

# Welcome to Free Syria

Saturday 8 December 2012, by [GOPAL Anand](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2012).

Abu Malek was pacing back and forth in the hospital parking lot, muttering to himself and firing off phone calls. "Don't say 'How are you' to me," he told one caller, "because I am not fine, I am very, very, very, very bad." The hospital was in the Turkish town of Antakya, and the staff was treating several rebels who had been wounded in the fighting across the border in Syria, about ten miles away. The Syrian army was in the midst of a major offensive, sweeping through one northern town after another with tanks and heavy artillery, trying to kill as many rebel fighters as possible before April 12, when a ceasefire brokered by former U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan would go into effect. The revolution had been grinding on for more than a year, and as many as 10,000 people had died already.

From Turkey, Malek had followed events closely and stayed in contact with his family in the northern town of Taftanaz. (Malek's name and those of some of the people mentioned in this article have been changed.) Soon after he learned that the army had surrounded Taftanaz, phone lines were cut, so he sent a friend to retrieve his family. The friend returned with the news that Malek's mother was missing, his cousins were missing, and his house had been razed.

The government had lost control of Taftanaz near the start of the revolution, and an intricate system of popularly elected councils called tansiqiyat had been created over the past year- "like mini parliaments, a government for us," as Malek put it. He had been chosen to represent Taftanaz in Turkey, where he raised funds and cultivated contacts with the international community. He was proud of the rebel councils-they were proof that Syria did not need President Bashar al- Assad-but he worried that the other council members had been captured or killed.

Malek agreed to help me get to Taftanaz, but he demanded information in return: "I want to know if my family survived-and I want to know if my revolution survived."

Traveling with me from the Turkish border to Taftanaz was Wassim Omar, an acquaintance of Malek's whom I would see several times during the week I spent in Syria. He had access to a network of revolutionaries along the way, almost all of them friends he had made during the uprising. Our driver avoided the highway and hopscotched from village to village along back roads; with the mobile-phone system disabled, it was impossible to know about troop movements and the location of army checkpoints.

Omar had been studying Arabic literature at Aleppo University before the revolution began. Now he traveled between Turkey and Syria often, smuggling rebel propaganda and supplies. This was his first trip back over the border since reports of the army's campaign in Taftanaz had reached Antakya.

The roads were empty, and in the tiny mountain towns the shops stood shuttered and padlocked. The rebels once maintained checkpoints openly in daylight, but now they confined their activity to the nighttime. "If you could have seen this place before the fighting," Omar told me. "It was alive."

We had yet to come across any villages touched by violence. But then, as we pulled into the town of Killi, about ten miles south of the border, we saw a multistory granite house with a collapsed roof,

yawning holes in its façade, and rubble everywhere. Omar gasped.

According to locals, Syrian aircraft had circled overhead for days, taking reconnaissance photos as almost all civilians and rebels fled the village. Then, on April 6-four days before we arrived-tanks came and fired from close range at this house and more than a dozen others. Soldiers had a list of those who had gone to protests or were involved in the rebel movement, and they went from house to house hunting them. Because most of the townspeople had left, however, there were very few arrests or casualties.

On the outskirts of Killi, I found one of those who had stayed behind. Nizar Abdo lived in a housing complex built around a central courtyard. When the soldiers arrived, Abdo hid in a neighbor's house. He watched through the shutters as a tank wheeled in front of his property, took aim, and fired. Afterward soldiers bulldozed the remains.

Standing where his house had once been, Abdo admitted that he had attended a few protests during the start of the revolution. He said he had never been political; more basic frustrations drove him: "You have to pay money to get a job, otherwise the government won't help. . . . You have to pay bribes."

Now homeless, he was unsure where he would go. But, embittered as he was, he still tried to see an upside. "At least," he said, "we aren't Taftanaz."

The 15,000 residents of Taftanaz are mostly farmers and traders: rows of olive trees stretch outward in every direction, although in recent years drought has browned patches of them. The town is typical of northern Syria; there are dozens like it nearby, an archipelago of villages known for their Babylonian cuneiform tablets and preserved sections of Roman road. Life there is slow, conservative, and pious.

