

Interview

# **Reporting From the Inside: “Syrian people are asking for our solidarity. The local civilian councils are a good place for us to star”**

Tuesday 18 March 2014, by [CHRISTOFF Stefan](#), [MUSTAFA Ali](#) (Date first published: 31 October 2013).

**Today, Syria is on the verge of collapse. What began as a grassroots protest movement, inspired by revolutionary action in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Middle East, is now a bloody civil war. As media headlines focus on the armed aspects of the battle against the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad, there is a sustained popular resistance being waged in Syria that is not being fully reported.**

**Independent journalist Ali Mustafa traveled to Syria earlier this year to witness the war and provide a firsthand perspective on what is happening on the ground. Stefan Christoff interviewed Ali Mustafa in July 2013 about his two-month trip and his views on the potential for solidarity between Syrians and radical activists in North America.**

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**Stefan Christoff - Can you first introduce yourself and outline the goals for your recent trip to Syria?**

Ali Mustafa - I'm a Toronto-based freelance journalist who has been covering events in the Middle East for some years now. I traveled to Syria in March of 2013 for two months, returning to Canada in May.

I originally went to Syria as a natural extension of my previous work in the region, having already traveled to Israel/Palestine in 2011, then to Egypt later that same year. After following the war in Syria very closely for the past two years, I felt it was important to go there to cover the war firsthand.

I could not ignore this ongoing human tragedy. As the head of the UN refugee agency stated, Syria is one of the worst humanitarian crises to take place in the post World War II era. To date, approximately 100,000 people have been killed, nearly two million have been forced to flee as refugees, and another four to five million have been internally displaced. These numbers continue to grow daily.

Beyond the statistics, I felt that Western mainstream media coverage of Syria leaves a lot to be desired. It's important for journalists coming from a critical perspective to be in places like Syria to

report in a more nuanced, informed, and contextualized way. The only way I could truly get a sense of the reality on the ground was to go there to figure it out for myself.

In a way, I'm also fascinated by war – not in the gory sense but in the way it impacts us as human beings. What does it take away? What does it leave behind? Most importantly, what does it transform us into? These are the kinds of questions that interest me more than anything else as a journalist.

**What are some of the points of the major media coverage on the war in Syria that you feel are inaccurate and should be looked at critically?**

I think the first rule of the Western mainstream media has been to frame what is happening in Syria in overly simplified sectarian terms, portraying it as a war between Syrian president Bashar al Assad's Alawite sect on one hand, and radical Sunni rebels on the other.

Although sectarianism is definitely one of the key factors at play in Syria and should not be overlooked, it's also a problematic way of trying to understand the reality on the ground for two basic reasons. First, the origins of the conflict – the real, deep-rooted grievances against the Assad regime that led Syrians to revolt in the first place – are completely ignored in this narrative. Second, it mistakes the effect for the cause, reducing the complexity of the conflict to its simplest, lowest common denominator. As a result, the war in Syria is framed as something primordial, ahistorical, and perpetual – it is without end because it has always existed.

Of course, this is not true. In reality, the sectarian dimension of the war in Syria emerged much later. During times of civil strife, religious fault lines typically come to the fore. People will often times retreat into religious, ethnic, and cultural identities when a country's social fabric suddenly unravels. In the case of Syria, several horrific massacres by Alawite militias loyal to President Assad against predominantly Sunni villages in places like Houla have caused lingering tensions to rise to the surface, helping create a sort of "us" versus "them" mindset. Revenge killings by either side have only added to the cycle of violence.

International players like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey (which are predominantly Sunni) and Iran (which is Shia) have exacerbated the problem by reinforcing internal divisions, further entrenching the conflict along sectarian lines for their own gain.

Foreign fighters from Iraq, Jordan, Libya, and elsewhere in the region have also done Syria no favors in this regard; they don't see what is happening in Syria as a fight against dictatorship but rather as a battleground for competing visions of Islam, whether Sunni or Shia.

As a result, most of the sectarianism you find right now in Syria is being driven by forces outside of the country. Most Syrians I talked to during my trip, with a few exceptions, completely reject sectarianism against Alawites, Christians, or Kurds. In fact, many individuals from these minority groups are currently fighting alongside the Syrian rebels against the Assad regime.

