic under siege in Eastern Ghouta, said: “I do not feel I have anything in common with my friends outside of Ghouta. Our concerns are different. Each aspect of our lives is different. The dangers that face us are different. I’m afraid of a raid, while my friend is afraid of talking about raids on the phone and getting arrested. While I am afraid of the advance of the regime’s army, my friend is afraid of the advance of opposition forces. In fact, I’ve noticed that a lot of my friends in Damascus avoid talking to me, maybe because I’m in an opposition area”.

Mahmoud says that there is something that prevents him from having real conversations with those who are not under siege, and that is the constant comparison between his situation and their own. He explains: “Even though we keep in touch with family members outside Ghouta or Syria, I often compare their living conditions to mine and their ability to move and travel freely, while we are being besieged in a limited geographical area with limited resources. I think about their lives and how they can carry on while mine is stalled. Because of that, I prefer to talk to..."
them as little as possible, to reduce the painful comparisons which are of little use. Moreover, communication is difficult due to network disruptions and the need to resort to expensive alternatives.

However, “limiting communication”, in Mahmoud’s words, has affected the strength of his relationships even with his siblings abroad. He describes this lack of connection with his brothers: “today I can’t find a single topic of conversation to discuss with them. We don’t have anything in common anymore except past memories to look back on together”.

Friendships torn apart
Since the first day of the revolution, political factors have been one of the main reasons for this disconnect. Clear divisions soon emerged in the streets between those loyal to the regime, and those supporting the opposition. “There were four of us who were close friends at university”, said Maysam, a Syrian engineer based in Germany. “But two chose to support the regime while another friend and I chose to go to the other extreme and take part in the revolution. When I called my friend, it was impossible to reconcile our stance with pro-Assad songs on the other end of the phone, while soldiers’ bullets were falling on my neighbourhood and city. This tore our friendship apart”.

As the murders continued and the violence escalated, Maysam was forced to immigrate to Germany after her father was killed, and things took a turn for the worse. “I recently had a friend from my old group be quite unapproachable about our current situation. She told us that we had brought it upon ourselves for opposing the regime, and that we had lived a good life in Syria before 2011. My friend then asked me sarcastically: ‘How was the camp?’ Maysam stresses the impossibility of establishing a friendship with people who can’t feel others’ pain, and who think this way.

Only strong relationships survive
Majid, a 29-year-old engineer living in Turkey, will not accept geographic distance as an “excuse” to break up relationships. “Distance breaks up fragile relationships, but strong ones survive and persevere anywhere and under any circumstances. This is what I experienced when I travelled to Turkey. Almost all of my family and friends stayed in Syria, and it was a real test of these relationships for everyone”.

Majid said that some of his friends have lost their strength and momentum since moving. However, other relationships have continued daily with the same strength, not changing at all: “I speak to my family on a daily basis or close to that. I celebrate happy occasions with them over voice and video calls, I never forget any of their birthdays. I set aside time every week for long conversations with close friends. I am keeping myself up-to-date with their lives, as though we were still living together”.

100   101
“Sisters of men” is the term used to refer to young women and ladies who work in media in the liberated areas of Syria. This term may not involve an underestimation of women’s potential so much as it is related to the complexity of working in press when it comes to the security and social circumstances within Syria. However, it may overlook many aspects of Syrian female journalists’ lives on a personal level.

A Syrian female journalist working in the liberated lands is not only risking her life, but is also doing this work at the expense of her personal life and often giving up “privileges” enjoyed by most female journalists around the world.

“Not Desirable” for engagement

Most unmarried Syrian female journalists in the liberated areas suffer from prejudice surrounding their work. This reduces their chances of getting married and also causes conflict with their parents, who pressure their daughters to quit working in the field.

Young journalist Mirna al-Hassan, who works in Idlib province, points out that although some young men do respect female journalists and their work, they would rather not marry one. This is largely down to us living in a “conservative” society that stigmatises any job where women “mix with men”. Mirna points out that press work in particular is not one of those professions that anyone can easily accept a woman working in, because it requires frequent travel and being away from home.

However, Judy Arsh, Enab Baladi’s reporter from the Al-Waer neighbourhood, in Homs, was proposed to a number of times before getting engaged to one of her colleagues. But when asked to choose between her husband and her work, she insisted on opting for her profession: “Today I am engaged to my colleague, and what pushed me to marry him is that he respects my job and encourages me. He also shares everything with me”.

Where you are determines what you wear

Most female journalists in the liberated zones cover the news and events in their areas. As a result, coverage must be carried out in line with community values, mainly because a female journalist is herself a construct of her social environment. However, this doesn’t mean that the journalist does not have to make some compromises like wearing certain clothes in some workplaces.

Whilst it is rare to find unveiled journalists in Syrian territories controlled by the opposition, those who are working are often compelled to wear the niqab, depending on where they work. Sonia al-Ali, a journalist working in Idlib and publishing articles in different newspapers, confirms that she wears a niqab only when she needs to interview one of the faction fighters.

Taking care of the way you look is not necessary

In liberated areas, the work Syrian women journalists do is often limited to writing reports. Most of them refuse to be in front of the cameras for various security and/or cultural reasons. This saves them from having to buy specific clothes for press interviews.

Judy Arsh believes that because most press coverage is focused on bombings and people’s distress, any attention paid to appearance becomes a secondary matter for female journalists: “We don’t have time to think about personal matters like clothes, especially when covering breaking news or massacres and bombings. In these cases, we struggle to think about our daily habits at all. The grief is overwhelming and shows in your appearance: it’s obvious, you don’t need to look for it”.

However, Mirna al-Hassan says that the interest she takes in her physical appearance is part of her everyday life, and has more to do with her personality rather than her work as a journalist.
Breast cancer patients suffer twice as much as other women during war. Their challenges keep increasing, whether it’s rare medicine, the high costs of treatment, or the difficulty of getting to hospitals providing them. This gets even more complicated in the besieged regions.

Cancer medicine shortage in Ghouta

Samira is a Syrian woman with breast cancer whose condition had improved through treatment. Tragically though, her health deteriorated quickly, and she ended up passing away once cancer medications were prevented from reaching Eastern Ghouta due to the siege imposed by the regime.

Samira is just one of many cancer patients in situation like this, according to Dr. Wissam al-Riz, Director of Dar al-Rahma Centre for Cancer, the only centre specialised in cancer treatment in all of Eastern Ghouta.

Dr. al-Riz told Enab Baladi: “We can’t do much for them. With medicines being cut off and the Syrian regime preventing supplies from entering, the number of deaths increases day on day. All we can do is watch.” Speaking of the number of cancer cases in Eastern Ghouta, she said that 669 women are suffering from the disease. About 300 have breast cancer, of which 110 were fully cured, while eight have passed away in the past two months. Dr. Wissam said that the centre, sponsored by certain organisations, provides cancer patients with medicines and cost-free treatment.

Towns in Eastern Ghouta are under a stifling siege, which became even harder in March 2017 following Assad’s forces launching a military campaign in the areas of Barzeh and Qaboun, in the south of Damascus. These military operations aggravated the suffering of those with chronic diseases.

War’s impact on breast cancer rates

Regarding the impact of war on the number of cancer cases and the deterioration of those with it, Dr. al-Riz mentions two main factors. The first factor is psychological, because intensive shelling affects patients and adds to the pain and grief caused by losing loved ones, as well as the absence of a sense of security. The second factor has to do with the siege. The Syrian regime is preventing supplies, including food and medicine, from reaching Eastern Ghouta. This has led to medical professionals avoiding the use of certain medicine, due to some patients’ physical weakness and their inability to tolerate high doses. Most of the time, cancer prevails in weakened bodies.

According to the doctor, there are many cases of relapse as a result of the siege. She tells us the story of Aisha, a woman with breast cancer, who was tested in Dar al-Rahma Centre last August 2017. Back then, doctors assured her that she had almost completely recovered, but only a month later, she relapsed and finally passed away at the end of September. She stressed the importance of launching regular cancer awareness campaigns to detect cancer early. The doctor said they had held many seminars in Eastern Ghouta, but this wasn’t enough, and they failed to reach most people.

No chemotherapy centres in Idlib

When it comes to breast cancer treatment in the Idlib governorate, in north-western Syria, Dr. Anas Daghim, responsible for primary healthcare at the Idlib Health Directorate, told us that there was an increase in cancer rates due to the increase in carcinogens, particularly chemical substances used during the Syrian regime’s attacks on Idlib and rural Hama.

The lack of medicine, and chemotherapy and radiotherapy centres, in addition to the difficulty associated with entering Turkey or areas under the control of the Syrian regime, are leading to an increase in the number of patients getting cancer, and aggravating the cases of those who have already been diagnosed. He said that breast cancer treatment has two phases: a surgical phase and a medicinal one. He also mentioned that surgical treatment is available in most of the region’s hospitals, stressing its efficiency. However, chemotherapy and radiotherapy are not available here. There is not a single specialised centre in Idlib, and breast cancer medication is obtained from either Turkey, or areas under the Syrian regime.

Breast cancer at an early age

Dr. Wissam al-Dalati, Director of the Breast Diseases Department of the Multiple Aid Programme, and based in Lebanon, told Enab Baladi that
most of the cases the centre diagnoses are already in the late stages of the disease, which makes their response to the treatment poor.

He explained that 80% of the women who come to the centre for treatment are in the third or fourth stage of the disease. In the fourth stage, the tumour has spread throughout the body with no chance for treatment. In the third stage, there is a possibility of recovery, but only with various types of treatment, including surgery, chemotherapy and others. As these cost a lot, the result is often a low recovery rates.

The organisation’s centre started its work about a year and a half ago. During this time, Dr. Al-Dalati said, about 4,000 women have been scanned, of whom 55 cancer cases have been diagnosed at a rate of three cases per month. He also said that the disease is emerging at an early age, with 45 percent of women diagnosed being under the age of 50. Globally, only 20 percent of women below that age have cancer.

Chapter 5
Detainees and Stories from Syria’s Prisons
Graffiti on a wall in the city of Damascus, saying: "We Want the Detainees."
Photo credit: Internet
"Today is the day "X", who has been detained since God knows when, will be released".

Iman, 29, is asking in an online post about her husband who was detained over a year and a half ago. She posts on a page about detainees and waits for the page administrator’s response. Iman counts the minutes and seconds, always hoping to find out any additional information. Eventually, she gets a number to call and she does so, only to be saddened once again upon hearing the reply: "Oh sister, I didn’t see him, but I’ve heard the name, and someone who was with me said he saw him". This is how the journey to search for someone starts, seeking out any possible link.

Iman is one of the hundreds of thousands of Syrian women who are waiting for the return of their loved ones from the regime's jails. She has not received any news of her husband for a very long time, and her three daughters are missing their father. Little Farah, one of their daughters, asks Iman every day: "Mum, does it mean that dad doesn’t love us? He doesn’t want to come home to us?" Iman doesn’t know how to answer. She gets lost in a cycle of longing, pain and tears. How can she answer her four-year-old child, when she herself has yet to find an answer that doesn’t hurt her even more?

Hiam is 26, and her husband was arrested two weeks ago at a checkpoint without having any charges against him. She is 6 months pregnant and has a two-year-old child. She has been waiting for two weeks for her husband’s return, despite being told that it was a simple matter. "A few days and he’ll be back", she tells herself. She’s counting the days and her two-year-old son doesn’t know why his father is suddenly absent from his life. This is a man who has not taken his eyes off his child since the day he was born. And then, the question comes once again: "Where’s dad?"

Umm Hisham, 53, has been waiting for her son to return for a year and four months. She has not lost hope, but when she heard that someone else was released after two years, she collapsed, crying, and asking herself: "Will it take that long for my son to be released?" She’s been waiting for his return day and night. She was displaced and it is becoming increasingly difficult to contact those who have been released, so she can no longer just sit still and wait for news.
Inside these prisons, countless detainees are living on top of one another, and endure torture day and night, every day, with many dying as a result. This makes their families’ lives hell, in addition to the hell of displacement, loss and homelessness they already face. They live in hope that those who get released will be able to tell them something, anything, of the people who were with them and reassure their families that their loved ones are okay.

Families live on the edge, trapped in waiting for those who disappeared behind prison bars, afraid of the unknown, and in the hope that God is merciful and that “nothing will happen to us that hasn’t been decided by God”.

Women being transferred from the security branches to Adra Prison often feel lucky, believing that this transfer to the Central Prison will allow them to, at least, communicate with their relatives through visits, as well as improving the conditions of their detention and food. However, detainees quickly discover that they have been transferred from one security branch to another, and a much worse one, as the Central Prison is where detainees accused of terrorism are held.

It has become commonplace for prison staff to call this section the ‘Adra Branch’, and its head the ‘Chief of Branch’. It's also become common to see prison guards wearing Shabbiha security branch uniforms, constantly reminding detainees that they are still in the grasp of the regime.

One detainee who was recently released said she was severely beaten in Adra Prison, because she took part in a hunger strike. The strike was carried out by a group of detainees protesting against being kept in detention for months without being brought before a magistrate for a fair trial.

Rima, another detainee, explained: "We were standing still and didn’t want to go back into our cells. We began to chant: “Raise your voices, raise your voices, we will take control or we will die!”. Within a few moments, Shabihah entered the prison carrying batons and long iron bars. They began beating us without listening to our demands”. Rima spoke of a detainee who was hit over the head with a club, and fell to the ground, still. She remained on the floor for hours, unconscious, with no one paying her any attention. The detainees who took part in the protest were prevented from leaving their dormitories, and their families denied visits.

Dalal, 55, suffers from a cancer of the wombs, which causes continuous bleeding. She told Enab Baladi: “When I was in the Air Force prison, I was treated by doctors who, despite the abuse taking place there, would at least give me medicine. I didn’t expect to get to Adra and find out that there’s no medicine or any doctors, and that I could suffer to death from this disease before receiving any care”.

Another detainee, Maha, says that a 38-year-old female detainee’s health deteriorated and she began to suffer from shortness of breath. The
women in her dormitory asked for an ambulance, because they knew the woman already suffered from an existing condition. However, the guards looked at her from the door and told the women: "We can't take her to the hospital. You want the Free Army to shoot us?". She died an hour later from a stroke.

Maha added that many women, including the elderly, were suffering from several diseases, yet no one cared, despite them repeatedly asking to see a doctor. Doctors struggled to reach the prison because it was located in a hot zone. The Head of the prison also prohibited parents visiting their daughters from bringing medicine, for no obvious reason. Maha added that guards raided prison wings without warning, saying that one of the detainees had a cell phone. There is no mobile phone reception in the women's section of Adra Prison.

Ghadir speaks of the indiscriminate collective punishment they were subjected to at the hands of prison staff for no obvious reason, or reasons unrelated to them. Ghadir recalled that several detainees had the soles of their feet whipped after the Free Army bombed Adra Prison, killing one of its staff. The officer in charge selected around 12 detainees at random, ordering them to wear trousers to make the punishment more efficient. The officer then had the guards severely beat the soles of their feet, by order of the Lieutenant. All the while, they insulted the women with the 'dirtiest words', and demanded: "you asked the Free Army to bomb the prison, didn't you?". The detainees were unable to walk for a week due to the beating they had suffered, and one of them ended up with a broken shoulder.

Farah recounts another incident: "the Shabbiha entered the prison and began searching through our belongings and bags. Among the women were those from the Prostitution and Drug Addiction Section. The Shabbiha stole money during the inspection, threw our food on the ground and trampled on it". She adds: "a prisoner from the Prostitution and Drug Addiction Section came to do a 'cavity search' on the orders of one of the guards. Many of the detainees refused, especially the unmarried ones. In response, the guards beat those who refused. One of them even hit a girl in her intimate parts while telling her "you let the Free Army do whatever they want to you, and now you talk about honour?". Then a guard forced her to undress and told a fellow prisoner to search her in another room, ordering the prisoner to insert her hand until she reached her stomach because 'she may be hiding something dangerous'". Farah said that the girl entered severe depression for a week. She added that treatment in some security branches was much better than Adra Prison, and did not reach this level of cruelty.

The prison's Director, Brigadier Faisal al-Aqla, who is originally from Deir ez-Zor, prevented those in the wings holding women accused of 'terrorism' from buying meat, fruit and vegetables, as well as using a phone or watching television. In the Prostitution and Drug Addiction Section, however, these items were allowed. "My brother sent me a box of sweets for Eid al-Fitr. Al-Aqla came in the evening and confiscated all the desserts in the unit, as well as everything the detainees had prepared for the celebration".

At the end of our conversation with her, one of the detainees said: "Why don't international organisations come to this prison to see what's happening here and how we're forced to live? We know that they can't enter the security branches, but why don't they ask to come to this cursed prison?"
The prisoner gives birth to two more prisoners and everyone is at the mercy of the jailer. At the heart of the prison’s darkness, the two babies miss out on the greatest relationship on Earth... It is not Judgment Day preventing the breastfeeding mother from feeding her own child, but rather Assad’s chains.

These opening words are those of media activist Hadi al-Abdullah, on the evening of Friday the 11th of February at a meeting with Rasha Sharbaji. Sharbaji, who is from Daraya, was released during a prisoner exchange between detainees from the Alawite sect, held by the opposition, and those in regime prisons. This agreement came about following meetings between the Salma Operations Room and the Bureau for Prisoners’ Affairs in Idlib. These meetings, held in the Bureau’s offices earlier this month, led to an agreement in which it was decided that the Bureau would take charge of negotiating with the regime. As a result, 55 detainees were released, among them Rasha Sharbaji and her five children.

Sharbaji was arrested while pregnant with twins, along with her three children and two sisters-in-law in May 2014 at the Immigration Centre in Damascus, where she went to get passports. Their arrest aimed to put pressure on Rasha’s husband, Osama Abbar, who is accused of possession and dealing of weapons, to turn himself in.

During the 40-minute interview, Rasha spoke about her life in prison with her sisters-in-law, from their arrest in May 2014 until the moment of their release in February 2017. She was first taken to the Immigration Centre in the Al-Marja neighbourhood of Damascus, before being moved to the Al-Qaymariyya Branch of the Air Force Intelligence, where she was interrogated by more than one security officer. She was asked about her husband’s whereabouts and made to listen to the contents of his phone calls. Sharbaji insisted that they were “normal calls, but they perceived them to be about weapons”. Rasha’s husband was accused of being “the biggest arms dealer in Syria”. The security forces used her, along with her children, as leverage to pressure her husband to turn himself in.

After the interrogation, Rasha was transferred to the Air Force Intelligence branch in Al-Mezzeh, where she was given the number 714 to identify her inside the prison. Her children were also given numbers. Rasha was placed in solitary confinement, in a cell measuring three by three metres along with her three children, separated from her sisters-in-law.

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour Affairs (DRL) in the US State Department put Rasha Sharbaji’s name on a list of 20 female detainees from around the world, and in September 2015, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, called for their release as part of the #FreeThe20 campaign. The Syrian Network for Human Rights nominated three individuals for the campaign: Dr. Rania al-Abbasi, Dr. Faten Rajab and Rasha Sharbaji, stating: “While the conditions of their detention and arrest differ, these three women all face human rights violations”.

During the interview, it was obvious that Rasha was “psychologically and physically exhausted”. She talked about her daily life in solitary confinement with her three children. She said that she tried to make her children forget about the “darkness of the prison” through recounting cartoons and stories about their grandfather and other relatives. She also recalled how she was moved between cells and how the warden used to treat both her and other prisoners.

Fifteen days before giving birth, Rasha was reunited with her sisters-in-law Laila and Bayan, and they were moved to a room in preparation for her labour. Rasha also spoke about her labour once she was taken to a hospital. She was not given the name of the hospital or any information about it. Two security guards were placed in front of her room. She spoke about the bad conditions she endured when giving birth, which she described as “the most difficult time I went through in detention”. The twins she gave birth to, Safa and Marwa, were “wrapped only in cotton. Instead of being surrounded by my family and relatives, and being in a clean and well-equipped room for my babies”, she gave birth in terrible conditions and on “a bed of blood” following her Caesarean section at the hospital.

Rasha paused whilst telling us about the early stages of her labour when she was still in prison, saying “I don’t want to remember any of it”. She continued, skipping forward four days to after she was taken to hospital, when she was transferred to a room with her children and newborn twins. At this point, they took her children away.

During the interview, Rasha mentioned Lieutenant Colonel Suheil who asked her, “without any introductions”, as soon as she entered the room to give him her children so that he could take them to the SOS orphanage in the Quesada district. She said she would rather be executed as “that
would be easier than having my children taken away from me”. After her children were taken away, Rasha was moved between a number of cells until she settled in one with her sisters-in-law Laila and Bayan. She went on a three-day hunger strike, which led to her health deteriorating. In November 2016, after joining protests in other cells with women demanding to see their children and speak to their families, Rasha was allowed to see her five children for just 10 minutes.

Major Omayyad told her that she would be released under a settlement that included her husband giving himself up. On the 2nd of February, Rasha was taken, along with Laila and Bayan, to Branch 48 in Al-Mezzeh, where she stayed for five days. Wardens at the branch inflicted psychological torture on a number of detainees in front of her.

One day before her release, Rasha was separated from Laila and Bayan and kept alone in a cell. The security guards told her that her release would be delayed for some time. However, she was released within 15 minutes of her sisters-in-law and was given her possessions, with the exception of her mobile phone. “After boarding the bus, they told me to wait until they brought the children. They brought my children and I felt like I was living a dream and a miracle”, she said. According to the Syrian Opposition, Rasha is one of around 13,000 female detainees on record. Rasha is urging others to work to save her fellow prisoners who remain in prison, known as mere “numbers”.

After a full year at Al-Mezzeh Military Airport (the main Air Force branch in Damascus), Ahmad was transferred to the Adra Central Prison for another four months. After that, he was set free only to get detained in a bigger prison. When he was at the immigration centre trying to get a passport, he was shocked that they couldn’t issue him with one. As a former detainee, his name had been flagged, and he had been prevented from travelling. In order to resolve the issue, he had to return to the Air Force branch where he had been detained.

Ahmad was a student at the Faculty of Civil Engineering. He was detained at a checkpoint when entering Damascus on route to his university. He was accused of belonging to a “terrorist” family. His only crime was sharing a name with a “wanted criminal”, which led him to being detained for a year and four months. Even though officers at the Air Force branch were aware of his situation, they wouldn’t consider releasing him while the ‘wanted Ahmad’ was still free. In Adra Prison, Ahmad survived all kinds of torture and to this day, he still has an open wound in his leg, which causes him a lot of pain.

As soon as he was freed, Ahmad recalled the time before his detention, when he insisted on going out despite his mother trying to convince him otherwise. Whilst he was fully convinced that he couldn’t get charged if innocent, his mother tried to remind him that security forces don’t spare anybody detention, regardless of ‘innocence’. But Ahmad was not willing to miss classes at university, and even his mother was unable to convince him to stay at home, leading to a long argument between the two of them. Their shouting got louder and louder, forcing some neighbours to intervene. Ahmad ignored his mother’s begging and left, regardless.

His mother, who lost her husband and older son, gave a last, desperate attempt and said: “My dearest son, what are you going to do when you pass one of the checkpoints and they ask for your identification? You know that young people in our family are all wanted. You also know that our family has received repeated death threats. Son, they could kill you at the checkpoint and your body will be thrown to stray beasts!” His mother’s words and fears only made Ahmad more determined to leave.

