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Syria's forgotten revolutionaries

Leila Al Shami

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Why did you write *Burning Country*?

There was a lot being written about Syria, a lot being written about Syrians, but very little that actually spoke to Syrians and asked them how they themselves define what's happening in their country. So we really wanted to bring Syrian voices to the forefront, and to speak with people who had been involved in the revolution and see how they felt, to hear their story and to enable other people to hear their story.

I think in general a lot of the narrative on Syria, whether it's been through people writing books or through mainstream journalism, has been looking at Syria either through a humanitarian lens or through an extremist lens. So, really wanting to see Syrians as either victims or terrorists, but not really wanting to see Syrians as agents of change.

Many people seem to think that the situation in Syria is simply too complicated to understand. Why do you think that view has become so common?

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I think that a lot of mainstream journalism, which people depend on for a lot of their information on Syria, has been extremely poor. By focusing on issues such as the humanitarian crisis or the extremism, what people are getting are symptoms rather than causes. So people do not feel, often, that they have a real understanding of why this happened or what the dynamics on the ground are. For example, if you are looking at the refugee crisis only through a humanitarian lens, you are not looking at the causes of the refugee crisis. It's going to be very difficult to find a solution, because there isn't a humanitarian solution to a political problem.

One argument that comes across very strongly in your book is that there's been a level of misinformation about the situation – of a regime that's hated by the United States on the one side and on the other side you have forces like Daesh/ ISIS and Al-Nusra, supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey etc. That seems to have become quite a dominant idea in sections of the left, for example.

I think a huge problem is people coming to the Middle East through a pre-2011 paradigm, and they are trying to interpret things as they interpreted events that happened in the Middle East before. But of course the whole region changed radically in 2011 when there were transnational uprisings from Egypt to Bahrain to Yemen, all across the region.

This has been hugely problematic, because there is this very dominant narrative in sections of the left that the regime is a resistance regime, but this narrative doesn't match reality. It doesn't explain the role of the Assad regime, of Assad the father in Lebanon, the massacres of Palestinians in the Lebanese camps that occurred during the 1980s. It doesn't explain why Bashar Al-Assad worked with the Americans for the extraordinary renditions, when the Americans were handing over suspected terrorists to the Syrian regime basically for torture by proxy. That was throughout the war on terror.

But we can't do this all through a humanitarian lens, there has to be a political solution to this problem, there has to be a real and meaningful peace process which is inclusive, and ultimately has representatives from the ground included in it.

In terms of solidarity, there hasn't been much visible solidarity with Syria and I think that's hugely problematic that that's been the case. I think it's amazing that at the moment when you're having this massive slaughter, this constant bombardment, there aren't people in their thousands, in their millions out on the street calling for it to stop.

Is that something that people feel betrayed over?

Of course they feel betrayed over it, and I'm sure they are no longer waiting for solidarity from the outside world, I think those days have long gone.

Do you have hope that the regime will fall, and that something somehow positive can come afterwards?

In many ways the regime has already fallen, because it is completely reliant on foreign powers for survival. It is completely dependent on Iranian and Hezbollah, and Shia militias from Iraq and from Afghanistan and from all over, for ground forces, and on the Russian air force. It's not managing to take and control territory, and it's unlikely that it's going to be able to take back the massive sections of the country which it's now lost. But I don't see any quick solutions to this problem. I can't predict what the future will be, I'm fearful that there will be some kind of partition scenario, some kind of imperial carve-up imposed from outside, it's so difficult to tell.

But what I would be fairly certain of is that I think that throughout the region the return to the security state is not going to be something which is going to happen. I think the region has changed dramatically and that we're in a long process of change.

This resistance narrative has persisted, but the thing is that the regime has used this resistance narrative to build popular support, and it did manage to do that both within Syria and across the wider Arab region because it was speaking the same kind of anti-Western, anti-Zionist rhetoric, which was in line with popular sentiment on the street. But a lot of this rhetoric was really to justify internal repression.