**The Syrian protest movement that began in Homs, Daraa, and other places really began to take shape in 2012. The civil resistance included street protests, creative actions, and art. Why is it useful to remember the origins of the revolution in Syria today as emerging from a protest movement, as opposed to an armed struggle?**

The Syrian revolution first began when a few youth in Daraa, in southern Syria, spray-painted some anti-government graffiti on the walls of a building. They were arrested, beaten, and badly tortured. This sparked major protests in Daraa and that spread across the country. The protests were brutally

crushed by the regime, which dispatched armed thugs known as shabiha to arrest, beat, and kill many protesters.

The Syrian revolution began very much in the same spirit as the uprisings against dictatorship in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere in the region as part of the so-called Arab Spring. Yet the level of regime brutality in Syria was, and continues to be, without parallel. It is important to remember that the first six or seven months of the uprising was peaceful. The movement used tactics like mass protests, sit-ins, and other types of creative actions. At that stage, the protests were not even calling for the overthrow of the regime but basic political reform, like fair elections, freedom of speech, and other rights taken for granted here in the West.

It was the Assad regime that decided to militarize the uprising, turning it into a bloody war. The Assad regime forced the crisis to a point of no return. Once the level of brutality escalated, many ordinary civilians felt that they were forced to take up arms in defense.

I feel this is exactly what the Assad regime wanted all along: they would much rather deal with so-called terrorists on the battlefield than mass protests in the street. This kind of strategy is important for the Assad regime, not only internally but for international optics as well. It has allowed Assad to frame his brutal crackdown on the revolution as some sort of fight against terrorism, adopting the exact same language as the West's so-called war on terror; the rationale is strikingly similar, actually.

### **Who exactly are the Syrian rebels?**

The most important point to understand about the Syrian rebels is that they are far from a homogenous or monolithic group – there are many internal tensions, divisions, and contradictions that have to be highlighted.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) doesn't actually exist as a united military force; it's more of a loose umbrella term used to describe a variety of rebel factions – some moderate, others radical – who have together taken up arms against the Assad regime. Alongside military defectors from the regular army, the FSA is mainly comprised of ordinary civilians who, before the war, had no kind of previous fighting experience.

Alongside the FSA, many radical jihadi groups like Jabhat al Nusra have also surfaced in Syria. Jabhat al Nusra includes both Syrians and a growing number of foreign fighters. Their goal is to establish an Islamic state based on Sharia law not only in Syria but across the Middle East. As a result, their agenda is far broader in scope than most of the other rebel factions who simply want to topple the Assad regime.

The problem is that Jabhat al Nusra is undeniably the most disciplined, organized, and resourced rebel force on the ground right now. They have managed to take advantage of the large security vacuum found in many parts of northern Syria, offering religion as an anchor of stability and order amid increasing lawlessness. That is how groups like Jabhat al Nusra operate: they thrive in places where state control is weak and civil society is fractured and vulnerable.

Although they enjoy some degree of popular support, it's difficult to gauge exactly how much of it is genuine and not merely a byproduct of the war. In reality, Syria has always been a religiously moderate country relative to most of its neighbours. Support for groups like Jabhat al Nusra simply didn't exist there before the war. That's why the current objective conditions on the ground are important to understand.

When, for example, I asked people in Aleppo why they support Jabhat al Nusra, they generally gave

me the same three answers. First, Jabhat al Nusra has very strong fighters, not afraid of directly taking on regime forces in combat. Second, they do not loot or steal, unlike many FSA brigades who have taken advantage of the chaos of war for their own profit. Third, and most importantly, they carry out a lot of relief work in the liberated areas of northern Syria, providing gas, water, food boxes, and many other key services that have long been abandoned by the state.

The relationship between the FSA and Jabhat al Nusra has become increasingly tense in the past year, sometimes leading to direct clashes over territory, resources, and power. Many FSA fighters I spoke to directly told me that they don't like Jabhat al Nusra, but right now they need them in the fight against the Assad regime. After Assad falls, they told me, they will take on Jabhat al Nusra. In fact, some clashes with Jabhat al Nusra have already started, threatening another war within the war.

In the meantime, Jabhat al Nusra and other related groups have been responsible for a growing number of very serious human rights violations in the liberated areas they control, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and summary executions of civilians for very minor offences. Any kind of trust that Jabhat al Nusra once enjoyed in those places is now quickly eroding in the face of this kind of brutality. Like the Assad regime, Jabhat al Nusra is relying on brute force to impose its own agenda in Syria.

But Jabhat al Nusra isn't even the biggest threat right now. There is another more dangerous radical jihadi group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). They're directly linked to Al Qaeda.