Since Hafez al- Assad took power in 1970, Syria has been ruled by an alliance between Assad's mainly Alawite military and wealthy Sunni businessmen from the cities. The government provides food subsidies, jobs programs, and funds for rural development for the people of places like Taftanaz, but in return demands absolute fealty. Businesses favored by the regime win no-bid and below-market contracts, creating what Syria scholar Bassam Haddad called "a crony capitalist state par excellence."

When Bashar al- Assad became president after his father's death in 2000, he tried to liberalize the country's economy. The government eased price controls on basic goods like fertilizer and animal feed. It reduced subsidies to the oil sector, leading to a 42 percent jump in the price of fuel. Meanwhile, a vicious drought dried up the countryside, prompting thousands to flee to provincial towns like Homs and Idlib, or to smaller communities like Taftanaz, which did not have the capacity to absorb the influx.

"There were no jobs, and if you found one, you had to see the mukhabarat," the secret police, for permission to work, Omar said. "If you wanted to buy a house or travel outside the country, you needed to see them." Office workers moonlighted as cab drivers. Farmers doubled as scrap dealers. In every corner of society, but especially in the countryside, the social contract holding the Assad regime together was failing.

On March 6, 2011, a group of adolescent boys, inspired by the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, painted antigovernment graffiti on walls in the desert town of Daraa. After word spread that the boys had been arrested, Daraa's streets filled with protesters. In Binnish, a few miles down the highway from Taftanaz, Omar and his friends watched the news in amazement. Later that week,

fifteen of them gathered late at night at a mosque to plan a protest, making signs with anti-regime slogans.

The following day, they stepped into the town's main square for the first protest of their lives. Omar was terrified: he knew the price of his actions would be imprisonment, and that the regime could target his family. But, to his surprise, the people of Binnish joined in. They came from all over town, shouting, "Daraa, we are with you! We in Binnish are with you!"

By April 2011, demonstrations were popping up all across the country. The Syrian army tried to cut them down, firing on and killing scores of civilians, only to inspire further protests. The mukhabarat, meanwhile, targeted the core activists in each town. One afternoon, agents showed up at Omar's door. "They treated me like a toy, throwing me here and there," he recalled. He said he was kept in captivity for two months, frequently strapped to a gurney, electrocuted, and beaten. A general finally released Omar after he promised to stay away from politics. When he left prison, he went straight to a demonstration.

Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, the Syrian elite remained glued together in the face of the protests. But the conscript army started to buckle, and some soldiers found they could not fire on their countrymen. I had met one of them in Turkey, a twenty-seven-year old named Abdullah Awdeh. He was serving in the elite 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, which put down protests around the country, when one day he was directed to confront demonstrators near Homs. Their commander said that the protesters were armed terrorists, but when Awdeh arrived he saw only men and women with their families: boys perched atop their fathers' shoulders, girls with their faces painted in the colors of the Syrian flag, mothers waving banners. He decided to desert.

By June 2011, there were hundreds like him; nearly every day, another uniformed soldier faced a camera, held up his military identity card, and professed support for the revolution for the entire world to see on YouTube. These deserters joined what came to be known as the Free Syrian Army. (When I met some of them just after I crossed the border, they told me, "Welcome to Free Syria.") Awdeh, with his aviator sunglasses and Dolce & Gabbana jeans, assumed command of a group of nearly a hundred fighters.

Many activists worried about the militarization of the conflict, which pulled peaceful protesters into a confrontation with a powerful army that they could not defeat. But in small towns like Taftanaz, where government soldiers had repeatedly put down demonstrations with gunfire and thrown activists in prison, desperation trumped long-term strategy. Abu Malek likened the actions of the rebels to those of a mother: "She may seem innocent, but try to take away her children and how will she act? Like a criminal animal. That's what we are being reduced to, in order to defend our families and our villages."

In Taftanaz, fighters from the FSA started protecting demonstrations, quietly standing in the back and watching for mukhabarat. For the first time, the balance of power shifted in favor of the revolution, so much so that government forces could no longer operate openly. Party officials and secret agents vanished, leaving the town to govern itself.

This created new problems: courts stopped working, trash piled high on the streets, and the police stayed home. To fill the vacuum, citizens came together to elect councils- farmers formed their own, as did merchants, laborers, teachers, students, health-care workers, judges, engineers, and the unemployed. In some cases, the councils merged with pre-existing activist networks called local coordinating committees. They in turn chose delegates to sit on a citywide council, which in Taftanaz and surrounding towns was the only form of government the citizenry recognized.

