Revolutionary echoes from Syria

Conversations with two anarchists from Aleppo

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Introduction

The discussion below reflects an overview of the conditions experienced by individuals who are trying to liberate themselves from the system of social hypocrisy and the mentality of subordination. Our experience is still fragile, a newborn.

During the revolution and even now the difficulty lies in our inability to observe clearly the inherent authoritarian power within the society and the state. Consequently this prevented - and still prevents - us from stripping the layers they hide behind and fighting them raw and bare.

Many individuals were launching a double war: one against a totalitarian regime. Another against their own forced affiliations: be it ethnic, religious or sectarian. When futility and frustration shattered the Syrian struggle, our loses were also doubled: not only did the regime crush the revolutionary movement, the achievement we made on a personal level were also wasted. Our sense of belonging to the uprising weakened, to be finally replaced by our ex-ideologies: tribalism, nationalism, Islamism, etc.

To add insult to injury, the dismantling of the political system was deemed "more important" than any other struggle. Consequently, revolutionary forces saw no contradiction in allying themselves with other hierarchical authorities to confront the bigger danger, namely the security state and its institutions.

With the beginning of the revolutionary movement, in a small meeting - among a group of friends - we concluded that if the conflict lasted more than three or four months, the whole country would succumb to a civil war. This was not a lucky speculation. The social balances inside Syria were very clear (sectarianism, religious tensions, nationalism ..). Alas, This early realization had not pushed us to develop a new strategy.

Revolution theorization, and theorization in general (any attempt at analysis, induction, or critique) is considered a crime when carried out by the "common" people. Contrarily, intellectual work is monopolized by a unique social class, "The cultural and political Syrian elites". A class with a long history in political struggle and detention, giving them the "right" to "represent" the people.

These cultural and political boundaries contemplated and drawn by those elites, confined revolutionary work. The enthusiastic and brave revolutionaries, fully conscious of their "lack of expertise" turned their heads to politicians and intellectuals looking for solutions. Innovative means of struggle were then replaced by rooting for political parties "representing" the "voice of the Syrian streets" in UN meeting halls.

Who's to blame? The corrupt politicians? Our gullibility for believing them? Religious ideologies that turned the struggle into a holy war? Foreign policies that sought to keep this region in a constant state of war?

We have no blame-meter, nor will it be much use anyway. What we can infer with certainty is that the question of "who's to blame" has cost us dearly.

We managed, in a short period of time, to conquer fear of imprisonment, of police brutality, of live bullets and death. Tragically, these sacrifices were in vain, because courage alone is not enough.

Critical thinking was needed, to reflect upon the movement and see where it's going, how we can "win" the largest amount of battles with the least amount of sacrifices.

Instead, we glorified our suffering and kept thwarting forward with the revolutionary body of the movement taking more violent hits, until it was completely and utterly fatigued and crushed.

It's our own Black Knight syndrome (see Monty Python for reference). Yelling " *'tis but a flesh wound"* when we were getting killed, detained, tortured on a daily basis, without getting anywhere far.

Our testimonies and overall analysis included in this interview doesn't fall far off. It suffers from our constant need to sugarcoat an otherwise tragic attempt at liberation.

We invite the reader to keep a critical spirit reading these lines. It's full of our own contradiction and logical fallacies; and limited by our experiences, to summarize we don't offer the Truth.

A. and R.

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conversations with two anarchists from aleppo

First Part: Next to the river

X.

The first question is: how did you organize before the beginning of the revolution, to start with this revolution?

R.

The question indicates that a single, united group was behind the earliest demonstrations, while the events were a little more complicated. There were several "organizers". Contrary to the Egyptian, Tunisian and the majority of revolutions, the capital city played a marginal role[1]. All attempts to organize demonstrations in Damascus were a total failure. It was the small, marginalized cities like Daraa, Banyas and later Homs that were the key players in the beginning. Each of those cities had a different story and way of organizing. For Daraa, a tribal, family-centered society, organizing manifestations with thousands of people wasn't difficult in the technical sense.

At the mean time, a lot of people, especially those of us living in places where protests were nearly impossible, we were active anonymously on social media, trying to create networks and find a way to break through the regime's security apparatus.

If we want to discuss what finally "sparked" a revolution after four decades of state oppression by an authoritarian, totalitarian regime, there were a series of events that took place in a short period of time, following the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

A.

Ten days after the first failed attempt to demonstrate, around mid-February[2], something happened in Damascus, a guy was arrested by traffic police and that's really the first moment when a lot of Syrians demonstrated together seeking for… *karama… dignity.*

R.

Yes, he was arrested and humiliated and it was for a small matter. It was in the suburbs of Damascus. A lot of people gathered spontaneously and started speaking about it, well they actually started shouting for dignity and they said that Syrian people should not be humiliated by the regime and so on. And there were many people actually, by the thousands. So the minister of interior actually came to this square and he started telling people "this is shameful as a demonstration, what you're doing" and they were like "No, no it's not really a demonstration".

A.

Laughs. "We're just kidding."

R.

[1] From the 17th of December 2010, the day that Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself, upto the 14th of January 2011 when president Ben Ali left, the uprising which started in Sidi Bouzid essentially spread in the southern regions and the central regions (Gafsa, Sous, Gabes and Kasserine) before moving upwards to the capital of Tunis, embracing Thala, Regueb and then Bizerte and Sfax. Apart from the demonstration on the 27th of December, Tunis only really insurged in the week before the fall of the regime that Tunis, mainly starting from the university and the neighboorhoud of Ettadhamen-Mnihl.

[2] This gathering took place on the 17th of February 2011 in the neighbourhood of Hareeqa in Damascus. About 1500 persons participated.

But it was… a lot of people shared the video and we all saw for the first time that we can do this. Because there were a lot of failed attempts to make demonstrations, there were a lot of failed attempts to actually stand in solidarity in a square with the Tunisian or the Egyptian revolution. The police would come, even during just a silent vigil in solidarity with the other revolutions, and the cops would come. So this was the turning point I think, when people saw that we could do this.

A.

We discovered at that point that we can film and we can share this short videos. But for all people, as there were no activists or no special classes inside the society at that time.

X.

In this manifestation you mean?

A. Yeah, I mean no special classes or activists in this manifestation. After this manifestation, we start to imagine we are all involved in this.

R. There were no leaders.

A. So after that we lived in a situation where a lot of stories took place which were not filmed by anyone. There was a demonstration in a city far away called Hassaka, it is on the border with Turkey. So there were long days of sharing weird, hush-hush stories about protests in far-away cities, about small clandestine groups organizing for a big protest. We were waiting for something to happen, we were very sure something would happen in that month. And at the beginning of March we put another date for our next attempt at a demonstration[3], it was the fifteenth of March.

X.

Another call-out.

A.

Yeah with a specific place, a square in Damascus, and it was not so. there were not so.

R.

There weren't many people[4]. There were a lot of intellectuals, like former prisoners and political prisoners and they arrested a lot of people that day, even they would.. The professor?

A.

Tayyib Tizini.

R.

Yeah he was like I think 70 years old and he's a philosopher and an ex-political prisoner too and they arrested him. It was big news that they arrested a lot of people so they released them in a short period of time. They were very careful at the time as not to add fuel to the already-flaming fire. When they saw that a lot of people took interest in the matter, they released the demonstrators two or three days later.

In a "normal" situation, they would've kept them for at least 5 years or so.

A.

[3] A first call for a Syrian "Day of Rage" was launched for the 4th and 5th of February 2011 in Damascus, but nobody showed up. Security forces on the contrary were very present at the appointment.

[4] In the old city of Damascus around two hundreds persons gathered in response to the call. But thousands of others gathered simultaneously in the cities of Hama (center of the country), Hassakeh (north), Deir al-Zor (east) and Daraa (south). Everywhere demonstrations were violently dispersed by security forces. The *mukhabarat,* the secret police, made several arrests.

The biggest event happened in Daraa, three days later, at the 18th of March. One week before this big demonstration, the secret police in that city arrested ten or more children. They arrested them because they wrote "down with the regime", they wrote a lot of slogans which they picked up from the Egyptian revolution. So after that the secret police and the regime wouldn't release them.

R.

At that time, a story spread like fire across Syria. One that I'm not sure ever happened, but I think the fact that it reached all four corners of the country says something about the events that were unfolding. The parents of the detained children went to the military security branch in Daraa and they demanded the release of their children, and the police told them that they wouldn't do it and that if they (the parents) still needed children they could send down their wives and the police could. you know. I don't know if this is true but I wouldn't be surprised because this is the way of.

A.

This is the mentality of…

R.

So, the 18th of March thousands of people in Daraa took to the streets, they weren't demanding the toppling of the regime, there weren't any demands like this, it's more. They were talking about freedom, talking about dignity, and they were talking about reform actually in the structure of the regime. During the first month we never imagined that we would actually call for… And of course from the first moment they started firing live bullets at the demonstrators. It wasn't that at first they didn't know what to do and then they changed. No they were very direct from the first moment that they would face demonstrations with fire, they never really questioned if they should do this or not, and I think eleven or twelve people were killed the first day of a big demonstration in Syria.

A.

Actually the first day there were four people killed. After that the protesters occupied a mosque, a main mosque at the city[5].

And this is what gave me hope, because this society in Daraa city is so religious, but even with this religious mentality they put leftist songs by an artist called Samih Shkair. He wrote a song immediately after the demonstration, it's called *ya hef.*

R.

What a shame. What a shame that you are killing your own people that are demanding freedom and you, you are responding with fire. And it became very popular very fast, because it directly blamed the regime. Because even at that point there were a lot of people talking: well, is it the regime or is it people infiltrating in demonstrations and shooting at people? But yes, he is a very popular leftist artist and they had no problem with this.

A.

They put him on the speaker of the mosque. It was a revolutionary step.

Pause

A.

[5] The Omari Mosque.

The army surrounded the whole city, after two days, actually the special forces inside the army, known because of their professionalism, the way they use violence.[6]

R.

They are very loyal to the regime, it is a battalion which is known for its loyalty to the regime so they can make sure that no one would defect from the army or anything. Of course the telephone lines, the internet was cut off in this city so no one could actually know what was going on, we just got short clips from people. For example there was one man and there was a tank coming towards him and he was filming and he said: "Come on, kill me, show people what you are doing in my city!". There were only short clips and they were very low quality actually because no one really had professional cameras and telephones and. So, it was the people who were, you know, they were the journalists and the correspondents in that situation, for the war on this day. But if you want to talk about how we organized ourselves, then I think you would be more qualified actually to talk about this.

A.