Ordinary Syrians are now finding themselves caught dangerously in the middle, squeezed between the Assad regime on one hand and rogue rebel groups with their own agendas on the other. Yet it's important to keep in mind that what certain rebels or rebel factions do doesn't necessarily reflect on the FSA as a whole. Because the Syrian rebels are so fragmented, divided, and disorganized, any crimes carried out by the rebel side – and there have been many – cannot be generalized in the same way as those committed by the Assad regime.

**There was a great deal of disagreement early on in the conflict about whether or not rebels should take up arms. Where does this debate stand currently?**

There is some tension that hasn't been fully resolved, but in a way it has been decided by default by the relentless, indiscriminate, and brutal military onslaught of the Assad regime.

Whether or not taking up arms was the right thing to do is really the wrong question to ask. The Assad regime's brutality never left any room for debate. Once the military defections began to rapidly rise in early 2012, there was no going back. Too much blood had been shed by then.

Yet, despite the brutal military onslaught, there still exists up to today a very vibrant, dynamic, and non-violent protest movement on the ground. Protests and other types of direct actions still take place every Friday in the liberated areas of northern Syria like Aleppo where I visited. Anywhere between five hundred to a couple thousand people gather at these protests, risking their lives every single time they take to the streets. This is a side of the Syrian revolution that we don't hear a lot about.

The militarization of the uprising has caused some key problems in this regard. First, it has overshadowed the protest movement on the ground. Second, it has neutralized the capacity to build any momentum by redirecting energy towards basic survival. Third, it has broken up civil society. People have fled the country, been internally displaced, or are left struggling to cope with the fallout

of the war as best they can.

As Indian author Arundhati Roy has described, protests are a kind of theatre: they need an audience in order to have a real impact. The type of mass protests that captured the imagination of the world in Egypt's Tahrir Square, Taksim Square in Turkey, or public squares across Brazil relied on the power of the spectacle to apply pressure on the state. Obviously, it's very difficult to stage mass protests of this kind when bombs are dropping from the sky, people are getting killed en masse, and the country is being destroyed. Any ability to build a viable protest movement is extremely limited.

In Syria, the war has totally isolated the protest movement. The objective conditions for protests to play this kind of a role in Syria right now simply don't exist. As I said earlier, this is exactly what Assad wanted. War is simply easier to manage, even if it means destroying the country in the process.

Also, it is important to remember that these protests are taking place in parts of the country where the government has already ceded most control or been driven out by rebel forces. The protests are operating in an entirely different kind of political space. This has posed another dilemma for revolutionaries on the ground: what good are mass protests, strikes, and other types of civil disobedience in the absence of the state? With all the fighting, lawlessness, and insecurity of war in the liberated areas, the space to build viable parallel state structures is completely lacking right now. The process is slowly starting but it will take time. The war is a major obstacle.

### **Can you talk about the current situation in relation to various global and regional political forces in Syria?**

There are many intersecting power struggles taking place right now in Syria: you have the Cold War tension between the US and Russia; the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran; and the alliance between the Assad regime, Iran, and Hezbollah on one hand and US-backed Israel on the other. The result is something of a mix between a non-violent popular revolution, internal civil war, and proxy power struggle all taking place simultaneously.

I think this is where many people who look at Syrian events as some sort of a Western imperialist plot get it wrong. The idea of a unipolar global order anchored by US hegemony in the classic sense – without serious tensions, constraints, or limitations – simply no longer holds as a way of explaining 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics. The reality is a lot more complex.

What is happening right now in Syria is best understood as a kind of intra-elite or intra-imperial rivalry, in which many competing global players are trying to influence the outcome of the war in one direction or another in relation to their own overall interests. For example, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are both involved in funding, arming, and supporting the Syrian rebels. On the surface, they would appear to be on the same side in this war. Yet in reality, they have totally different agendas in Syria. For example, Qatar is very close to the Muslim Brotherhood and would like them to take power in any kind of post-Assad government. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has always feared the Muslim Brotherhood: they view them as a threat to the ruling regional monarchies, so most of the arms they are supplying go to groups like Jabhat al Nusra instead.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been openly competing with one another for the past two years over influence in Syria. They may be on the same side in the fight against the Assad regime, but they are sending arms in opposite directions. All of this is creating a lot of confusion on the ground, fueling competition between various rebel factions, and sowing more division at a time when exactly the opposite is needed.