Syrian authorities repeatedly sent tanks in to Taftanaz and neighboring villages, targeting the new council members. After every intrusion, the rebels would reassemble. But on April 3, the Syrian forces returned to Taftanaz, this time to end the insurgency there once and for all.

When I reached Taftanaz on April 9, the air in the town stank of manure, hay, and gunpowder. The smell of smoke grew more powerful near houses, and once inside you found your eyes watering and your throat burning. Many of the locals who were left had taken to wearing surgical masks. Every fourth or fifth house was completely destroyed; many of those still standing had black streaks climbing outward from the window frames. Boys were scrubbing graffiti off the walls: *assad*, or the country burns, signed by the *assad* death brigade 76.

For three days I explored the gutted town, speaking to everyone I could about the battle. I spent my nights in a neighboring village-government soldiers conducted raids in the evening- but each day I returned to learn more.

On the first day, I sought out Abu Malek's relatives-almost everyone knew him-and found Abdullah Rami, a young man with sunken cheeks and a hard stare. He had been a university student, but "the revolution makes choices for you," he said, and now he was a rebel sniper. He described for me what had happened on April 3.

It began early in the morning, when helicopters appeared above Taftanaz and fired into the town center. Then, around 7:00 a.m., the mortars started. (A farmer named Muhammad Abdul Haseeb was at home at the time. "I got all the children and women together and ran out," he told me later. "One of the shells dropped really close by, but I couldn't see where it hit. Later I learned that it killed my brother.")

Most of the residents escaped. By around 9:00 a.m., tanks had arrived at the outskirts of town, and they shot at anything that moved. A plump forty-six-year-old man named Massous had loaded dozens of relatives into his truck and was about to turn onto the main highway when he saw a tank about a thousand feet away. It fired and hit his truck, killing his father and mother and injuring his ten-year-old daughter. Around the same time, nearly a hundred men gathered inside a house near the town's center to decide whether to retreat, as rebels elsewhere had done, or stay and fight. A few dozen chose the former, but most stayed. "We didn't want to end up like other cities, crawling back after the army leaves," Rami said. "Our neighbors needed something to believe in."

As the army shelled the town, the men spread throughout the warren of low-slung concrete buildings, onto rooftops, into homes, and through alleyways. Rami went to the main road through town and helped bury I.E.D.'s, most of them assembled in Turkey and smuggled Photograph of a young man walking past burned cars, into the country, and rebels hid nearby with the detonators.

Around noon, a tank approached the building where Rami was hiding. A second pulled up alongside it and swung its turret slowly around. Then Rami heard a deafening boom and saw the tank pop up in the air-an I.E.D. explosion, which he had captured on video and later showed off proudly. After a few minutes, the second tank was also struck as it tried to retreat.

Across town, another rebel group was in a firefight, and Rami could hear the reports from their Kalashnikovs. The rebels used civilian houses as cover and, at one point, trapped soldiers in an alleyway and shot them all. By late afternoon, though, the advantage had shifted to the army. Soldiers left their tanks to circumvent the I.E.D.'s and fought their way to the center of town. They surrounded a house full of rebels, a few of whom climbed to the roof to signal surrender. The troops responded with heavy fire, killing almost everyone inside and out.

By sunset, soldiers returned to their tanks or were billeted in homes (both sides, lacking night-vision goggles, avoided fighting after dark). The rebels regrouped in a house on the town's edge. There Rami learned that his brother had been killed.

A short while later, his mother sent word to him that soldiers had found the shelter where Taftanaz's women were hiding. They threatened to take revenge on the women if the fight continued. Dejected and cornered, the men voted to retreat. By sunrise, there were no rebels left.

Saleh Ghazal, a member of Taftanaz's large Ghazal clan, was a stubborn man. After a sniper's bullet struck his grandson Muhammad, a medical volunteer who had tended to wounded fighters, his family decided to flee. But the old man insisted on staying behind. He would mourn in his own way, he said, in the home he had grown old in, in the town his grandson had died for. And besides, he figured, the army would have no interest in an eightytwo- year-old.