I am trying to build a background first of all about the media situation, I will stop because it started randomly, it's not. We achieved a point when we realized we should start organizing ourselves, we should start something organized. Because all of the media channels refused to publish this kind of videos, even Al Jazeera, all of the mainstream media actually. There was only one channel actually called Orient, it belongs to a business man, a Syrian business man, who invested his channel in this Syrian revolution for some reason.

R.

Yes it was actually still based in Damascus when he started showing these videos, so then their office was closed and they opened another one in Dubai to continue, I think their office in Damascus got attacked. A.

Yes. So after like one month, there was actually no media coverage, only this one channel and the social media, youtube and facebook. At that time it was quiet in most of the cities, in Damascus and Aleppo it was so quiet, there was nothing happening until April I think. But the third biggest city in Syria which is called Homs joined the revolution.

R.

And there was France 24 which was also showing this videos, and BBC. But Al Ja- zeera and Al-Arabia, which are the two main Arabic speaking or Arabic based channels, they weren't. But BBC and France 24 I remember that I used to watch them and to see what was going on.

A.

It was short, like two minutes.

R.

It didn't make the headlines. It was just. you know.

A.

[6] On the 23th of March 2011, the occupied mosque got attacked by security forces . An unknown number of people were killed duig this attack, numerous people got injured and many got arrested later on after being taken in by hospitals. The following weeks, hundreds of raids took place and hundreds were detained. The 25th of March 2011, a call to a "Friday of Dignity" brings tens of thousands of people to the streets in Daraa. A statue of Hafez al-Assad gets destroyed during the demonstration. Massive demonstrations took equally place in the cities close to Daraa like Jasem, Dael, Inkhil and Sanamayn. In this last city more than twenty people were killed by security forces repressing the demonstration. Thousands of people take the streets in Homs, Hama, Sa- raqeb, Jableh, Amouda, Baniyas, Raqqa, Deir al-Zor, Lattakia, Damascus and Aleppo.

"There is something happening in Syria."

R.

"If you want to know."

Laughing.

A.

We were so disappointed, especially with Al Jazeera, because they aired an intensive coverage of other "Arab Spring" revolutions. They had like 10 hours for Egypt and Tunisia and they just give us like written breaking news. So the situation is, the most powerful weapon we have is the media, it is the most powerful weapon with which we can face the regime, our cameras. Because for some reason we have, we don't believe we can defeat this system just by going to the street and nobody knowing about it. We should use these videos to show the whole world and to call the whole world to defend us. Because we know this regime is so violent, it will kill us at any moment, so if we have a media spot, the regime will calculate this as a new situation, it will not go as far with its violence so we can manage. The first organized group was the media group. Young people cooperated with channels, they made the channels actually, on youtube, and I still remember the first channel, local channel on youtube which was called *Ugarit.* After that we got *Flash* and *Sham.* These were the local groups based on youtube. They were organized, they had correspondents everywhere. They collected movies and made it a little bit.

X.

But these were people who organized together and who knew each other already from before the revolution, or was this something growing in the revolution?

R.

I don't think so because it was across Syria, in different cities so I think people actually. And it was hard because there was no trust, you had to build the trust because anyone could be an informant of the regime. So it took some time but in the end they could form a large group of many correspondents across Syria that could film and edit, they started editing the videos, increasing the quality.

A.

At that moment we were using Skype, but we were using fake names and closed chat rooms, to get to know each other. For example I was living here in Homs, in a certain neighborhood and I had gotten a hold these videos. So there was something like a platform opened called *Ugarit.* We were all involved in this channel. And after we had an alternative platform, like it is a channel but there was no kind of "we know each other as persons". There were no persons actually, only the matter of what we were doing at that time.

X.

You mean that there were no people physically meeting each other, everything happened through skype?

A.

For media, at the earlier part of the revolution, yes there was no physical meeting, except for friends who knew each other, because. This has nothing to do with coordination, managing how we were going to coordinate protests on the streets. But the first organization, the first organized phenomenon in Syria was a media group. And after that the creation of a coordination developed. People dealt with each other in the same city, sharing videos, uploading videos on youtube. After one month of doing this work, it had created some kind of trust between this group so: "OK, let's go and meet in this place and talk about how we can…" And even when we

meet physically we were still afraid of each other. Not really afraid of each other, afraid really there is someone who presents himself as a revolution guy but maybe belongs to the regime. We were afraid of the regime, more than we were afraid of each other. So we decided not to share our real information, everybody knew we were using fake names, nicknames to protect ourselves and this was not a problem. So everyone was working anonymously, but physically at this stage. Especially when we are talking about those cities which don't have a big revolutionary movement, but were building a big movement inside the city. But when we talk about Daraa for example, the revolution has already started inside the city so everyone already knows each other. And Homs, the same situation. And there is a small city called *Salamiyah,* where I came from, it is like the city of atheist *laughs*, secular city. It joined the revolution from the beginning, and this was something which gave us some hope and power because there were ten thousand people on the streets in this city, this city with a population of no more than 100 000 people. So we have an impression from this city protesting and it was a huge number for us at the beginning of the revolution. And besides "freedom" and "dignity" they rise as a *shar…*

R.

Slogan.

A.

Slogan, secular slogans.

X.

For example?

A.

"The religion for God and the nation for all." Something like this. It is kind of diplomatic, but it was good. *Laughs.* hmm… What else, about how we organized, we are talking about how the organization developed during the revolution.

X.

So at one moment the idea grew that there was a need for coordination, did I understand well what you said? Like at which moment this idea was growing and why and how this took form? Or is it too fast, maybe we are not yet at that point.

A.

Ok, there were a lot of local coordination groups, and they made a good job at the beginning of the revolution, and were called.

R.

Local coordination committees.

A.

Local coordination committees actually does not include the majority of coordination groups and they were trying to represent everybody. They put goals, and values to "protect" the revolution from going so radical with religion, or sectarianism.

X.

When did this start to develop more or less? A.

It started from April onwards and they were trying to conjoin all the other coordination groups, virtually or physically but I don't believe that was something based on values or believes, I think it was a political step, for example this council declares a document which said clearly "the revolution seeking for equality for all people regardless religion, gender, nationality etc". And there were a couple of groups inside the council who agreed on paper, but when it came to actions

they did the opposite. After three months, in July, when the violence had risen, something new appeared, which was called…

R.

The Syrian revolution committees.

A.

These committees were controlled by the Brotherhood movement, not officially but under the table, this is how the Muslims brotherhood works.

X.

Syrian Revolution Committees, what was this? A.

It was the alternative of the Local Coordination Committees. Or it is not the alternative, it is like *munafiz…* competition.

R.

Especially when they started to become weaker and weaker because the regime arrested a lot of activists from these committees, the local coordination committees. They were starting to shatter. So that gave the opportunity to the other committees to replace the work that had been done by the local coordination committees.

A.

And these committees had good thoughts, good goals, good values. But they didn't give anything new, a new strategy for example for how we could resist as a civil movement[7]. After the struggle was becoming more complex, more and more and without any solutions, so people were seeking to find another political solution. So it was not just a matter of how the Brotherhood hacked this civil movement, there was a real problem that wasn't solved. So after that we got this phenomena "I can make a council and invite some friends". You know we started to be divided between a lot of groups who wanted to be the center of all these groups. But the main view is that we got two councils, the Syrian Revolution Council and the Local Coordination, local councils because they had a good relationship with the main media channels and other international organizations let's say they got a good support from a couple of factors. In July the politicians started organizing as well, the individual politicians organized and what happened next…

R.

Yes, the Syrian National Council I think this is how it is called.

X.

The one that was outside of Syria?

A.

It is inside and outside.

X.

Like the official representation.

[7] "Civil movement" is the term used by large parts of revolutionary activists in Syria to indicate the popular movement, generally outside [8]of political parties or existing political structures and unarmed. This term allows to distinguish between the "civil" movement and the "military" movement. The military movement will be formed later on, starting from local people who took up arms to defend the demonstrations against security forces. The terms "civil movement", "peaceful resistance" or "civil disobedience" do not seem to imply a total rejection of "violence" as one often understands in Europe. When Syrian revolutionary activists are using these concepts, they embody wild gatherings, massive demonstrations, sit-ins as well as riots, attacks with molotov cocktails, arsons against official buildings, burning barricades. Therefore the distinction seemsto point out the difference between a "military" approach of revolution and a "popular" approach of revolution.

A.

And this is very important because why do people choose to trust politicians instead of trusting the councils which were created during the revolution? People immediately stated to be so motivated about waiting "What's this guy going to do?" and "Who is this politician?". Most of them were educated, highly educated. The discussions in the revolution were about them and how they would make a solution for the whole situation, not what we will make. Our mission at that moment was to go on the street and to do the same thing as we did before. To go to the streets and say "freedom, freedom", get killed and go again. To come with bodies, I don't know how to say… funeral. Funeral, funeral.

R.

We were stuck in a vicious circle kind of, and the reason why people trusted so many councils, so many groups over and over again was because they were looking for a way to get out of this circle, because we were really stuck. Well first of all we don't have any experience, any civil disobedience experience, any political experiences in order to have the tools to inflict change. So what we saw from other Arab revolutions, we did the same thing. But the thing is that the regime we have is very different. It wasn't going to wait you know "These people seem very determined to change the regime, so I'll just leave". No, it wasn't like this, we were faced with violence over and over again and it was actually increasing, not decreasing, with time. So we felt like we were doing the same things and we weren't getting any results. So every time when a group or especially when politicians came into the scene people felt like:"These are political prisoners, ex-political prisoners and they have a political record so maybe they know what to do, because these councils and these civil groups that are being formed don't really have a solution for what is going on". So this is really. People started to loose hope I think, at that time. So they became more willing to put their destiny into the hands of others, no matter who those persons were.

A.

At the same time we developed good skills with media, with filming. So for example in Homs they put a lot of cameras around the neighborhood, filming 24 hours on 24, and this for watching, for controlling actually what the regime would do, in the night, how they would arrest people for example. So we've got a record, a huge record actually about how they arrest people during the night and when it came to streaming, it was this new level on.

X.

Streaming?

A.

Streaming. Streaming is.

R.

The video was live, it was not upload ed after the demonstration, it was during the demonstration that people were seeing it. And we got a lot of help from big news channels like Al Jazeera who started showing, sharing these videos live. Yes and by that time there were a lot of neighborhoods, in Homs for example, that were totally liberated of regime presence, there were only people and they were organizing within themselves food, so it became freer for people, it was safer to…

X.

How did they chase the police from these neighborhoods in Homs?

A.

How did they take them out? With a little bit of violence, with locals who have Kalashnikovs. Something like this. They helped these people, but the main power was the people. When we are talking about Homs, about this neighborhood for example *Baba-Amro,* or *Khaldiyah.* All the people there were going to the street so we've got thousands in the street, ten thousands actually. They occupied the whole city. So the regime was thinking about how it would manage this situation. So the regime left, but not for long actually. This area didn't remain liberated for a long time. We are talking about the civil era.