The US only decided to start providing arms to the Syrian rebels once they realized that they couldn't rely on their regional allies, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to carry out their interests. The US/Saudi/Qatari imperialist axis is really nothing more than a conspiracy theory – in reality, they can't even agree amongst themselves who should get arms, let alone how to manage the war. All the parties involved are too busy trying to out-maneuver one another to orchestrate some kind of a master plan for Syria.

Far from taking the lead, as many people tend to believe, the US is just one of many rival powers vying for influence in the war. The problem is that sending more arms into Syria is not going to help. By itself, it won't tip the military balance of power in favour of the Syrian rebels. The Assad regime's key allies, Russia and Iran, will simply respond in kind. The result will just be more arms flooding into the country, more bloodshed, and more chaos on the ground.

As for Russia and Iran, they are backing the Assad regime for similar reasons. Both countries have strong political, economic, and military ties with the Assad regime. The fall of Assad would be a major blow to their respective interests in the region.

In terms of Hezbollah, their decision to enter the war should be understood in the same way. State and non-state actors are no different: they each act in accordance to their own perceived interests. Hezbollah is trying to protect the supply of arms, funds, and other kinds of support they receive via the Assad regime, mostly from Iran. Their survival pretty much depends on it.

The problem is that Hezbollah's entry into the war has only further inflamed Sunni/Shia tensions in Syria. In fact, the war now risks spilling over into neighbouring Lebanon, where the sectarian fault lines are very similar. Because of groups like Hezbollah, the war is now being driven by sectarian identity politics rather than the fight against dictatorship. The only beneficiary of this scenario is, of course, Assad.

Lastly, there has been a lot of speculation on Israel's role in the war; are they with the Assad regime or the Syrian rebels? I think it's clear that neither option is particularly appealing to Israel but, as one Israeli official put it when referring to Assad, "better the devil we know than the demons we can only imagine." Of course they don't like Assad, but the prospect of groups like Jabhat al Nusra taking power in Syria poses far more of a security threat.

If you look at the record, not the rhetoric, the Assad regime has basically normalized relations with Israel. In the past 40 years, they have done absolutely nothing to try to regain the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. They have also kept Palestinians in Syria under very tight control, effectively playing the role of Israel's border guard. The obvious question is why would Israel want to see that change?

### **The Conservative government in Canada has been critical of the Syrian regime but also vocal against the Islamic factions among the rebels. Any reflections on the Canadian government's reaction to the war in Syria?**

The Conservative government is approaching Syria from more or less the same position as the US, although with a lot less influence on the outcome. The Canadian government is definitely opposed to the Assad regime and would prefer to see it gone. At the same time, it is also very skeptical of the Syrian rebels, especially as the conflict has dragged on and groups like Jabhat al-Nusra have grown more prominent.

Canada has been very vocal about these kinds of fears. Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird has used very strongly worded language about the "terrorist elements" within the FSA, without fully understanding the nature of the Syrian rebel opposition and its many complexities, nuances, and

internal contradictions. All of this has left Canada in a bit of a bind – there are just no military options available that don't risk backfiring later on.

Yet, the challenges posed by the war aren't only military but humanitarian as well. In reality, this is where Canada can take a leading role on the ground; they can do a lot more to confront the growing humanitarian crisis in Syria by providing more funds to international NGOs working inside the country, shipping more direct aid to Syrian refugees living in neighbouring countries, and increasing the number of refugees and asylum seekers being accepted into Canada. Of course, under the current Conservative government, it is unlikely any of this is going to happen.

### **Can you describe the popular protests that you saw in Aleppo and day to day life in the city?**

It's important to understand that most of the city is completely in ruins. The scale of destruction is totally unimaginable, caused largely by government shelling. In the liberated areas, the government has cut off all services: there is no electricity, very little water, few jobs, and the economy is at a standstill. What is taking place there can only be accurately described as a form of collective punishment against a largely defenseless civilian population.

We so often see images of the violence, death, and destruction in Syria today, but it is important to remember that despite this reality, in the areas away from the frontlines, people still try as best they can to live a normal life. People still walk the streets, vendors still sell goods, kids still go outside to play. People are just trying to find some semblance of normality amid all of the chaos. The resilience of the Syrian people really amazed me.

I found the atmosphere of the protests to be very festive, cheerful, even celebratory. People were singing, dancing dabke, and waving the Syrian revolutionary flag. I remember going to my first protest in the neighbourhood of Bustan Qasr and asking myself, "Why are they bothering to protest in a place like this, where the government doesn't even have any control?" I quickly realized they are not doing it for the sake of the Assad regime but rather, for themselves. The protests are a way of keeping up morale, showing a face of unity to the world that is constantly portraying them as divided, and most importantly, I think, trying to make the point that it isn't only the guns doing the talking – the people still have a voice.