On the morning of April 4, soldiers from the 76<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade returned to town. They came with officials from the Military Intelligence Directorate and armed Alawite civilians referred to as shabeeha. When soldiers burst through Saleh Ghazal's front door, he hid upstairs in his bedroom. They raced from room to room, shouting out the names of his family members, loudly enough for neighbors to hear. When they found Ghazal, they shot him, then lit his corpse on fire. As it burned, they went downstairs and wrote a message on the wall in silver paint: nobody controls syria except bashar. Then they doused the floors with gasoline and set the place ablaze.

The soldiers visited every house in the neighborhood. As they neared Mustafa Ahmed Ahad's place, he went into the bathroom and locked the door. Soldiers ransacked the house and set it on fire. A few days later, Mustafa's eighty-seven-year-old father, Ahmed, returned to find his house a pile of blackened rubble and his son missing. Eventually he found Mustafa's charred remains buried under slabs of fallen concrete. "He was poor, he was a worker," the elder Ahad said. "He was a grandfather, he didn't go to demonstrations."

A large number of women, the elderly, and aid workers had taken refuge in the basement of Rahim Ghazal's centrally located home. "They broke into the house and found the door to the basement," one of the women told me. "The gunmen ordered everyone upstairs and took the men with them for questioning. They ordered us to go back downstairs, and then we heard gunfire."

Government forces dragged nine men and boys outside, lined them up against a wall, and executed them. The soldiers came back to the basement and selected five additional men, then took them to a nearby shop, where they were lined up and executed. Two volunteers for the Red Crescent were shot in the yard outside Ghazal's house. By the time Syrian troops left that evening, there was not much left of Taftanaz. In each house, the story was the same: any male who was found was summarily executed, and his house was burned.

At least forty-nine civilians were killed in the massacre, and nearly 500 houses were destroyed. On my second day in town, I saw a crowd of wailing women surrounding a pickup truck. In the back, flies swarmed around a tar black decomposing body. The missing flesh above the mandibles exposed what looked to be a set of gold teeth. A group of men pushed a teenage girl toward the truck; upon seeing the teeth, she crumpled with a shriek of recognition. It was Jamil Setoot, an office worker who had been heading to his job in Aleppo on the morning of April 3. As he waited by the highway for a taxi, soldiers were moving into Taftanaz. They shot him and tossed him into a field, then killed the cows and sheep in the area for good measure. When the property's owner returned days later he found Setoot's body lying among the animal carcasses

I went to Abu Malek's home and found that it, too, had been burned to the ground. After relatives

cleared the rubble, they found a body too badly disfigured to identify. They added it and about thirty others to a mass grave on the town's edge. Many of the tombstones there mark the remains of Malek's relatives. At some point during the killing, locals watched as a Syrian soldier refused to carry out an order and was executed. They retrieved his body later and interred him in the mass grave, marking his tombstone simply as soldier.

A second mass grave sat on the opposite side of town, where more corpses are buried, rebels alongside civilians. Next to it, a large hole had been dug. A little boy was playing nearby, and when he saw me peering into the hole, he pointed to it and said, "For when they come back."

Ibrahim Matar served in the army unit that put down the early protests in Daraa. He didn't believe the government's assertions that the protests were organized by Al Qaeda, but he felt it was too dangerous to desert. When he finished his service, in November 2011, he came home to a transformed Taftanaz: ordinary people were running the town. "It was like a renaissance," he said, "a new look at life."

During the massacre, he fought alongside the rebels and then abandoned the town at night. When he returned to his scorched home, he headed straight for his prized library. "I saw the burned paper," he told me, "and tears came to my eyes." He had been studying for a master's degree in English translation and had maintained the library for years, collecting books by Shakespeare, Arthur Miller, Samuel Beckett. "Some say Godot is God," he said, "but I say he is hope. Our revolution is now waiting for Godot."

Matar brought me to a mosque that sits next to one of the mass graves. Inside, there were heaps of clothes, boxes of Turkish biscuits, and crates of bottled water. An old bald man with a walrus mustache studied a ledger with intensity while a group of old men around him argued about how much charity they could demand from Taftanaz's rich to rebuild the town. This was the public-affairs committee, one of the village's revolutionary councils. The mustached man slammed his hands on the floor and shouted, "This is a revolution of the poor! The rich will have to accept that." He turned to me and explained, "We've gone to every house in town and determined what they need"-he pointed at the ledger-"and compared it with what donations come in. Everything gets recorded and can be seen by the public."