R.

Yes it was for weeks but then the regime would come back.

A.

Come back with the army, not with police. X.

And you were saying people were organizing food and so on and so on. Can you explain how this was done?

A.

It was based on. Actually the economy. We had kind of a local economy in each city. So all classes in Homs for example they were in solidarity with each other. The rich people did a good job during this period of time, they were giving free food to people during these days.

R.

They kind of collectivized at some point the food and they divided it within each other. But also because these neighborhoods were liberated but at the same time they were surrounded by the army, so they were blocked from. there was sort of a siege around each neighborhood which didn't have any regime presence anymore. So they would organize patrols of people that would leave at night to go and get food and come back and. I know this because I have a lot of friends who were at Homs during that period, even people who left from cities like Aleppo, they went there. They would tell me stories about how they would take advantage of the army sleeping or doing other things and they would go to other places in the city and they would bring stuff, and come back.

A.

And a lot of. For example in Aleppo there was nothing happening, it was a little bit of a quiet city, but there were a lot of people who supported the revolution. They couldn't do anything in Aleppo but they did a lot of support, by food and money, sent it to Daraa, sent it to Homs. But this way doesn't help us on the long term, you know it was a short term solution. It built a kind of bond between cities. Before the revolution, we had a lot of problems between cities.

R.

When we're talking about this time period in July really the biggest thing that happened which shocked everyone was Hama. Because this was the city where the biggest massacre in the history of Syria took place and where 40 000 people were killed in the 80's. But they made a demo in July and a lot of people were killed, so then the *muhafez,* the mayor of the city, he sympathized with the revolution and so he ordered everyone from the army that was in this city not to fire at demonstrations.

A.

To go out of the city.

R.

Yes, he kicked them out. And so the next Friday like 800 000 people were in the demonstration.

X.

Who did he kick out, the army?

R.

Yes, all of the regime officials from the city. There was only the mayor and the civilians of the city. And I think that almost everyone, the children, the old people, everyone really participated in this huge demo and it was on TV. It was the first liberated city of Syria let's say. And so at that time it was mostly only on Friday that people, large amounts of people would go out into the streets but then they started having demos every day. You know these huge carnivals you would say where someone would stand up and sing and everyone would dance and it was amazing. And people started coming from other cities like from Aleppo, where they couldn't demonstrate in their cities so they would go there. And the thing is, although Hama is a bit religious there were a lot of people from different sects and women without veil and they were welcomed. So, it was, I think it was the utopia of the Syrian revolution because everything good about the revolution was there in that square, it was a huge square.

A.

Yes, I still remember in that square we met two guys and one of them was saying:"I am from Hama, I am not radical I am not a real Muslim actually, we are now in Ramadan and I am smoking you know you saw me, I am not." he told me. *Laughs.* So we've got like a stereotype saying that all people in Hama are so religious, so radical and they talk only about god and. But what happened there, I was there, I attended one of those demos and people were in a really great situation, psychologically. Happy, singing, there were no problems. Actually, for sure there were some troubles here and there but the big energy of this demos was like perfect I can say.

R.

Two weeks later, the mayor was invited into the house of the president and he fired him from his job and he put another one. He was really violent…

A.

A soldier.

R.

.very radical. Yes he was a military man, and then the army of course stormed the city of Hama and everything stopped.

A.

There was a famous singer called Kash- oush, he created a lot of.

R.

They were revolutionary songs but at the same time they were mocking the regime, they were trying to. Because it was mostly fear that was the barrier for a lot of people so we used comedy a lot in order to just make the regime seem inferior, that we just shouldn't be scared of them because they are mostly stupid and *[laughs]* something like that.

A.

So when the army occupied Hama they take his. what's this.

R.

They slut his throat. They killed him and they threw him in the river.

A.

This was the end of the civil era of the revolution. This was the first sign of the end.

R.

The beginning of the end.

A.

After that there was the free generals movement.

R.

Yes, generals of the army they defected from the Syrian army and they founded this thing. So it stopped being you know locals defending their neighborhoods and it became more experienced army men.

X.

Can you explain about these locals defending their neighborhoods before we go to the military?

R.

Ok.

A.

Most of the. they declared a mission about what they had to do, the locals. They said "We are here to protect the demonstration. Not to fight the regime. We are here for protection not.for war". So. It was really different from city to city. For example when we are talking about Daraa it was more controlled by the civilians, the demonstration power. More than the military. Because you know, some groups had the power especially when we are talking about weapon power. So they would be more authorized to do and give orders: "We should do this and we should do this". So with this criteria in Daraa for example it was more friendly between the locals that were armed and those who were not armed. In Homs it was different. Because in Daraa the whole society was involved in the same time. There is actually no big difference between the country side and the city. When we are talking about the *Horrani* they had this traditional bond, families and so on so on. And Homs was a little bit different because in that city we have three sects, actually three sects and two religions; Christians, Sunnis and Alawis. So from the beginning of the revolution there was a division.

R.

Laughs. They don't like each other.

A.

At all.

R.

There is a very sectarian hate between the three.

A.

Also we can add to this situation that Homs had a problem between the countryside and the city. So the locals who were armed, most of them were from the countryside. And most of them were people from an area called *Baba-Amro.* This is an area based on traditional society which is called Bedouin.

R.

It is a tribal society.

A.

They trade weapons, I am talking about the past, drugs, and they were already so violent. So they got more power with their attitude. They didn't care about values such as freedom. They have other sort of ideas. it is not acceptable for them to accept freedom as a value. Instead of it they would be more motivated for revenge and fight the regime. This kind of difference in the conflict is based upon which society we are talking about, because Syria is not one society at all. And with this sensitive situation, when we are talking about Homs there are three religions, three sects and a bad relationship between people and everyone who is involved, who had the

most power inside this struggle? Two groups, the regime and the armed locals who were seeking for revenge and fighting the regime, it didn't matter what happened to the city.

R.

But to be perfectly clear, this happened across the board because it wasn't like people organized themselves and decided to hold up arms in order to defend the neighborhoods. In a lot of cases they were people who already had arms and there were a lot of people who chose to stay peaceful and decided not to hold arms. So the power was divided between these two groups. People who had arms felt that they were more powerful, because they were putting their lives in danger more than peaceful demonstrators so they thought they should be in control, they should decide. There were a lot of conflicts between the two, the people who kept holding on to the principles and the values that we set from the start of the revolution which were not about revenge, which wasn't something personal with the regime, which was not something against specifically the Alawites that as a sect were in control of the regime. It's about a better life for all the citizens, for everyone in this country. So there was this conflict between these two and in the end I think when civil demonstrators weren't going anywhere, I think they felt they were stuck, those people were allowed. eum. or had even more power in order to set the course for the rest of the revolution. They said: "Well if peaceful isn't working we should go to arms". And so the people who had different values, who were leaning more towards revenge, who didn't really take part in the revolution from the beginning but who joined afterward when they were fueled by hate and not by. They were not really revolutionary they were just, they had personal matters with the regime that they needed to sort out something like this, so they took over from there, I think.

X.

They were all like this, the people taking up arms?

R.

No, off course not.

A.

I mentioned Daraa. We didn't have this kind of situation in Daraa.

R.

And other places.

A.

We are talking generally actually. It is not the truth that Daraa represents the revolution values and Homs doesn't. No but the situation there was more balanced between a lot of powers, a lot of sources, of values, of.

R.

Yes and off course when, because the regime knows about hate between or conflicts between different sects, different religions in cities where you have different religious groups like Homs, they try to play on this, they try to play this card. Because at the beginning there was everyone, it wasn't homogeneous like after, the demonstration wasn't from a specific sect it was everyone coming together. But afterward, when violence was targeted towards a specific group, when they took Sunni prisoners and they tortured them while they were more indulgent with other sects or religious groups, they tried to fuel hate in between them, to try to turn them against each other.

A.

And officially actually also the consultant of the president showed up at the media and she said: "Here in Syria we have a lot of sects, religions. All people live together in peace and if this will still happen, this situation will be in danger. And we can remember stories from the history

how Sunni killed Alawi." she mentioned a lot of stories about when the regime had no power, no control, the people were going to eat, to fight each other, to kill each other. So it was a kind of warning. They warned us that this would happen. And about this I have justified information from Homs at that time, they killed Alawites, opposition Alawite people, young and politicals, politicians and they made stories about how it was Salafis and jihadis and terrorists who had killed them but actually the secret police had killed them and they, for two months they played this game and the city already they.

R.

There was tension to begin with between themselves. It was easier for people to believe these stories than in other places.

A.

You've got the radical religious people from both sides, they proved these stories, they justified these stories: "This is real, this is who we are. We hate each other".

R.

And the thing is they bombed, they bombed a school in an Alawite's neighborhood, a children's school, and people started saying it was the regime who would benefit from this, that no one would benefit except for the regime from hate between people, turning people against each other. But people would really believe these stories because they'd say:" Why would the regime do this, he belongs to the same sect, so why would he kill his own people?".

A.

It is like an everyday question: "Why would the regime do this?".

R.

Yes but it is true because he was, he tried to commit such atrocities that it would be impossible or unbelievable that people would actually, they couldn't believe that the regime would do this. He tried to go to extremes in order to make it. (intervention of a dog passing by) . So what do you think, what should we talk about now?

X.

We could talk about the military defecting... You have the feeling that all things that were happening, how the things were evolving, there was something in your hands still at that moment or it was slipping out of your hands?

R.

Yes I think so, but at that time we went into reaction, we weren't acting, we were just reacting to what the regime was doing. We lost a lot of the power we had, we lost a lot of the control we had because as time progresses people started loosing the enthusiasm, loosing the energy they had at the beginning of the revolution and they were seeing that a lot of lives had been lost and a lot of blood has been shed and nothing seemed to change, the regime seemed very determined to continue with the policy it had and. I think maybe more people were beginning to sympathize with the revolution and we were becoming more but at the same time there were a lot of people who were leaving. So. Everything was becoming chaotic at that point. We didn't know, we didn't know what to do. And the two main cities, Aleppo and Damascus, seemed too hard. I mean I was there and I remember I blamed a lot the people of my city that they weren't doing anything, because there were only small demonstrations taking place. But the regime was more violent with these cities because it was too afraid that something would happen there because it could loose a lot of support, especially with Damascus being the capital of course, and Aleppo being a very industrialized city with a lot of investments and interests, so if it lost this city the economy

would be destroyed, and this is what happened actually. So what he did was the tribes that are known to be very loyal, that were mostly drug traffickers, they were deployed, they weren't eum. What do you call them? Eum. Like *shabia* we could say. Shabia is, you know they are not officially with the regime but they are paid in order to.