Spitefully, he asked his mother to remove his name from their family that
angered the regime. Ahmad replied to his mother’s questions, saying that “I’m going to tell them that I belong to the family of “nobody”. But this didn’t stop him from getting arrested at a checkpoint at the main junction of Daraya city, and being detained for a year and four months, simply due to being accused of having a similar name to the ‘wanted Ahmad’.

"You have come to your final resting place. This is hell. God does not intervene on the orders of President Hafez Assad, so don’t bother praying to anyone!"

This is how the officer welcomes those arriving at the prison in the middle of the desert, according to Ali Abu Dayan, a Lebanese national who was detained in Tadmor (modern-day Palmyra) Prison. Abu Dayan recounted his experience at the opening session of the Documenting Darkness Conference, held in Bern on 12-14 December 2016.

Farad Bayrakdar, Ali Abu Dayan, Baraa al-Saraj, Mohammad Berou and Wael al-Sawah are five former detainees who were all held in Tadmor. They came to Bern from different countries at the invitation of UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) and Syrian NGO Etana, to discuss the issue of prisons in Syria over the course of the two-day conference. They shared their personal stories of life in Tadmor prison with attendees, and it was clear that its effects had yet to be erased from their bodies and souls.

Today, Abu Dayan is Head of the Association for Lebanese Detainees in Syria. He still speaks in a hoarse voice after being forced to swallow a dead bird, damaging his vocal cords. He said that he would “never” forget what he experienced in Tadmor Prison, even 16 years after leaving, and that everything he experienced is etched in his memory “like engravings in stone”.

According to Abu Dayan, enumerating the different methods of torture is no longer as important, as they are the same in every place ruled by a torturer. The methods do not differ according to nationality, identity or alleged crime. The most important thing now is for detainees to break the taboo surrounding their experiences in Syrian prisons, which kept them silent during the years of iron rule, regardless of their nationalities.

The former detainee is one of 782 Lebanese nationals whose detention in Syrian prisons has been documented by UMAM. "What we witnessed and experienced is etched into our memories. What you are seeing today in

15 You can watch the video of the conference here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E-bCoWMGcGk
the horrific images of detainees who died from starvation or having their reproductive organs or tongues being cut out, is the same thing we will continue to witness today and tomorrow – torture, terror, killing, blood and crimes. This will continue unless the United Nations, major powers and non-governmental human rights organisations do something to stop these daily inhumane violations of the rights of Syrian, Lebanese and other prisoners held in all Syrian regime prisons," said Abu Dayan, summing up his experience of 13 years in "hell".

Mohammad Berou was arrested at the age of 17 in May 1980 and accused of joining the military youth wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. He was not executed at the time, as he was still a minor, but was instead sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, which was then extended to 13 years. He was transferred to Tadmor Prison, where he spent 12 years witnessing the most brutal torture and executions ordered by Hafez Assad.

Berou quotes the hero of the film Imagining Argentina, which tells the story of forced disappearances in Argentina: “The survivors never forget... what is left if we forget? Our lives are just past memories, and if they finish or are lost, nothing will remain”.

Storytelling is a form of resistance because the regime seeks to hide the truth. Documenting these experiences restores value to the victims, even if it cannot restore their rights. It immortalises them in the national and social memory, and identifies criminals, according to Berou.

In Berou’s opinion, the value of documentation lies in the extensive number of witnesses, victims and survivors who have lived through the Syrian crisis since the 1980s, and are now recounting their stories and giving their testimonies on the violations and injustices they experienced, in order to identify perpetrators and have them condemned, which is the least that could be done to achieve justice.

According to Berou, Tadmor was the site used for the execution of over 15,000 detainees, and all were executed without a single written order from the President. Most of the orders were verbal, as the regime recognised early on that documents and written orders may serve as incriminating evidence later on in any trials or inquires that may ensue. The lack of execution orders is one of the greatest challenges in documenting crime in Syria.

Tadmor Prison was built in 1966 close to the desert city of Palmyra and its famous archaeological sites. It was intended to hold members of the military in particular, but the Syrian regime used it for detaining prominent political and opposition figures. Amnesty International described the prison as "designed to inflict the greatest possible suffering, humiliation and fear on inmates".

“My land ‘blessed’ me with countless lashes that only God could count. The number of lashes I received almost equalled the number of words I have written; can you believe that?” This is what Farad Bayrakdar, a Syrian poet and politician, said while describing his experience in Tadmor and Saydnaya prisons. Bayrakdar was detained three times during Hafez al-Assad’s reign, and was held for 14 years during his last period of detention.

Bayrakdar said that as time went by, and with repeated slaps, curses and beatings, he learned to present himself as "prisoner number 13": Prison is an attempt to destroy the inmate’s sense of value. “So I had deep conviction that any creativity, or act to create meaning through writing, art or even gossiping, was a way of challenging prison and its effects... Poetry managed to save me and give my life in prison a different meaning than what they intended”. Prisoner number 13 left prison having written six poetry anthologies and a story about his experience and the most significant incidents during his time there.

Tadmor: Our prison, our home, and keeper of our secrets

On the 30th of May 2015, Daesh blew up Tadmor Prison, days after it had gained control of the city of Tadmor in Homs’ eastern countryside. The prison’s tale ended there, after having borne witness to the many massacres perpetrated against its inmates in the 1980s and throughout the Syrian revolution.

Ali Abu Dayan said: “When Tadmor Prison was destroyed, people rejoiced, but my colleagues and I who were in Tadmor cried... We cried over our prison, our home, the keeper of our secrets... We cried over the walls that we had leaned on and used to tell our stories to, the walls which heard our pain... We cried over the ground that drank from our blood and feet... that drank our pain... We cried over the military blankets that we used to cover ourselves with, which were covered in blood and rust after so many years... We cried over the scabies that we carried, the disease and pains that we lived through in Tadmor... We cried over Tadmor Prison, the place that should have remained a museum, so that people would know what happened inside its walls".
What’s next after the conference?

Lokman Slim, UMAM’s Director, considers a conference on the issue of prisons in Syria hosting honest and open discussions to be an “achievement”, which contributes to putting pressure on Western governments to pay more attention to the issue at a time when detainees are an afterthought on political agendas.

In Slim’s opinion, the conference was an important opportunity to conduct a series of meetings between the relevant institutions, producing many ideas worth pursuing. He expressed UMAM’s interest in following up on the conference’s outcomes, adding that the institution is working on a regional project on the topic of prisons, and has started reaching out to other countries on this issue. Slim described the project as transcending Arab borders, especially as the discussion on transitional justice has become part of public space in the Arab world.

Using the law to silence opponents

Tyrannical rulers need not find an excuse to execute opponents or imprison them, as they control all of the country’s resources. No one holds the tyrant accountable, and no authority protects the people from him. Despite this, a tyrant is at times forced to find legal cover for his actions, especially vis-à-vis foreign organisations and countries that may criticise him, or open cases of human rights violations against him or his country.

In Syria, the totalitarian regime hastened to legitimise the dictatorship and its oppression, by drawing on a series of laws that are used as mechanisms to silence anyone who dare oppose it. It is well-known in criminology and legal studies, that legal texts must be written using precise and clear terminology, that is not at all open to interpretation. Tyrant law, on the other hand, is distinguished by the use of language that is flexible, ambiguous and includes broad or vague terms that could potentially apply to all acts, and include any person.

The tyrant’s objective is to guarantee a wide margin for judicial authorities when examining cases and determining situations to which the law applies. The accused becomes hostage to the judge’s disposition, which is usually determined by authorities and the state’s security apparatus, as so-called “judicial authority” is made completely subservient to the tyrant, and turned into one of his tools.

The Syrian dictatorial regime works according to this principle. The articles of the Penal Code on crimes against state security, internal or external, are characterised by their generic and vague nature. The same characteristics are found in all of the laws and decrees issued following the Ba’ath Party’s rise to power.

Decree No. 6 of 1964 punishes all who oppose the aims of the revolution and resist the implementation of a ‘socialist’ system, whether verbally, in writing or by other means. Those who are accused based on this decree are punished with life imprisonment, and in many cases, the sentence extends to capital punishment. The text can be interpreted in many ways to include any action that displeases the authorities. This decree has been used extensively to justify the arrest and trial of persons opposing the regime.

Executive Decree No. 4 of 1965 is similar and includes the following clause: "Any person who attempts to obstruct the execution of socialist legislation will be punished with a life sentence of hard labour, and the sentence may be increased to execution".

In addition to these decrees, several laws were used to justify arrests, among them Law 49 of 1981, which is an emergency law ordering capital punishment for all persons belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, even if the person concerned did not commit any other crime. Perhaps the most absurd aspect of the law, which is currently still in operation, is its retroactive nature, as it includes all individuals who joined the group, even if their membership ended prior to the law being issued.

The Publications Law 50 of 2001 institutes a sanction of up to three years’ imprisonment for vague and nonspecific accusations, such as insulting national honour or the army, violating the unity of society, or disseminating false news, which provides room for a “non-neutral” judiciary to bring cases against people working in the media who criticise the state. The law also gives the Prime Minister, as well as the Minister for Media and Communications, the power to allow or prevent the issuing of publications. The Minister of Media and Communications holds the power to grant or rescind licenses for foreign and Arab journalists without any judicial or administrative restrictions. The executive authority can thus easily silence any voice.

Syrian penal law was the basis used by security authorities to justify the arrest of opposition actors, relying on court decisions that condemned them. Perhaps the most important articles used were those which condemned any Syrian who sought, through action, speech, writing or other...
means, to split off part of Syrian territory in order to unite it with a foreign country. Another condemned any person in Syria who, at a time of war or anticipated war, behaved in a way that weakened national sentiment or awakened ethnic or sectarian divisions. Both these accusations were used against Syrian Kurds or any person who sympathised with their cause. Other articles that were frequently used as accusations against a number of opposition members include undermining national consciousness, stirring up sectarian or ethnic rivalries, or being a member of unlicensed parties and organisations.

We must also mention the law on combating terrorism, which was published as a substitute for all legislation issued under the state of emergency which was lifted after the start of the Syrian revolution. This law includes broad and very vague terms that can be interpreted according to the dictator’s whim. The law introduced a new unprecedented crime concerning the use of electronic means of communication. Article 8 of the law dictates: “Persons engaged in disseminating printed material or stored information, regardless of its form, with the aim of promoting terrorism and terrorist acts, will be sentenced to temporary hard labour. The same punishment will be used in the case of any person who managed or used a website with the same aim”.

We have tried to cover above some, but not all of the laws and texts used by the regime to persecute, arrest and prosecute opponents. It must be noted that, in many cases, the Syrian regime’s security apparatus made additional accusations of immoral acts against a number of their opponents, with the aim of taking revenge against them and destroying their reputation in their social environments.

Who kills detainees?
The many crimes of the Assad regime are known to the international community in all their different forms. Many of these crimes have been documented in their entirety and there have been attempts to prosecute the perpetrators. The regime’s crimes are perhaps the most documented throughout history, since most were observed directly by the international community, while others were documented through video recordings and the testimonies of thousands of Syrian refugees in different countries around the world. One of the most violent of these crimes is still being committed right now. As I write this article, a number of detainees are being killed and tens of thousands more, by the lowest estimates, are struggling against death every day in regime-imposed purgatory inside the network of detention centres on Syrian territory and underground.

We all know this. But what have we done, as decent people concerned with these crimes, more so than those against whom we direct accusations of silence, betrayal and complicity? Do we know that every day, detainees perish and are killed in basements of the Syrian regime?

Are detainees the people we have betrayed the most? Do we know the circumstances of their detention? Who among us has not seen the pictures of Caesar? 16 Who among us does not have a detained relative or friend who was killed under torture or due to illness?

Do we carry their blood on our hands? Have we dedicated just one hour a week or month to do something for the forgotten people laid to rest, in the depths of the earth?

Have we managed to save one detainee from his inevitable fate? Have we established one single organisation specialised in following up on the cases of detainees and campaigned, using everything at our disposal, to keep the issue of detainees at the forefront of our demands? Do we search for the families of detainees to document their pain? Who among us would dare say that he or she has done all they could?

Have we resorted to burying the issue amongst Assad’s multiple crimes? Have our hearts turned cold? Or did we fail when our humanity was tested, even before those who we accuse of silence, betrayal and complicity?

Have we fallen lower than the international community in dealing with the issue of our detainees?

Did we kill Nabil Sharbaji?
The Syrian regime arrested Nabil on the 26th of February 2012 in Daraya. Nabil spent the first period of his detention in the Air Force’s Intelligence Branch of Al-Mezzeh Airport in Damascus. He was then transferred to Adra Central Prison and later to Saydnaya Prison. Nabil struggled with fate for three years. He did not want to die. He used to sing “Raj’een ya Hawa” (We will return), in a whisper so the guards wouldn’t hear him. He wanted to return to his life.

His body tried to cling to his soul in this purgatory, but the feet of Saydnaya’s jailers struck his chest and sent his soul into the heavens, and his body to

16 In August 2013, a military defector code-named Caesar smuggled 53,275 photographs out of Syria
a mass grave, or an incinerator perhaps. We do not know where Nabil’s body is, but we assume his spirit is above us, asking for forgiveness on our behalf, or perhaps cursing us. The Assad regime’s monsters killed the journalist Nabil Sharbaji in May 2015, sending his soul to join the many others watching over us from above.

Nabil spoke to us many times, but we didn’t really listen to him. He documented the names of his cellmates from inside his silent, cement-walled cell, but we did not appreciate the risk he took or say thank you. From his cell, using his finger and blood from a cell-mate’s gums mixed with rust, Nabil wrote the names, telephone numbers and places of residence of all his cellmates on a piece of cloth for it to be smuggled out of prison. The cloth, which was part of a shirt belonging to another inmate, was smuggled out by journalist Mansour al-Omari when he was released.

Nabil told us what was happening in the basement of Assad’s prisons in a letter smuggled out of Adra Prison. In it, he wrote:

“Mansour, my friend, I was so sad when you left us. I tried to continue what you started and I did continue, but the conditions have changed a lot and it has become too difficult... There are now 90 of us in one room... I miss singing together and you telling us about films. You amazed me, you and ***** all the time you were here... By Allah we will return, my friend, to the tune of Raj'een ya Hawa... Peace. Adra Central Prison. 15/04/2013”.

Nabil had hopes of surviving more than once, and we let him down each time.

Omar al-Shaghiri, one of the people who witnessed Nabil’s death in detention, said: “The Prison Governor used to come every morning and shout: “Bastards, has someone died?” That day, the officer in the cell next to mine said he had someone. The Governor asked him for the prisoner’s full name, mother’s maiden name and date of birth. The officer responded “Nabil Sharbaji”. Then he told him Nabil’s father’s and mother’s name, and his date of birth. I remember that day well. One of Nabil’s closest friends was in the same cell as me and he cried when he heard Nabil’s name. His mental state and health deteriorated after hearing of the passing of one of his dearest friends.

He is middle aged, medium height and bald, with a large belly and protruding eyes. He’s a member of the Military Security Branch 215 in Damascus. His job? Searching Syrian detainees before they enter the cells.

There was not a single female detainee in this section of the prison who had not suffered from the methods used by the guard to ‘inspect’ them. His ‘inspections’ became even more difficult to face than the interrogations that would follow, including torture and insults, or even the pain and suffering of detention.

Zeina, one of the detainees, said she was taken into a room immediately upon arrival at the branch for inspection. The guard followed her in, and closed the door behind him without saying a word, which made her feel very scared. Then he asked her to take off her clothes, so Zeina took off only her coat. He looked at her and said: “Take everything off” Zeina looked at him in surprise. “No way” she told him. He then attacked her and they got into a struggle. He tried to take off her clothes by force. She began to shout and beg, before grabbing his hand and biting him.

When she backed down, she realised that she had hurt him and he was sitting in a chair gasping. But the guard had not given up his intentions to take off her clothes under the pretext of inspection. He called the two guards waiting outside the room to help him hold her down while he took off her clothes, Zeina unable to fight back. He then searched her naked body, claiming that she may have been hiding something on her person.

Zeina says that she was traumatised and depressed for over a month following the inspection. This was made worse by the fact that she heard the screams of women coming from the room, women who would then tell her what they went through. Even the male detainees could not bear to hear those voices. They would beat the doors in anger, causing officers to break into the cells and beat them severely.

Reem, another detainee, was asked to remove her clothes by the same guard. She did what she was told out of fear. After he had finished searching her, he made her wait, naked, for five minutes for no reason other than to further humiliate her. However, the guard did not limit himself to searching naked women for alleged security reasons. He would also mock
them during the inspection, making fun of their bodies by saying: “Why
don’t you lose some weight? You have a fat belly” and other derogatory
words that cannot be mentioned.

After humiliating stories of inspection spread into the cells, some of the
female prisoners decided to report what this guard was doing to the Head
of the branch. The Head, however, said to them flippantly and emotionless:
“You have to take into account that he is a mentally troubled man suffering
from psychological illnesses, but there is no need to fear him. He will not
be able to rape you. He is incapable of that”.

Another detainee, who spent over 20 days in prison, says that she didn’t
speak to anyone, due to her shy nature and the brutality of what had
happened to her during the search: “Our revolution has been armed for
over two years. I think killing someone like that is more important than
blowing up a checkpoint or liberating a city. I don’t know what the Free
Army is doing!”

Detainees named the guard “Gargamel”, and this nickname started
spreading throughout the branch, even among his fellow officers and
interrogators. However, he is but one man in a whole system designed to
violate our honour, not far from the eyes of a regime that has gone along
with it, in the Military Security Branch 215 in downtown Damascus.

Chapter 6

Violent Conflict
Tanks of the Syrian Arab Army storming the city of Daraya (2012)
Photo credit: Daraya Media Center
Daraya, known for its peaceful movement, was also famous for its organised military action offering a bright picture of Syria's future. The start of armed action in Daraya dates back to the beginning of 2012, starting with a small group of young people. The city witnessed several important developments which left their mark on the course of the revolution. The first one was a day, which later came to be known as Black Saturday in February 2012, when around 17 young people were killed at the funeral of Yaman al-Ahmar.

However, the biggest event in the city's history continues to be the massacre committed by Assad's forces on the 24th of August 2013, when more than 700 people were killed. The city recovered from this massacre to produce one of the most prominent examples of Syrian leadership in local administration: the Local Council of the city of Daraya. The only one to have a Military Council among its ten offices.

Through perseverance and patiently waiting, Enab Baladi managed to meet with Captain Abu Jamal, Commander of the Martyrs of Islam Brigade within the Military Council in the Local Council of Daraya. The interview was carried out with the sounds of shelling and explosions in the background. The meeting was interrupted more than once because of the serious security situation in the city, or because the Free Army needed their captain.

Question to Captain Abu Jamal: Did you participate in military operations with the regular army, and what led you to defect from the regime?

During the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and consequently in Yemen and Libya, I was thinking and hoping that a revolution would spark in Syria. I was aware that it eventually would. Given the widespread corruption in our society, only a revolution could change this situation.

When the revolution started, I supported it from the very beginning, but I was late to defect. I defected at the start of 2012. Up until then, I was expecting the army to take action, like in Tunisia or Egypt, to maintain its structure and military units, but I soon lost hope due to the army's sectarian makeup. So I quietly defected and left for Jordan.

After that, I went back to my homeland to do my duty and defend its people. Before leaving, while I was in the regime's army, I did not participate in
any mission. My service was in an educational facility. I did not man the checkpoints, or participate in incursions in the cities. When I defected at the beginning of 2012 it was not so bad, and because I was at the educational facility, I was very far from checkpoints or raids.

What is Daraya's importance in the Syrian revolution?
Daraya is important to the Syrian revolution due to its geographical location, 7 to 8 kilometres south of Damascus. But it is also important due to its population. Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Daraya has held demonstrations - as early as the 16th and 17th of March 2011. I heard that there were people participating in demonstrations which started at the Umayyad Mosque, and that there were youth who had been detained by the regime since the Damascus Declaration (2005) and the beginning of Bashar’s rule (2000).

The Syrian regime realised the gravity of the situation when it saw the high level of participation among people who had been detained, and the presence of political dissidents. The impact of this city’s participation in the revolution meant that, due to its past, it was considered a serious threat. All of this combined strengthened the regime’s determination to kill the revolution in Daraya, despite its losses in the latest campaign, which began in late November last year (2012).

Why does the regime insist on breaking into Daraya when it can impose a security cordon around it?
As I said, the regime does not want to impose a security cordon on the city of Daraya, because it wants to eliminate armed opposition there, in all its forms. The regime does not want the Free Army to be in the city of Daraya, so it’s hell-bent on dividing it, until the Free Army can finally be eliminated altogether.

Since the last massacre, when Daraya was stormed in August of last year (2012) and nearly 800, or even 1,000 people were massacred, the objective was to annihilate the Free Army, or separate its popular core. After the massacre, however, their objective fell apart. The results were counter-productive. We saw the unification of battalions, and the establishment of an organisation of sorts, which eventually became the Local Council of Daraya.

This time, the regime tried to enter, but the councils were organised. The Local Council was better organised thanks to the Free Army’s resources and support. The Military Council was directly supervising the operative room, and coordinating and cooperating with the Free Army battalions, and thanks be to God that they have been able to hold on until now.

Who are the forces fighting with the regime's army in Daraya?
The Republican Guard, the special forces, troops from the Fourth Division and the Palestine Special Branch, and security branches in general. The presence of part of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah was also noted at the site of the Sakina shrine. Many of them were reportedly killed whilst allegedly defending of the shrine.

Do all opposition fighters fall under a single leadership?
The truth is that in Daraya there are several parties fighting the Syrian regime. There is Ansar al-Islam group, represented by the Sahaba Brigades, the Martyrs of Islam Brigade, in addition to a battalion from the Furqan Brigade, the Saif al-Sham Brigade and a brigade called ‘the unification of the capital’ that used to be here.

What difficulties are the Free Army facing in Daraya?
Difficulties are related to arming itself, and the types of weapon the Free Army can obtain. In Daraya, we’re lacking special weapons capable of destroying the regime’s tanks, and taking down their planes that bombard civilians and destroy the city’s infrastructure.

Are the Free Army’s fighters in Daraya experienced enough to fight long-term battles?
Yes, after long battles fought against the regime’s forces, they have built up good skills and experience, and this has allowed us to hold up until now. I believe we are now able to withstand much more, even moving from defence to attack.

Are Free Army’s fighters paid for the work they do?
None of the fighters are paid for their work. All of them are part of the Free Army in order to defend their land and overthrow the regime. Some of the
money available is given to fighters simply to cover personal expenses.

What's the relationship between the Military Council and the Local Council in Daraya?
In Daraya, it was a successful experience. Thanks to the success of the project, attempts have been made to implement it in more than one area in Syria. A fundamental part of this experience is the fact that both the Free Army and the Military Council are based in the Local Council offices, rather than elsewhere.

So could we say that the reason for the Free Army’s steadfastness in Daraya is due to it being well-organised?
Steadfastness, of course, whether in Daraya or in any other region, is the result of organisation and good management when it comes to battles and fighters.

The city of Daraya contained many battalions, which recently united under the banner of the "Martyrs of Islam Brigade". What was the reason for this brigade being formed?
The formation of the Martyrs of Islam Brigade came as a result of the increase in the number of members of the Free Army and the need to unite them in something larger than a small battalion. In the military hierarchy, a battalion comes after a brigade. Due to the increase in numbers and weapons within our ranks, we’ve formed a brigade for organisational reasons and to make room for more fighters.

