

Syria's Drowning Dream

Written by Afra Jalabi

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AFRA JALABI, NOV 5 2013

Syria is drowning. A country that has a rich history spanning thousands of years and one which fairly recently witnessed cultural, political and even economic rise for a short period after its independence from the French, fell into the grip of military coups d'états and dictatorship. In general, the post-colonial state in the Arab World turned to be a dark phase in the region. Most of these illegitimate regimes who came to power through coercive means without the consent of their people shared, to varying degrees, the distinct features of corruption, monstrous security systems, huge and systematic violations of human rights, and the monopoly over power and national resources.

It wasn't surprising then when the people in the region, inspired by Tunisia's first spark, came out demanding the downfall of the regime in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. The Syrians, like the other peoples in the region, came out demanding freedom and dignity in mid march 2011 after a 43-year reign by the Assad family. They were met with bullets, tanks, arbitrary detentions and systemic and organized torture.

The regime used excessive force everywhere and at every level. But it also had a strategy in crushing the legitimate demands of the people. It relied on double-speak. While it announced to the world it was engaged in reform it was on the hunt for civil rights activists. When it announced lifting marshal law it was sending tanks to the southern city of Dar'aa to put it under military siege in the spring of 2011. The regime used cheap propaganda tactics riding on the waves of the rampant Islamophobia around the world and pretended to be fighting Islamic radicals, while also at the same time telling Syrians inside that the revolutionaries are foreign agents and infiltrators coming to destroy Islam.

The Human Rights Watch report, in October 2013, refers to the tens of thousands of peace activists languishing in Assad prisons in horrific conditions. The regime with the help of Iran, which also crushed a civil revolution, a couple of years earlier, focused on targeting the peace activists and uprooting the non-violent peaceful movement. The regime had a vested interest in turning the revolution into armed struggle. It was the turf it knew how to fight.

As civilians and residential areas were being targeted the protection of civilians became a core issue in the revolution, especially that the pleas to the international community to aid Syrians in their struggle were not heard. So the soldiers and some of the generals who were defecting from the Syrian army began joining the revolution and helped form the Free Syrian Army—initially composed of those who defected and later joined by volunteer civilians throughout Syria, and mainly without a central command. Both the non-violent protests later the FSA were marked by a decentralized grass roots dynamics considering the tremendous pressure by the regime in its targeting of any emerging leadership on the ground; and also because of 43-year reign of terror and the lack of avenues for organizing and networking before the revolution. Syria had been notorious for its heinous security nightmare. And the Syrians paid a heavy price. They became a fragmented repressed society under the constant surveillance of the Big Brother, and before Bashar al Assad to the surveillance of the Big Father, Hafez al Assad, the father of Bashar who came to power through a military coup d'état in 1970, and who ruled the country with an iron fist for the next 30 years. Like father like son. Both have been brutal in their crushing of the Syrians as is the case and psychology of any dictator who is locked into seeing the people he kidnapped as the enemy. Assad, the father, had also crushed a mutiny in the city of Hamah in 1982, killing over 20 thousand civilians in a 27-day military campaign led by his brother, Riffat al Assad, who brags about having killed 38 thousand. In the next following 10 years, there were thousands of arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances. The numbers of those year are not finalized yet, just as the numbers of the revolution. The Syrians have not counted their dead and disappeared from before let alone now.

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Having tremendous pressures on the ground compelled the Syrians in the diaspora to form umbrella groups uniting different Syrian voices to represent and amplify the Syrian voice internationally, especially considering the dangers and the targeting of such leadership inside the country. Mish'al Timmo, the Kurdish leader paid the price when he decided to stay in the country and be part of the Syrian National Council after he had been released from prison. He was assassinated by the regime in his house. The regime did this to many young activists who were becoming inspirational figures like Ghayath Mater, known as the little Ghandi in Daraya, near Damascus, whose tortured body was delivered back to his family on September 10, 2011, only 4 days of his arrest in an ambush by the security forces where they also arrested his friend, Yahya Shurbaji, who had a profound influence on him in his understanding of non-violence.

Everywhere women participated in the revolution, more present and prominent in its civil phase, but still working in silence afterwards; in humanitarian aid, in media offices, local councils and even as in case of Razan Zaitouneh, a human rights lawyer, in documenting the violations whether in general or specific massacres as in the cases of the chemical attack of August on the Ghouta region near Damascus.

Today, the revolutions in Syria is being presented in a simplistic polarized fashion as being a civil war between Assad and Al Qaeda, who infiltrated the country with the increased failure of the international community to act and due to the help of Iran and Russia to maintain the wobbly regime in power. However, in this reductionist polarity millions of Syrians whose voice and suffering is at the core of this revolution are missing. Their blood is trickling daily and they are leaving the country en mass in large numbers. The Refugee Agency of the UN has put the number of registered refugees at 2.3 million and their economic report put the number of destroyed houses at 1.5 million. But when talking to Syrians, even the official estimates of the killed being 115 thousand is doubted. These are always the verified lists and not the final numbers. Nevertheless, even the official numbers coming out, as well as the reports by human rights organization –despite the limited access– are horrific enough.

With the world being happy about the removal of chemical weapons from the fangs of Assad, they're ignoring that the Assad regime continues to kill the Syrians; that Iran is running the military operations on the ground and that Russia is supplying the regime with weapons and international political support. The world is allowing Syria to implode into a black hole. Black holes have tremendous gravity and pulling power and all this blood and suffering is going to undermine the stability and prospects of the entire region for a long time.

The Arab World is faced with tremendous odds in its journey towards democracy, internally and externally. Therefore, if democracy ever emerges in this region it has the potential of being one of the most enduring and resilient democracies perhaps the world over. But the price has been heavy, not just for Syrians, but to the very core of our collective human conscience.

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