Against all the odds, many people in Syria are still fighting for the original demands of the revolution: freedom, dignity, and social justice. At many of the protests people hold up signs, posters, and banners - many of them in English. The village of Kafr Nabl in the Idlib province is the most famous example of this kind of revolutionary creativity. But why do they do it? They are not just doing it for show. It is a direct appeal to the outside world for some kind of solidarity. Unfortunately, people in the West have failed to meet that call. The Syrian revolutionaries on the ground, the youth who first started the uprising, have been completely abandoned at a time when they need solidarity the most.

One scene I remember vividly that captures the horrors of daily life in Syria took place where I was staying in Bustan Al Qasr, which is divided between rebel and government controlled areas. In this area, gun battles happen daily. Government snipers are located in the nearby buildings, simply waiting for any type of activity on the other side. Everyday, amid sniper fire, people from one side cross over to the other because they have to go to work, visit family, or transport goods. They call it "the crossing of death." People get shot by the snipers all the time trying to make this perilous journey – many of them get killed. Yet despite the danger, people still do it – they don't really have a choice.

You see people running back and forth, some fall down, others risk their own life trying to help them back up. The scene is total madness. It just gives you a sense of how daily life in Syria has been completely taken over by the war in this very tragic way.

**I am wondering if you have any reflections about your trip to Syria as a progressive media activist in Toronto?**

It's very heartbreaking to see what is happening in Syria. Leaving Syria, coming back to Canada and knowing that it's getting worse every day is difficult. I struggle every day with trying to think about ways that we can show solidarity with the Syrian people and possibly influence the outcome in a positive way.

I quickly came to the realization that the daily images of the horrors taking place in Syria – all of the death, destruction, displacement – although tragic, simply aren't enough to move people to action. I felt very demoralized after leaving because I learned that no matter how much you try to show people the reality of what is happening, by itself it isn't likely to make much of a difference. Most people will probably just tune out because it doesn't affect them directly in any way.

Personally, I don't think foreign military intervention is the solution. Yet it's clear some kind of an international response is needed. There are many clear, concrete, and effective ways for ordinary people like ourselves to make a positive impact on the ground in Syria.

I will give you one example. I visited a village in the suburbs of Aleppo called Atareb where a new local civilian council has emerged. This is a very important development taking place right now, not only there but all over northern Syria. These local civilian councils, although still in the early stages, represent a kind of alternative governance structure that is filling the void left vacant by the state. They address basic needs like water, electricity, food distribution, education, and so on. Right now, because of the damage done by the war, they are largely preoccupied with reconstruction efforts.

In this case, the bakery in the village has been shelled by the Assad regime no less than 10 times. Several of the bakery workers have been injured or killed in these attacks. Nevertheless, after each attack, the workers are back at the bakery the next day to repair the damage so they can resume production. Bread is a staple food in Syria, and the bakery doesn't just provide bread for the people of Atareb; it also supplies another 17 surrounding villages, so it's very important that it's up and running.

In addition to the constant shelling, the bakery also struggles with wheat shortages. Where does the bakery get the wheat? They receive it from Jabhat al Nusra, who themselves seize it from government areas they take over in combat. The village has become dependent on Jabhat al Nusra in this way.

People like us can actually do a lot to support these local civilian councils by backing small projects, like getting the wheat mill up and running – either by offering financial assistance, logistical support, or technical expertise. By doing so, we not only help ordinary Syrians in a direct way that goes beyond mere charity but also build a basis for genuine people-to-people solidarity.

As a result, you achieve two key objectives: you support the Syrian people's capacity to help themselves, moving away from aid to solidarity, while at the same time directly undercutting the growing influence on the ground of groups like Jabhat al Nusra.

If we don't like Jabhat al Nusra, then we have to understand how they are winning support, directly confront it, and offer real alternatives. If we simply cede this terrain, we leave it to groups like Jabhat al Nusra to step in and fill the void. The results should not surprise us.



Syrian people feel abandoned by the world. They are asking for our solidarity. The local civilian councils are a good place for us to start, I think – one that actually provides a principled alternative to both the Assad regime and the Syrian rebels.

**Interview by Stefan Christoff**

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**P.S.**

\* Thursday, October 31, 2013:

<http://frombeyondthemargins.blogspot.fr/2013/10/reporting-from-inside-interview-with.html>