Is the Battle of Daraya being won or lost at the moment, and has the Free Army gained control of important and strategic places here?
The Battle of Daraya is not measured by the amount of land controlled either by the Free Army or the regime. The Battle of Daraya is about steadfastness. We are all aware that Daraya is surrounded by forces allied with the regime and isn’t connected to any revolutionary area except the city of Muadamiya. This has been ongoing for five months, nearly six. This in itself is a victory. We are now fighting to survive and it doesn’t matter if we gain or lose ground.

Given the location of Daraya, surrounded by areas inhabited by religious minorities, what are your views on minority areas such as Sahnaya? In all honesty, we never thought about the minorities as such. The only distinction we make is between those who support a regime who killed and displaced our people, and those who oppose it. Anyone willing to take part in the revolution, will participate with us in building a new future for Syria, and whoever supports the regime and participates in killing and destruction will be held accountable in a fair trial.

How do you feel when most of the fighters get killed in battles?
We hate to see any fighter get injured, even if it’s a minor injury. But when we started on this path, we knew that the regime was a criminal one and wouldn’t hesitate to kill us and destroy our homes. When a fighter from the Free Army is killed, we celebrate him and hope to join him next time, for our logic is always to either win or die.

Since defecting and seeing what’s been happening, do you feel that freedom warrants the price being paid by Daraya and Syria in general?
The truth is that freedom comes at a high price, and I’m speaking from experience. We’ve known since day one of the revolution that this regime would not be easily defeated, and the process would require a lot of casualties and blood spilled. I always have the sentence "Assad or burn the country", repeated by regime forces, in the back of my mind. But this regime must be overthrown, despite all the sacrifices that will have to be made in the process. We have no choice but to sacrifice everything in order to save our people from this regime.

Syria made a lot of sacrifices and it came at a high price. Are you worried that the revolution and its objectives might change?
I’m not worried that the revolution will change course. The revolution has been challenged by every country in the world. Each one is against the Syrian revolution, and yet they have not been able to stop it or divert its trajectory.

17 Sahnaya is a town in southern Syria, administratively part of the Rif Dimashq Governorate, and located in the Daraya District. The town is predominantly inhabited by Druze and Greek Orthodox minorities.
I have faith in our people to continue the revolution and righting wrongs. Many mistakes have been made and put right, and mistakes that could be made in the future will need to be avoided, but none of this will change the course of the revolution.

What are your views on the way things are going in Syria in general, and how might things end, in your opinion?

We aim to cooperate with the Local Council and all other stakeholders in the city of Daraya, and we want this to be a template for all of Syria's regions to follow. We hope that this project will be successful and that we will stay on the right track. Overall, in Syria, people are aware and educated, and although there are many mistakes that have been made, they have been put right, and in my view we're on the right track.

Do you think there can be a political solution with Assad?

Assad didn't leave any room for political solution when a hundred thousand people were killed and many areas destroyed. Homs has been destroyed, Aleppo has been destroyed. We hope Damascus will not suffer the same fate. After all this devastation, it's impossible for victims to have open dialogue with the regime.

In your opinion, Captain Abu Jamal, what lies in store for the Free Army after the fall of the regime, and is it likely to bring change to the policy of the country?

In my opinion, no clear policy has been devised to absorb the fighters of the Free Army. So far, there is nothing that could constitute the start of a future national army. We must start work now, to form the beginnings of a future national army recognised by all Free Army fighters.

Several days ago you went to the station and made a complaint. Why?

Yes, there was a problem with the food provided by the kitchen. I went to Abu Jamal, Commander of the Brigade. I asked him to make a formal complaint. We took a sample of the food to the station, and are awaiting test results from an examining committee.

Why all these actions? Why didn’t you simply punish wrongdoers, as Commander of the largest battalion in Daraya?

The Syrian revolution still retains a large number of its men who chose to silently work on, away from any media attention. The city of Daraya, which provided the most beautiful examples to follow in this revolution, can still count on a large number of such men, symbols of awareness, moral commitment and discipline.

Abu Salmu is a soldier from Daraya who defected from the regular army. He saw the true face of the war in Baba Amr and Eastern Ghouta, and is currently Commander of the largest military battalion in the city, the Osod al-Tawhid Battalion of the Martyrs of Islam Brigade in the Local Council of Daraya.

The number of men in the battalion did not prevent him from accepting a post working under the authority of the police set up by the Council. Instead, he became an example to follow, once he and other leaders of the Brigade's battalions recognised the existing authority and acquiesced.

This situation is quite rare, given that we have seen leaders of other battalions and brigades in Syria deal with similar situations by appointing whoever they want, according to their mood and interests.

Activist Mu'taz Murad held a brief interview with Abu Salmu, who refused to be photographed for security reasons. He spoke frankly and transparently with Enab Baladi about his vision for military and administrative matters in the city, as well as his outlook for the country's future.
We are an army and we have to operate as a respectable one, though our work is limited to the battle fronts. We collaborate with the Local Council on matters such as these. The Council is the body authorised to form a committee which can resolve such issues. The army's intervention in these matters would ruin everything.

I've heard you say before that you are a civilian, and that you will put down your weapon when the revolution ends and return to your normal life. What would you say now?

I take back what I said before. I now have a greater ambition, which is to build a nation in which we are able to live in dignity and respect, without being humiliated. It is the Free Army’s duty to protect Syria, give it freedom and dignity, and to defend people of all sects, regardless of their affiliation.

What do you think of the police station’s role?

The station is excellent, but it needs more support from the Council and Free Army.

What do you think of the Free Army in Daraya?

The Free Army in Daraya has proven its worth by increasing its organisation and control over fighters. Most members of the Free Army in our brigade are sufficiently aware of this.

Is the Free Army responsible for Daraya’s destruction?

When the Tatar and Mongol armies entered and destroyed Aleppo, it was not the Crusaders who destroyed their city. When the governor of another city surrendered his to Hulagu Khan, and Khan entered and destroyed it, it was not the people who destroyed their city. Accepting humiliation is not an option. The party responsible for destroying, and continuing to destroy Daraya, is the army of the regime.

Do you wish the war never happened?

This is not a war. This is an awakening. Syria is ruled by a pack of wolves, enforcing a regime of humiliation, oppression and moral corruption. In the past, a person could have been detained for 20 years with no one having known anything about it. Today, if 150,000 people are dying in Syria to allow 24 million more the chance to live in dignity and respect, who am I to object? It’s important for them to embody their true understanding of Islam, and for the Syrian people to allow all religious communities to live in peace.

Should the Free Army intervene in the political system?

The people will be the ones to determine this. We will personally seek a system that is genuinely Islamic, but an independent system should allow everyone to advocate and act as they wish and without surveillance. If we are prevented from doing so, there may be another revolution. We’ll call on the people to moderate Islam, for as God says: "We also made you a moderate nation".

You mentioned other communities. How do you expect to approach the different communities within Syria in the future?

To each his or her own. But the constitution should define the head of state is a Muslim, so long as Syria is majority Muslim. Most constitutions around the world state that the head of state must represent a majority.
A bitter episode of the struggle that the city of Hama endured for half a century began when the late Hafez Assad was the Secretary of Defence in 1964. The start of these tragic events was marked by the destruction of the Sultan Mosque, following orders from Assad himself.

The events continued to unfold until Hafez Assad came to power in 1970. From that date until February 1982, Hama was a platform for peaceful resistance, which Assad had tried to eliminate, resulting in the ‘massacre of Bustan al-Saadah’ in August 1980, which left only a few widows in the area. Then, on the 2nd of February 1982, the so-called tragedy of the century began, of which Hama was centre stage.

"Tragedy of the Century"

The “Tragedy of the Century” was the biggest military operation the Syrian regime carried out against the city of Hama, under the pretense of eliminating the Muslim Brotherhood, killing as a result, tens of thousands of the city’s inhabitants over a period of 27 days. During this time, the city was besieged, then shelled, before becoming occupied by the military, which then began carrying out massacres.

Events on the first day of the massacre took place in 3 stages. The first stage began at midnight, when government forces raided the houses and hiding places of rebels, though failing to capture any of them. The second stage began with the Hama rebels’ decision to defend themselves and their families, following the regime’s intensification of military operations. The third stage began early in the morning, with the government sending reinforcement in the form of large special forces units and armed Baath party loyalist gangs, as well as the Defence Brigade via Hama’s military airport. At the same time, the 47th and 21st Tanks Brigade headed towards the city.

The difference between that and the events we’re seeing today, is the rebels’ ability to now resist the attempt to storm the city from many different points, made by Assad’s men. At the time, Assad’s forces lost many men, as well as artillery, which resulted in reinforcement being sent to four main points in the city. Soldiers killed any man they saw and raped any woman or girl they came across, as well as pillaging anything valuable. This is not to mention loyalist gangs personally retaliating against families of the ‘tali’ah’ rebels, who had taken part in the fighting.

The city witnessed twenty seven days of horror and intense suffering never before experienced, the worst being the day Rifaat Assad patrolled the city streets after Martial Law was called off. Inhabitants were allowed out of their houses. It was a Friday and naturally, men went out to the mosques to perform their religious duty. Infuriated by the sight of these men, Rifaat made a notorious comment that the people of Hama still recall to this day: “There are still men in Hama?” He ordered his soldiers to round up all the men at once. They led the men to a graveyard known as the ‘Khadraa’ Cemetery, also known as ‘Sreheen’ Cemetery, where they were all executed. There were around 5,000 men killed, according to local witnesses.

From that moment up until now, the Assad regime has employed a consistent policy of destroying mosques, which must be pointed out. This tactic has been used deliberately to heighten sectarian conflict in their war against the Syrian people. Eighty eight mosques were destroyed, either completely or partially by the regime. And it didn’t stop there: one of the city’s churches was shelled, which resulted in a large part of it being demolished, thus confirming the regime’s intention to destroy the entire city.

Witnesses from Hama

Mr Attaf Tarkawi, better known within revolutionary circles as Sheikh Salih al-Hamwi, a member of the General Committee of the Syrian Revolution, and a military leader of the ‘Sons of Hama’ Brigade, gave an account of the massacre in Hama to Enab Baladi, confirming the horrific episode that took place.

“1982 was a very hard time. There was nothing anyone could do but stay at home and wait for death. For the first time in my life, I saw people herded like sheep and taken to the slaughter in complete submission. They came into our area and rounded up all the men, sending some to the 47th Brigade, while the rest were swiftly executed. That was one of the most horrifying sights; to see all these bodies, on top of each other, swimming in blood.” Sheikh Salih added, describing the human and material losses that
the city suffered, that "A quarter of the city's inhabitants were either dead or missing. Not a single house remained unaffected by this great calamity. In some areas there was total carnage. A large number of women had been raped and dishonoured. This continued after the massacre, when widows of the martyrs were told to come forward and claim compensation for the loss of their husbands, killed by the regime, in order to feed their orphans". In Sheikh Salih's opinion, the worst outcome of the massacre was "the combination of humiliation and killing".

Ameed Alwany, known by revolutionaries as Imran Taj-Uddin, one of the founders of the ‘Ahrar Hama’ (the Free People of Hama) group, and a revolutionary co-ordinator in the city, came forward with his eye witness account to Enab Baladi: "The losses were great and well known, but the worst loss was that of a whole generation of educated and productive men and women, on the basis of hatred, as well as the fact that thousands of the best intellectuals were banished, and the rest detained. This left behind nothing but fear and repression, fear of even thinking about freedom. That generation passed down this fear to the next, leaving it paralysed and unable to shake off this humiliation". Mr Alwany added that the "new generation has benefitted from the pain of the past that was pushed onto it. This pain, along with the hope it carried, was what brought about the Hama Revolution". Alwany states: "We know for sure that those that weren’t moved by 1982 will not be moved by today’s revolution. As a result, we have no faith in them, they are of no use to us.'

Ameed continues to retell the events he witnessed in 1982. "One of the worst things was when they wanted to enter the houses. The women were terrified. I remember my mother covered her face in soot and locked herself in a room, trying to pretend she was mad, in hope that the soldiers would leave her alone. Many women in the family wore multiple layers of clothing, to try and protect themselves from Assad's savages. You couldn’t imagine the relief once the soldiers had left, despite having ransacked the house of all its valuables." Statistics from the Syrian Human Rights Committee indicate that the number of people killed was between 30 and 40 thousand, the vast majority of them civilians, most having been shot dead in mass executions, then buried in mass graves.

Investigations into the massacre

Instead of investigating the war crimes carried out by regime forces against the civilian population in Hama, and alleviating the suffering of those who remained, the regime actually rewarded soldiers believed to have been involved, or those directly responsible, such as Rifaat Assad. He was appointed Vice President of the Republic for National Security. In addition, a number of generals and army officers were promoted to higher ranks, while the Mayor of Hama at the time, Mohammed Harbeh, was appointed Minister of Interior. This was no less than the regime’s complete indifference towards public opinion, which made clear their intention to continue using force over dialogue, to handle internal problems. This is proof that the international community turned a blind eye to the massacre, in order to reinstate Assad’s rule in the country.
This is a moment of historical fiction. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Damascus, the oldest capital in history, is under siege. But if we look deeper, we are still confined within a system of military power and hegemony. As shameful as Saddam’s invasion into Kuwait was, or the blatant interference of Syria in Lebanon, we now see Iran, a country still living in the shackles of its past and delusion of regional domination, bringing to mind Persia’s ancient wars with its current activities. Twenty-six centuries since the ancient wars, Persian history is repeating itself. This time, however, not in the land of the Ancient Greeks, but in the country of the Syrians, in Damascus, the cradle of civilisation; in Aleppo, Homs and Eastern Ghouta; and in Jobar, Barzeh and Daraya.

When the Syrian revolution began, protests in the squares attracted more and more participants. From this revolutionary movement, names of young activists emerged, and they have come to be recognised around the world for their work. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime continues to vilify the revolution and those who took part in it as terrorists, infiltrators, secret agents, extremists and Al-Qaeda members.

Today, Daraya is a city in shambles, abandoned by what was once a population of more than 200,000 people. More than 2,000 people were killed, and more than 1,700 civilians and local activists are now in prison. Among the most important activists of this revolution are Ghiath Matar, Yahya and Nabil Sharbaji, Islam Dabbas, Mash’al Tammo, Razan Zaytouneh, Yassin al-Hajj Saleh and Anas al-Sheghri, among others.

A few days ago, Human Rights Watch in New York published a report about the tens of thousands of Syrian detainees held in jails in horrific conditions. According to the report, Yahya, Ghiath and Anas al-Sheghri are among them. But what lies behind the facts and figures of such reports are stories that have accumulated over the years, and impact history itself. People like Yahya, Ghiath and the rest of the activists didn’t suddenly appear with roses in their hands out of nowhere. A civil movement had already existed in Daraya for over 15 years. People of great moral influence such as Abdul Akram al-Saqq’a (also detained today) focused on promoting religious values to create a distinct civil movement.

This movement was trying to create a small margin for intellectual and social change, promoting clean-up and anti-smoking campaigns, reading groups and study meetings. However, most of these ended up with imprisonment and punishment. This movement and the longing for civil cultural change sprung out of that generation, one that came about before Assad took Syria and reduced its popular will under his rule and that of his family in 1970. The generation that tried to form a pluralistic Syrian identity, following the independence from France, and that still inspires Syrians today. The generation of this revolution knows its predecessors had developed a vision that reflected the nature of Syrian cultural and religious entanglement, and looked back at intellectuals such as Faris al-Khoury, Mary al-Ajami, President Shukri al-Quwatli, Shakib Arslan, Muhammad Kurd Ali, Adila Bayham, Sheikh Bahjat al-Bitar, and Sheikh Abdul Hamid al-Zahrawi. Because of these intellectuals, Syrians today believe that their revolution will achieve their objectives and restore a national project.

But the real shock to Syrians came when they discovered that they were not only fighting Assad, but also Iran and its ally, Hezbollah. It’s now clear that the regime couldn’t have gone on without Iran’s support and intervention. As far as Russia is concerned, although it also supports the regime and continues to send weapons, it has greatly benefited from European and American hesitation to take a stance on the issue, and has devoted itself entirely to re-establishing the image of the bipolar world in order to restore its faded glory.

But the real confrontation is with Iran’s desire to expand regionally. If we look at a map of the region, it becomes clear what’s happening. With the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Maliki government in Iraq, Iran is expanding its control. From the very beginning, Iran has been shamelessly declaring that Syria is under the control of its national security, as if it were an Iranian province. Subsequently, it lost its greatest historic opportunity to create a renaissance in the region, by caring for the concerns of the oppressed.

The ghosts of history are reappearing today. Qasem Soleimani, Commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, who is leading the battles from an operation’s room in Damascus, has now become, for Syrians, the biggest violator of their country’s sovereignty. But this also shows the inability of Bashar Assad’s soldiers to repress the revolution on their own. According to one source, Soleimani told an Iraqi politician: “The Syrian army is useless, give me one of the Basij militia’s brigades, and I will be
able to conquer the entire country”. He was referring to one of the Iranian militias that crushed the popular uprising against the Mullahs’ regime in 2009.

Despite the non-violent steadfastness of the Syrian people for six months in the face of the Syrian regime’s brutality, the role of Iran has greatly contributed to stripping the conversation away from Syrian national sovereignty and turning the revolution for freedom into a regional conflict. Iran did not leave the Syrian people to decide their fate peacefully, or even afterwards once the military were involved. Just as with the Green Revolution and the suppression of the Iranian movement, Iran supported the Syrian regime in the same manner: uprooting and destroying peaceful civil resistance, focusing on the arrest of civilian leaders or inspiring youth figures that maintained the cohesion of this civil movement, as the Human Rights Watch report released in October shows. In contrast, Russia contributed to the destruction of infrastructure, as it did with the Chechen revolution and its wiping out of Grozny. The regime wiped out Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus in a similar way.

Frankly, we wanted to be like Athens but found ourselves to be the new Sparta. We wanted Syria to be a country of science and civilisation, but the dream of the ancient Persians, although under a religious disguise this time, stood in the way of a people who wanted to do away with the clutches of tyranny.

Athens was the capital of the Greeks and the ancient world, the city of science and knowledge, and home to the great philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. But when the Persians advanced towards Greece during the Greco-Persian wars of the V century BC, as they are known, Athens was forced to confront them in their first campaign. Persia pursued with a second campaign that would have been victorious; had the Spartans not secured a slow withdrawal of the Athenian army that had captured 300 of the most courageous military leaders of Sparta, led by Leonidas. The Persians returned in defeat after several battles.

In the film, which glorifies that moment and made Leonidas a legend, he stands up to challenge the Persian messenger, who demands that he hands over the city. But Leonidas stands firmly before them and says in a loud voice: “This is Sparta!”, before throwing them into a hole.

The Persian messenger told them that they were committing a great violation in killing the former messenger, but he had himself failed to see the violation of an entire people whose lands were being invaded. Similarly today, the world’s media focuses on the violations occurring within the revolution, while deliberately disregarding the systematic and continuous abuse committed against the Syrian people by the regime and its allies.

I write from besieged Daraya. Like Sparta and its three hundred warriors, we are not responding. Daraya has been under siege for over a year and has almost been wiped off the map. But the regime couldn’t gain control of Daraya, despite there being only few of us here. And we do not have weapons that could rival Iran’s, nor Russia’s supports for the regime.

Every day the siege grows and it’s choking us. We’ve resorted to eating leaves from the trees. We haven’t had any bread to eat for months, and we even have to manufacture our own IV bags to meet the needs of the wounded and the sick. Yesterday’s activists have become today’s warriors. Throughout Syria, these courageous people, who yesterday demonstrated in the squares, say boldly and courageously to this invading occupier: “This is Daraya! This is Damascus! This is Syria!”

Despite the brutality of military operations carried out by the regime, Damascus and its countryside are still almost free of foreign fighters. We still want our freedom and envision of Syria as home for the Syrian people. But we are also eager to break free of these power games and regain our place as brothers and sisters among the peoples of the earth, to build a more humane world.

As our friend Imad al-Abbar says: “History doesn’t repeat itself, but we repeat our actions in history”. This is the opportunity for everyone to come out of the old, boring and painful world with all its destructive crises and repetitions. Let us move towards seeing our interests in the region met, and the inevitability of our common future. Always remember, this is Damascus! The cradle of human civilisation.
The Reasons Behind the Defeat and its Potential Consequences

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On the 23rd of June 2012, the now-deceased Abdul Kader al-Saleh and his comrades in the Free Syrian Army moving into Aleppo surprised those living in Masakin Hananu. The FSA took control of the neighbourhood and several others nearby, leading the regime to lose half of their territory in the city in a matter of days. On the 23rd of November 2016, the regime turned the tables. Their forces and militias took over the neighbourhood in only two days and managed to take control of half of the city in a few more.

Ten days of control over Aleppo’s eastern neighbourhoods were sufficient to drastically alter the city’s fault lines after four years of stable division between east and west. Regime forces and their allies inflicted heavy field losses on the opposition, who appeared defenceless to the enemy’s attacks. Neighbourhoods surrendered one by one, and thousands of civilians were forced to migrate to regime areas.

It’s “the end of Aleppo”, as some Twitter users described it. No one predicted the horrors the besieged people of Eastern Aleppo would witness. Hopes of victory were high, increasing with every shot fired by fighters in the south, but those hopes were soon destroyed. Assad, supported by Russia and Iran, achieved his goal by storming the city’s eastern neighbourhoods, his fighters and mercenaries taking over the whole area. Thus, Aleppo returned in the hands of the regime after the fall of its last rebel bastion.

How did Assad and his allies prepare to regain Eastern Aleppo?

For two and a half years, Assad’s forces have steadily advanced on Aleppo’s outskirts, which has enabled them to reach their desired result today. Their plan began with regaining control of the industrial area of Al-Sheikh Najjar in the east of the city in June 2014, followed by relatively slow progress towards north. They continued their attempts to advance along the eastern and northern fronts in order to lay siege on Aleppo.

At the beginning of 2015, Assad’s forces gained noticeable ground by opening a road from Al-Sheikh Najjar to Sayfat, then Bashkawi, north of the city. At that point, the regime’s plans became clear: they aimed to take control of the north part of Castello Road, a vital route connecting the city of Aleppo to its northern and western rural suburbs, all the way to the border with Turkey.

Operations along this axis continued for over a year, until Assad’s forces managed to gain control of the villages of Haiylan, Rtyan, Hardatnein and Ma’arasit al-Khan, reaching Mayer in February 2016. Regime forces managed to partially break the siege on pro-regime villages of Nubl and al-Zahraa. At the same time, Kurdish forces took control of the city of Tel Rifaat, Menagh Military Airbase and several neighbouring villages, which meant that the two main roads connecting Aleppo to the border with Turkey were cut off.

The regime, along its Russian and Iranian allies, managed to besiege the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, launching a new phase of the conflict, with the aim of taking control of the Al-Malah area overlooking Castello Road, which they managed to do in June 2016. Operations continued, with Assad’s forces gaining control of parts of the road in mid-June. Since then, Aleppo has been under siege.