X.

They call it paid thugs in English.

R.

So it was crazy they had knives, and long I don't know, bats, and they would go and it was. I don't know but eum.

A.

At that time we started demos inside of the university and we faced this group of people which was mentioned. It was the start of a student movement and it was so amazing because there were a lot of backgrounds, from a lot of different cities, inside the campus. What happened. We took like one month, struggling, we made a lot of progress with each other, if we are talking about a space coordination. We had a solution for how we could communicate between each other even if we were so different, even if we have different backgrounds, different views about what is this revolution, what is the future of this revolution. We escaped from this struggle between each other. After that eum. I don't know why the regime was a little bit tolerant with us at the beginning, I think to not make a lot of trouble inside the university, you know this is the university, it's students and a big city, and all was so quiet except for this area. So at the beginning we faced the police, official police, they used against us gas, fake bullets. And it was amazing for us, this kind of condition. "Oh, we have gas now we are humans not…" *laughs.* But after that they sent Shabi- aha and it was a bloody night, nobody killed but a lot of students had injuries. Dangerous situation. After that they escalate to violence, they for example they eum… It's not a kind of bomb it's. It's a kind of bomb they throw it inside of the building. And it was a crazy night, the end of this struggle inside the campus.

X.

You were staying the night in the campus as well? You slept there?

A.

I slept at my cousin's room Akheel, we were me and Akheel.

X.

But the students are living there or it was an occupation of the university?

A.

No we were sleeping there, we have rooms, we have beds. We call it the university city.

R.

Because the thing is that it started really early actually. It was the only movement that was going on in Aleppo. Because at the university city of course there are a lot of people who came from other cities which witnessed a lot of demonstrations, they came from Homs and from Daraa and well first of all they were infuriated because the people of Aleppo weren't doing anything to stand in solidarity with their city, but at the same time they wanted to do some-thing so everyone there got together and. it was.

A.

It was fun.

X.

But what was going on? You were doing demos in the campus?

A.

Yes, it's kind of a lot of buildings, its like a neighborhood we could say, there are streets inside the city, without cars. So we occupied, we don't occupy it with… just at the night, six hours each day. So we have bottles, for the police. *Laughs.*

R.

Yes, you threw rocks and.

A.

We threw molotov's, rocks and. We were playing actually, we had a lot of fun. And it was like.

X.

But you were not going to classes, they were no classes going on anymore?

A.

No, at night there were no classes.

X.

Ah, this was at the night, OK.

A.

Yes, at the night. Because in the evening this city was surrounded by police, blocked. There were a lot of parties, groups, the Baath party groups, inside the city. They checked a lot of the identities: "You are from here, from there". They controlled during the evening, but at night there was not a lot of light you know so we could hide there and we could run etc.

X.

And so what did you want to tell about these bombs?

A.

At the end of, at the last day in the university, actually they bombed a building with…eum…BMB?

R.

Oh yes, the smaller tanks, not the big ones. A.

They are called BMB.

R.

It is a medium size tank.

A.

Yes, there was a student thrown from the roof, two students actually. One of them thrown off by the secret police, and the other one was thrown off by the students. He was a student but he was cooperating with the secret police. He was also an Alawite. So they throw him from the roof and the regime used this story to bomb the building, to attack and throw students from the building. Like twenty or thirty students got thrown from the roof. Or people just escaping from the police and they throw themselves from the building. So it was, this last day was a disaster and everybody after. We couldn't do anything because the university was shut down so everyone should travel to their cities.

X.

They closed the university?

R.

No, it was the end of the second semester. X.

But I didn't understand, they threw bombs in the building?

A.

It is a kind of small bomb, it makes gas, but it damaged one floor of this building. It made some damage like whole rooms were destroyed.

X.

And this was the same night they threw all the students from the building?

A.

The last day was the most violent day, yes they threw students from windows and arrested a lot of us, they used white weapons etc. But before this day there was also a familiar violence which happened during the strike I could say the struggle lasted for 4 weeks, the government was tolerant with us just for 3 or 4 days and after that they changed the chief of police and started with a new strategy, eum… what happened during this struggle. During the last weekwe were losing our bond, students seemed more. More violent, no communication, they just regrouped: "We are from Idleb" for example, from this city.

X.

Because of what the regime was doing the people were.. ?

A.

Yes because of the news we received, it was so violent about what happened in Idlib, what happened in Homs, what happened in. So, people started shouting to each other: "You don't do enough in your city!". Like this, and off course if someone from another sect, if someone is not Sunni, or especially if someone is Alawi, they will never talk to him, or they were trying to protect themselves from him. Also there were reasons for this. Because what happened also we got an Alawist group working with the secret police, armed with weapons, making patrols during the night. So everything we were working on, the bond, the values, no matter what was the background, collapsed. And it was such a huge loss. *Sings.* This is the end.

R.

So you see all the civil movements, all the revolutionary movements that were created at the beginning of the revolution were being destroyed at the same time period you could say, in different cities, in the university which was very important also. So yes, people started becoming more hesitant, asking themselves if this was the right way, are we doing the right thing, should we look for other means of fighting the regime. This is where we started thinking of an armed struggle, and not a peaceful struggle.

Second Part

R.

Earlier demands of the revolution. In the case of Daraa for example one of the problems was that -following an international environmental agreement- the government banned drilling water wells in the city. This isn't a bad bill in itself, except for the fact that Daraa is an agricultural city with no other sources of water. The government never supported the farmers or provided new means of irrigation, especially since a severe drought had hit the area. Bribery became omnipresent in the city. Some farmers would pay the secret intelligence or the mayor a couple million Syrian Lira to drill a well. This created a huge problem for the locals who began to gradually loose their main source of income. Add to this the issue of youths being detained in the city and you get the perfect recipe for a revolutionary hub.

A.

After that the people were seeking for demands, not to change the regime, they were seeking for a negotiation with the regime. I can refer to the paper that was made by this council of Horan families. There are ten points: about the release of the children, to fire the mayor of Horan, let people make wells inside of their lands, kind of demands like this. So actually we are not talking about revolution but we are talking about social movements. Before this, the social movement was dead in Syria, there was nothing actually happening, no one made demands, no one spoke up, people just lived their lives with shitty conditions. So we think it is an important moment to use and transform it into revolution. I still remember my friends from Horan inside the university, they told me: "Look, this is not revolution. This is something special between us and the state. You Aleppian, you rest of Syrian people, you don't have anything to do with this issue. Don't drag us into what you are thinking about." It is not the majority of Horan, not the majority of Horan is like that but the official speech of this city was like this: "It is not revolution. It is some conflict between us and the city and we will solve it as soon as possible". Could you continue from this point?

R.

Are we talking about how at the beginning of the revolution the demands were not really revolutionary as much as it was for social reform, or? Is this what you are talking about?

A.

Yes, exactly. It wasn't a revolution, it was. We noticed that we were alive now, that we could do something, we could demand, we could protest. But it was not revolution. Until April, the 18th of April, the morning when the main square in Homs was occupied. At night, the secret police *(mukhabarat* in Syrian) blockaded the square and gave people half an hour to empty it completely. Those who chose not to leave were killed, all of them. We still don't know exactly how many. Hundreds! It was a Monday.

R.

The next Friday, people demonstrated under the name "The Good Friday".

A.

It was Easter. It was like a message: "We are not racist, we are not just Sunni's. We consider this day as a national day. On the other hand online, in the virtual world, the revolution began with a specific date, the 15th of March, I am talking here about the virtual world. At the beginning the names of the Fridays were national, revolutionary names that did not divide people or categorize them by distinct identities. After that they had begun to give Islamic names with radical Islamic concepts like jihadist and stuff like this. So, with the Good Friday, we. Like most of the country, even Aleppo, Damascus, were involved in this Friday and went into the street to protest against the regime and in Homs at that point they demanded the downfall of the regime. This was the biggest moment of. Now, it's so serious! *Laughs.* Homs became the center of the struggle. Homs because it was the responsible city for this demand, we accept what Homs went through, we as other cities. So this request moved from Homs to all the rest of the country. All the people now don't demand to make some kind of reform with the regime, now we know that the regime will never listen to us, it will never reform or make any promise. So at this point we say: "The Syrian media is lying, the regime is lying, we cannot trust the regime".

X.

I think, was it you who explained this point before, like that there was always a new center. Maybe you can explain it again because…

R.

OK, eum… OK, so like A said, the first demands to topple the regime were in Homs and after that there were huge demonstrations taking place in Homs and whole neighborhoods that got, that were liberated from regime presence, there were only the civilians living there and self-managing the whole neighborhood. So we felt like Homs took a central role in the revolution because they made the largest sacrifices, a lot of people were killed there, they were organizing large demos, they were trying to even. I don't know, you could say there were a lot of activities taking place there. At the beginning there weren't many cities involved in the struggle still so we felt like Homs was the center, the central city in the struggle. So everyone was talking about Homs, Homs was like the capital of the revolution for a long time. So every time the regime would enter the city and reoccupy a neighborhood that had been liberated, we would feel like a part of the revolution was being lost, we'd feel very disappointed, we'd feel conquered by the regime, that we became weaker. And this is because we put such high hopes on a specific city and we really gave them more responsibility than we should have, I mean no-one should hold such a huge responsibility on their shoulders.

A.

But also not just us.

R.

Yes, but them also not.

A.

No, also not just them. We are talking about media too, we're talking about Al Jazeera, they focused on this city and they made stars like Khaled Abu Salah, like… What's he called? Goal-keeper?

R.

Al-Sarout.

A.

Al-Sarout, yes. We've got like stars from this city, revolution stars from this city.

R.

And the thing that happened was people in Homs started at some point exaggerating what they were doing, even exaggerating the number, the toll number of people who actually died in order to keep this role that they are the ones who sacrifice themselves, they are the capital of the revolution, in order to keep up with this title that has been given to them. They actually fabricated a lot of news and this cost the revolution to loose a lot of credibility in the eyes of even other Syrians who were hesitant about joining the revolution or not. Because they saw the regime lying but also the opposition, so they are not really that different from them. And this is what happened, different areas like even small villages in Homs (Qusayr) were opposing for months and they kept resisting and this village also became a star and everyone was like: "They will never fall and we will keep struggling", even people who aren't really there, you know. And actually the regime did conquer it because of course it has many, many more soldiers and more weapons and everything. The whole revolution lost, instead of everyone trying to organize within themselves and standing in solidarity with this city or with that village and saying even if this village, even if we lost here we are still strong there and we can keep going. It is not, the revolution is not Homs, the revolution is everyone. We didn't do this, we were always very emotional, which was the negative side. We were always sad, always felt like we were being, we aren't going anywhere, like the regime was too strong and we couldn't keep up with what it is doing to everyone. So, centralizing the revolution in specific areas of Syria has really cost us a lot on many levels. On the level of credibility, on the support that we got from others who aren't involved, and even the sentiment and the energy we had towards the revolution because with each failure we felt weaker and weaker to the point that we felt that we didn't have anymore energy, that we didn't have any strength, that perhaps we couldn't fight the regime, maybe it was a mistake to begin with…

A.