All around Taftanaz, amid the destruction, rebel councils like this were meeting-twenty-seven in all, and each of them had elected a delegate to sit on the citywide council. They were a sign of a deeper transformation that the revolution had wrought in Syria: Bashar al-Assad once subdued small towns like these with an impressive apparatus of secret police, party hacks, and yes-men; now such control was impossible without an occupation. The Syrian army, however, lacked the numbers to control the hinterlands-it entered, fought, and moved on to the next target. There could be no return to the status quo, it seemed, even if the way forward was unclear.

In the neighboring town of Binnish, I visited the farmers' council, a body of about a thousand members that set grain prices and adjudicated land disputes. Its leader, an old man I'll call Abdul Hakim, explained to me that before the revolution, farmers were forced to sell grain to the government at a price that barely covered the cost of production. Following the uprising, the farmers tried to sell directly to the town at almost double the former rates. But locals balked and complained to the citywide council, which then mandated a return to the old prices-which has the farmers disgruntled, but Hakim acknowledged that in this revolution, "we have to give to each as he needs."

It was a phrase I heard many times, even from landowners and merchants who might otherwise bristle at the revolution's egalitarian rhetoric-they cannot ignore that many on the front lines come

from society's bottom rungs. At one point in March, the citywide council enforced price controls on rice and heating oil, undoing, locally, the most unpopular economic reforms of the previous decade.

"We have to take from the rich in our village and give to the poor," Matar told me. He had joined the Taftanaz student committee, the council that plans protests and distributes propaganda, and before April 3 he had helped produce the town's newspaper, *Revolutionary Words*. Each week, council members laid out the text and photos on old laptops, sneaked the files into Turkey for printing, and smuggled the finished bundles back into Syria. The newspaper featured everything from frontline reporting to disquisitions on revolutionary morality to histories of the French Revolution. ("This is not an intellectual's revolution," Matar said. "This is a popular revolution. We need to give people ideas, theory.")

Most opposition towns elect a delegate to one of the fifty or so district-wide councils across the country. At the next level up is the Syrian Revolution General Command, the closest thing to a nationwide revolutionary institution. It claims to represent 70 percent of the district-wide councils. The SRGC coordinates protests and occasionally gives the movement political direction: activists in Taftanaz told me that they sometimes followed its suggestions concerning their publications.

The SRGC sends representatives to the Syrian National Council, the expatriate body based in Turkey that has been Washington's main interlocutor, but the relationship between the two organizations is complicated, and many in Taftanaz expressed their disdain for the SNC. "Who are they?" Omar asked me. "What have they done? They are busy talking to foreigners but they don't know the situation inside Syria."

I asked Elizabeth O'Bagy, an analyst who studies the Syrian opposition at the Institute for the Study of War, about the U.S. approach to these two different rebel organizations. She said she doubted the usefulness of "supporting a group like the SNC, which on paper pays tribute to all the Western ideals we hold dear but has absolutely no legitimacy on the ground."

Washington officials, however, have said they prefer to deal with known quantities like the SNC rather than the grassroots opposition, which operates deep inside the country and whose leaders usually stay anonymous to stay alive. To complicate matters, some towns have competing councils.

The various bodies have only recently begun to formalize their vision of a post-Assad society, even if their constituent elements are already carrying this vision out in practice.

The village of al-Fua runs right up against Binnish. The two look almost indistinguishable—the same shabby buildings, the same patches of drying olive groves. But whereas Binnish is a town mobilized from top to bottom in support of the revolution, al-Fua is a Shia village, a rarity in the swath of Sunni countryside around Taftanaz, and its residents support Assad's government.

Many Sunnis see the Shia and Shia Alawites as inseparable from the regime; the Shia and Alawites, for their part, fear Sunni reprisals. Revolutionaries in Binnish told me that their town had escaped the army's northern offensive because they promised to massacre al-Fua if they were touched. Even Matar, with his talk of the French Revolution and equality, told me, "I have relations with everyone, with Christians, with Druze, with all kinds of people—but not with Shia."

Liberal activists from Syria's cities are dismayed at this divide, but theirs is a revolt so different from that of the conservative countryside that they seem, at times, like two different uprisings stitched together. The revolutionaries have failed to make significant headway in Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's two largest cities, where, despite a few recent bombings, the alliance of the industrialist aristocracy and the Assad security apparatus remains firmly in place, and where the well-heeled see

the countryside awash in chaos (a Bloomberg headline from April read: “Syria Elite Dance to Dawn as Risk of Assad Collapse Fades”).