On the 28th of June, regime forces entered Bani Zaid neighbourhood, which borders the Castello Road along the northern axis of Aleppo. It’s the first area Assad’s forces have regained since the opposition entered the city in 2012. Battles continued on that axis until the end of September 2016, when regime forces tightened their control on the village of Handarat, Ma’amil al-Shakif, thus gaining complete control of the Castello Road and its surrounding areas.

The southern and south-eastern fronts of Aleppo have remained quiet since Assad’s forces took control of the city of Al-Safirah and its rural outskirts in October 2013. These forces returned with extensive Iranian support to launch new battles in the area in October 2015, managing to gain control of opposition areas starting with the village of Al-Wedihi, which stands between Aleppo and Al-Hadher, among others.

These forces expanded operations on the south-eastern front to break the siege imposed on Kuweires Military Airbase in November 2015, and subsequently moved eastwards, stopping 11 kilometres south of the city of Al-Bab.
Assad’s forces and their militias achieved all of this along Aleppo’s three axis over the course of 24 months, encircling the eastern neighbourhoods by targeting the area from the east and south, and besieging it by controlling the only road going north.

Some of the militias participating in the battle of Aleppo

The Syrian regime has depended on armed militias, most of which are sectarian in nature, to fight against opposition factions in Aleppo since 2015. Here we mention the names of 17 militias, most of which belong to the Shiite sect and come from six different countries, other than the local and mixed militias.

Foreign Militias:
Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas (Iraqi), Al Beit (Iraqi), Al-Najba (Iraqi), Sayyid al-Shuhada (Iraqi), Badr (Iraqi), Hezbollah (Iraqi), Al-Quds (Palestinian), Fatemiyoun (Afghan), Zainebiyoun (Pakistani), Hezbollah (Lebanese), Basij (Iranian), 65th Airborne Special Forces Brigade/The Green Hats (Iranian)

Local and Mixed Militias:
National Defence Forces (local), Desert Hawks Brigade (local), Al-Fuhud (local), Baqir Brigade (Syrian-Iraqi), Storm Eagles (Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which includes different nationalities).

During battles in recent days, Assad’s forces and their militias also joint forces with the Kurdish People’s Defence Units and “Asayisha” forces, the two military wings of the Democratic Union Party, the founders of the Autonomous Administration in northern and north-east Syria.

Failed battles exhaust the opposition and residents

The opposition did not stand idly by as the regime attacked. They fought twice to break the siege on Aleppo’s eastern neighbourhoods, but failed on both occasions. The failure negatively impacted their position on the ground and contributed to weakening the military and organisational structure of the factions, which were exhausted and fragmented following the defeats.

On the 31st of June 2016, Jaish al-Fateh factions, which have popular support in Aleppo and its surrounding countryside, called on civilians to burn tires, in order to spread smoke and prevent warplanes from obstructing the operation. The opposition operation opened a gap in Ramouseh, south of Aleppo, reaching Sheikh Saeed with the aim of ending the siege imposed on the eastern neighbourhoods.

This resounding victory for the opposition, and continued collapse of Assadist forces’ defences, resulted in the latter losing the military academy in the Ramouseh area, the southern hills reaching Al-Hikma school and the "1070 Apartments Project", which is part of Al-Hamdaniya neighbourhood. This success enabled a first aid convoy to enter the city through Ramouseh crossing in the first week of August 2016, albeit with great difficulty due to regime warplanes targeting the route.

The victory chants did not last long, as it became clear in the following weeks that this axis would not be the key to ending the siege on Eastern Aleppo. Assad’s forces, Russia and Iran would not allow humanitarian aid or weapons to continue moving along this route. Air strikes began to inflict severe damage on the Jaish al-Fateh factions, together with consecutive regime attacks by land, which managed to close the gap in September 2016, returning the military academies and vast parts of Ramouseh neighbourhood under regime control. The opposition only managed to maintain their control over a few hills and the “1070 Apartments Project” area at that time.

On the 28th of September 2016, Jaish al-Fateh, supported by the Fateh Halab factions, began a new battle on a different front, with the aim of breaking the siege on the eastern neighbourhoods. The plan included gaining control of Assad suburb and the area of Menyan, strengthening their position in the “3000 Apartments Project” area, and taking control of Al-Hamdaniya and New Aleppo neighbourhoods, including the military academy. The opposition would, thus, take control of parts of Western Aleppo and break the siege on the eastern neighbourhoods of Salah el-Din area.

The battle didn’t last long, despite the opposition’s victory in the first phase as it gained control of Assad suburb and the neighbouring area of Menyan. This gave the impression that they were able to gain control of all of Aleppo, if Al-Hamdaniya, New Aleppo and the military academy fell, given Assad forces’ reinforced position in the city.

On the 12th of November 2016, Assad’s forces prepared to regain what they had lost in previous battles, and the situation returned to what it
had been prior to the 31st of June 2016. All opportunities to break the siege on the city from the southern front were lost, and the eastern neighbourhoods entered a new, more violent and tragic phase, according to local and international human rights and humanitarian organisations.

The opposition failed to rescue the besieged people of Aleppo and they committed several military mistakes, the most important being the lack of coordination between the 15 factions that participated in the two battles. Perhaps the most influential, was the decision to gain control of areas but then not defend them, a move that was repeated on several instances, according to a field officer in Jaish al-Fateh who expressed his regret over what had happened: "We lost 700 fighters from among our finest Inghimasi 20 fighters in two months, and the factions were exhausted, without having really achieved anything".

The situation on the ground after taking the northern part of Eastern Aleppo

After the opposition’s failure in its last battle, Assad’s forces launched their most violent attack on the city of Aleppo. The attack resulted in the death of over 600 civilians, according to the Civil Defence Force, and destroyed more buildings and infrastructure than ever before. As part of this offensive, Assad’s forces and their militias launched attacks from the eastern side of the city, to take control of Al-Zuhur hill overlooking Masakin Hananu neighbourhood on the 21st of November.

On the morning of the 23rd of November, Assad’s forces stormed Masakin Hananu, and had gained complete control of it by the 26th of the month. Forces expanded towards the surrounding neighbourhoods in clear, but unofficial, coordination with the Kurdish ‘People’s Protection Units’, which took over six neighbourhoods after opposition factions withdrew from them, including Bustan al-Basha, Ein al-Tal, Hellok, Sheikh Fares and Al-Zaitouniat.

On the 28th of November, Assad’s forces and their foreign and local militias took control of the following areas: Masakin Hananu, Al-Haidarya, Al-Sakhour, Suleiman al-Halabi mosque, Jabal Badro, Al-Intharat, Ein al-Tal, Arad al-Hamra and Al-Sheikh Khader. Assad’s forces continued their military pressure and consecutive strikes, benefiting from the collapse of the opposition’s ranks. On the 3rd of December, regime forces took control of Al-Bab road, Masakin al-Shabab, Al-Hilwaniyah and Karm al-Jazmati neighbourhoods. Fighting continues in Karm al-Myssar neighbourhood at the time of writing.

Assad’s forces have taken control of around 20 square kilometres of the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, whilst 20 kilometres remain under opposition control. The areas under opposition control are restricted to the south and centre of the city, with the possibility of the regime advancing on Karm al-Myssar and Karm al-Tarab for its forces to reach Al-Qatraji, Al-Sha’ar and Al-Marja neighbourhoods.

Opposition factions managed to block the attack on the Sheikh Saeed neighbourhood from the southern side. Assad’s forces and their militias then attacked along the Al-Azizeh and Al-Shurta Hill front, with the aim of gaining control of the Sheikh Lutfi neighbourhood that borders Bab al-Nayrab on the south eastern front, but they didn’t manage to achieve any change in control.

Jaish Halab: The opposition seeks solutions

The initiative of the United Nations Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan De Mistura, aimed at facilitating the evacuation of fighters of the Fateh al-Sham front from the east of Aleppo towards the north, in exchange for the cessation of bombing and hostilities, allowing convoys of aid to reach the besieged population. Since it was proposed, Russia announced its willingness to convince the Syrian regime of the initiative, on the condition that the Fateh al-Sham fighters leave.

Early attempts to form a united military opposition body in Syria began in 2014, when 90 opposition factions announced a new initiative under the title “And They Persevered”. The charter of the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council was put forward, but according to observers the initiative failed to achieve its goal.

In Aleppo, a number of factions formed the first joint entity, represented in the Fateh Halab operation room in March 2015, which aimed to take control of the western neighbourhoods of the city that are all still occupied by Assad’s forces. The number of factions later rose to 31, including Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, the Levant Front, Ahrar al-Sham Movement, Jaish al-Islam, Al-Sham Legion, Abu Amara Battalion and Suqour al-Jabal Legion.

20 Translator’s note: Inghimasi is a tactic used by extremist forces like Al-Qa’eda/Al-Nusra that was then adopted by ISIS as well. For more info, see Bellingcat: “Inghimasi – The Secret ISIS Tactic”
As part of the operation room, these factions executed hundreds of operations against Assad's forces in Aleppo and its outskirts. These factions eventually formed the "Aleppo Command Council" on the 14th of November, in order to include all factions operating in the city, in light of disputes between a number of them. While battles close to the city escalated, these disputes took centre stage with residents accusing the factions of letting them down.

At the start of December, the largest alliance to date was created in a bid to rescue the stricken city, and named "Jaish Halab". This alliance included the Levant Front, Ahrar al-Sham and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement alongside several other factions, under the leadership of Abu Abdulrahman Nour from the Levant Front. The majority of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement's work has focused on stopping Assad's forces' and their militias' attacks on the Sheikh Saeed neighbourhood from the southern front to Eastern Aleppo, as well as regaining some areas that Assad's forces have advanced on in the nearby Al-Sakan Al-Shababi area.

Following the formation of Jaish Halab, Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, confirmed that Russia accepted the De Mistura initiative, which required 'armed fighters' to leave Aleppo, "despite the lack of clarity of the idea", as he put it. He commented, "Jaish Halab is an attempt to rename Fateh al-Sham, to enable it to avoid the punishment it deserves".

Russian discourse didn't change after the emergence of this new alliance, and it confirmed its forces' continued efforts to "cleanse" the city of Aleppo from "terrorist organisations". Lavrov estimated the number of fighters in Eastern Aleppo to be at around 7500, "1500 fighters from al-Nusra Front, and around 6000 others belonging to different groups that are under al-Nusra's control".

Enab Baladi spoke to Yasser Ibrahim al-Youssef, a member of the political office of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, who said, "Jaish Halab should be replicated in all other areas and frontlines, to reach the point of forming a free national army controlled by the people and protecting them, which would only use its weapons to fend off enemies". He confirmed that, "Jaish Halab will later expand into Aleppo’s countryside, to join the northern national army".

Al-Youssef described Jaish Halab as "the defensive cordon and a true added value to the revolution in Aleppo", clarifying that "the ‘Jaish’ means a united revolution and force in the city, and a unified base leads to unified decision-making".

Responding to residents’ and activists’ criticism of the city’s factions, Al-Youssef didn’t deny responsibility, and said that everyone is at fault: "We are all to blame". He said that what had happened in Aleppo in the previous week didn’t require justification, but positive work to salvage what could be saved. "The battle is not between one army and another, but against armies, militias and major powers that have united to force the Syrian people to surrender, but we will never compromise and will resist with whatever strength we have, even though we are up against Iran and Russia".

Enab Baladi tried to reach out to a number military commanders in Aleppo, including the leader of Jaish al-Mujahideen, Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad Juma Bakur (Abu Bakr), to get their views regarding possible solutions to the current situation, but our intermediaries informed us that the commanders were busy dealing with threats the city is currently facing.

**Aid is paralysed amidst demands for referral to the General Assembly**

The United Nations’ plan to get humanitarian aid into Eastern Aleppo is receiving a large amount of interest from Western media amid political tension and accusations regarding the obstacles preventing aid from being delivered. The situation on the ground in Aleppo shows the regime’s and its Iranian and Russian allies’ determination to take control of the remaining neighbourhoods of Eastern Aleppo. The military option gives the impression that it’s almost impossible to deliver aid to the area at present.

Jan Egeland, a UN Senior Advisor, is still waiting for the green light from Russia and Assad, after opposition factions agreed weeks ago to the international organisation’s plan to deliver humanitarian aid and evacuate patients to nearby hospitals. Russia, however, claims that circumstances are not suitable at present for launching the United Nations’ humanitarian plan in Eastern Aleppo.

Delivering aid requires speeding up efforts to end the battles in Aleppo, according to a shared vision summarised in a telephone conversation between Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, on the 30th of November. However, Washington doubts the possibility of opening safe roads to deliver aid.

On the 1st of December, the US State Department announced that Washington is taking the violence in Aleppo into consideration, confirming that, "It is difficult to rely on Russian announcements regarding the possibility of establishing safe roads for delivering humanitarian aid to Aleppo".
International organisations around the world criticised the UN Security Council’s actions regarding the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo, amid warnings that its imminent surrender “will make it another Rwanda or Srebrenica”. A total of 223 organisations from 45 countries issued statements, the most prominent being Human Rights Watch, Save the Children and Care International, along with 63 Syrian organisations. Dr. Simon Adams, Executive Director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, believes that Aleppo is turning into another Rwanda or Srebrenica. “We are witnessing yet another moment of global inaction in the face of human annihilation”. He added: “Given the shameful deadlock in the Security Council, Member States of the General Assembly must act within their power and demand an immediate end to attacks on civilians and accountability for the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria”.

Ahmad Tarakji, a member of the Syrian American Medical Association, called for action to be taken “to face the depravity and lack of respect for basic standards regarding what is happening in Aleppo”. Eduarda Hamann, Coordinator of the Building Peace programme at the Igarapé Institute in Brazil, said that the current situation in Aleppo “is the ultimate test of the international system. The community of nations cannot stand by while tens of thousands of Syrians are violently forced to evacuate their homes”.

“In accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly can take decisions instead of the Security Council if it is found that the Council is unable to maintain international peace and security, but the powers of the General Assembly remain limited. The procedure demanded by Canada during the 1950 Korean crisis, the 1960 Congo War and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1980”.

Human Rights Watch recently published a report documenting “war crimes” executed by Assad’s forces and supported by Russia in September and October of 2016. According to the report, 440 civilians, among them 90 children, were killed in these attacks. The organisation demanded Member States of the United Nations respect the “United For Peace” principle and act to immediately to “stop the Security Council’s paralysis and stop the horrors in Aleppo”.

Other countries have taken action regarding Aleppo, including Canada, which launched an initiative and gained the support of 73 countries in demanding an emergency session of the UN General Assembly.

International meetings on peace or evacuation?

Far from the battles on the ground, international meetings and gatherings continue to discuss Aleppo, with the Security Council voting on the 5th of December on a joint draft statement proposed by Egypt, New Zealand and Spain, calling for a ceasefire in Aleppo and allowing humanitarian aid to be delivered. Meetings were also being held in Ankara between representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defence and some of the opposition factions in Aleppo city.

“The draft statement that the Security Council will vote on doesn’t include battles against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Fateh al-Sham Front or any other group the Council classifies as a terrorist organisation”.

No decisions or results came out of those meetings until the 3rd of December. While the opposition say that Russia is purposely dragging its feet in these meetings, experts predict that work will continue until an agreement is reached that will reduce the intensity of the fighting, and allow groups of fighters to leave Aleppo in conjunction with the Paris meeting for the “Friends of Syria” group on the 10th of December. An agreement for fighters to leave for Idlib raises the possibility of emptying Aleppo of fighters, especially as Russia considers the Daraya scenario as an example that could be replicated in other towns and cities controlled by the opposition in Syria. Experts, however, doubt the possibility of this scenario happening in Aleppo as it did in the towns of Eastern Ghouta in the Damascus countryside.

Yasser Al-Youssef, a member of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement’s political bureau, sees Turkish-Russian discussions in Ankara as being aimed at limiting the violence and getting medical and humanitarian assistance into Aleppo. He pointed out: “The issue is being exaggerated in the media on the basis that these are direct negotiations with the opposition, but they’re not. Our discussions are with the Turkish side only, and the revolutionary factions play an important role in securing the potential convoys and delivery routes for assistance”.

Regarding the possibility of Aleppo being emptied of its fighters, Al-Youssef said: “The regime’s plans and those of its Russian and Iran allies have become clear to all, with the adoption of the ‘starve or surrender’ policy, alongside policies of displacement to change the demographic composition, which they have managed to implement in some areas in the South. But Aleppo, with its revolutionary bodies in the city and
countryside, and the determination of its people, will break the arrogance of these tyrants to show how flesh and blood will defeat iron and fire.

Al-Youssef sees no possibility of executing any initiatives at present. “We are forced to resist and defend ourselves and our people. The revolution is not a street here or a neighbourhood there, but the will to change, which grows with each drop of blood”. He concluded by asserting, “we have achieved what we can up until now and we are not depending on any international or regional efforts to break the siege”.

Some experts believe that the remaining eastern neighbourhoods will face the same fate as the old ones in Homs, when they were emptied of their fighters by Assad’s forces and Iran two and a half years ago. This comparison comes to mind as thousands of families have already been forced to leave for Western Aleppo, and thousands more are preparing to leave in order to escape death, which awaits them at every corner. Others insist that this was just one unsuccessful round, and that the Syrian revolution will rise again, despite all the difficulties.

"I remember how that day bore witness to the heaviest bombing since the beginning of the revolution. Missiles and cluster rockets were pouring down like rain. The sounds of ambulances echoed endlessly, and there were many martyrs". Mohammed Jokhdar described the last moments in the city of Aleppo before the aerial bombardments were stopped by the ceasefire, and the noise which had dominated the last year turned into silence following the wailing of the departed.

That same morning, the 12th of December 2016, Bustan al-Qasr and Al-Kalasah neighbourhoods were destroyed by Assad’s forces and supporting militias, and the rest of their inhabitants gathered in the area west of Jisr al-Hajj. Under the pressure of rockets and explosive barrels, fighters of military factions and residents surrendered to a settlement that gave their neighbourhoods and streets to those who had taken their lives away for five years.

More than 50,000 people in an area of no more than two kilometres, most of them children and women, were burying their last victims in the quick-build graves, leaving what remained of their homes and revolutionary memories and getting ready to leave.

The first convoy lasted for a whole day until it reached Al-Rashideen neighbourhood in the west of the city, after being attacked by Hezbollah and other sectarian militias. Despite the organised reception prepared by the western countryside and Idlib residents for the displaced people of Aleppo, the frustration about and fear of the future were obvious.

"Here is the real suffering". Mohammed, a media activist and photographer, described the situation to Enab Baladi the moment he arrived in the western countryside. Thousands of people were forced to stay in newly constructed shelters, while some went to Idlib to look for work and somewhere to live, and others illegally left for Turkey in search of stability and security.

**Displacement of communities**

On the 22nd of December 2016, the last convoys left the besieged neighbourhoods of Aleppo. In the eastern part of the city, the signs of the
hope of returning were left on the walls. While the "victors" were entering the desolate neighbourhoods, displaced people were facing a new type of suffering mixed with a feeling of alienation.

The number of families displaced from the eastern part of the city to the western countryside was 1,052. Meanwhile, 5,552 others arrived in the northern countryside, described by several international organisations as “the largest forced displacement in Syria”. They had relied on Russian statistics, who were yesterday killing the city’s residents in large numbers, but today are counting the number displaced one by one.

The neighbourhoods used to ‘freedom’ since the control of opposition factions in 2012, are no longer interested in the remaining rubble, and the return of some of the city’s people, who were previously displaced to neighbourhoods in Western Aleppo, didn’t ease the burden of loneliness.

According to a local resident, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo remained vacant for around four months before the first self-financed repair workshops began rebuilding a number of houses at the expense of their owners, while sources estimate the rate of those returning from the western part of the city to the Saif al-Dawla, Ansari and Salaheddine neighbourhoods at around 30% of those displaced.

Division of community identity

Before Assad’s forces took control of the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, the regime continued to convince its loyalists in the west that it was protecting them from “terrorists’ shells”, and that those in the east are corrupt and should be eliminated.

Loyalist Facebook pages have embarked on the promotion of racist ideas, such as “children of the eastern neighbourhoods are incubators for their terrorist families” and “the neighbourhoods from where mortar shells are launched should be wiped out”. Over the years, the regime was able to gain the loyalty of western neighbourhoods, even though they knew that the reality was different.

The division between eastern and western Aleppo reached its peak once the regime took control of the whole city. While thousands were transported to the diaspora in green buses, loyalists in Western neighbourhoods were dancing with joy after their “victory”, creating irrevocable divisions within the population. The regime then exploited the ruined rubble of the city to spread the image of “life in the face of the terrorists’ destruction”, through photographs of “modern and liberated” young girls and boys in front of the Citadel of Aleppo and over the rubble. These indicated its willingness to erase the character of ‘Islamisation’ associated with opposition factions, to emphasise that it is a secular regime open to all components of society.

This division of community-based identity concerns not only residents and displaced people from eastern neighbourhoods, but also those who remained in Aleppo. Today, parts of the eastern neighbourhoods are marginalized, particularly at the levels of service and finance, while western neighbourhoods are experiencing relative improvements.

All roads lead to Aleppo

While his city continues to witness the contradictions of life and death, destruction and “reconstruction,” geographical unity and social division, Mohammed Jokhdar adheres to his Aleppo identity and revolutionary orientation, despite being 200 kilometres away.

Today, Mohammed lives in the Turkish city of Mersin, after spending ten months in the western countryside of Aleppo. He feels a sense of nostalgia for Aleppo. “Everywhere I look, there’s a sign that points to Aleppo”, said Mohammed to Enab Baladi. “In my memories are images of those who stayed there, our martyred friends. They were normal people who believed in our cause and were displaced with us without having done anything wrong”.

The Aleppo scenario as a military scarecrow in opposition-held areas

The phrase “the situation in Aleppo is not like it used to be” meant that Syrians were afraid that the opposition’s departure from Aleppo may be followed by their withdrawal from areas in other provinces.

Perhaps the most prominent aspect of this fear lies in the way the city has collapsed. The eastern neighbourhoods witnessed a drawn-out policy, which began with the imposition of a complete siege and consequent starvation and shortages of essential materials for civilians, and was then followed by the targeting of infrastructure and hospitals, and a progressive closing in.

On the ground, the geographical distribution of power changed once the regime took complete control in mid-December 2016. Opposition factions lost vast areas of influence in Syria to Assad’s forces, especially
in the western Damascus countryside, the central region of Homs and the surrounding areas.

Wadi Barada and Ain al-Fijah regions were the first targets after Aleppo. Assad’s forces began a battle in the area in conjunction with buses leaving Eastern Aleppo. After a month-long aerial escalation, they managed to fully control the area, with an agreement to deport fighters and their families to the north of the country.

The regime also applied the same military policy to displace citizens of western Damascus to the cities of Madaya and Zabadani, which the opposition lost following the “Five Cities Agreement” that Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the Ahrar al-Sham movement had the most prominent role in implementing. The leader of Ahrar al-Sham and former negotiator for the Eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods, Al-Farooq Abu Bakr, considered the collapse of Aleppo as a vital moment in the history of the revolution, and pointed out that the military and political circumstances that followed were fundamentally different from what was previously the case.

In an interview with Enab Baladi, Al-Farooq said that the policy adopted in the city was applied to the areas recently lost by the opposition, through intense Russian bombardment, the use of “barbaric” force and burning land, as well as forcing fighters and civilians to leave. According to Al-Farooq, fighters faced a major problem with the presence of civilians in the neighbourhoods of Aleppo, which have been subject to heavy shelling in recent days, amid the absence of medical and civil defence centres.