Yes, this is true. And we never made a plan to go and occupy Damascus, which is the most important city. If we had occupied Damascus and made a lot of trouble in Damascus, that would have been a huge damage for the regime, more than in other cities. So people preferred to go with their villages, with their cities, to say to other cities or to say to other people: "We are here, we support you". To make solidarity with other cities you know, rather than to focus on what was the goal of this protest, what was the goal of this demonstration. Yes, I understand, it was important to be in one's own village, or in one's own streets, in one's own neighborhood to say what you want to say but we needed these people in a specific place, not in their own place because it was not helpful for the revolution to make demand in theses villages. So what happened at the beginning of the revolution, the revolution was civic, without weapons, without power. There were a lot of villages, for example we have a village like Albedaa (which means the white), we know about what happened there. The intelligence forces went there and they arrested the whole village, the whole village, we are talking about hundreds of people. They arrested them and started to humiliate them and torture them, treat them like animals, and they took them to what we call the *black hole*. We didn't know anything about them until one month later, because of a brave man who appeared in a film. He filmed himself: "This is my name, I am from this village. What happened in this village is this and this".

R.

Yes because they. Well I think what was really important was that the police or, well they are all police to me, they were stepping actually on the bodies of people. They were on the ground and they were stepping on them, and what they were saying was: "You want freedom ha! This is

for freedom", and they would step on them. So what really was infuriating the regime was this: that the the regime felt it has subjugated people to the point that is was impossible for them to imagine a different kind of world, a different kind of.

A.

Yes, and this is also what made the situation more religious. Because in these videos they don't just say to people: "You want freedom ha", they say: "Say Bashar Al Assad is your god". And this made the situation more radical religious, for people to defend: "No fuck you Bashar Al Assad, Allah is my god. I don't pray, just for Allah", so on, so on.

R.

When the video was aired on TV stations, the regime denied it happened in Syria and they said it happened in Iraq when the American army was occupying.

A.

No it was not the American army actually, Peshmerga.

R.

Ah, Peshmerga. So one of the people whose face was shown in the video, he went out on camera and he said: "My name is this and I was there and this happened in Syria". This was. Because for the first time you could see someone from the incident who came out to speak and to confirm what happened.

A.

And it was really brave what he did in that period. Because one day after that they arrested him and until now he is still in prison, we don't know anything about him… I mentioned about why don't we go to Damascus instead of protesting in our villages, in our countryside small cities. There were only two attempts to occupy Damascus, made on the countryside of Damascus. For example what happened in Cairo, it was not just the population of the people of Cairo who were protesting in Tahrir square, all Egypt was there. All Egypt came from the countryside, from far away cities to Cairo to protest in Tahrir square. And that never happened in our case. A lot of people went to Hama for example but we didn't have any plan to go and occupy Damascus.

R.

I don't know why.

A.

And that cost us a lot. If we were focusing on Damascus instead of dividing our powers in the whole country and call for help. People in Daraa they shout for: "Where are you Aleppo, where are you Damascus, where are you Tartus". And people made invitations through demonstrations. We imagined that the whole country should protest at the same time. And it was a really hard task. We were not organized enough, we had hard conditions, the regime was violent, so the goal we put in our imagination to protest in the main squares in the whole country at the same time, it was kind of dreamy and not realistic at all.

X.

But, like just to make it a bit more clear. First we are talking about the mistake of centralizing the struggle and then we talk about how we all have to go to Damascus. But this would also be a centralization of the struggle no?

A.

Yeah, it is kind of centralized but it would be understandable, for me. If we destroy Damascus. *Laughs.* The whole regime would be destroyed. But the regime has no interest in Homs and it

already destroyed it, but it will never do this in Damascus because it is the main point of power for the regime.

R.

And there is something else because a lot of these demonstrations that were taking place across Syria, were taking place in areas which had no regime presence anymore. So people were just, it was becoming a tradition that every Friday or every day people would go in the street and demonstrate but nothing was going from there. They weren't building on this, they were just repeating the same thing and what we are saying is if these people and all of us really came up with a plan to occupy a quiet city, a still city, like Damascus at the time, it would have cost, even if we didn't demonstrate if just a lot of people would go there because they weren't going to stop people from entering the city they don't know. If a huge number of people would have just gone there, they would have been just walking around the streets without doing anything. If we had just came up with other means of struggle, other than demos because either it wasn't working because people were just getting killed and then repeating the same thing over and over again, or it was already dead. I mean if we are demonstrating for the regime to leave this city to go somewhere else we've done this already so we aren't putting anything at risk, we are just repeating the same thing. So instead of this we should have come up with a different way of fighting the regime, in its castle, in Damascus, or even in Aleppo if people would just go to a big city where we had a lot of problems of media coverage, it would be a shock to the regime because it would never imagine that cities, big cities like Aleppo or Damascus would revolt. But if people were demonstrating in small villages, in small cities that didn't have regime presence anymore, if they just had moved to another big city and they would there… Because first of all it would shock the regime and second of all other people would see. Because these people were really afraid, no one would go into the streets and demonstrate, they were sitting at home and they were hesitant to join or not to join, to support the regime or not. But if they saw people in the streets, even if they are not from the same city as theirs, demonstrating they would see: "These are civilians", that they don't have arms. A lot of the regime's propaganda and lies would be uncovered because they would see with their own eyes what is going on. But we didn't, we were stuck in this, in this cycle.

A.

Instead of blaming. Because we are stuck on blaming Aleppo and Damascus. People just for example Homsian, this people of Homs blame a lot Aleppo: where are the people, where is the support of Aleppo. And that has enforced a couple of ideas about localized movement, and you are responsible for your city, if I am from Aleppo I am responsible for what will happen in Aleppo. So they don't consider me as a friend, as a comrade of this revolution, they will blame me for my failure to make this city move in solidarity with the other cities. Instead of doing this, come to Aleppo and let's do something here. It is not my city, just forget these fucking ideas like *my city,* it's stupid, fucking cities, the whole country is for us, so let's. It is still these kind of walls like "I am from Aleppo and you are from Idlib, you…". And that enforces this idea and people were becoming so proud about "Ah, I am from Homs!". Also, about centralizing the struggle in Homs, my cousins, I have cousins they are not from Homs but they started to say: "I am from Homs." *Laughs.* Really, it's like that. We have a village that belongs to the Assad family which is called Alqerdaha, so anyone who wants to make an authority on people he will say I am from Alqerdaha and the other man would be very afraid of him. So it became like this. "I am from this village, in this village you know we are…".

R.

Yes, it is a tribal mentality I think. No one felt like we had a common enemy and this would abolish all the walls we have, all the barriers and the sense of belonging to certain groups that have discrimination against another group. We always felt constrained by these affiliations. So this is, if we are talking about the civil struggle, the peaceful struggle at the beginning of the revolution this is what really was holding us back from getting to the next level, from innovating new means to fight the regime, new tools and not just to keep using the same ones when we saw that even if it had effect it was a little effect and it was very slow, it was slower than we imagined. Because the thing is that when we saw the Egyptian and the Tunisian revolutions we thought that it would be that easy: if we could just get to a square and occupy it and people would see that we were peaceful that we didn't have any weapons and that the regime keeps killing us and keeps bombing us and everything, the whole world would stand with us and the regime would be in such a shame that it would leave. But it wasn't like that. Firstly it was very hard to do that and second of all this may have worked on a short term but as time progressed and violence escalated and we had never changed our tools… Because I don't think we knew what else to do. We didn't have any former experience in the matter to help get us out of this hole that we had dug ourselves into. Because we had this preconceived picture of what everything would be like and when the things that happened didn't meet our expectations, we didn't change anything. And this is where I think everything started to collapse.

A.

Yes, also when the Libyan revolution started and the NATO decision was adopted… Eum… The new flag rose in the name of the Syrian revolution, and it was not a decision of… You know they start people and one of them, we start with that talk like: "This flag, old flag, is the Arabian flag. Because it is the flag of the Arab united nation between Syria and Egypt, which was declared by Jamar Abdel Nasser, so it is not the Syrian flag, we should use the Syrian flag and this is a historical fact. We should change our flag". What a silly thing we were discussing, why did we put another struggle in this society.

R.

Because we were failing and the…

A.

Because we were thinking to generate the same thing as in Libya. Because the same thing happened in Libya, they had two flags, the green one and the old one. So we wanted to simulate the conditions and after one week we were seeking for NATO and we called this Friday…

R.

Foreign intervention. Yes, after what happened in Libya, we started thinking that a foreign intervention in Syria was possible, before we didn't. And so we thought if we are failing on a local level maybe a foreign intervention could solve our problems. That the regime was too violent, too strong for us but maybe if… you know the western countries and America if they could come with their big drones and they would drop bombs and the regime would leave.

A.

Laughs. Now we are seeking for, also in the demonstrations we are seeking for a help from the Islamic world, from the arab world, and we created such a thing like "Where are you, Muslims?". We made an official invitation for Muslims to come here and declare jihad.

R.

Yeah and when they did…

A.

And when they did, they said: “Fuck you Muslims. Get out of our country.”

R.

Yes and even when we’re being subjugated under different names and with different types. When the Free Syrian Army entered the city of Aleppo[1] and people were start ing to criticize its wrong doings and were saying that they are doing this, they are doing that and it’s not good and that they should change their behavior, we tried to communicate with them and then people are stating: “And what are you doing, they are putting their lives at risk to save you and what are you…”, so people started becoming like the lovers of other dictators, under other names but they returned to their old selves when they accepted that people would treat them in a… You know as slaves that don’t have an opinion, that don’t have freedom to decide. Just because… I don’t know.

A.

Because: “They didn’t take enough risk. They didn’t risk their life. So you have no right if you are in *safety.*”

R.

Between brackets.

A.

Yes, it became like this: if you have a gun and you fight the regime you have a right to make decisions, but if you are not holding these guns you should be so careful about your words and what you are saying about the Free Syrian Army. We should be kind of respectful about these guys, what they are doing, they risk their lives, so you should respect them. What I was talking about we should belong to each other and if they made something wrong we should say it to them: “You are making mistakes here”. It doesn’t mean we hate them or we don’t respect them, it is not a matter of something personal between us, it is a matter of the whole country and the whole revolution. I belong to this revolution and I put risk to belong to this revolution. I don’t need to prove my beliefs and to go and fight with guns, it is not your business to talk to me like this.

