

Reporting in Syria at the Start of the Uprising

Claire Duffett

On the drizzly Friday morning of February 3, 2011, I sat with a colleague in al-Rawda Café in Damascus, eyeing the Parliament through smudged glass windows and waiting for a protest to begin.

On Facebook, Syrians had called for a “Day of Rage” outside the government headquarters. A few journalists gathered across the street to wait and see what happened. Leather jacket-clad secret police also sat alone throughout the café, with folded, unread copies of the day’s newspaper on the tables in front of them. They silently monitored the situation and puffed on *argillah*. My colleague and I laughed about their bumbling conspicuousness—the brutality of which they are capable not yet ubiquitous on YouTube.

The scene was both tense and strangely dull. By the end of the day, nobody had gathered outside and, frustrated and a bit relieved, the room full of people pretending not to notice each other went home. It was settled: Syria would not be the next Arab Spring domino to fall. *Al-Jazeera* labeled Syria “the silent kingdom.”

My friend and photojournalist Leila Haddad¹ explained to me why the day had been so rage-free.

“We have a saying about Damascenes—if a man comes to your house and wants to [sleep with] your mother, you call him ‘father’.”

From the time Mohammad Bouazizi’s self-immolation sparked the Tunisian uprising and the Arab Spring on December 17, 2010 Syrians speculated about whether or not the revolutionary fervor would spread to their country. The consensus reached was that Syrians have a long history of passivity, punctured only by opposition to French rule. Most in Damascus believed Syrians today to be too repressed and wary of Iraq-like sectarianism to oppose the rule of President Bashar al-Assad. Religious minorities,

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constituting about 25 percent of the population, had fervently supported the president since the Muslim Brotherhood threatened to oust Bashar's father Hafez in the late 1970s and early 1980s—a movement put down by the famous razing of Hama in 1982.

Less than a month later, a series of events debunked the prevailing theory of Syrian docility. A small rally in Damascus demanded justice after police beat and arrested a shopkeeper. The Interior Minister arrived at the scene within 15 minutes, promising to release the young man and prosecute the police responsible. The crowd dispersed. Then, secret police beat and arrested protestors who gathered outside the Libyan embassy as well as Kurds who staged a small protest in al-Raqqa in the country's northeast. A pro-reform rally in the famed Souq al-Hamadieh, the entrance to Damascus's Old City, was quickly dispersed by force. My colleagues speculated that the regime might be savvy enough to withstand small-scale, Arab Spring-inspired protests.

On March 13, 2011 the regime arrested parents silently protesting their children's extrajudicial detention outside the Ministry of Interior. Then, 15 Dera'a youths who had spray-painted anti-government slogans on a city wall were arrested. A protest against the arrest broke out and police responded with beatings and fire hoses. Footage of the incident spread throughout the country. The regime's hapless, heavy-handed responses to these two small, non-violent acts of dissent generated widespread opposition and protests in cities throughout the country took place for the first time that Friday, March 15. In the weeks following, crackdowns escalated while Assad paid lip service to reforms, "lifting" Emergency Law and dismissing his government. An out-of-touch presidential speech in April galvanized the movement. Assad, surrounded by sycophantic Parliamentarians clapping feverishly and shouting adulations, blamed the discord on terrorists.

Changing Scene

After March 15, the political climate of the capital shifted. People suddenly learned how many others believed that something was deeply wrong with their government and their sentiments evolved into wary excitement mixed with deep trepidation. Until the scene of thousands of Syrians in cities across the country jointly calling for reform emerged in March 2011, dissent was kept quiet and—outside a vocal and mostly imprisoned or overseas opposition community—expressed only among the closest of confidants.

"You'd be amazed how many people are informants," my colleague, the journalist Samaher al-Riad told me at the time. "Everyone's a spy."

The regime worked hard to foster a culture of extreme—and well-founded—paranoia. And for the past few decades, it succeeded in preventing any unified, widespread opposition from coalescing.

"We're never sure what the risk is and we're never sure if it's worth it," Samaher once said. "Never in our lifetime did we think we would see this."

In addition to thousands of secret police monitoring daily life, the country's three

million public sector workers receive small stipends for filing reports to the Military Intelligence Office about the political opinions of friends, neighbors and colleagues. Telephone lines are also tapped. Naturally, these measures affected all interactions. A colleague once recalled sitting in a café, talking to a friend who spoke loudly about how much he disliked the president.

“He was too comfortable, so I figured he must be *mukhabarat* [secret police].” Only after this young man disappeared during the uprising did she realize he simply lacked the instinct for self-preservation.

During the two years I lived in Syria, I worked as managing editor for the only English-language media outlet not affiliated with the regime, *Syria Today*. In November 2011, we had identified and terminated our office’s government informant. Then, one day in April, a trusted reporter on our staff did not come to work. He didn’t call or answer his phone for the next three days. Finally, I got through to him and, angry and worried, asked where he had been.