Al-Waer neighbourhood and Homs collapsed a few months after the fall of the cities and towns of western Rif-Dimashq, as Assad’s forces stepped up air raids on the neighbourhood last April. Forces also and obligated factions in the region to accept the agreement requiring them to leave and head towards the northern Aleppo countryside and Idlib province.

After they left the neighbourhood, Assad’s forces moved to eastern Rif-Dimashq and re-enacted the Aleppo scenario in Qaboun and Barzeh. Assad’s forces took control of these two strategic neighbourhoods through the use of an exit agreement to the north of Syria. In doing so, they cut off the last supply lines of fighters and civilians in Eastern Ghouta.

The geographical distribution of control saw a gradual shrinking of opposition territory, in favour of the regime and the militias supporting it. Analysts attributed this to international agreements that accompanied the fragmentation of the opposition. Al-Farooq stated that no country can impose its conditions on “a rebel carrying a gun”. He believes that whether international agreements existed or not, there are facts on the ground than they appear on the international stage. They depend on the ‘scorched earth’ strategy adopted by Russia, which leaves opposition factions with little hope. The same thing happened in Eastern Aleppo after warehouses containing ammunition and food were targeted.

Al-Farooq criticised the tyrannical way in which the military factions operating in Aleppo, including Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and Abu Amara Battalion, have fought the Fastaqim Union, drastically contributing to the collapse of the city.

Control of the city gave the regime greater “military confidence” to restore the areas held in the western countryside of Aleppo, and to completely expel Daesh from said areas through a triple axes attack which reached southern Raqqa countryside and the western outskirts of Deir ez-Zor. The regime also took control of the eastern countryside of Hama and Homs.

The strongest party politically controls on-the-ground developments

The political situation did not differ from that of the military after the fall of the city. The circumstances presented a new political path of “ceasefires” in the Kazakh capital, which had different variations, the latest being “Astana 7”. The Astana conference failed to reach any clear position in favour of the opposition forces. Instead, it was a political cover for the regime and its international supporters on the ground, while they continued committing violations under international auspices.

Since December 2016 and the collapse of Aleppo, the opposition has been prevented from using its most important negotiating cards. It has turned into an internationally “weak” party in comparison to early years of the revolution, as Western and regional countries cannot offer anything tangible to a party without a heavy military presence.

According to Syrian opposition member and former member of the Astana delegation, Zakaria Mellahfji, the period that followed the siege of Aleppo and the withdrawal of military forces witnessed a change, not only in terms of the geographical distribution of power, but also at international and regional levels. The US withdrawal made its overall weakness at the general level more obvious, while countries in the region found other priorities to focus on.

The morale of opposition forces, and their decision to participate in the Astana talks resulted in a new situation. In an interview with Enab Baladi,
Mellahfji believed the international community to have great potential, and that if the US wanted to prevent the fall of Aleppo in late 2016, it could have been possible. However, the US withdrew in conjunction with regional interests of the states that are influential in the Syrian issue.

After the regime took control of the city, one idea reigned over the political scene: the bargaining power of the negotiating party depends on presence on the ground and the cards it has yet to play at a military level. The city, the Syrian opposition member said, was conquered in a painful way, including burning, destroying, starving and removing people. This has been later followed by political action, with Russia in the lead, seeking to take control of Syria beyond the military dimension.

Astana did not differ from the Geneva negotiations, which reached its eighth version without any significant progress in favour of the opposition, and also failed to stop air raids on Syrian cities, especially Eastern Ghouta. The opposition also failed to open safe corridors to the civilians trapped there. Meanwhile, the Riyadh meetings, with their two versions, came out with a number of items and propositions. This followed a series of resignations within the Supreme Negotiating Committee, the main opposition party. The main actors did not implement or commit themselves to any of these resolutions.

On the other side, the Syrian regime has clung to a number of things, including the shift from discussing the fate of Bashar Assad and his regime, and the issue of political transition, which he considers a red line that cannot be crossed or discussed. All this aside, Russia has taken a number of steps in the past three months, in order to take part to the political negotiations in the Syrian National Dialogue Conference in Sochi to impose complete hegemony over Syria's political future.

Aleppo struggles to reach the reconstruction stage

"The destruction caused by the proxy war in Aleppo was huge. However, the most important achievement is the will of Syrian people, and their ability to withstand terrorism and demonstrate their courage to defend their country". This was Ali Akbar Velayati, Advisor to the Supreme Leader of Iran, during his visit to Aleppo one year after Assad's forces took complete control of the city, through the support of Iranian-backed militia fighters.

However, the "courage and steadfastness" that Velayati spoke about were not of critical importance to the regime. What matters most was the result of the visit: contracts and agreements, some of which have been announced, while others remain undeclared, in addition to promising to participate in the reconstruction of Aleppo, 60% of which they are responsible for destroying.

Russia has also announced several projects that could be included into the reconstruction of Syria. What has been implemented so far is limited to services, tourism and cultural investments.

Local "rehabilitation" efforts

The Eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods that have been heavily destroyed are often home to huge, multi-story residential buildings. Each floor consists of more than one house, given the population density in these areas. As for ancient and archaeological neighbourhoods, these are historic buildings and Arabian houses scattered among stone alleys surrounding the citadel.

The Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian supporters did not take any steps to rebuild the destroyed buildings in the eastern neighbourhoods, as they are in complete ruins, and need to be rebuilt from scratch. In a previous investigation, Enab Baladi monitored the individual "reconstruction" movement, initiated by the small business owners of Aleppo’s old markets since last March. Those areas and markets extend from the Aleppo Citadel through Al-Zurb and Al-Saqṭya markets to Bab Antakeya, and other areas around the Citadel and the Great Mosque.

United Nations Assessment Committee

The most heavily destroyed neighbourhoods of Aleppo are witnessing large-scale monitoring and assessment of the magnitude of real estate damage. The Aleppo Sindacate of Engineers, led by Morris Esber, has been responsible for this under the auspices of the United Nations.

One of the engineers participating in the committee, who did not want to be named for security reasons, assured Enab Baladi that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provided around 40 million Syrian Liras to the Sindacate of Engineers, whose experts are now conducting extensive tours to assess damage to properties.

According to the source, reports by engineering experts on the buildings or properties with minor or medium damages are prepared and then submitted to the UN authority responsible for the commission, which in turn funds restoration operations through local contractors. Properties
which have been completely demolished are only referred to, without mentioning details on the authority that might rebuild them.

Industry and services: Iran's share

Last September, the regime announced the signing of contracts with Tehran worth 135 million euros, for the supply of special power generators in the Aleppo province, which has suffered an almost complete absence of electricity since 2012. Since the signing of these contracts, the electricity situation has improved and electricity has become available to households for an average of 8-12 hours a day. Water is distributed to different neighbourhoods following a schedule around once a week, which is considered by residents to be a good thing compared to months of interruptions to water supplies in the past.

With the second Iranian fiduciary line (including the supply of oil and industrial as well as agricultural products) being established, the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce multiplied its contacts with Iranian industrialists to support local projects and establish Iranian investments. The projects benefiting from the fiduciary line have not yet been announced, but recently, there's been slight movement in the industrial city of Sheikh Najjar after it was suspended for a long time due to the regime’s failure to finance reparation and restoration operations.

According to the statement made by the Director of the Department Economy and Foreign Trade in Aleppo, Maan Nadman, to the official news agency SANA, the Ministry of Economy granted the industrial city of Aleppo 290 import permits, worth 94,769 million euros.

Russia is watching over tourism projects

According to investment plans, Russia is moving quickly to take a number of tourism projects in Syria away from reconstruction projects, which has been avoided so far. One of the projects that Russia adopted was the renovation of the Umayyad Mosque near the Citadel of Aleppo, as part of a tourism plan for the city of Aleppo.

In November, Russia started allocating funds and running local archaeological workshops to assess damages and study how to renovate the mosque, without affecting its historical value. Russia is expected to sign more investment and rehabilitation contracts on archaeological sites near the Citadel of Aleppo.

Reconstruction and "hiding secrets"

Many observers believe that the issue of the reconstruction of Aleppo is a cornerstone to rebuilding Syria under the Assad regime, because it involves both important symbolic and distant goals. According to opponents of the reconstruction operation, the issue is not the rehabilitation of public facilities, the provision of houses for citizens or the provision of basic services, but rather the regime’s attempt to “glaze over its crimes”.

All the projects that Syrians hear about today, such as the metro or commercial and residential towers, require very deep foundations. This raises concerns among its critics about the possibility of the regime exploiting these ‘architectural and engineering’ opportunities, to get rid of mass graves, especially given that the regime considers reconstruction an ‘award’ to grant to its allies. Assad has already announced that Syria’s reconstruction will be left for “allies”, meaning the crimes they committed together, they will bury together.

On the other hand, the regime's senior traders aren't hesitating to seize the opportunity to exploit the situation and expand their wealth. According to Decree No. 66, they will be able to take “illegal” properties and “invest” in them.

With the regime being drained in its battles to survive, its losses reached “crazy” figures according to the estimates issued by its own authorities. This means that Syria will inevitably resort to external support. This is not only limited to residential neighbourhoods and the reciprocal wars of accusations between the regime and the opposition in targeting civilians, but also the country’s heritage, which belongs to all of humanity.

According to activists, violations committed by the regime and opposition forces against the ancient ruins of Aleppo have been documented in places such as mosques, markets and historic public baths that were turned into battlefields. This raises serious questions about the efforts of European countries and international organisations to support the regime in restoring old Aleppo, before opening any investigation to reveal the party responsible for its destruction and damage, as though merely manipulating a crime scene.

In August, UNESCO announced its intention to open a school for craftsmen in Aleppo, which would help it repair what military operations have destroyed. The very quick move this organisation has taken once the regime took over the city, has again raised the issue of indirect funding
which international organisations are providing to the Assad regime, an issue that has already been raised by journalists around the world.

The regime’s political and economic goals are a new “front”, from which it can burn its enemies, leading some of its opponents to consider ‘reconstruction’ as a whole new category of war crime.

Chapter 7

Local Councils: Unique Examples of Self-Organisation
Man on a demonstration held in the city of Daraya, on the back of his shirt "Daraya... Revolution of Ethics" is printed (2012)

Photo credit: Activists' social media pages
Without any professional controls or strict laws limiting the spread of hate speech in cyberspace, dozens of websites and accounts are active on various social media platforms, following or promoting intellectual, political or military groups in Syria, without taking into consideration social groups and communities that are rooted in the Syrian landscape. They promote a discourse that is loaded with political, national and religious division, increasing social tensions created by six years of revolution, war and complex international interference.

Today, it's normal for anyone who follows Syrian affairs through social media to find dozens of words and terms that carry a great deal of hatred, in a discourse fuelled by war and bias towards certain factions, parties and religious or ethnic groups. For instance, we see headlines using the terms “the polytheist Nusayris”, “the atheist Kurds”, “the Daeshi (Daesh sympathisers) Arabs”, “apostates”, “terrorists” and other terms.

Syrian journalists we met with unanimously agreed on the need to first acknowledge the existence of hatred, before seeking to address excessive media “demagoguery” by working to improve media discourse, and promote professional and moral responsibility towards Syrian society with all of its components, without violating freedom of expression, which has been restricted by the Syrian regime for decades.

How has hatred been promoted among communities?

The outbreak of the revolution against Bashar Assad’s regime in March 2011 was a turning point for the media scene, transforming it from a totalitarian media in the grip of the ruling Ba’ath party, to a broad space that witnessed the emergence of newspapers, radio stations, news agencies, websites and TV channels. This came to be known as ‘the new Syrian media’, and it played a prominent role in reporting local events to the rest of the world.

With the regime’s violent crackdown, the media scene witnessed the emergence of media platforms through social media websites with different
political, military and ethnic tendencies that transformed Syria’s differences into a battlefield. New terms have been developed and used to name entire social groups, creating a chasm between communities and fuelling hate speech.

According to journalists interviewed by Enab Baladi, the Syrian regime bears primary responsibility for the current situation, since it decided to criminalise all protestors who were against it through official and loyalist media platforms, describing them as “saboteurs, terrorists, agents, mercenaries and Salafists”. This was the first form of political media alignment. As a result, Syrians were categorised either as patriots when they supported the regime, or “terrorists” when they did not.

This division has evolved to include most social groups, in light of the military and political complexities in Syria, as well as the emergence of fundamentalist groups that adopted ideological approaches reflected in their media discourse. For example, Daesh, which has a relatively advanced media presence and is active on most social media platforms, has used adjectives against its opponents that promote hatred, such as “the atheist Kurds”, “the polytheist Nusayris”, “the apostate Awakeners”, “the infidel West” and “the Crusaders”, among others.

In addition, the social media accounts of some political parties or military factions have played a role in promoting this negative discourse, which is directed at particular social groups on the internet, which may threaten civil peace on the ground. For example, some websites and pages close to a Kurdish political party adopted a hostile discourse against Arabs on Facebook, describing them as “al-Dawaesh” (Daesh members), while some Arab websites and pages described Kurds as “separatists”.

The Syrian press: United to denounce hatred

At the invitation of Enab Baladi, a Syrian media forum was held in the Turkish capital, Istanbul, on the 8th of May 2017, to discuss the current situation of local media and its role in addressing hate speech. The forum was entitled The Syrian Press: Unite to Denounce Hatred, and was attended by 14 visual and audio-visual Syrian media institutions.

The participants came up with a series of recommendations addressed to the Syrian media and journalists, aimed at reducing media messages containing ideas, information or vocabulary that could cause or increase tensions between communities, in order to achieve a professional and national media discourse that promotes civil peace in Syria.

The forum participants agreed on a definition that described hate speech as “any discourse that includes exclusion, marginalisation, insult, incitement, negative discrimination, abusive stereotypes or defamation that is, either directly or covertly, directed against a social group, in accordance with a systematic or arbitrary policy”.

What were the outcomes of the forum?

At a terminological level, the forum stressed the need “to avoid using generalising words and terms that may offend any social group in Syria, and any terms that clearly distinguish between the assessment of political, partisan or military authorities in addition to the description of an entire social group, and the need to use unifying terminology that enshrines the concept of citizenship and contributes to the maintenance of social peace”.

In terms of media content, participants stressed the need for Syrian media to adhere to professional standards in the press. This involves conveying and explaining information to the public in an objective and balanced manner, accurately selecting sources where controversial issues are concerned, not confusing opinions with news, distinguishing between political and journalistic work, and closing media platforms to voices that promote hatred. The forum also recommended “diversifying media content to ensure fair coverage of all Syrian communities, reducing tension between Arabs and Kurds in media messaging, and applying these suggestions to all other communities”.

The participating media groups agreed to adopt media messaging that promotes the need to “refrain from disseminating all calls for violence, discrimination and incitement, instead favouring messaging which disseminates information and content to promote a culture of acceptance and recognition of the other. Messaging which contributes to enshrining the value of coexistence, and launching media campaigns against extremism, exclusion and extermination”.

Participants asserted the need for Syrian media institutions to sign up to local or international media codes of ethics in order to denounce hatred, adopt policies that “promote regional and ethnic diversity among staff at Syrian media institutions”, and the need to implement codes of conduct for journalists, which ensures an absence of hate speech in their press coverage and social media posts.
The forum stressed the importance of increasing the number of training programs dealing with ethical and legal issues in the media, and the importance of establishing partnerships between local media institutions from different backgrounds, in order to enhance media cooperation between national institutions and reach all demographics of the Syrian public. It also recommended the publication of a joint guide on "positive and negative" media terminology either increasing or decreasing hatred in media discourse.

**Arab and Kurdish media institutions: We denounce hatred and call for civil peace**

After the Syrian Press: Unite to Denounce Hatred forum, Enab Baladi spoke to administrators and journalists representing eight Syrian media outlets about their experiences in addressing hate speech and the challenges they face in this respect.

Lujain Haj Yousuf, Chief News Editor at Rozana Radio, says that hate speech that is widespread across social media platforms has an impact on media institutions, since the public is prepared for such a discourse. "At Rozana Radio, we try to be neutral to parties, be objective in raising issues, focus on promoting coexistence between Syrians, and address cultural topics, such as Kurdish culture and introducing this topic to Syrians. Topics reported on by Rozana fall under the editorial policy of the institution, with a focus on building civil peace and the need to maintain social harmony, refraining from publishing material which may actively offend and isn't based on correct documentation".

The Director-General of Halab al-Yawm (Aleppo Today) TV, who asked to remain anonymous, said that the general policy of the network has, since its establishment, been based on respect for the Kurdish community and its place as an essential component of Syrian society, as well as respect for its languages, norms and traditions. The Director said, "We consider broadcasting Kurdish news on the channel to be an act of respect towards the Kurdish language. Media coverage of public affairs in these areas, including cultural and folkloric themes, is critical to us".

The Head of Halab al-Yawm TV pointed to the importance of terminology, and the response its misuse can create, "On this aspect, we stand firm. We worked on distinguishing and identifying discourse and avoiding all types of generalisation. For instance, we say 'a faction has attacked' and not 'the Kurds have attacked': He added, "There is a politicised discourse in the Kurdish areas, as well as very complex political interests. Consequently, the channel tries to maintain its own approach on this issue, namely, that the Kurdish population is a fundamental part of Syria and as such, it warrants good coverage".

Omar al-Khateeb, a journalist at Orient News stressed the need to define the term "hatred" and emphasised the importance of "not allowing false generalisations or holding a whole group responsible for the actions of a political party or political figure". Al-Khateeb added, "At Orient News, we address and represent all Syrians, be they Kurds, Arabs and other ethnic groups and sects. However, that doesn’t mean that we have to be afraid of each other, self-censor ourselves or shy away from criticising certain political actors".

Omar al-Khateeb also asserted that "the current phase in Syria is clear, in terms of the various political projects and coalitions. Those allied with the Assad regime, Russia and Iran, must be considered enemies of the Syrian people. When we attack or criticise a certain ally to these political forces, this doesn’t mean that we’re criticising or despising the local community. We, as journalists, view Syria as a unified whole, and it is natural that we reject some stances and oppose them without fear or threat of being censored. We are journalists and not politicians. Our job is to convey and clarify different views and stances".

Speaking on the agency’s approach to the Kurdish issue, Mohammed Alaa, Editor-in-Chief of Smart News Agency, said “we have several offices in Hasaka governorate, the towns of Ayn al-Alar/Kobane and Tell Abyad, as well as Afrin. These offices are located in the areas under Autonomous Administration. We follow developments that relate to our editorial policy on a continuous basis, and report on different social and economic issues in a balanced manner”.

Smart News Agency focuses on the social, economic and military specificities of the province of Hasaka, with special coverage of events and holidays. Alaa added, “‘Smart News’ offices are authorised by the Autonomous Administration in the region. We are facing some restrictions, but there is some form of cooperation in return”.

**Media authorities to monitor discourse**

As for the role of the Syrian Journalists Association (SJA) in confronting all forms of hate speech, Razan Ameen, a journalist and the head of the association’s New Media Committee, explained that “the Association

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21 You can watch a related video by Enab Baladi here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_C1s-oD_Dg
has worked to bring together Syrian journalists from all intellectual backgrounds, ideologies and religions around the basic principles we adopted in the Charter. When a particular institution or journalist commits a violation, a warning is issued to the establishment or individual, then the SJA releases a statement on the subject. Based on that, we follow the relevant procedure.

Razan Ameen added: "Through the last forum, we achieved positive interaction and convergence of views. We collectively created a clear definition of 'hate speech'; and the terminology that strengthens this discourse. We may go on to create a guide clarifying these terms. If successful, this would be a big step".

Hussein Berro, a member of the Ethical Charter for Syrian Media, said: "The Charter tries to reduce hate speech and legally regulate it by presenting it as a major issue. However, we have not yet achieved this on the ground. Nevertheless, after the Charter was issued, we observed significant development in terms of self-discipline among the signing institutions".

Berro clarified, "Forty-five media institutions have signed the Charter so far. There will be an Advisory Committee composed of journalists, legal experts and civil society organisations, which will begin to receive complaints from the public and monitor the activities of the signatory institutions. The Committee will issue media reports every three months to the public, which will identify which establishments are respecting the Charter, and which are not, so that the public may collaborate with the institution".

Hussein Berro believes that "the forum put forward the idea, and enabled an exchange of views about the issue, which is a good thing. There used to be many issues that we ignored, as a result of a long-held policy of compromise, at the expense of our fundamental principles. Violent discourse and hate speech exist, and today we acknowledged the problems and mistakes caused by certain media institutions, which is the first step in the right direction. Its continuation depends on the extent of our colleagues' enthusiasm and willingness to discuss the issue".

The Kurdish contribution to "denouncing hate speech"
Farouq Hajji Mustafa, Head of the Berchav Organisation for Media and Freedom 22, explained to Enab Baladi that, since the organisation was founded in 2013, it has focused on creating and strengthening social harmony between Arabs and Kurds, especially as the Kobane region (where the organisation is located), is adjacent to Arab regions. Today's forum was important in delineating important concepts concerning the rejection of hate speech and its definition, as well as what will be required for the next phase.

Mustafa also said: "Civil peace begins through workshops, networking and meetings. The next social and political phase in Syria will involve capacity-building and establishing communication channels between communities and political groups, consolidating all their different ideologies and approaches".

Referring to the role of his media institution in the process of reinforcing civil peace and renouncing hate speech in Syria generally, Serwan Haji Barku, the General Manager of ARTA FM, said, "We address the Syrian situation in its entirety, but we are specifically concerned about developments in the Jazeera and Kobane. For this reason, we established a number of partnerships with several Syrian media institutions (Enab Baladi and Radio Hara FM), which will enable us to revive a dialogue between Syrian regions as a whole".

"It's important for us that the channel's audience know what's happening in other regions and listen to the voices of Syrians living elsewhere, expressing their opinions on a variety of issues, such as Arab-Kurdish dialogue and social issues. ARTA FM's presence from the outset, as well as the fact that it broadcasts in four local languages have contributed to building a bridge between all ethnic and religious groups. There is no 'Arab' and 'Kurd', but rather compatriots of each area".

Mr. Barku concluded, "ARTA FM is not a Kurdish radio station. It is a radio station for all residents located in the broadcasting area (Hasaka, Jazeera and Kobane). We do not use ethnic or religious discourse, and we use all terminology in a professional manner".

International efforts to denounce hate speech
The past century has witnessed two world wars and a huge number of revolutions in all countries around the world. This demonstrates the deep conflict between calls for freedom and civil rights on the one hand, and violence linked to hatred and violating others’ rights on the other.

22 http://www.bercav.com/en
These security and political changes, along with their social repercussions, have, in one way or another, influenced a revival of the media, and have been reflected in media content and messages. Certainly, the media has often been exploited as a means of promoting conflict, and employed by political or party figures with extreme racist tendencies, or marginalized groups who misused the media to express themselves.

With the increasing pace of this conflict as a result of the spread of mass media in the second half of the twentieth century, there has been an increasing tendency to create International Laws and Charters in order to limit the propensity of the media to diseminate speech that incites violence against others, and fuels strife or contributes to the exclusion and marginalization of other social groups. Thus, the media began to regulate the scope of its freedom and assume its responsibilities.