R.

They were starting to create new classes. While at some point we were on the same level, we were all comrades in the revolution and we were all the same, then it became people who had arms, and people who didn’t. People who demonstrated, people who made strikes, people who stood in solidarity with the revolution but never really did anything. But at some point we started becoming divided: the class of activists who were going to do I don’t know what and the class of humanitarian workers and the class of the Free Syrian Army, and everyone has this persona generalized, like the Free Syrian Army shouldn’t be criticized because they were doing this and this and the activists are doing that. And each group started developing these biases, the in-group bias favoring its own group and against other groups. These rumors started being created and every group started hating the others. I don’t know.

A.

We are talking about the collapse of the revolution now.

[1] At its starting point commanded by former officers of the regime and composed of several brigades, the FSA was formed in July 2011. They enter Aleppo on the 20th of July 2011, taking over the southern and western neighboorhouds of the city. Battles with the army and its reinforcements (tanks, helicopters, airplaines) started from the 28th of July. From December 2012 onwards, the regular demonstrations start criticizing the Free Syrian Army and protest against its abuses.

R.

Yes, this is it. When we had a common struggle, a big common struggle that united us and we were fighting for it, when we felt that we were loosing we started having these pitiful small things that we wanted to win. Like I am an activist and I want to win this sort of thing, I want to prove that my group is better than the other group because we weren't really succeeding on a bigger level. So we started just inventing this conflicts between each other in order to feel that we are doing something, like the flag for example. It would never have been a conflict if we weren't really feeling like we are loosing.

A.

Laughs. But it is fucking revolution, what the fuck are you talking about.

X.

Were there different propositions for flags? I don't really understand what was the conflict about this flag, not everybody agreed to change the flag?

A.

Yes, not all people agreed about changing the flag. But the idea behind it, I don't like. I was one of the supporters to change this flag. Because, when I think about it, yes fuck this flag, this flag is fucking racist Arabian flag and the old flag was you know good for everybody, Kurdish for example they don't have any problem with the green flag, the red one is a nationalist flag. So logically it is right you know. When you take it historically, to change the flag, the old flag is more representative for all groups in Syria. But the other flag represents the ideology of Ba'ath and Arabist party so… But it wasn't like this.

People who supported the other flag, the majority of these people that supported change, they supported it because of what happened in Libya, in the Libyan revolution. This caused a new conflict between them, between the same groups. At a specific period of time you'll have enough problems to deal with, and now you bring another problem that divides the people, the groups who support the flag and… So this is my point about the flag.

R.

Because at the end flags are very national symbols to everyone, to every Syrian person. I think I never really cared because I don't give a shit about flags, I mean I think it's just a colored piece of cloth, but to a lot of people it is a symbol. So even to the supporters of the regime or people who were in between felt like these people, the demonstrators or whatever, they are trying to separate themselves from us and it is true what he regime is saying that they don't care about Syria, they want to destroy this country because they are messing with the most nationalist symbol of all Syria, the flag. People even started talking about aesthetics, about how this flag is better looking than the other flag, so why change it? And there were a lot of stupid arguments being made and this allowed the regime to spread its propaganda about how, because people don't really read history, about how the revolution flag was the flag of the French colonization of Syria. And people actually believed this and so more and more rumors were spreading about how these people are trying to destroy the country. This helps the regime because it divided people even more than they already were. It created two countries I think or people fighting amongst each other. "Why did you have to do this?" and I don't know how to explain it because when we were inside the struggle we became very defensive like: "You know what you are saying about this flag is wrong, it has nothing to do with France, it was actually from after France left and this and that". And we shouldn't have, I mean it is a stupid conflict that…

A.

Yes, those are fake arguments, it's a fake struggle.

R.

So you see how something really small can end up…

A.

And people started hating the old flag, they even took it from…

R.

They started burning it.

A.

Yes. And now you don't remember about how we bring this flag inside Hama square. Because during the revolution people took the red flag and there was no problem with it and they treated it as holy flag. *Laughs.* But this changed.

R.

What's next?

A.

Compromises. As which group.

R.

Who are we?

A.

OK, like at the beginning of the revolution there were limited the religious slogans. We just accept "Allahu akbar", we're cool.

R.

It wasn't at the beginning.

A.

"Allahu akbar" was at he beginning. Also it was the key in for example Aleppo, when we wanted to start a demonstration, there was a special man who said "Allahu akbar!" and he would run. *Laughs.* This was his mission, you just shout "Allahu akbar!" as loud as you can and you run. So it is OK, but it was not the main slogan, so people just said it at the start of the demonstration to say: "we are here". And it was okay until then but what was happening after is that people started to change all the slogans which have to do with freedom, dignity and economist issues and the demands of what we want were replaced by religious slogans. Like: "Our leader forever is Mohammed and he is the leader of our revolution". OK great, now we loose *laughs* christian and a lot of atheists for this revolution. And a lot of friends started to talk with me: "Now you became a Sunni, we thought you are atheist what happened to your values, you are supporting these people saying this kind of shit?". I was trying to explain: "No, they are not mean, they are emotional, they are under the pressure of violence" and it was true. People started to talk about this religious things after violence escalated, after the regime started to challenge the holy god of Islam. So the army wrote on the walls "Our god is Bashar Al Assad and you should pray to Bashar Al Assad". We got so many videos during the revolution of someone being tortured and they say to him: "Pray to your god!". And they put a picture from Bashar Al Assad, and this drives people to be more religious and more and more and more…

X.

It is a strategy?

A.

Yes, off course it was a strategy. They used this already before, in the 80s, in Hama, they used the same way and this is the same methodology of the regime, and we knew this, but what can we

do with this situation? How can we react? We felt if we just keep standing beside the people and go with them and say the same shit they say and after that we will make discussions with them: "OK, let's be more logical people, let's calm down and think about what the regime is trying to do with us". But actually the task was much harder than what we can do about it. This videos… we started to… if we can stop these videos to be in hands of people.

X.

These videos of people being tortured?

A.

Yes, but it was impossible because Al Ja- zeera and Al Arabia where showing them on a large media scale.

R.

They were also part of this because their policy, their strategy was actually to accentuate how other sects and other religions weren't taking enough participation in the revolution. How it was a kind of Sunni revolution and how the regime is a sectarian Alawite regime and it's not that he's indiscriminately trying to kill anyone that stabs in his back, no it was systematic to target specific groups. And they were funding more religious groups, with arms, with money. And they were trying to play on this card because it is really Sunni, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, well they are the Sunni branch of the power in this scale so they were helping the regime in this game really.

A.

And also the regime started to bomb the mosques and humiliate how Muslims pray. For example there are a lot of videos… So it became, the struggle became Sunni against the whole country and this is the majority of the country so they could have controlled the whole country.

R.

But I really don't know which part of it was our fault and which part of it was…

A.

But it's not…

R.

This what happened, I mean can we blame ourselves for what happened or can we just say that the regime was smarter than us maybe, or he had more resources.

A.

No, we could say… It was not just what happened during the revolution that made the whole thing like this. We've got a history of this. We've got a history with this that started four or five centuries ago. We have this situation between the sects and even if we are not talking in a historical context, we could just take it from what happened in Aleppo and Hama in the 80s. And the example of the power the Alawite accent had in Syria, because when you talk with an Alawite accent in Syria, you have the power of the accent you know. You could terrify a person. So the conditions are ready for it to be a civil war, and the regime with all its power, with the help of other countries like Saudi and Turkey and Qatar with their media. We resisted for four months and I think we did great. Four months it was a great thing to do. Because it is weird to imagine a successful revolution with these conditions. We've got like 5% to succeed and we take the rest to…

R.

It wasn't conscious but yes OK. But yeah, we talked about this before that all this hate between the components of the Syrian society was repressed and when it finally came up it turned into a civil war because it is the only way to… So people think that: "Why don't we just go back?",

people are really just tired and want to go back to a place in the time before 2011, to a time when everything was peaceful and all… But the thing is it wasn't peaceful, it was just on hold, it was just put on hold and eventually it would have exploded if not in 2011 then in 2015 but it was going to explode because it is not normal for people to hold so much hate and to be in such bad conditions and not to act on it, not to manifest their hate and these negative feelings they have towards each other. So maybe at the beginning people were idealizing the situation, idealizing the revolution that we are standing together now and this regime is affecting all of us negatively the same way, we are all poor, we are all repressed and persecuted and we can't express ourselves, we can't do anything, so we should stand together in order to conquer it. But then, many factors played a role but eventually people stopped looking at the regime, they started looking at each other and realized: we have unfinished business with each other and now we have the opportunity to act on this. Yes actually like A said I think everything was going to be like this sooner or later because we don't really have a chance with so much…

A.

Even M *(anarchist comrade)* he said to me one time: "I can't believe you, listen to his accent! It is, you know, the revolution we are talking about! I love you!" *Laughs.* M was so surprised by listening to an Alawite accent talking against the regime. Not because he is racist or something but because it is really weird you know. It is a fact, the majority of Alawites they support the regime. For a reason, of course.

R.

Yes, but the thing is that you can't explain that when they are being targeted, when they are being killed. Are you going to sit down with them and explain the social-economic conditions the Alawite community is being put through, that create the conditions for them to act in this specific way, that it has been a strategy for the last 50 years, since Hafez Al Assad, purposely putting this community in the corner, in order for them to act exactly this? Because some of them yes they benefit from the regime, but the majority they don't. They are just convinced that the regime is protecting them because before the Ba'ath party took over they were a really persecuted minority when the Sunni, the majority, were in power let's say, they were mocked, they were put down and they were marginalized. So when the Alawite president took over they felt like now everything will change, now we will stop being in this position. And yes, the accent, a lot of things changed for them, in the end it wasn't really… The majority of these people remained living in distant villages where they have no electricity, where they are really poor, but still they defended the regime. This is what he did, created a human shield, by really convincing, really convincing a large number of people that everyone around them wants to kill them, wants to eat them, that unless he stays in power they will be obliterated. You can't explain this to people, they won't listen to you. What others see is an Alawite defending the same regime that is trying to kill him, so they see the supporters of the regime as just as guilty as the regime itself and so sectarianism started to grow stronger and stronger and we couldn't do anything to stop it, we couldn't be logical with people because everything was so emotional, just can't just sit down and explain it to anyone.

X.

The other day you said that in the beginning you would have had more chance to bring forward our ideas. Do you think this would have made a difference? In what sense do you regret that you didn't do this or is it just a consideration?

R.