For example, you have the emergency law that was put in place, which was ostensibly because Syria was at war with Israel. But really that was the law which suspended all the constitutional rights of Syrian citizens and greatly empowered the security forces, so that was the law that was used to round up and detain dissidents to take them to military courts. But at the same time, the borders with Israel remained quiet, there weren't serious efforts to liberate the occupied Golan, for example. The Syrian borders with Israel were quieter, more peaceful even than borders that had peace deals with Israel, such as Egypt and Jordan. So the resistance narrative doesn't match up.

And there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever that the Saudi regime or the Turkish regime are funding Daesh, and it seems highly unlikely that they will. If you look at Daesh's statements, one of its main targets is to bring down the Saudi regime. I think it's certainly the case that individuals in Saudi Arabia have sent money to Daesh, and Saudi Arabia until fairly recently has played a very negative role in not clamping down on those financial transfers to Daesh from citizens within its territory. But I don't see any evidence that the Saudi regime itself is funding Daesh, there is enough we can criticise the Saudi regime for without making stuff up.

What has been the role of the United States in supporting forces hostile to the regime?

The United States support for Free Syrian Army militias on the ground has never really been any more than rhetoric. It's never really given any serious support to them. The main thing that op-

position fighters on the ground need is heavy anti-aircraft weapons to defend communities from air force attacks, which are the main cause of civilian deaths inside Syria. The Americans have never sent in those anti-aircraft weapons and their most significant military intervention has actually been to veto other countries from sending in those weapons to FSA fighters. Some things have gone in, lighter weapons, a lot of things like night vision goggles have gone in, but that's not what these groups need. And also with the weapons that have been going in, it sometimes seems designed to pressure Assad to the negotiating table, to create a stalemate. Some gains will be made as a consequence of that in the battle field, and then the weapon supply dries up, so there's always this small gains being made, the weapons dry up and then of course the regime makes gains. So it seems that this stalemate is just maintained much of the time.

That seems in stark contrast to the way Russia and Iran are giving support to the Assad regime.

The regime has massive amounts of financial and military support from its backers, both Russia and Iran. There should be strong sanctions on countries sending weapons to the regime.

Where does this leave the revolution, and the self-organisation of those besieged from all sides?

Communities have had to self-organise for survival because as the state's collapsed in large parts of the country or has been pushed out. People have had to come together to keep life functioning in those areas. And I think this is one of the really remarkable things about the Syrian revolution and the untold story is how people are creating alternatives to authoritarianism in these immensely challenging circumstances when they are being bombed by their own government, they are being bombed by foreign governments, they are under attack from Islamic extremists, they are being starved, they are being gassed. But they are also trying to create ways of organising which are democratic,

which is much more community-based, to keep their communities being able to stay in those areas.

In the book you mention how a number of ideas, such as Islamism and anarchism, are part of the debates in how these communities should be organised.

There are so many different ideas going around, and that's the result of the revolutionary situation. People are really discussing and debating and trying out new ways of organising and new ideas. The self-organised communities are under threat not only from the regime but also by Islamist extremist groups, and in some areas there has been a power struggle, around the councils and within the communities as other groups have also tried to impose structures on the people. Today in Idlib it was the 85th day of protests against Jabhat Al-Nusra in Marat Numan, so the people have been very clear that they don't want Jabhat Al-Nusra to stay in Marat Numan. They are very clear that they do not want to replace one authoritarian system with another. Idlib is under very heavy bombardment at the moment from the regime, and by Russia, and it's exactly to destroy these self-organised and democratic communities. They are not ISIS, they are not these extremist groups, they are FSA militias and self-organised communities.

What's the best way of offering solidarity to the Syrians?

There are serious humanitarian issues that need to be addressed, there are still many communities in Syria which are under siege. The UN set the deadline of 1 June to airdrop to these communities, and that's deadline's passed and there's been no airdrops. Now the UN is saying that it's wanting permission from the regime, the people responsible for the siege of these communities, to access those areas. Today in Daraya they've actually sent in some aid, and what they've sent are mosquito nets while the people are starving, it's an absolutely desperate situation and I think one very important form of solidarity is to call on the UN and governments to ensure that aid gets to those areas.