United Nations resolutions

In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of this declaration states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 1965, sponsored by the United Nations, is the first international treaty to directly address the topic of hate speech. It states that “all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial discrimination, as well as all acts of violence or incitement to such acts against any race or group of persons of another colour or ethnic origin” is “an offence punishable by law”.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1966, calls for the elimination of hate speech from media content. Article 19 calls for “respect of the rights or reputations of others”: Article 20 also states that “any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law” as well as “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence”.

In addition to this resolution, several countries and federations around the world have adopted special covenants on freedom of expression. In general, however, they do not appear to be detailed when it comes to hate speech, according to a report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights entitled Incitement to Racial and Religious Hatred and the Promotion of Tolerance (2006).

This article was prepared by Enab Baladi in collaboration with ARTA FM Radio.
Differences between Arabs and Kurds in Northeast Syria have long played a role in keeping these groups from mingling with each other. Part of the reluctance stems from a fear of diluting their culture, or abdicating their identities somehow. Another part of it is simply a refusal to change. Whatever the reason, these groups have seen their differences exacerbated by Bashar Assad’s regime, which used identity cards and preferential treatment to maintain a divide between them.

However, a sort of peaceful resistance to decades of segregation began to emerge, notably in the form of marriage between Arabs and Kurds. The impact on these societies was manifested in images and colours of coexistence in the Syrian Jazeera, with the unions being spontaneous and free of any political agenda. Young people in this region of the country largely support marriage between Arabs and Kurds. Large-scale intermingling in Syria’s urban centres during the years prior to the Syrian revolution gave the youth in Hasaka province a desire to explore the other cultures around them. In fact, throughout Syria, this north-eastern province exhibited the highest interest in their neighbours.

As these marriages became more common, the bonds created by a common religion, frequent trade, and simple community affinity began to negate Assad’s laws of separation based on history, language, and political conflicts. Now, families in Hasaka, Amuda and Qamishli, as well as nearby towns and small villages, can be heard speaking both Arabic and Kurdish. This is evidence that the natural ties between the two cultures are strong enough to survive the smoke of wars in the region, and to preserve a colourful mosaic of the population in northeast Syria.

Sham in Amuda: Love, unobstructed by nationalism and politics

Liwa Souliman waters small shrubs in a courtyard in Amuda, recalling days of his youth when he studied philosophy in Damascus. He speaks to his young daughter Sham, first in Arabic and then in Kurdish, showing equal preference for each language.

Souliman, a young Kurdish correspondent for a local radio station in Amuda, married an Arab girl while he was in Damascus. Today, he lives with his wife and two children, Sham and Joud. It’s a life he says he built on love, far enough away from the ravages of war to prevent it from reaching his small house. He told Enab Baladi: “I named my daughter Sham after the city I love, Damascus, where I spent 10 years living with my Arab wife. I studied philosophy at Damascus University and had unforgettable experiences in that city, before the war took me away from it”.

Prior to the Syrian revolution, Amuda’s population was roughly 75,000, 95% of which were Kurds, and the remaining population made up of Arabs, Yazidis and Assyrians. However, the city’s relatively small size and rural nature created frequent opportunities for cross-ethnic relations. These interactions in turn eroded the more nationalistic, isolationist tendencies, and gave space for natural human emotions to grow into legitimate relationships. Indeed, recent years have seen dozens of young men and women in Amuda choose to marry ethnically diverse partners, further intertwining relationships between different groups in the city.

Liwa adds: “I speak to my children in both languages, Arabic and Kurdish, and I try to encourage them to also speak using both languages”. His insistence comes from his passion for the Arabic language, which he calls “the richest encyclopaedia”, but he is mindful of the practical opportunities being bilingual will offer his children. “If one of my children wants to learn music in the future, or has a desire to sing, Arabic offers the opportunity to blend and learn more in the field. It will also provide opportunities to participate in competitions on a larger scale”.

The bridges that families like Liwa’s are building have been noticed by others in the community, despite the Syrian regime’s attempts to maintain distance between Arabs and Kurds, and despite cultural traditions that frown upon inter-ethnic marriage. More and more young Arabs and Kurds are breaking through the artificial barriers between them, setting aside their perceived differences, and instead laying foundations based on mutual love and respect.

Another young Kurdish man, Kameran Khalil, considers marriage a basic human act that should not be restricted based on any sect, doctrine, or race, adding that “the world has overcome this phase, even in terms of race. We’ve been coexisting here, as Arabs and Kurds, for hundreds of
years. Racist barriers should not be put up'. The Syrian revolution, which pulled Liwa away from his beloved Damascus and back to Amuda, renewed hesitation to marry into different groups.

As a result of the fallout of the previous five years, Syrian minorities began to fear backlash, even within their own communities. Social relations inside this previously welcoming region of the country began to adopt a more cautious form. 23 Aziza Khanafer, Co-President at the Office for Interfaith Affairs in Hasaka, explains that Syrian minorities are suffering from anxiety due to an increasing and deepening focus on the differences between them. He asserts that in recent years, marriage between Arabs and Kurds has dropped significantly as a result.

Khanafer’s point of view does not necessarily apply to many cases inside the Syrian Jazeera. Liwa, for example, a philosophy student from Damascus, separates his personal life from the political crisis in the country, just as he separates his work as a reporter from the hours he spends with his family at home. In his personal time, he plays with and talks to his children in two different languages, giving them the opportunity to learn the value of human relations instead of racism and nationalism.

Liwa and his wife were able to embrace the concept of accepting others by having the freedom of expressing their opinions and political stances during the revolution, adding that: "our personal views do not affect our lives, as we have both kept our stances without trying to impose it on the other. It’s something to do with conviction, and neither of us can change the other’s conviction". He wants to raise his children to have freedom of choice, as well as freedom in choosing their partners, hoping that "segregation will be less prominent in the future". He will encourage them to overcome difficulties, in case they choose to marry into a different ethnic group.

They have great hopes for their children’s future, driven by historical Arab-Kurdish ties in this region which are bound tightly enough to withstand contemporary blows. Thousands of people carry these ties, belonging to both cultures through family.

A combination of races and religions unique to the Syrian Jazeera

The Syrian Jazeera has been so thoroughly marginalised, particularly with the emergence of the Ba’ath party in 1963, that even today, it is a mysterious place for many Syrians, despite the unique blending of cultures that make it a shining model for co-existence. For example, Hasaka, the province in northeast Syria housing most of the area considered the Syrian Jazeera, is around 23,000 square kilometres in size and, up until 2011, was home to 1.5 million people. The Syrian regime has divided Hasaka into four areas: Hasaka, Qamishli, Ras al-Ain (Sari Kani), Maalkieh (Derek) and 14 districts including: Amuda, Shaddadah, Al-Darbasiyah, Qahtaniyah (Terbe sepi), Jawadieh and Yarwbieh (Tel Kojar).

The people of the Syrian Jazeera come mostly from Arab, Kurdish, or Assyrian families. Arabs comprise the largest demographic, and mostly reside in the city of Hasaka and its south and east countryside, with smaller concentrations in the north and west countryside. Kurds are the second largest group, with thousands living in villages and towns to the north, northeast, and northwest countryside. Assyrians live mostly in the north and northeast regions of Hasaka, especially in Tal Tamer, but also in Qamishli and Maalkieh.

The Syrian Jazeera is also home to people of three different religions: Islam, Christianity and Yazidi. Regional Arabs and Kurds both commonly adhere to Islam, making it the dominant faith in the province. The region’s Christians are primarily Assyrians and Chaldeans, descending from the oldest cultures in the Middle East. According to historical sources, these groups were among the first Christians in the world. Finally, the Yazidis are an amalgam of Persian, Islamic and Christian philosophies, and are represented as a minority among the Kurds. Yazidi villages are located in the far northeast of the Jazeera, and their numbers, prior to the Syrian revolution, peaked at around 50,000 people.

The Jazeera was almost completely out of the Syrian regime’s control, so much so that the Kurdish Democratic Union Party was able to establish an Autonomous Administration to form a core for a possible future federal region in Syria.

Amuda’s history of independence and acceptance

Amuda, a city in the province of Hasaka, is located in the far northeast of Syria, about 80 kilometres from the Turkish border. The city is made up of almost 160 villages. What’s more important about Amuda, however, is that it fought the French and rebelled against the Assad regime long before the revolution.

The history of the region dates back millennia. Archaeologists excavating
three hills near the city have found evidence of human civilisation in Amuda dating back 3000 years. Even the name “Amuda” goes back far enough to be rooted in myth. Historical references give way to various stories, the most famous of which tells of the daughter of the king of Mardin, who ordered her son be deported immediately after he was born. The man assigned the responsibility of taking the child away placed him next to a column erected near the city. A passing convoy found the child, and people retold the story of the child left at the column for so long, that the area became known as “the column” or Amuda.

Before the Syrian revolution, the population of Amuda was around 75,000. After the revolution, and as a result of displacement in the city, the population dropped to almost 50,000.

The most prominent Kurdish clans in the region are the Umarieh, Kikan, Gholy and Tamki. However, tribal influence among Kurds has declined significantly. The prevailing Kurdish component of Amuda pushed a decrease of marriages between Arabs and Kurds. One of the reasons behind many marriages between people of the city’s two groups was attendance at Syrian universities, where mixing is more common.

Amuda has witnessed revolutionary movements in the last century, most notably the Kurdish tribal uprising against the French occupation, led by Saeed Agha Dakori. This led to the city suffering a French air raid in 1936. Each year, residents mark the anniversary of the attack during Amuda’s ‘Toshet’ (clatter).

Again in 2004, the people of Amuda rose up with others in the region to support demonstrators in Qamishli, a movement that saw the loss of seven young Kurdish men at the hands of Syrian security forces. The city was then kept under regime surveillance, at least until the rest of the country rebelled in 2011.

With the first sparks of the Syrian revolution, Amuda’s youth again demonstrated against the Syrian regime, leading to the arrest of hundreds, and the death of dozens more. Today, the city is under the Autonomous Administration.

What do young men and women of Hasaka think about marrying people of other ethnicities?

The Syrian revolution has affected the country’s youth from all walks of life. The revolution brought with it a desire to rid the country of social restrictions on freedom of thought, work, marriage and other forms of self-expression. Yet paradoxically, the revolution also pushed many to hold on to xenophobic patterns, fearing alienation by those close to them. Rapidly evolving political shifts have placed residents of the Syrian Jazeera in conflict of security, intellect, and society. This forced many young people to leave Hasaka province, as an alternative to assimilating into a community ruled by an emergent political management and being almost constantly threatened.

Even though migration seemed to be a more natural form of community escape, each single aspect of coexistence between the different components of the Kurdish society were greatly affected, this has also been reflected in the declining rates of marriages between Arab and Kurdish, as well as Muslims in the Syrian Jazeera.

Enab Baladi asked a number of young people in Hasaka province to share their views on intercultural marriage. In the recorded videos, Enab Baladi sensed the voices of a generation who finds itself facing tough historical conditions, a current emergency situation and an unknown future.

Overt marriage supporters are largely male, while women are more cautious

Most of those polled by Enab Baladi, both males and females, welcomed the idea of marriage between Kurds and Arabs. Those who opposed it justified their opinions by citing obstacles such as language and traditions.

One young Kurdish man, Sherwan Heso, says “love is how we overcome all obstacles”, and asserted that a loving relationship between two people of different ethnicities could actually act as an ideal example within the community and lead to a decrease in discrimination.

On the other hand, a young Arab woman, Sial Mohammed, expresses a different opinion. Although she recognises the importance of marriage between the two groups as a form of cultural integration and coexistence, she still believes that it could create a number of problems between the married couple in the long term.

The desire to break “the stereotype image” shrouded in fear

Another young Kurd, Manal Hasan, praises marriage between Arabs and Kurds because it breaks a stereotype, yet she disputes the idea on a personal level due to “the barriers involved”. Manal answered the question
with another: “When two Kurdish people from different areas get married, problems related to their different environments arise between them. The same goes for a marriage between Arabs from two different cities. How would a marriage between two different ethnicities succeed?”

Afdar Hasan, also Kurdish, believes that “polygamy among Arabs” is what scares a Kurdish girl most when it comes to marrying an Arab man and she says that she won’t face the same problem marrying a Kurdish man.

Humanity above social differences

Moaz Al Hamad, from Qamishli, believes in the “positive” impacts that cross-cultural marriage has on the community of the Syrian Jazeera. He told Enab Baladi the many pros of such a marriage, especially since the community is originally based on people from both groups.

Another young man from Qamishli, Abdul Bari Massor, thinks that love between two individuals cannot be related to ethnicity, adding “If I fall in love with a girl, I would be willing to give up many things to be with her. Being in love is enough to convince me to stay with her for a lifetime”.

How did the Syrian revolution affect marriage between Arabs and Kurds?

Lawyer Khaled Ibrahim, also from Qamishli, explains that marriages between Kurds and Arabs, as well as smaller minorities in the Syrian Jazeera, represent only a few cases that change from one area to another, and from one social class to another. Ibrahim further explains that “marriages between Arabs and Kurds in northeast Syria are decreasing, compared to Damascus and Aleppo, as a result of the latter being more societies”. He adds: “in other, more ethnic regions, such as the Syrian Jazeera, traditions limit marriage among different groups”.

The lawyer also says that revolutionary movement in Syria has contributed to a dramatic decline in marriages, often for political reasons. Ibrahim believes that the benefits of marriage between Kurds and Arabs can be identified as coexistence and cooperation, whilst arguments against are related to fear of diluting the majority population, which, in turn, could constitute a significant societal barrier.

People will always turn to kinship as an escape from difficulty, and tend to congregate with people most like them, which makes breaking down walls a challenge in itself. Marriage, however, represents an identifying image that dilutes political attempts to segregate mixed societies. It also lessens the impact of traditions that otherwise maintain segregation. An example of this is the Syrian Jazeera, through the hundreds of successful marriages between Arabs and Kurds there, and through the thousands of individuals who carry names representing the depth of their heritage.

Khal and Krev: an example of coexistence between Kurds and Arabs in the Jazeera

Mohammad Jamal Barout, of the Arab Centre for Research and Political Studies, traces the relationship between Kurds and Arabs back to the time before the arrival of Zengi (Imad ad-Din Zengi) and Ayyubid (a Muslim dynasty of Kurdish origin, founded by Saladin Ayyoubi) people to the Levant region.

Talking about the era of the French occupation of Syria, Barout says “the Kurds remained part of Syria. The Kurdish neighbourhood in Damascus was an appealing destination for large numbers of Kurdish migrants from Diyarbakir”, adding “Kurdish activist Ali Zolfo Agha was among the first who fought the colonisers and defended Syria”.

Tracing back origins of cultural contact between the two peoples, we find that the spread of Islam in the region had the largest impact on the Kurdish–Arabic convergence. Having the Quran as a constitution for Muslims all over the world strengthened cultural connections between Arabs and other adherents of Islam, including the Kurds. Islamic culture is inclusive of the cultural heritage of all societies and peoples who embrace Islam.

“Khal” (uncle) and “Krev” are among the most widely used expressions among the people of the Syrian Jazeera, especially between Arabs and Kurds. The geographical overlap in many areas created a kind of bond.
between the two segments of society. This bond was framed in two types of family relations; the first was intermarriage, with Arabs mastering the Kurdish language despite the regime banning Arabs and Kurds from learning it.

However, investigating an Arab person's family origins, you may find out that he has a Kurdish mother. In the same way, you could find a Kurd who speaks fluent Arabic and who has close Arab family ties. This was a form of adaptation and intermingling in the neighbourhood between two groups that have different languages and traditions.

The desire for greater connection among ethnic groups of the Syrian Jazeera was the root of another act of intermingling and coexisting between Arabs and Kurds. The act of circumcising a male baby whilst he was sitting on the lap of someone from another family was used to create a bond between the two families. This practice is called "Krev", a Kurdish expression used in such cases. This expression was circulated among Arabs as well, who used it to describe a prevalent tradition in the region.

As a result of these relations, a shared culture grew among the people of the region. This was particularly true for clans and the authority of both Arab and Kurdish tribal leaders, especially from the early 1900s until the 1980s. Marriages between children of tribal leaders were evidence of reconciliation after conflict, supplanting the urge for revenge that sprang from the bloody conflicts that generally governed relations between tribes. For those seeking a way to end the bloodshed, marriage between members of the ruling tribal families were welcomed.

These arrangements, however, did not please the Syrian regime. It continuously created rifts between the two groups, by using a racist approach towards the Kurds, in the name of the Ba’ath Party. Assad gave Arabs privileges at the expense of Kurds, and created a policy intended to 'Arabise' the names of Kurdish villages such as Jaffa, Palestine, Haifa, and Jalek.

Additionally, the regime denied citizenship to thousands of Kurds until 2011, classifying them as foreigners. This not only minimised the possibility of Arab-Kurdish unions, but also created a near full-blown caste system. Indeed, we cannot present a case of coexistence between Arabs and Kurds as being perfect or devoid of any prejudice. However, there is a precedent for peaceful intermingling between the two and reason to believe that, free of unscrupulous state meddling, the countless Syrians who belong to the two cultures and speak both languages can aspire to a better future for their children who hold Syrian citizenship.

3 - Local Councils in Syria, Affiliation and Mechanisms: An Interview with Osama Natoof, Head of the Local Council of Rif Dimashq Governorate

Since the beginning of 2013, revolutionary groups in some of the cities and towns that have been liberated by the armed opposition have started to take an organised form in the name of "Local Councils", to substitute governmental councils which were managing the affairs in the area before. These small Local Councils started to get together recently, forming bigger governorate councils such as the Governorate Council of Aleppo or Idlib.

In an interview with Enab-Baladi, Osama Natoof, Head of the recently formed Local Council of Rif Dimashq Governorate, discusses the mechanisms and structure of these councils, and clarifies some unresolved issues.

Let us start with the term "Local Councils", which is still vague to some people, who are unclear as to who these councils respond to. So what are the "Local Councils", and what are their structures and mechanisms?

Local Councils are civil organisations. They don't deal with military issues or fighters. They are tasked with meeting the needs of the local population, and trying to rebuild infrastructure in liberated areas. They represent an alternative to the regime's government.

As for their subordination, I speak here specifically about the Local Council of Rif Dimashq Governorate, the representatives of which have been locally elected in a semi-democratic way. All Local Councils in Rif Dimashq are elected or appointed representatives, who form the Governorate Council. Then, the newly formed Governorate Council elected an Executive Officer and a Chairman. Therefore, these councils are fully legitimate structures representing revolutionary projects on the ground. They work administratively under the Ministry of Local Administration, Relief, and Refugees in the Syrian Interim Government.

Can these councils form a revolutionary body that represents the revolutionary formations and effective activities inside Syria, or have they not yet reached this stage?
Local Councils can certainly represent people on the ground and reflect the revolutionary reality, but they are not the only representative. There are military brigades and NGOs which support the Syrian revolution. They are not under Local Councils, but there is a kind of coordination and cooperation between both sides.

In fact, there is some revolutionary pessimism, so to speak, from the multitudes of councils and bodies that have been formed since the beginning of the revolution, and which claim to be representatives of it. In light of current revolutionary sterility and working at the same pace for three years, what’s new in terms of what the Local Councils will offer?

I totally agree with you in that there is a kind of sterility and pessimism because of the many bodies and names. As the poet said: “The misplaced titles in a kingdom are like the cat when it fakes the roaring of a lion”. There are revolutionary fronts here and coordination there. But now, with the existence of the Interim Government, we are trying to completely organise our work. We need this work to be organised under the Governorate Council. The Governorate Council should also include all the secondary Local Councils. We need the work to be hierarchical, administrative, institutional, and united after three years of the revolution.

What’s the extent of cooperation between the Governorate Council and the secondary Local Councils? And how about between the Governorate Council and other councils in different governorates?

The Governorate Council of Rif Dimashq includes 180 secondary Local Councils. It deals with them and tries to organise areas that do not have their own Local Councils. The Governorate Council is the only mechanism connecting secondary councils on the ground and the Ministry of Local Administration in the Interim Government. There may be some communication between secondary councils and donor organisations. The Governorate Council cannot control them adequately, but it tries to organise them.

With regards to the relationship between the Governorate Council and others like it, such as the Governorate Council of Aleppo, which is the pioneer in our beloved Syria, there is some kind of administrative and organisational cooperation between us, so that we are able to benefit from their previous experience.

What is the reason for limiting this experience to some governorates, and not circulating to the rest of liberated areas where the opposition can form regulatory bodies, away from Assad’s security grip, in Dara’a and Deir ez-Zor, for instance?

Actually, there’s a department related to the Ministry of Local Administration called the Department of Elections, which is responsible for connecting with other governorates and trying to form a Governorate Council to manage their affairs. However, military and political disputes might be reflected on the ground, and could hinder or delay this body being formed. The Council is supposed to be a unified entity that represents the governorate in terms of services.

I’ll give you an example from Hasaka. Unfortunately, each liberated area, however small, has at least three local councils, according to political and military affiliations in the area. Each council refuses to join in a unified front that would form a governorate council. These disputes shouldn’t affect these councils being formed and doing their work. We are not a political or military institution. We exclusively take care of providing civil services.

What system or suggested plans do you have in place to accommodate the sub-councils and support their members and staff, or to organise the youth’s energy in different domains?

We have a plan, in the Governorate Council of Rif Dimashq, to accommodate Local Council staff on-the-ground and to employ 1,000 people locally only in Rif Dimashq. We’re working to increase this number to 1,500. They will be employed in relief, general relations, media, or project offices. This does not include staff for the medical or health offices and field hospitals, such as doctors and nurses, or those working in the educational offices, such as teachers, who will all be hired under the authority of the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education in the Interim Government.

There have been some accusations claiming that Local Councils are controlled by Western donor organisations or the Interim Government when it comes to financial support intended to be used for cities and villages. What transparency mechanisms will you adopt to dismiss these accusations?

One of the basics of our work is documenting each financial transaction, whether from the donor or other funding entities. But when somebody is
intentionally looking for flaws, that’s what they will see, regardless. That’s why we’re not aiming to please everyone. The work of the Governorate Council is open to the Finance Office, donor organisations, and the Interim Government.

We don’t justify our work to every single entity, but if there were a revolutionary entity that was really seeking the truth, we would deal with it and disclose the required information. We sometimes choose not to reveal data, because the regime is still controlling some places, or because people work in the Ministry of Local Administration while still having relatives in regime-occupied areas. There is confidential security data in certain documents, but they are known to the Finance Office and the Ministry, and are authenticated in a satisfactory manner.

If you manage to prove how effective this experience has been, and make it standard practice in all the governorates, what will your vision for the future of the Syrian revolution and the role of civil society within it be?

Local Councils should continue operating within their framework of services, and they should have a political body, which is the coalition that manages the area and legislates over it. The Local Councils shouldn’t be elevated to small temporary government status in the areas they represent.

The role of a Local Council should be to provide services, and policy-making should be left to the experts. We have a lot of reservations about the Coalition, because it’s divided. We hope the next few days will see a unified revolutionary body being formed, be it political or military, to represent the Syrian revolution.

Our goal right now is to achieve justice for the people of Rif Dimashq, by distributing what we receive from the Interim Government or donor organisations, whether in the form of cash or in-kind assistance.

