The Hama Revolt of 2011: An Eyewitness Account

Maria Minkara, University of Ottawa

A year ago, one would never have imagined that the Syrian people would rise up, take to the streets and chant for the demise of Bashar al-Asad’s Ba’thi regime. In recent years, the government had entrenched the idea that the fall of Asad’s rule would produce the kind of chaos that which the world has witnessed in Iraq since the American invasion in 2003. As a result, a social contract emerged between the regime and the people, which entailed that the Syrian people would give up their freedoms in exchange for stability and security. Yet on January 26, 2011, an unthinkable phenomenon erupted in Syria--an anti-government protest. The people took the anger and frustration they had endured over the past 40 years and chanted for the first time in public, “Al Sha’ab Yurid Iskat Al Nitham” or the “People want to topple the regime”. This article attempts to give insight into the events I witnessed, and the attitudes of the people I encountered, on a visit to Hama between July 7 and July 11, 2011.

On Thursday, July 7, I entered Syria from Areeda in Northern Lebanon. Upon arrival at the Syrian border, procedures were carried out as usual but the army and security apparatus appeared unusually suspicious and asked an unconventional number of questions about where we were coming from, the purpose of our visit, how long we intended to be there, and most important, where and with whom we were going to reside. None of this startled me, for Syria has been known for the meticulousness of its security apparatus. Upon leaving the customs building, though, one particular image stunned me: it was a picture of Bashar al-Asad that was embroidered with a highly offensive statement. The writing on the picture said: “Mahal il Assad ma bi doos ihna mnirka’a o min boos” or in other words “we kneel and kiss the places that Assad sets his foot”. Such remarks are highly provocative in a nation ruled by an Alawite minority.
Moreover, many conservative Muslims may find this to imply that Bashar al-Asad is a divine being.

Upon our departure from the border, and on the way to Hama, there were around seven checkpoints, at which each car and the individuals inside were carefully examined and questioned. As we arrived at the entrance of the city, we were greeted by a familiar roundabout that was missing a vital component, the grandiose statue of President Hafiz al-Asad. Protesters had managed to coerce the security services into dismantling the statue, and upon doing so, they scurried to replace it with a donkey on June 19, 2011.\(^1\)

This donkey was only one of the creative tactics that the opposition employed in order to assault the dignity of a dictator who was long perceived to be stripping Syrians of their dignity, a problem which one could easily identify as a main force driving the protesters. When one of the residents in Hama was asked why they had replaced the statue of the former president with a donkey, he smirked and responded that Bashar al-Asad is not a lion like his name indicated but is instead a donkey, which also happens to mean fool or idiot in Arabic. This incident was only the first of a series of creative assaults on the dignity of the Assad regime that I witnessed.

That same day, after al-Isha prayer, the final prayer of the day for Muslims, protesters took to the streets to express their views of the regime. Various chants were heard echoing around the historical center like “leave, leave, oh Bashar. Freedom is now at the doors” or in Arabic “\textit{irhal, irhal ya Bashar. Al Hurriya saret ’al bwab}”. In a more humiliating chant, the youth chanted “\textit{Maktoob ala il ganasa, Bashar immo ra’asa}” or in other words “written on the rifles, Bashar’s


\(^2\) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ7DEi1T6b8
mother is a dancer”. Chants of this sort are considered a grave insult in Syrian society, as dancers are ultimately metaphors for promiscuous. Moreover, any insult to an individual’s mother is considered of utmost offense.

On July 8, 2011, Robert Ford, the American Ambassador to Syria, grabbed the attention of the international community with his unexpected visit to Hama. More unexpected, however, was the warm greeting that he received from the residents. Ford was welcomed by protesters carrying olive branches to signify their peaceful intentions, flowers to celebrate his presence in support of the revolutionaries, and random chants for “freedom” or “hurriyeh”, and “karamah” or dignity and “karamah aw moot” or “dignity or death”. The protest that took place that Friday took shape after the mid-day prayers, when men were joined by a small number of women in the central square, known as al-Assi Square or “Sa7at il Assi”. During these demonstrations, protesters chanted and sang anti-regime songs, and displayed various banners with their views of the regime. Following the president’s, notorious speech, which alleged that armed gangs and foreign conspirators were the “germs” that had spread unrest around the nation, signs flooded Hama that stated: “Syrian germs demand a new doctor”. Some of these banners even took the form of advertisements for local anti-bacterial agents. This was a witty attempt to refute the speech and demand the president’s ouster in a humorous manner.