Yes, I regret we never took this as an opportunity, an unprecedented one and maybe it would never happen again for tens of years, an opportunity for change on all levels, not just on a political level. We restricted our demands with a list, even if it was unconsciously: "We want this and this and this… And maybe if the regime leaves we'll have the chance to change a lot of things". But we were so restricted by the demands we had in our minds, to the point that we didn't really think that people now for the first time they are willing to change, they are not afraid to change, because change is really scary sometimes, but that this was exactly the time to express our ideas and discuss them with people and to see, to understand our society because we had been so isolated. I feel we had a really preconceived and very distorted image of what the Syrian society was in its core. But we lacked the experience, we lacked… I don't know. Maybe it's just, it's hindsight, you know when you are confronted with a situation but then things pass and you think about it and you think: "Why did I do this?" and it is so clear, but at the time it wasn't. There were a lot of things going on and we couldn't really have a clear image of what we wanted and what we should do. But still I think if we had done this, it would have changed a lot of things, it would have at least gave us more time, more unity to sort these things out, to think them out between each other, not just between closed groups in different cities. We could have all sit together and talked about it, not just each group developing its own ideas which were really isolated from the rest of the scene which was then going in a different direction.

A.

Let's take a break!

Third Part

R.

I am going to talk about the humanitarian issue now. I was just thinking I should give some context about why this thing happened, because in July 2012 the Free Syrian Army entered Aleppo from the countryside. In almost three days they occupied a number of neighborhoods in the city, neighborhoods which are mostly close to the countryside but it was big neighborhoods with a large number of people. So of course the regime's response was to bomb the neighborhoods immediately and thousands of people were displaced and came to the other half of the western side of Aleppo. This is why we talk about the eastern side and the western side because the western side remained mostly unoccupied by the Free Army forces, it was occupied by the regime and the other side under their control so there are always conflicts between the two. So it was summer and they (the displaced people) came to the government buildings like schools and other government facilities that were empty at the time. And immediately, I don't know how these things got organized so quickly but it was crazy because in a matter of two days hundreds of people came to clean the schools and prepare them with… We took out the desks and everything, to make enough space. And everyone started working at the schools, we were divided into school systems, every school had staff that was working there mostly. And we did classes, you know school classes, and we were feeding all these people with contributions that were coming from other people living in Aleppo. Of course we were also working before that happened because there were refugees coming from Homs and other places far away from Aleppo, but never at such a large scale because there were now thousands of people leaving their neighborhoods and coming to schools. So as time progressed, there were more and more, what would I call them, people who used to be active in the revolution, who… When the Free Syrian Army entered the city, all the activities stopped, from magazines, every, you know revolutionary outlet no matter what it is, it stopped, and all the people active at that time became humanitarian workers. They started working in schools, n'importe quoi.

X.

Why did all the activities stop?

R.

Well, I think… First of all because the neighborhoods that the Free Syrian Army occupied were the same neighborhoods that we would usually demonstrate in, and they were being bombed and the people were leaving. So the Free Syrian Army kind of blocked the only neighborhoods that we could be active in. And at the same time there were a lot of changes going on, even most of the people we were working with on the magazine, a lot of them used to live in these neighborhoods, so they moved and the groups got a little broken. And the fact that they had no other thing to do made them kind of move into the humanitarian aid. What can I say? There weren't any discussions being held at that time, everyone was trying to focus on sparing these people, the suffering that they have or they endured and how we can help them not to feel like they are displaced. There were a lot of small theater acts and we showed them movies sometimes.

But everything headed in that direction, we stopped everything we were doing, everything was on hold.

A.

But theater acts, like what?

R.

Like there were three people who used to work with puppets and things.

A.

Ah, you mean for children?

R.

Yes.

A.

And movies, like?

R.

Actually M was someone who occupied that position, so it were mostly cartoons. Mostly for children, no one really thought about… Yes, and there were doctors there also. But… I left shortly afterward, so… I don't know what happened exactly later but…

A.

I just wanted to add something here about when the Free Army entered the city. They didn't take any responsibility about the people's safety. Or they didn't alert people to leave this area because they would occupy it, at least. They just entered the city and they changed the whole situation so now we should, as a civilian movement, we should now deal with the humanitarian issues, regardless what we were working on before, like magazines or demonstrations or whatever thing we were doing, so the whole city was hanged.

R.

They were occupying civilian neighborhoods and they knew what the consequences were going to be, the regime doesn't really care about… anything really…

A.

Everybody was happy, we are talking about activists, demonstrators. Because the first day, Z told me about it, all the security were in their bases, hiding in their bases.

X.

What security?

A.

Intelligence forces, police. So it was like, you know, there is no police in the street. I don't know why I mentioned this but I think this situation just makes that people don't blame the Free Syrian Army, I am talking about demonstrators, they don't blame them.

R.

They were the saviors at that time. I don't know if this is worth mentioning but when we were working at the schools I saw a lot of my old friends who used to support the regime actually, but they came to these schools to work. They took this as a humanitarian non-biased territory where they can come and work together.

A.

And the church was involved in this.

R.

Yes off course. There was a monastery, they were the organized ones that were working on this before this happened in Aleppo, with displaced people from other cities.

A.

But all the food was sent by this organization?

R.

No, these were contributions mostly. A lot of people would buy bread and sometimes send money. Especially that it was Ramadan at that time when the Free Syrian Army entered the city. But it was crazy, the people that were displaced, sometimes they thought that you worked for them.

I remember, because in Ramadan most of the shops are closed until very late at night. And one person came and he said that he wanted shampoo, no he said that he wanted hair gel actually. And I tried not to scream at him but I really couldn't: "Why are you asking me for hair gel or what should I do now? *Demand and supply, you supply here.* What do you what me to do?". *Laughs.* But I think it sucked the life out of people who were active before in the revolution. We were starting to see this, because we were starting to see atrocities being committed by the others, by the other army. And I don't know, we stopped seeing the revolution from how we used to see it, it was becoming more of a humanitarian kind of thing. It was the situation we were put in: you could sit home and do nothing, because you couldn't do what you used to do, or you would come here and work with people who were suffering, and becoming Mother Theresa you know, becoming this and listening to stories about how people… And I'm not saying it's, because we didn't go through this, but sometimes when this is all you are getting, all you are hearing, this affects how you see the revolution. It becomes misery when it used to be work and energy and everything. Then I couldn't see how I am doing anything. I felt like I was just handling the consequences of what was going on, I wasn't changing anything, I had no effect, I was like a straw in the ocean. So I left. I left Syria. And on the way I saw for the first time the countryside of Aleppo, which was destroyed. I never visited these areas before. And then on the borders a Free Syrian Army patrol stopped us, they wanted our passports. So my father, my father was with me and he gave my passport to him. So he was checking the passport and he said: "Why are you giving me her passport, she is a woman". This is the last scene I had in Syria and it was so ugly to actually witness that really this is what all of this has let to, this is how you say goodbye you know, to me. The guy from the Free Syrian Army battalion he told my father: "Why are you giving me her passport, she is a girl.". He meant that he shouldn't look at a woman's face.

A.

It's kind of religious.

R.

Kind of?

A.

Yes, it is a mix between religious and psychopath.

R.

Laughs Where do we go from here?

A.

On the other side… This story…

X.

Do you know what you want to talk about?

A.

About the magazine.

X.

OK.

A.

So, the idea was to create some platforms to work on, on a cultural base: to write something, to record some songs, make some art, so on and so on. We had three ideas: magazine, radio and music band. We started with the magazine, we were six; five males and one female, at the beginning. The female was not R. *Laughs.* We didn't have any skills about how we could make a magazine, we didn't have any background about how we could write an article. So we decided to just write an introduction page, and the other articles we collected them from writers we talked to through facebook. So we weren't so interested by the content, especially with the first issue. Of course we put some filters and criteria to the topics but we didn't focus on this thing. Instead we were focusing on how many issues we will print and how we could distribute them. We didn't have a network to communicate with so we started to look for people, we didn't know them except from skype. The whole situation was so dangerous, there is nothing to stand on and we took this decision, and printed the magazine. So when we succeeded with the first issue, it was like a dream you know. With the second issue we focused more than before, I started to write, Z also and R2. So in the second issue we got four articles from our group and another four articles from the social network. So it was developed like this, and in the third one I got two articles, Z also, and it is: now I know what I am doing inside the magazine, A also, A2. All the group of *Tamarod* (name of magazine, *Rebel)* had specific missions to achieve, so we became a group, a real group, organized and… but… we failed to continue this project. For a lot of reasons, one of them was that it was hard to continue at the same rhythm and we didn't prepare ourselves to print one issue every ten days, every ten days we should print something new. For that we got an alternative solution, so we started not focusing just on printing the magazine. We started to print posters and going at the night and put posters on the walls.

X.

What was written on these posters?

A.

For example we met a girl on facebook, she is a digital designer and we asked her to design something about kalashnikov and the violence and the non violence too, or the acceptable violence, the alternative violence we would say. So she designed a photo that showed a woman…

R.

It was a pinup actually, it was a pinup right?

A.

What? Pinup?

R.

Pinup, the ones, the American ones.

A.

"If you don't have a kalashnikov, you could use molotov.", it was written.

R.

"Switch to molotov."

A.

With a tutorial how you make a kalashnikov.

R.

Molotov.

A.

Molotov.

Laughing.

X.

To come back to the magazine, how did you distribute it?

A.

For example, we knew someone who worked in the coordination and he had an access to this area, let's say he had an access to 100 persons. So we would give him let's say 25 issues (our standard was 1 issue for 4 persons) and so on so on. We just had a circle of persons working on the countryside, working in a neighborhood. We'd give to someone and this person would give to three or four others, and these four would give… Like this.

X.

Did you get a lot of feedback on the magazine?

A.

Yes actually. And the facebook page was a little bit active with comments and shares and it was a little bit famous in this time period.

X.

In the region of Aleppo or also outside of it? A.

Especially in the region of Aleppo, but we printed one issue in Daraa, distributed also dozens of issues in Salamiya, but mostly on the countryside and the city of Aleppo. There was like a link between us and other magazines in other cities. So, we printed another magazine for them inside Aleppo and distributed it for them and they did the same thing for us. So it was like this: we don't have anybody in Daraa but we wanted to give some messages to Daraa for example so we could print something there.

R.

There was a lot of cooperation between different magazines, and a lot of magazines in different areas of Syria would exchange their newspapers and distribute it to the maximum amount of people possible.

A.

Yes and also we built a cross connection between each other. It was like we built a syndicate for magazines.

R.

Because a lot of magazines were being established in different places. We had a lot of, because I worked in alternative media - the website -, a lot of them were actually quite good. I mean, maybe their strategy was very different from Rebel magazine but they had interesting ideas.

A.

Yeah. … But we were the best one. *Laughs.* X.

You didn't talk about the radio yet.

A.