Chapter 8

Refugees and Forced Displacement
Endless lines of refugees led through the fields by police as they are walked from the village of Rigonce to Brezice refugee camp in Rigonce, Slovenia (October 23, 2015).

Photo credit: JEFF J MITCHELL / GETTY
Syrians have lived through countless tragedies: from bombings, arrests and displacements, to drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. On top of that, the silence of the media brings nothing but a lack of serious solutions being proposed. Thousands have fled the inferno of years of war, only to die at sea, in unmanned boats, and the water destined to be their last home by the so-called “dealers of death”.

Both Western and local media no longer prioritise news of boats and ships sinking in the Mediterranean sea. It’s become routine, like daily bombings and massacres in Syria. We see news headlines saying: “Boat carrying 100 illegal immigrants, mostly Syrians, sinks”; however, none of these articles propose any solution to put an end to these endless deaths.

Mohammed, 25, was one of the survivors on a boat that sunk last year, when he tried to travel to Europe illegally. He spoke to Enab Baladi about the experience he says he’ll never forget: "I’m tired of waiting and I’m sick of this life. I see my friends and relatives dying every day, one after the other. I know that the same fate awaits me, especially since the crisis shows no sign of ending any time soon".

Mohammed, originally from the town of Kafr Nabl in the countryside of Idlib, decided to migrate to Germany illegally by crossing the sea. He was aware of the dangers, but felt that “the likelihood of death was higher if I stayed in the country, higher than the risk of dying at sea”.

In September last year, Mohammed travelled to Turkey illegally with a group of friends. He made a deal with a smuggler transporting migrants across the sea, and who asked for €6,000 per person. “Of course, we accepted what he asked. We were willing to travel in any way and at any cost. We were dreaming of and planning a new life. We were going to cross the sea of death in search of a new life, far from the smell of blood”.

A week later, Mohammed and his friends went to the agreed location, only to discover they would have to board a worn-out boat designed for livestock which had fallen into disuse due to damage. But “the smuggler reassured us that this damned ship had already transported thousands of immigrants".
At 4:30am on the 23rd of September 2014, the boat left with young men, women and children on board, looking for a safe and prosperous future. After hours of sailing, strange sounds began to come from the boat, while strong winds were starting to pick up, making matters worse. The smugglers reassured the migrants that it was a minor malfunction that would be repaired in no time. “We were astonished when we realised that they were escaping on a small boat they had prepared in advance after taking our money. The ship stopped in the middle of the sea, in the darkness of a grave. Women started screaming and babies started crying”.

The boat remained at sea for about 10 hours, until around noon of the following day, when the Turkish Coast Guard arrived and evacuated the migrants, taking them back to Turkey. Mohammed said: “We were handed over to one of the security branches and then each transferred to individual officials”.

Many stories resemble that of Mohammed, stories of survival and escaping death. Every day, a large number of Syrians consider emigrating in the same way. Some of them succeed in reaching Europe and starting a new life, but most drown, or are detained and returned to the country they came from. At the time of writing, about 100,000 illegal migrants have arrived in Europe via the Mediterranean sea since the beginning of 2015, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Thousands of them have been saved from drowning, while 1,500 died in 2014, according to a survey by the IOM.

The revolution is the priority

When Syrians began their protests at the start of the Syrian revolution, many didn’t expect the revolution to last longer than a few months. They drew hopes and expectations from the examples of Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring, and from universal values that justice will prevail over oppression and the oppressed will triumph over tyranny. This was enough for them to devote their time and invest their futures in the revolution.

To that end, Syrian activists dedicated all their time and energy to the revolution, while putting different aspects of their lives “temporarily” on hold: education, work, family and hobbies. Instead, they would take to the streets, chanting: “no studying, no teaching, until the president falls”.

They channelled all their energy into the revolution, aiming for success. As a result, many students temporarily halted their university education or business activities for a year or two, thinking that it wouldn’t take more than a couple of years to achieve their goals. This hasn’t been the case though. So, are they still using the same strategies? What are activists’ priorities today?

Activists’ priorities at present

Nour al-Musa, whose name has been changed to maintain her anonymity, is an engineering student in Daraya. During the first two years of the revolution, her life revolved around protests and revolutionary activities. She said: “Activities related to the revolution were my priority and everything else was secondary and could wait, be it university or family commitments”.

Nour missed a number of classes and exams at university because of her activism and eventually stopped attending altogether. She added, "I deliberately missed some of my exams to protest some friends’ arrests, and the detention of others in besieged and conflict-ridden areas where they were being prevented from attending university".
Few other students shared Nour’s stance, but she consoles herself in saying that “the important thing is that I did what I thought was right according to my principles and values”. “Back then we were still in our house in Daraya”, she added longingly. “We used to meet to think about new revolutionary activities that would encourage more people to get involved and increase the number of participants, whether it be in strikes, distributing pamphlets, painting graffiti on walls, or other peaceful means of resistance”. She heard about protests being organised from a group of her friends involved in the revolution and made sure to participate in as many of them as possible.

Nour hid what she was doing from her family because, although her family opposes the regime and are pro-revolution in principle, they refused to be involved in the movement at the time: “My family didn’t know anything. I used to spend my time with other activists engaging in revolutionary work. This prevented me from having any social life. It was as if I was in a different world”.

Syria: The black hole

Eventually things started changing. Nour gradually started thinking about her future, while her family moved to Damascus: “Moments of frustration started to follow one another, over and over again. Feelings of helplessness began to take over after I lost my role in peaceful resistance. The revolutions’ tools on the ground changed, weapons started to take over and I completely opposed the idea of carrying one. I am totally convinced that the use of weapons was the main cause of the revolution’s decline”.

Nour still lives in Damascus and she says that she’s been considering moving to a ‘liberated’ area. The desire to contribute to the revolution is always on her mind, “but this could cause a big argument with my family and they could still cut me out entirely, even though I’m far less engaged in the revolution and my activities are now minimal. Through my volunteer work I try to change people’s conditions for the better and this is what we hoped to do once the regime had fallen”.

As a result of all of the above, Nour returned to university. “I am trying to study science. Despite the interruption to my studies, I’m trying to graduate and continue my higher education in Europe. Here in Syria we live in a black hole. Time passes by without us developing ourselves”. This way, she hopes to acquire skills she can offer her country, when she has the chance again.

When asked about changes in priorities from the outbreak of the revolution to today, she said: “In the first two years, my goal was to overthrow the regime. We thought it would be easy and we exhausted all of our resources in peaceful resistance. My priority today is to achieve relative stability to be able to offer sustainable effort to the revolution”.

Mohammed: We continue

Mohammed is an agricultural engineering student from Douma, in Eastern Ghouta. He participated in the revolution from the early days, but, due to continuous displacements, his revolutionary activities went through a "hibernation" phase at one point. “During that time, I tried to finish my studies and get involved in civil society again, but couldn’t. I used to feel as though I was in danger every time I crossed a checkpoint, then I decided to return to Douma as it was not yet besieged at that point”.

In March 2013, Mohammed returned to his “liberated” area, and never left again. 25 In the process, he left behind his university studies and the dream of graduating. Once in Douma, he started wondering how he could participate: “I received military training so I could carry a weapon and defend myself if necessary, but an injury in my foot made any involvement in armed action impossible”.

Mohammed decided to move on to medical work instead. He trained to become a paramedic, and said: “Today I live at medical centres, often because there is a real demand for paramedics due to the high numbers of people injured following a massacre, but also because I don’t want to go back to my empty house now that my family has left Syria”.

“Our only choice today is to continue”, Mohammed added. His life in a besieged area means offering assistance anytime he can, as centres are often overwhelmed. He adds: “For me, staying here no longer comes from a revolutionary perspective, but fundamentally from a human perspective”.

Mohammed’s priority used to be graduating at university, but this is now but a memory: “My priorities now are to contribute to alleviating pain and make living conditions here better. I will continue to do this until the siege is broken and my family will be able to return. Only then I will continue with my studies and life”.

25 Note that the fall of Eastern Ghouta happened over two years after this was written, in April of 2018.
Mays: Dreams the size of a homeland

Like Nour, Mays took part in the revolution in Yarmouk Camp. She made herself completely available for peaceful resistance, putting all other aspects of her life on hold. “I didn’t expect to graduate from university once the revolution started. I gave all I had to the revolution”.

The revolution touched every aspect of her life: “I don’t remember any part of my personal life not related to the revolution. I even met my current husband through mutual revolutionary work. Our dreams were the size of a homeland”.

At that stage, Mays’ priorities were to increase people’s awareness of their rights and expand the number of participants in the revolution. This pushed her and her friends to organise cultural sessions. “We used to prepare sessions to increase political, social, and historical awareness. We used to read books about peaceful resistance and learn lessons from previous revolutions like the French one in the book ‘The Story of Civilisation’”.

Mays has been living in Germany for the past two months for her husband’s medical treatment and to continue her studies. “My priorities are different now. I want to further specialise in my field in order to offer something that can make a difference. Moreover, I’m hoping to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees here”.

From protesting to journalism

Tareef, a blogger and university student, told us that he and his friends were waiting for a signal, a revolutionary spark, to begin organising protests in their city, Homs. “We used to encourage people around us to take to the streets and protest. We didn’t have a vision of what would come after. It was the first year of the revolution”.

Protests decreased in Homs after the regime stormed Baba Amr the first time. But they didn’t stop, they moved from one neighbourhood to another. It was in Homs that Tareef and his friends started organising different types of activities, until the group dispersed later on. “The group I belonged to shared the same fate as the revolution today. The founder of the group was assassinated and others were detained. Some of them survived and emigrated to save themselves”.

Thanks to his experience in blogging and writing, Tareef moved to media work, in order to report what was happening in Homs: “I focused on writing and conveying reality. I observed what was happening and wrote articles for revolutionary newspapers. This happened alongside my forced confinement at home, due to the heightened military presence in Homs. With all that was going on, I completely neglected my studies for two consecutive years during which I didn’t even do my exams”.

“So that we are not reduced to ashes”

In the past three years, most of the activists close to Tareef joined the armed resistance, while others emigrated. He ruled out both options: “Armed action doesn’t work for me at all and emigrating at that time was not a good idea. That’s why I continued to work in journalism and returned to university”.

Tareef was forced to travel to Turkey over a year ago because he was unable to delay his mandatory military service. There, he continues to do what he was doing in Homs, adding: “I’m currently trying to improve my journalistic skills and my understanding of society and politics. At the moment, I’m working on a documentary project, gathering all digital materials from the revolution. I still write opinion pieces every now and then”.

Tareef believes that the current phase of his life has to be focused on developing personal skills he’ll be able to offer to Syria in the future. He explains: “We have to be strategic about our work. It’s no longer a matter of a week or month. We realise that Syria’s path has turned into an international war, and we have to know our roles and abilities, so that we’re not just reduced to ashes in this phase”.

Nour, Mays, Mohammed and Tareef are four activists who were working for same goal in the first year of the revolution. Their priorities and dreams were the same. Today, although they are scattered all over the globe, they still believe that they are preparing for tomorrow, no matter how late tomorrow comes.
“The tent people” is a term used by neighbouring states to describe Syrian refugees in their countries, as these camps are now hosting over half a million people.

But the camps are no longer limited to the areas near Syria’s borders or remote desert areas. They’re now built in car parks in the capital, Damascus, and increasingly resemble some of the larger border camps.

The phenomenon of displaced people finding shelter in public car parks in Damascus emerged after fighting intensified in 2013 and 2014. In 2015, temporary accommodation in parks and public spaces disappeared to be then replaced by tents in closed-off areas. In a residential neighbourhood of Kafr Sousa, a car park was turned into a small camp inhabited by dozens of displaced people from the surrounding countryside.

Enab Baladi spoke to Mrs Sana’, a 45 year old activist in the relief field, who has witnessed first-hand the situation in these car parks, as she regularly visits one of her relatives there. Sana’ pointed out that the owner of the building put tents in the car park instead of cars as a ‘charitable act’, to provide shelter for displaced families unable to rent a house in the city centre. She said that most of the residents are originally from the region of Kafr Sousa, but some also come from the countryside of Daraya and Muadamiya, and were displaced when the fighting intensified. The cost of renting a house in Damascus ranges from 50 to 100 thousand Syrian liras, while the average civil servants’ salary is around 35 thousand liras (at the time of writing, one dollar was around 500 liras).

Damascus’ countryside witnessed battles between the regime and opposition forces that led to the displacement of people towards the capital, and especially from towns in the eastern and western regions of Damascus, such as Douma, Daraya and Muadamiya. Areas controlled by the Syrian regime are relatively safe and rarely bombed, making them the preferred destinations for people displaced from opposition areas.

Relationships and marriage

The car park Enab Baladi visited has thirty eight tents and two shared bathrooms: one for women and one for men. Each tent has a cooking stove. Every woman cooks in her tent and can wash clothes in the shared bathroom.

According to Sana’, things are organised in a specific manner, in order to avoid problems between residents. The landlady has set specific days and hours for each family to wash their clothes, bathe and clean, and she supervises the schedule.

Sana’ said that “the residents of the car park have developed a close relationship and have become a big family”. She tells the story of a young boy who proposed to a girl living in the tent next to his. When they got married, the landlady put up a new tent for them next to their families’. This paved the way for other young people to think about getting married in order to get away from their parents and have a home of their own with their spouses.

Security clearance required for housing

Like rented houses in regime-controlled areas, a family wishing to live in the car park requires ‘security clearance’. In accordance with the decision issued in mid-2014 by the General Intelligence Directorate, everyone who wants to rent a house in Damascus is required to go to a special office and file an application stating the area they want to live in to their local security branch. Approval is granted only after a comprehensive examination of each family member regarding their legal status and where they were displaced from, as well as their relationship to what officials define as “terrorists”.

One of the prerequisites for obtaining the approval is that the names of those who’ll be living in the house be recorded in detail. The tenant is not allowed to host anyone else, other than for visiting purposes. Otherwise, they will be evicted from the property if authorities discover it. Similarly, the landlady of the Kafr Sousa car park can’t welcome any newcomers into her tents before they’ve got “security clearance”.

Sana’ pointed out that security personnel come to the car park all the time, to ensure that everyone living there has security clearance, and to make sure that only those registered are living in each tent. She pointed to the reluctance of security forces to give their approval for housing in the tents and that some people were evicted from their tents, despite having received security clearance. No reasons were given for these decisions.
Difficulties in obtaining the approval

Enab Baladi spoke to a lawyer in Damascus, who preferred not to be named. She said that security clearance was a prerequisite for housing anywhere, whether it was a house, shop or tent.

She stressed that clearance can be withheld in the case of security "suspicions" about tenants. On that basis, the regime often refuses clearance to people coming from areas that are or were outside of its control. It also refuses to grant approval to the family if one of its members is detained or wanted for conscription, or has first-degree relatives who are wanted by the regime.

When we asked her about the options a family can resort to in those cases, the lawyer said that some families are forced to rent homes in areas far from the capital, where housing clearance is "less complicated". She added that: "In the event of refusal, some families pay large amounts of money to get clearance and for security personnel to overlook any existing security issue in their application".

Relief organisations

As waves of displacement and harsh humanitarian conditions suffered by displaced people worsened, relief and humanitarian organisations started actively working inside and outside Syria. The residents of the Kafr Sousa car park could access a share of this aid. According to Sana', charities regularly visit the garage and offer subsidies to families.

The Syrian Red Crescent also provides medical care and supervises the distribution of medicine. Doctors visit the car park every Monday, examining children, women and those in need of treatment, and giving them medicine free of charge.

Organisations also distribute what's known as the "food basket", which contains basic foodstuffs such rice, burghul, lentil, oil and others. Sana' explained that there are also individual contributions being made by people visiting the car park and giving money to the children, and that "displaced people get subsidies every three months not knowing where they've come from".

Supporting organisations provide services for "children of the car park", through registering them in public schools, and providing them with stationery and school materials. However, despite the assistance provided, the car park's residents are more keen on working, in order not to have to rely on relief organisations. Sana' pointed out that, because of the spike in prices and terrible economic conditions in Damascus, both men and women work to support their families.

This isn't the only car park of its kind. In the area of Kafr Sousa, there are three others which have been turned into accommodation to host displaced people, according to our source. According to UN statistics, 7.2 million people left their homes, most of whom emigrated to Tartous, Lattakya, Damascus and Aleppo's western neighbourhoods.
**4 - How Will Daraya’s Children in the Camps Complete Their Education?**

Friday, 7th of October 2016

Linda could barely catch what was written on the back of one of the volunteers’ t-shirts. Her sporadic attendance at school throughout her last three years in Daraya has left her with reduced reading and writing skills. Dozens of families were expelled northwards from Daraya to live in the Ataa camp in Atmeh, in the countryside of Idlib. This includes 85 children of school age. And yet, there’s only one school in Ataa that has been equipped to allow them to complete their education.

A relief organisation says it’s difficult to recruit teachers from outside the camp, as it’s too far from city centres. As a result, it’s necessary to appoint teachers from the camp itself. There are 7 teachers in the camp who are able to teach these children, only 2 of whom hold university degrees. There were 40 teachers in Daraya, but they were divided between the makeshift camps of Hirjalleh and Idlib. Teachers who didn’t have a university degree took 4 month courses in Daraya. But while a first group managed to complete the course and graduate, others had to stop when bombing and displacement campaigns began in the area.

Aisha Fayyad, a former school Headmaster with a degree in Islamic law, says that students are now one year behind their curricula because either their studies were suspended, or they could only focus on basic materials for no longer than two or three consecutive hours.

Daraya used to have around 300 students, 250 of whom were enrolled in two main schools, including primary and secondary. During the four years of siege, schools continued to educate these children from a basement in unspeakable conditions. In the last two months after the shelling on Daraya intensified, students stopped attending school. Linda and dozens of children lived for four years in a state of relentless war, with barrel bombs falling over their city and a siege that denied them access to food and medicine, until they left for Idlib on 26th August last year.

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**5 - Discouraging Refugees from Staying: How Lebanon is Forcing Syrians to Leave**

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Sunday, 9th of April 2017
Author: Sama Na’a’naah
Translated by: Enab Baladi

“I went to the Lebanese General Security Directorate several times hoping to be able to pick up my passport, which they had kept when I applied for my Lebanese residency permit. The authorities kept delaying the process, and offered me the option of a deportation order in exchange for the passport”.

Amer, a 22-year-old Syrian student from Aleppo, is studying at the Lebanese University. He came to Beirut in early 2015 to study after it became impossible in Syria. Although Amer has met all the requirements, he has not yet been granted a Lebanese residency permit at the time of writing.

What’s puzzling is that the young man (who opted not to reveal his full name for fear of being harassed), has had his passport withheld by the General Security Directorate. This means that, in addition to his unstable legal status in Lebanon, Amer is unable to leave the country to visit his family in Turkey. The young man is worried about getting arrested, or being made to pay a fine whenever he encounters Lebanese police or army in a security checkpoint, which would be a great burden for any Syrian student in a similar situation.

Amer is only one of thousands of Syrians who have not been granted residency in Lebanon. Some of their passports have been held by security services without any explanation, and they’ve been threatened with deportation at any moment. But where would they go?

Through this in-depth investigation, Enab Baladi seeks to shed light on Amer’s difficult situation and other similar cases, and reveal the reasons behind Lebanese security officers’ behaviour when dealing with Syrians. This study also looks at possible ways for them of obtaining a legal status in Lebanon. In order to obtain accurate information on this issue, Enab Baladi interviewed a number of Syrians living in Lebanon who weren’t approved for a residency permit despite repeated attempts and meeting all the requirements. Enab Baladi also consulted Lebanese activists and politicians interested in the issue of Syrian immigration, who are in direct contact with similar cases.
No residence permit, passport or military record

Amer spoke of the difficulties of getting a residency permit in Lebanon and "how irrational the authorities are", as if they were following a policy of "systematic harassment" to push immigrants to leave.

"I don’t know why they’re not allowing me to stay, even though I’m a student and all my papers are in order," says the young man. Amer explains that having his passport withheld has caused him a number of problems. Over the past two years, he’s been stopped by the police several times for not having a residency permit or passport and forced to pay a fine each time.

Amer added: "what’s ironic is that they’ve held my passport for almost two years and now it’s expired, so I can’t even renew it. I can’t register at the consulate to carry on with the process of getting a military record, as it requires presenting a passport in the first place".

After examining Amer's and other similar cases, Enab Baladi consulted some lawyers and human rights activists to try to understand the legal status of Syrians in Lebanon. We also tried to speak to the relevant authorities, but we haven’t received any response.

Lebanese lawyer and Jurist, Diala Chehade, explained the situation of Syrians and residence requirements in detail. She said that as of January 2015, the Lebanese General Security Directorate, part of the Ministry of Interior, imposed new conditions which are difficult for most Syrians to fulfill. This government body has the power to follow up on residency issues relating to Syrians.

According to Chehade, the difficulty of obtaining a residency permit in Lebanon is due to two main reasons. The first concerns residency fees, which are about $200 per year for each family member aged 15 or over. The second is to do with conditions set up by the Lebanese government. They were initially relatively flexible for those who had a UNHCR registration, which the government considered as Syrians’ guarantor under the so-called "sponsorship system", and for those with individual Lebanese sponsors. However, the General Security Directorate later started making it a requirement that Syrians be sponsored by an employer, something which not all Syrians are able to secure.

If the Investigations Division of the General Security Directorate discovers that the sponsor is fictitious, the person risks deportation, Chehade added. "This won’t happen, mainly because there’s no official deportation policy in Lebanon for Syrian refugees. However, this situation would make a Syrian feel psychologically unstable and unsafe, as he or she would have no residency permit allowing him or her to travel at night or go through checkpoints without risking arrest and detention".

According to the cases observed by Enab Baladi, this instability has prompted some refugees to demand their passports, even if this means having to leave the country, signing a compulsory deportation order in exchange for the passport. Chehade pointed to the decrease in the number of arrests of those who have violated their legal period of residency. The reason behind this is not the decrease in numbers, but rather the fact that illegal residents are not brought before courts. It’s left to the General Security Directorate to decide, except in the South.

Enab Baladi was unable to obtain official figures from the authorities, which consider all Syrians on Lebanese territory to have legal residency. Enab Baladi tried to contact the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to get some statistics on this, but didn’t receive a response. Chehade asserted that “there are no exact figures”, noting that on one occasion she had asked the General Security Directorate for figures and was told that all Syrians living in Lebanon have legal residency. Chehade added that this was "strange, because most of my clients have either not received a residence permit or didn’t meet the required conditions".

According to official figures, the number of Syrians living in Lebanon is more than 1.5 million. Chehade says that “half of them or even a million don’t have residency. To be cautious with figures, we can say for sure that hundreds of thousands of them don’t have residency in Lebanon”.

Amer can’t get legal residency or clarify his legal status, and he is subjected to permanent restrictions. This has led him to ask whether there is a systematic policy of deterring Syrians. What are the legal justifications for it? And if the government wants to deport Syrians, why are they holding their passports?

What are the conditions for obtaining legal residence in Lebanon?

Sponsorship by an employer

To obtain a year-long residency permit in Lebanon, a Syrian immigrant must provide "sponsorship" from an employer who has a company, factory, plant, shop, agricultural land, a house with a garden, or anything
that proves the latter's ability to take on a worker. In addition, the employer must carry out all legal procedures and pledge that he or she is the sponsor for the Syrian immigrant.