The most intriguing part of the revolt is the amount of unity, planning and organization that was prevalent during the protests. Neighborhoods were completely controlled by their inhabitants. The security of the neighborhoods was ensured by groups of men who resided in the respective neighborhood and took turns watching over the residents. The residents utilized bricks and old pipes to construct security barriers that allowed them to control who entered and left the area. Housewives united and combined their resources to cook food and share it with family and friends. Local neighborhood checkpoints were set up to ensure that only actual inhabitants of the
area could enter, and prevent the infiltration of the secret police. Young people communicated verbally with one another to co-ordinate meeting locations for the creation of banners and various chants for the protests. The ability of the residents to unite in such a fashion prompted many to consider Hama a city that was liberated from the Ba'th and its security apparatus. People referred to Hama as “madina muharara” or a liberated city.

The protests appear to have sparked a sense of national pride and unity in people who were formerly captivated by the fear the regime had embedded in their souls. The uprising has shown how residents became immune to the politics of fear that had suppressed them. They are now working together to plan protests, and risking their lives to take to the streets and speak their minds. It is, however, imperative to question certain aspects of this revolution. For example: what sparked the emergence of such a highly organized and courageous protest movement in a tightly controlled security state? When one resident was asked why he continued to protest despite the death and bloodshed he had witnessed, he responded that members of society had crossed a line of no return and that if their efforts to topple the regime came to a halt, they would surely be killed. He voiced a strong preference to be killed protesting for freedom, rather than to die without dignity at the hands of a regime that was infamous for slaughtering the people of Hama in 1982.

The 1982 massacre remains deeply engrained in the memories of the people of Hama. For years, the memory of that event kept residents fearful of speaking out against the regime, but now they are defying threats of death to speak their minds. The only visible remnant of the massacre is the opposition’s total rejection of taking up arms. While observing the protests, it became evident that the protesters had gotten creative in choosing the tools they needed to protect themselves against the security services. The protesters resorted to using old pipes that were loaded with fireworks
whenever they found themselves cornered. Fireworks appeared to be useful defensive weapons, as they emit loud sounds and are thus effective at dispersing crowds.

When members of the protest group were asked why they were vehemently opposed to arming themselves, the general response was that they did not want to give the government an excuse to repeat the atrocities of 1982. They instead preferred to show the world the willingness of the regime to commit abhorrent crimes, even against unarmed protestors. One man tragically responded by saying, “You know the story of the donkey in Homs?” “No,” I replied. He proceeded, “There was a donkey in Homs that someone spray painted the name Bashar on, and the donkey was seen roaming around the city.” “Yes” I nodded. “Well, the security services looked and looked until they found the donkey and they killed it, then they proceeded to kill the men and women in the streets of Homs, just like they did the donkey.” The most tragic part of the conversation was that the man had acknowledged that in the eyes of the regime anyone who objected to al-Asad’s rule was equated with an animal and was considered unworthy to live.

There are some imperative questions that must be answered in light of the Syrian revolt. Firstly, there needs to be more understanding of the event that represented the tipping point of Syrian society. What was it that pushed Hama from being traumatized by the massacre of 1982 to becoming immune to fear and defying the security services with such ferocity? More important, research is required to understand the parties that are funding the protests. In all of June and July, shops in Hama opened inconsistently for a period of some ten days. This is problematic because most businesses are small, privately owned shops. So how then are they funding the protests? Also, during the largest protests, which take place in the afternoon after the Friday prayer, trucks could be seen dispensing food, water, and drinks to protesters. Research needs to be carried out to identify the individuals who are funding and organizing such initiatives.
Maria Minkara is a graduate student at the University of Ottawa.