Rebels in rural communities have been pulled deep into asymmetric warfare, which has opened the uprising to more radical influences. Omar told me that Salafis, ultraconservative Islamists who have operated underground for years, have openly joined the revolt in Binnish, although “they keep to themselves.”

On the way back to the border, our driver celebrated the Sunni fighters and sang songs poking fun at the Shia, Iran, and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Omar had arranged for his comrades to take me back to Turkey while he stayed on in Binnish to prepare the next issue of Revolutionary Words. Darkness had fallen, the army offensive had given way to a shaky ceasefire, and rebels thought they had the roads to themselves. But when we approached a checkpoint, it wasn't clear whether it was controlled by rebels, by the army, or by the Alawite shabeeha. The driver swerved abruptly onto the shoulder and sent one of the passengers into a nearby village to fetch another vehicle, which carried me onward via side roads while the first car headed through the checkpoint as a decoy.

We reached the border just after dawn. I ran across a field with a Syrian refugee family at my side, heading toward a barbed-wire fence. We found a gap and crawled through to Turkey.

When I handed Abu Malek my notebook filled with the names of the Taftanaz dead, he fell silent. After a while, he said, “I feel like I am about to burst.” He pointed to the names: “He was just a teacher; he had a small piece of land, that's all; I had spoken to him just last week.” Nineteen members of Malek's family had been killed.

Later that day, another relative from Taftanaz made it across the border to report that seven more bodies had been found, some of them apparently executed in a lineup. “Before, I just wanted to kill Bashar al-Assad,” Malek said. “But now I must kill all of his family.”

Had it been wise for the guerrillas to try to defend Taftanaz rather than retreat, as they had in other towns? It was a question that Malek said Riad al-Asaad, leader of the Free Syrian Army, had put to him at their headquarters in a Turkish border camp. “I shouted at him, ‘Who are you to ask me anything?’ ” Malek recalled. “ ‘You sit here and eat and sleep and talk to the media! We're inside, we aren't cowards like you.’ ”

Malek called the Free Syrian Army a “fiction” meant to give Western governments an impression of unity. When I asked Ibrahim Matar's commander in Taftanaz about the FSA leadership, he answered, “If I ever see those dogs here I'll shoot them myself.” The Turkey-based commanders exert no control over armed rebel groups on the inside; each of the hundreds of insurgent battalions operate autonomously, although they often coordinate their activities.

The ceasefire barely held up for a day, and in June a U.N. official described the conflict as a civil war. In Turkey, Malek continued to raise funds and buy weapons for the Taftanaz rebels. Once, I went with him to a tiny office in a working class section of Antakya, where he haggled with a man over the price of roadside-bomb detonators, the use of which Malek said he had learned from “a friend in another country.”

Some of the rebel groups had contacts with the United States, which was helping to coordinate the flow of money from the governments of the Gulf states. Others were developing their own patrons, a sort of privatization of the armed movement similar to what took place in Libya. Malek received a steady stream of visitors, mostly wealthy businessmen, from the Gulf. He knew that such pacts were



dangerous, but he believed the exigencies of war demanded them.

Still, in Taftanaz the revolt felt intensely local. On my last afternoon there, as the muezzin's noon call to prayer sounded, I walked through the town's central square. It was Friday, the traditional day of protest in the Muslim world. You could feel everywhere the heavy atmosphere of defeat: the town had been reduced to heaps of rotting trash and broken concrete, and not much else. And yet after the prayers were over, men and boys left the mosques and headed toward the square. Waving the old pre-Assad Syrian flag, they chanted, "God loves the martyr! God is the greatest!"

The Syrian army's helicopters buzzed overhead, watching. Protesters climbed atop the ruined buildings surrounding the square and waved their banners. This was the first demonstration since the massacre. Here and there in the melee men burst into tears as they saw friends and relatives for the first time. The protest was a ritual of survival, part of a revolution that seemingly can't be won yet somehow refuses to be extinguished. On a mound of twisted metal and concrete shards that had once been a house, a group unfurled a banner that read, even from the rubble, we will fight the regime.

**Anand Gopal**

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and A Socialist In Canada website:

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