A certified lease

A Syrian who has a lease certified by the municipality and the Security Bureau in his or her local area can obtain residency on a six-month, renewable basis. However, the problem is that not all Lebanese Bureaus follow the same general orders, as each acts separately.

Tourism

For those who want to come to Lebanon as tourists, the Lebanese government requires a hotel reservation, a cash deposit of at least $1,000 or $2,000, or an invitation from a family member living in Lebanon who must hold a lease certified by their municipality. Syrians coming from the airport can present a tourist or work visa granted by a country other than Lebanon, which allows them to enter the country and remain for a period of maximum one month.

Students

Student visas are one of the most complicated types of residency permits in Lebanon. The General Security Directorate takes a long time to verify whether the student wants to obtain a residency permit only for the purpose of living in the country, or to genuinely undertake studies. Thus, the student must provide proof that he or she is actually studying by providing a record of grades issued by the university.

"Selective" measures against refugees coming from areas under Hezbollah control

Nabil al-Halabi, a Lebanese lawyer and director of the Lebanese Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (LIFE), told Enab Baladi that "arbitrary" measures concerning the legal status of Syrian immigrants are "taken by Lebanese security against a certain subset of Syrian refugees coming from areas in Syria that are controlled by Hezbollah, which are not applied to others".

Hezbollah’s forces are mainly located to the west of Damascus in the areas around Zabadani and Madaya extending to Qalamoun and Al-Qusayr, its main stronghold being in the western countryside of Homs by the Lebanese border. These areas are considered an extension of the political movement’s control over the Lebanese border in Bekaa.

As a close observer of the Syrian situation and refugee issues in Lebanon, Al-Halabi, says that, despite the fact that Syrian refugees do fulfil the conditions required for residency in Lebanon, the Lebanese General Security Directorate obstructs the process and only "selectively" grants them residency permit. The Directorate can go even further and forcibly deport them, according to Al-Halabi.

Al-Halabi criticised the Directorate, saying: “They give them an order to leave, but leave to where? It’s as if they're exerting pressure on Syrians to force them to return to Syria, in order to use them in ongoing negotiations over refugee repatriation. These issues being taken on by various political actors entering into negotiations with the Syrian regime”.

According to Al-Halabi, there is no general policy aimed at "discouraging Syrians from staying in Lebanon". However, he confirms that the Lebanese authorities are pursuing a "selective policy", which doesn’t include all Syrians. It only assists "those coming from territories involved in negotiations over refugee repatriation and reconciliation".

Syrians in Lebanon: are they hostages?

On the other hand, Al-Halabi describes the Lebanese government’s policy towards Syrians in Lebanon as being akin to treating them as "hostages". He said: “Syrians are like hostages in Lebanese territory. These “arbitrary” measures also apply to Syrians who have been allowed to join their families, or granted residency in European countries or Canada”. He also pointed to the intentional obstruction by Lebanese security to prevent Syrians from traveling outside Lebanon by "holding their passports without justification".

Al-Halabi also added that, two years ago, the arbitrary measures adopted by Lebanese security pushed the Canadian Foreign Ministry to denounce the actions of the Lebanese government for banning Syrian refugees from leaving the country. According to the lawyer, this strategy "goes on and on".

Al-Halabi also cited the example of the Syrian media activist Ali Ibrahim who was travelling from Zabadani, an area besieged by Hezbollah militias.
He explained how security forces held Ibrahim’s passport, which Al-Halabi describes as “typical” of the arbitrary behaviour of the Lebanese security forces, and banned him from travelling without any legal justification. The ban came after the journalist had been granted permission to enter Norway. The situation continued until Norwegian authorities and lawyers intervened to retrieve his passport.

Why do the Lebanese authorities want to detain Syrians in Lebanon, despite constant complaints of their growing numbers, which have reached nearly half of the population? What interest do they have in doing so?

**Forcibly returned under the cover of “peace” initiatives**

Al-Halabi believes that Lebanese security is exerting pressure on Syrians to negotiate with the Syrian regime and return to Syria. However, this would only serve the interests of the regime.

The objective behind this is to pressure those coming from areas controlled by Hezbollah, which are subject to negotiations and reconciliation with the regime and Hezbollah. If Syrian refugees in Lebanon go abroad, they will oppose negotiations, but if they remain in Lebanon in miserable conditions, they will eventually accept a forced return back into regime hands.

Al-Halabi stressed that the Syrian regime is embarrassed by the presence of refugees outside Syria. “Major General Turkmani was sent to work on the repatriation of refugees while they still had diplomatic relations with Turkey, because the regime knows that the presence of Syrian refugees abroad is a source of pressure on the regime in terms of the political process”, Al-Halabi said.

Consequently, Syrian refugees in Lebanon will accept any deal to escape the “violations they face in Lebanon”. Al-Halabi believes that the Syrian regime “doesn’t want the presence of an opposition outside Syria, so it won’t be used as a bargaining chip against it abroad”. He believes that if security forces exert pressure on Syrians and make their legal situation “fragile”, they’ll be prompted to accept negotiations with the regime and eventually return to Syria. Al-Halabi’s words reflect what was also said in a meeting held in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, on the 9th of February between Syrian opposition figures and regime loyalists, to discuss a “peace initiative” aimed at returning a thousand Syrian refugee families in Lebanon to Syria with a Russian guarantee as a first step.

The meeting was held at the Riviera Hotel amid tight security and was attended by parliamentary and academic figures under the slogan: “A united homeland for all Syrians”. The London-based newspaper, Al-Hayat, reported that the meeting was “the outcome of channels opened by Hezbollah to the Syrian opposition in anticipation of the next phase, and represents a concrete possibility for regional and international changes with regards to Syria”.

Enab Baladi obtained information from the Saraya Ahl al-Sham faction, which is based in West Qalamoun, north of Damascus, regarding negotiations with Hezbollah to repatriate refugees, but negotiations failed after the demands were sent to Hezbollah leaders.

You can read the rest of the report on the [Enab Baladi website](https://www.enabbaladi.com).
The Syrian regime imposed new fees on Syrian refugees in diaspora countries, raising the cost of issuing and renewing passports from its consulates. The cost of issuing a new passport has become $300 while the fast track process, which grants it within three days, is now at $800.

The new fees have become an additional burden on Syrian refugees in an already complex situation, especially since they are forced to renew and obtain passports from regime consulates after the Syrian opposition failed to obtain passports and have them recognised by the world. With an increase in both demands and fees, Syrians in some countries such as Turkey have encountered difficulties in booking an appointment with the consulate. This situation has also given rise to brokers who demand a booking fee of an additional $200.

Decisions that heavily burden refugees

There are many questions about the reasons that led the regime to raise the fees. Some believe it to be a form of revenge against Syrians, especially those who are linked with opposition institutions or civil society organisations, but most people attribute it to the need for the regime’s treasury to get funds in foreign currencies following the deterioration of the Syrian economy.

The Syrian regime has issued several decrees on passports over the past two years. The main purpose for this was to improve its own financial situation. In 2015, the regime abolished the “security approval” as a condition for obtaining a passport despite the fact that the majority of Syrians abroad are wanted by the regime, thereby exploiting their need for a passport in hosting countries. In April of that year, Assad issued a decree stipulating the increase of the consular fee for the issuance of passports to Syrians living abroad by 100%, from $200 to $400, while it set the fee for the renewal of the passport or its extension at an additional $200.

The decision pushed thousands of those who left Syria through smuggling routes to neighbouring countries to rush to consulates and obtain passports to prove their identity. This means that most Syrians outside the country who have passports will need to renew it every two years and pay $200. However, last April the regime issued a decision to ban the extension of the passport as has been the case for years, so citizens can now only get a new passport every time.

Millions of dollars for the regime’s treasury

Despite the absence of official statistics from the Syrian Department of Immigration and Passports on the number of passports issued by consulates or the value of these operations this year, the administration said, according to the pro-regime newspaper “Al-Watan” in March 2016, that “the number of passports granted and renewed to Syrian expatriates reached more than 50,000 passports within three months”, or an average of 200,000 passports in that year.

If all Syrians decided to get their passports reissued, this would amount to a contribution of a minimum of $60 million a year to the regime treasury, not counting emergency passports or the money paid to authenticate documents issued by the consulates.

Additional fears

Syrians are afraid that the consulates will not comply with the time limit for obtaining the passport, which is between 10 and 21 days. Speaking to Enab Baladi, Asad Darwish, a refugee in Turkey, said that he fears that the regime’s embassies would purposefully delay the procedure to force refugees to apply for their passport through the urgent procedure and pay $800. Darwish is among those who will be forced to apply for a new passport as his residency permit ends in a month.

In addition to the higher fees demanded by the regime, brokers who deal with appointments at the Istanbul consulate have also increased their fees. According to Darwish, booking an appointment on the consulate website has become too difficult, forcing him to resort to a broker who deals with the consular staff. To his surprise, the broker requested $200 for the appointment, instead of the typical 250 Turkish lira (around $57) that was common before the new law.

Another broker that Enab Baladi contacted in Lebanon said that he asks for $550 to get a passport from the regime’s consulate. In other countries such as Egypt and Jordan, booking the appointment was easier, according to Enab Baladi’s sources.
The regime’s justification

The Department of Immigration and Passport of the Syrian regime claimed that the reason for cancelling the extension of passports was "passport forgeries".

"The reason for the cancellation is the fact that counterfeiting is taking place outside Syria, and some immigration authorities around the world have tightened controls over Syrian passports and sometimes not recognised them", the director of the Department of Immigration and Passports, Naji al-Numeir, told local radio Melody FM on April 30th. Al-Numeir added that the regime "has not cancelled the renewal of passports, and citizens can still change their passports or obtain a new passport in the usual ways".

The worst and most expensive passport in the world

According to a March 24th, 2017 report by World Atlas, a specialised website, the Syrian passport was the most expensive in the world, followed by Turkey at $251, Australia at $206, Switzerland at $159, Mexico at $155, the USA and Italy at $135, Canada at $133, Japan at $115, New Zealand at $115 and Britain at $110.

The Syrian passport was classified as one of the worst in the world after six years of war, ranking the fourth worst passport in the world, according to the specialist site "Passport Index". Syrian passport holders can enter 30 countries, which means the Syrian passport is only better than the Iraqi passport (28), the Pakistani one (27) and the Afghan one (24).

"During an interview for granting Turkish nationality, the officer asked me to change my family name because it wasn't Turkish. I tried to insist as much as possible, but he refused to let me keep my surname and told me that under Turkish law, it wasn't possible. I had to change it to a Turkish-sounding name, so my name became Manal".

The case of Manal, a 27 year-old Syrian resident in Turkey, can be seen from two points of view: some consider this a core part of the process of integrating into the new society, whereas others see it as abandoning one's Syrian identity.

The search for a second nationality is due to the fact that most countries decided to close their borders to Syrian people. Today, only 30 countries allow Syrians entry, and some under complicated conditions. This has led to the Syrian passport being ranked among the world's worst four.

Of the around three million Syrians in Turkey, some have attempted to apply for citizenship under Turkish law, either on the basis of having Turkish origins or other reasons, such as having resided in the country for five years. Some put forward an official request to the Naturalisation Office.

Enab Baladi went through a number of cases of Syrians who had applied for, or already obtained Turkish citizenship and noticed that whilst in some cases a name change was "compulsory", in others it was considered "optional". In order to get some clear answers on the issue, Enab Baladi contacted specialised human rights organisations and obtained a copy of the Turkish citizenship law.

Manal, who asked us not to mention her real name for personal reasons, assured Enab Baladi that she had been asked to change her family name by deleting one of its letters to suit the Turkish pronunciation, after an attempt by the officer to change it entirely. The same thing happened to several people Enab Baladi met. Some of them changed their name and/or family name, entirely or almost, sometimes replacing the Arabic pronunciation with a Turkish one.
Funny situations and accidental connotations

Abd al-Razzaq al-Alloush, a Syrian lawyer and specialist in Turkish citizenship and residence, confirmed to Enab Baladi that any name change when applying for Turkish citizenship is “optional” and not “compulsory”. Al-Alloush said that anyone who wishes to obtain Turkish nationality can retain their names or family names, or request to change them regardless of their country of origin. He pointed out that the civil code in Turkey is clear and straightforward on this matter.

When asked about the cases where people had to change their names at the request of the responsible officers, Al-Alloush explained that there could be several reasons behind this, even though Turkish law does not explicitly demand it.

For instance, it could be due to a simple misunderstanding between the officer and the applicant. Another reason could be related to the nature of the name itself, which may not conform with the Turkish language. Even though this is against Turkish law, it may occasionally happen due to the officer’s own decisions and ‘moods’.

Alloush, who is fluent in Turkish, gave us some examples to understand how this linguistic issue may arise. One example is the Arabic word ‘shabaka’ (network). The word has several meanings in Arabic: it could be literal or economic, and it may also refer to a group of companies or associations. But this word has a negative meaning in Turkish, meaning “gang”. Therefore, in cases whereby the Arabic name has a meaning that is bad, funny or too different, people can be asked to change their personal or family name.

What are the legal consequences of a name change?

Enab Baladi tried to investigate the legal repercussions of changing a person’s name when it comes to official transactions, banking or certificates. If a person is forced to change his/her name, they must do so with every official body they are registered with, be they universities, embassies, government departments or banks. In order to do this, the person has to apply to the Turkish relevant authorities to obtain a name amendment statement, with the decision issued by the Ministry of the Interior.

If a person is required to show proof of identity in a foreign country outside of Turkey, he/she must obtain the authorization of the State and the embassy of the country of destination. For example, a person holding an engineering degree from Syria or Turkey who has a different name on the document to the one on their passport or identity card, will need to provide all the necessary documentation to justify the connection between the two different names. In short, a name change can have negative repercussions, whether in Syria, Turkey or any other country they may travel to.

Integration into a new country

When people are forced to change their names, they are exposed to risks of alienation from their past and history, including from their old friends and relatives. To find out about the social and psychological repercussions, Enab Baladi contacted Amani Sinda, a psychologist who works at a refugee centre in Turkey. She views a person changing their name as facilitating the process of integration into their new society and homeland. Besides, she indicates that this is normal for people who live in the country, accept its citizenship, work and have social relationships there. Sinda’s analysis is consistent with the behaviour of some Arab residents in Turkey, who changed their names on their social media accounts to the Turkish pronunciation (Ahmet, Mehmet, Ömer), even though they have not yet started the process of obtaining Turkish citizenship.

Social heritage

According to Sinda, when talking about the social effects on individuals, their families, or their future children, the matter has “serious repercussions”. In Syria, family names are associated with a family’s heritage and represent a source of pride, especially for well-known and deep-rooted families.

She believes that people, upon giving up their name, start from scratch and abandon a social, historical and cultural heritage related to their past and family.

This can have negative impacts on children in particular. When children feel the difference between themselves and the other children, and notice that other families have relatives with the same family name, they start wondering: “Why do they have similar family names while we have family names different to our relatives and grandparents?” This generates a state of psychological instability for those who already suffer from anxiety stemming from previous experiences.
Jordanian human rights organisations have recorded the marriage of 750 Syrian minors to people of different nationalities in the past year.

According to a report by Saudi newspaper Makkah, citizens of four different Western countries have married Syrian minors. The Jordanian Women's Union has documented cases of such marriages with American, French, German and Canadian citizens in the past year.

In a report published on Saturday the 20th of August 2016, Executive Director of the Jordanian Women's Union, Makram Odeh, said that the marriage of Syrian minors in Jordan had increased dramatically in 2014 and 2015. According to statistics from the Jordanian Women's Union, 750 marriages of this kind were recorded over the past year. The majority of them were cases whereby minors were married off to Syrian citizens, followed by 114 to Jordanians, 52 to Saudis, and in 3 cases to a Bahraini, a Qatari and a Libyan.

Some 650,000 Syrian refugees live in Jordan, 120,000 of them in border camps, the largest of which is the notorious Zaa'tari Camp. Refugees in these camps suffer from poor humanitarian and economic conditions, relying mainly on the aid of UN organisations.

Odeh pointed out that the phenomenon of marrying underage children has arisen from the “difficult circumstances experienced by the families of refugees, due to a war that has been raging on for over five years now”. She explained that only between 5 to 10% of the total cases were dropped, and stressed that some families have agreements with the husband that the marriage will only be temporary, whilst the family look for another marriage for money.

She added that the person wishing to marry pays between 100 and 1000 Jordanian dinars (77,200 - 772,000 Syrian liras) to families of the minors, who are generally aged between 15 and 18.

Today, on Wednesday the 22nd of June 2016, Hassan Rabeh, a 25 year old Syrian-Palestinian dancer, committed suicide by jumping off a building in Hamra, Beirut.

The news of Rabah’s suicide spread quickly on social media. Most commentators viewed his story as a “defeat, like that of most Syrians living in exile”.

Syrian journalist Sheyar Khalil posted a status on Facebook saying: "Syria’s losses are accumulating like individual snowballs anticipating the avalanche about to fall over all these regimes. Blessed be your soul, Hassan. You'll join Lawand Hajo [Syrian dancer assassinated in 2008] in the sky, where dreams come true".

Others said that Rabah "decided to leave life and threw himself from the seventh floor. He chose a different path, one which around 20 million Syrians try to go down". Other commentators wrote: “Shame on the world, on all governments and all political parties”.

Well-known journalist Diana Moukalled said that “there’s pleasure in resisting the temptation to commit suicide, but Hassan Rabah couldn’t resist this temptation, and threw himself from the seventh floor”. She added: “I didn’t know this man, but five years of non-existence here in Lebanon and the impossibility of returning to Syria is what facilitated the final jump, and is forcing us to face the reality we’ve been running from”.

One Syrian said: “I don’t feel sad about the young dancer Hassan Rabeh. He must feel much more comfortable now, rather than the hell he was living through in Beirut. I pray for the rest of us struggling to stay alive”.

Syrian activists shared a post by Rabeh from the 13th of June when he wrote: "I was jailed for smoking hashish. I stayed in prison with the most beautiful people. When I quit smoking, getting drunk and taking drugs, I stopped talking to my friends, sisters, family, my flesh and blood. I stopped talking to everyone. I started lying. I’m nothing but a servant of God. My name is Hassan".

Rabeh added: “Peace be upon you and forgive me my friends, family and loved ones. May this failed and fascist Syrian regime fall, along with its devil
Bashar and his father. May the capitalist, Zionist, settler, colonial system fall. May Daesh and [Lebanese Minister of Interior] Nohad Machnouk fall. We’ll return to Palestine one day”.

Rabeh was a member of a band called “Sima”. He started dancing at the age of seven. He loved Michael Jackson and took part in a number of dance performances in Beirut and Syria before that. Rabeh is not the first Syrian to commit suicide in ‘host’ countries. This phenomenon has been spreading recently in Germany and Sweden as well.

10 - "Baynetna": An Arabic Library Opens in Berlin
Tuesday, 28th of February 2017

Thanks to Arab-German cooperation, a group of young people announced the opening of an Arabic library called “Baynetna” [Between Us] in the German capital of Berlin. “The Arab youth in Berlin needed access to Arabic books and they were difficult to find here, that was the idea behind the library”, said Muhannad Qaiconie, a member of the library’s founding team, to Enab Baladi today, Tuesday the 28th of February.

He added that the team consists of five people: Dana Haddad from Jordan, and Ali Hassan, Maher Khwis and Muhannad Qaiconie from Syria, as well as Head of the Women’s Section at the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, Ines Kappert. Qaiconie explained that the library was furnished thanks to the work of German students, under the supervision of Professor Donatella Fioretti from the University of Architecture, while the “Zusammenkunft” group provided the location for the library. He stressed that everyone was extremely helpful and supportive, noting that “the library will become something closer to a cultural hub, where activities such as poetry and literary evenings, concerts, art exhibitions, music, art and literature courses, and everything related to the cultural field will take place”, he said.

Qaiconie said that the aim of the library is to incentivise an exchange of knowledge and culture between Arabs and Germans, with the help of Arabic-German interpreters at events. One of the team members confirmed that the library is open to all "on the basis that the project would be useful and beneficial to people in need of cultural assistance", and will support Arab students interested in reading Arabic books.
The Syrian Cultural House in Istanbul, named Hamish ("Margin" in Arabic), held its first meeting on Thursday the 27th of March 2014, when it hosted a number of Syrian intellectuals and journalists living in Istanbul. The aim of the meeting was to discuss ways to develop and open the nascent cultural institution which was launched just ten days prior, on the 17th of March.

The meeting, held in a small cafe in the middle of Istiklal Street in the Taksim district, was opened by Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, one of the founders and Chairman of the Syrian Cultural House. He discussed the idea behind the institution, its objectives, and gave a brief introduction to its founders. He also talked about several projects being prepared for launch in May 2014, such as a writing session in preparation for a book entitled "Writing the Revolution" by a group of Arab writers. Other projects include a photo exhibition from Damascus by the photographer Mohammed Roumi, a documentary film exhibition, a wood-engraving workshop featuring poetry readings, and a concert with a Turkish band. These activities, according to Al-Hajj Saleh, focus on the Syrian community within Turkey, but also aim to address Turkish society as a whole.

When asked by Enab Baladi why Hamish is targeting Syrians outside the country, while those inside continue to live in a state of cultural and intellectual poverty, Al-Hajj Saleh said that Syria is "currently cut off," to the point where it’s difficult to deliver any real message there. However, he didn’t rule out the possibility of sponsoring cultural activities inside Syria whenever possible, adding that Hamish’s aim is to reach as many Syrians as possible.

Yassin Swehat, another of Hamish’s founders, said that it’s important to carry out cultural activities abroad, in order to allow people to express themselves and communicate their message to the world. He also clarified, however, that “those within Syria must express themselves there,” without waiting for Syrian initiatives overseas.

On the other hand, the writer Alwan Zuaiter spoke about the apparent absence of creative output coming from the Syrian revolution three years since its outbreak, which has led Syrians to resort to non-Syrian literature, such as Ahmed Matar’s and Mahmoud Darwish’s writing. Therefore, Zuaiter believes that Hamish can also play a role in becoming a cultural incubator for revolutionary creativity: whether literary, intellectual or artistic.

Similarly, activist Yamen Hussein added that the absence of independent civic and cultural institutions has made Syrian creativity vulnerable to exploitation by organisations and political actors with “a bad reputation”. This, in turn, discourages participation in the revolution and encourages resignation. It is the responsibility of Hamish and other independent cultural institutions to adopt and sponsor such artists and cultivate them.

During the three-hour session, the guests presented a variety of ideas about their expectations of the “margin”, as well as their suggestions for developing the concept of this institution, and ways of supporting, or trying to invest it, in order to serve the Syrian cultural, intellectual and artistic landscape. In his speech, Yassin al-Hajj Saleh said that the Syrian Cultural House is a club open to ideas and contributions, where the participation of young people is highly valued in determining the general direction the club will move in, adding that it seeks to benefit from their suggestions and experience.

The Syrian Cultural House Hamish opened on the 17th of March 2014, and was co-founded by 8 Syrian and Western intellectuals: Yassin al-Hajj Saleh (Syria), Yassin Swehat (Syria), Omar Berqdar (Syria), Chanay Ozden (Turkey), Ozhan Andr (Turkey), Alice Argzen (Turkey), and Laurence Pardo (France). It is based in the Taksim area of the city, one of the most attractive areas for Syrian intellectuals and activists in Istanbul.