Yes, we recorded, we started with one program.

X.

On the internet?

A.

No actually we were just recording, we were preparing some substance to start with it. So we were just recording to achieve let's say five hours and start with five hours streaming, and after that we continue like this, that was the plan. But what happened, it was very difficult. We

succeeded in recording 40 minutes actually. Because of the problem in the group. You know you have a lot of activities now, you have a radio activity, a magazine activity, a singing activity, and… We succeeded with the magazine and in the beginning it was so new, we should try again and again and at some point it becomes a little boring kind of something you have to do. On the other hand, the musician band, it was fun because they had the chance to go to one of the most famous villages in the countryside of Aleppo which would become the capital of the Free Syrian Army. Just I am trying to remember the name of the village, (Mare) Okay, no, it doesn't matter. But people there they were so conservative, and most of the songs were kind of leftist or you could say communist, because the singer he used to be a communist and after that he had a lot of leftist ideas, so. It is not acceptable to sing that kind of songs in that place. But it worked. For some reason it didn't bother people and they would listen to them and everything was fine for the group and it was kind of an achievement and so we started to think about how we should be prepared for when we would occupy the main square in Aleppo, the musician band should be better than every musician *laughs* that is inside this. And they started to work more to develop the musician band so, there was no singer professional one, it was just the group who was singing together. So we started to make an invitation and make interviews … *laughs…* for singers. To test their voices and something like that. *Laughs.* It was so funny to begin with this project because we met a lot of people, and we tried a lot of different types of music. I wrote two songs, but silly ones, just mocking with the situation. The musician band was released three months after the magazine and it had like 10 or 12 songs. Yes, at the end of the project we made only one issue outside of Syria. We tried to, maybe it could work, but the whole motivation and the power we had got clashed because we got all the power from people you know, people gave us feedback, not just on the virtual life, we needed a physical contact with people, we printed and distributed around the countryside and in the city, and when we left all that disappeared. So, all of us recognized that there is no meaning from doing anything with the magazine anymore. Especially there was no source of money like we got in Syria because there we were in our homes, our families were supporting us. And now we needed to get a job and take care of our basic needs. So most of us were thinking about how we could deal with these new conditions. This with managing the magazine, but we failed this mission. So we decided to stop with all this work and we looked for a new solution and we looked for a new meaning for this magazine, to not let this magazine get hanged. And I don't know, maybe in the future we could continue this magazine. It means a lot to me because most of my memories, my revolution memories are connected to this magazine. … But I should correct this, the plan was to make the magazine to be like every 15 days, or maximum 1 month, but what was happening. For example I got arrested or somebody got injured or would have an exceptional situation and should now deal with it, so there was no, you know, rhythm, a stable rhythm to this magazine, it was kind of a problem because people would think it is just one number and it is gone, and then after three months "O, it's the second number". You should build a stable relation with the readers, not every randomly "okay now…". It was crazy like this…

X.

You still want to add something?

A.

No

Afterword

I met A. in 2013, on a travel in Egypt. He stranded in Cairo, as did so many Syrians during Morsi's rule. I met him and some of the comrades with whom he created the *Tamarrod* magazine. Their travel continued afterwards. Some years in Turkey and then from Greece on towards Western Europe, the infamous refugee route.

M, a Syrian comrade who had been living in exile in Egypt for years and participated in the Syrian revolution as a surgeon, brought me into contact with this group. We spent some evenings together, looking for a quiet spot in ever burstling Cairo. Accompanied by Mo, an Egyptian revolutionary, we sat along the river Nile, or drank some beer in cafe *Hurriya.*

We talked about cultural expressions such as movies and literature, and about revolution. Off course. All was about revolution in those days, all conversations leaded towards that beloved topic. Even if massacre was on its way to Egypt, the battle against Morsi was full on. Even if barrel bombs were dropping on Syria, there I was sitting with these comrades who made me *feel* what their revolution was all about.

It is a strange thing, to come into contact with people living a revolution, and it blew me off. I met people so *different* from the ones I knew. And I am certainly not talking about *cultural differences.* I'm referring to an *etat d'esprit,* so wide, so open, so full of fervent vibration, experiencing something I could only grasp before loosing it again.

I got convinced that the most beautiful thing about revolution are its people. Its people who are ready to defend it, to discuss it, and above all *to live it.*

Thinking about Egypt still makes one nostalgic, as leaving it has made me lovesick. Going back the reality of pacified democracy felt like waking up from a dream full of torny roses. As love can catch you and change your view upon the world surrounding you, so does revolution. And it does the job in a thoroughly profound way. You can't compare it, but somehow you can. The pain accompanied by a lost case, is like the pain of a love lost.

So getting back to Europe I missed the people of the revolution, their passion and love for change. Their desire for change which was not a placid theoretical one, but a real experience that goes beyond limits of which one cannot imagine what will be there to find. I missed their vividness, their urgent interest of exchanging ideas and confronting views. And their openness towards them.

The Syrian comrades told me about the magazine they created back home and about the printer stuck in a war zone. Explained me about their will to continue the project once arrived in Turkey. They told me many stories if which I understood not even halve, and were very attentive and interested in what I had to say.

They were fully aware that the world didn't give a fuck about the Syrian revolution. Many revolutionaries in Egypt turned away from expressing solidarity with the Syrian revolution since Islamic involvement became clear. European anarchists didn't take up their responsibility as revolutionaries in this case *at all.* Let's say it was a revolution too easy to not care about, because:

"too hard to understand" and "Islamist not revolutionary", or "it's a civil war let's forget about it" and "I will not get involved in humanitarian aid".

For my part I felt ashamed. It's not that we didn't try to express our solidarity with the Syrian revolution back home, but I needed to admit to myself that I hadn't had the *courage* to really open up the Syrian chapter of the revolution book. The many images of mutilated and murdered bodies, of bombarded children and tortured elderly which one could come across in European cities, spread by Syrians living abroad, blocked me. The image created was one of defeat, of mass murder, of atrocity, and nothing else. It lacked *the other side of the coin.*

Therefore I wasn't incited to search for the story beyond death and so my solidarity towards the Syrian revolution had been a shallow one, lacking depth and a true attempt at understanding.

But the Syrian comrades attracted my attention, yes it was a question of *feeling,* and since this was the case it became an impossible task for me to warm up people back home for this cause. But I searched for the powerful story of this revolution, the story that will forever remain inaccessible for the one's not willing to know, for the one's not willing to make the effort.

A. told me in Cairo that "the one who wants to know about the Syrian revolution will find his answers.". And it is true.

Are you willing to learn? To meet with a world of magic and tragic? To leave racist prejudices behind? Because the Syrian story will forever remain a closed book for the one who is fed by fear of loosing the grip on their fixed frames to interpret the world. To led go of these anchors for a moment and watch the difficult reality full of conflict and contradictions. To be able to watch it without pre-constructed moral judgements or idealized views upon *what the fuck is revolution.*

Because revolution is contradiction. Revolution is an ongoing fight between different currents. It is a conflict between reaction and whoever wants to push the revolution further and further, beyond any limits known to humankind. Revolution is not a clean story, something which we can only *believe* if we read holy books or seek for holiness in the books we read.

So we need to make the effort. The effort not only for the Syrian revolution, but for revolution in general. It's an effort of sitting together, gathering the necessary information, analysing, making the necessary contacts and deciding upon what to do. But not only. First and foremost it is an effort at mental openness. An effort at leaving the "revolutionary" *I know everything-arrogance* behind. A preliminary condition without which we cannot even *start* imagining a project.

The Syrian revolution is an underestimated revolution. Revolutionaries elsewhere have not lost many hours of sleep thinking or acting in solidarity with the events. More generally we can say there is a huge lack of courage for confronting one's self to this *thing* revolutionaries pretend to desire: revolution.

A lack of courage and a certain laziness. Because yes, it takes an effort to understand. A big effort, and one can always easily say that "my own context" is more press ing, or more easy to understand. Thereby we can forget about what is going on, and read books about it in the years to come. To discuss about it in twenty years time, when all is dead, and we can sigh together that revolution is always on the loosing side. And we can dream about revolution, without even realizing that what we are able to dream is *nothing* in comparison to what Syrians have lived.

We can invent purified versions of the conflicts which will never help us at living them, since we will always find some excuses as to why this conflict doesn't meet up to our expectations of a purely antiauthoritarian revolt. Anarchists are somehow relics of a world passed away, holding onto the past, getting lost in the present, not knowing how to confront dream with reality, preferring to dream than to create. Anarchists are dreamers, an undeniable and necessary quality if

one wants to storm the existent, but as well one that can make an individual by moments utterly incapable of intervening because the dreams seem too unreachable and so why would it matter to even try? But our dreams and ideas are not there to be protected in its purity for days more beautiful to come. They are there to be used in order to destroy this world of chains today.

At last I wanted to say that revolution is not a matter of scales, and points and evaluations saying:"O, this one it lacked point number five and seven. And this one is my favourite.". We are not at school. Revolution is a striving, always difficult, always beautiful and passionate and equally cruel and devastating. There are no objective criteria to decide upon "What is a revolution?". We will leave this question to history teachers. Because revolution is a givenness, when it's going on it is going on. Let's please *stop* this crap of deciding upon whether these were revolutions or not. Because if we are not able to acknowledge they *are* we will be able only to stand in solidarity with history books and love the teacher instead of the living revolutionary. And we can forget about getting to what it is we have to do: to act in solidarity. To search for ways of giving blows to reaction. To understand what is going on and the games power is playing, in order to know how to attack the world we are living in. I am convinced that the current situation in Syria and elsewhere is partly due to the lack of revolutionaries mental courage to put one's self at the side of the courageous revolutionary not wind but storm, in "the Arab world". And we need to reflect upon this.

The interview with our comrades R and A is a contribution to the discussion about how we could organize to make connections between fights taking place in different contexts, realizing we are living in the same world, are living the same oppression and that the struggle against it needs to be an international one. Our reality is much more closer to the Syrian one than we often realize. The current militarization on European soil and its borders as well as the recuperation of negating forces by Islamic tendencies give us the cruel proof of it. But that is food for another text.

I, as others, have been looking for ways of expressing solidarity with the different revolutions taking place. The lack of comrades willing to act makes it a task difficult to bear once the revolutions are shattered into blood, prison and reaction. Once we need to be tough and persistent, knowing why we do it even if it's not easy nor magnificent.

This interview offers an anarchist perspective on a revolution lived by comrades of ours. In Syria as elsewhere, anarchists try to forge their way in the tumult of the present. So let's continue our attempts, get more intelligent and leave the ready-made answers behind. Let's discuss, let's look at the events from an internationalist perspective. Let's do the necessary effort, fearless and without prejudices. As is revolution.

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