“I was on vacation,” he said from the other line, and laughed awkwardly. I knew the *mukhabarat* had taken him in, and, the next day, learned they had detained him and told him to begin maintaining files on his colleagues and supplying them with a report on us as well as the content of our computers on a .zip disk. I then realized the stupidity of my inquiring about his absence over the phone.

After the uprising started, I began to notice who was watching me, until the lines between actual surveillance and my own paranoia began to blur. The same man often walked behind me on my route home from work. Security cameras outside my home captured footage of three men photographing my front door and marking it with an X. We assumed this was because my landlord was a foreigner who did not provide the secret police with information about us and the X identified to officers who to monitor. Further, a Kurdish friend with whom I had exchanged text messages about the Libyan embassy protest was detained and questioned about our correspondence.

“Surface-level Stuff”

I lacked the risk-aversion instincts most Syrians have built over a lifetime and so worked to consciously avoid endangering myself and others. For my freelance reporting, I began writing exclusively under pseudonyms, only interviewed people endorsed by trusted friends, and always met sources in person and in private.

At the same time, foreign journalists began trickling into the country. I witnessed the perils of an underdeveloped local media sector combined with the dangers posed by an international reporting industry that is increasingly reliant on poorly paid and under-trained stringers. As the only local, English-language journalism outlet unaffiliated with the regime, inquiries poured in once the uprising began. A woman from the *National Catholic Register* called me one afternoon and asked me to send her my list of sources—something I would never maintain in writing in one location nor would I share it with anyone, particularly a stranger. She complained that she

had been in Syria for two whole weeks and was still “only getting surface-level stuff.” Other newly arrived journalists called Syrian reporters on staff, and over the tapped phone lines, asked them specific questions about crackdowns and security operations. The recklessness and sense of entitlement of these correspondents became a constant source of worry and frustration.

The experience underscored for me the need for citizens to have the power and skills to tell stories of their own countries and conflicts. “Parachute journalism” in those early days seemed to be less a selfless act of truth-telling and more a selfish, ego-driven pursuit of adventure and acclaim, with little regard for the safety of others. I understood the urgency of telling the Syrian story to the world, but the techniques employed led me to question some individuals’ motivations and altered the way I view conflict reporting. After a Western reporter leaves a country in crisis, the fixers, translators, and sources he or she encountered remain, and often face grave danger as a result of the interaction. Chronicling and archiving conflict is important and necessary, but maintaining humility and respect for those caught in the crisis goes a long way to carrying out this work in a way that is responsible and respectful.

Deferring to Syrian expertise while there helped me learn how to report safely and accurately inside Syria. Fellow correspondents residing in Syria did the same, but at the start of the uprising, there were only a handful of us and most lived in the capital. Few Syrian journalists reported on the crisis for an English-speaking international audience, with notable exceptions such as *Reuters*’ Khaled Oweis and *BBC*’s Lina Sinjab. The result is an information vacuum that fuels misunderstanding and bolsters the regime by reinforcing fears that the situation is too complex, divided, and chaotic for Assad to remove his iron grip.

Human Impact

The situation in Syria is indeed complex and growing more so by the day, although Assad’s continued presence only aggravates the violence and the prospect for future conflict. Since I left the country in late July, 2011, comprehending the scale of the crisis and processing how it has impacted people’s lives becomes increasingly difficult. The UN death toll at the end of March, 2012 was 9,000, with many more likely killed and tens of thousands detained and displaced.

These numbers exacerbate the disconnect between those who read about the conflict in Syria and those who are experiencing it. To combat my increasing distance from the events, I try to remember the many ways in which the uprising has affected people I know and recall key moments when those around me explained the significance of what was beginning.

I think back to an April night at an apartment in the Damascus neighborhood of Berzeh, now the scene of ongoing clashes between protesters and police. A group of anti-government Syrian friends had gathered around *Arak* and snacks for a weekly *sahra*, or evening visit, where they talked excitedly about the unfolding events. *Sham*

TV, the network airing mobile phone footage of protests, played in the background.

“Look around the room,” the host said to me, motioning to the group. “Kurd, Alawi, Sunni. What *fitna*?” he asked, referring to the Arabic word for sectarian strife. The group was indeed diverse. The child of a Circassian couple slept on the couch behind them.

Since then, the regime has successfully stoked inter-ethnic fighting, and several of the people sitting in that circle have been arrested and tortured. The host and his wife now live in London and a few of the others are now based in Beirut, where they help coordinate protests.

When I think about the number of people who have died or see photos of the destruction in Homs and Idleb, I remember the words my friend said that night. I wonder how many Syrians would still say the same thing today.

“I’ve waited my entire life for this,” he said. “And I’m just glad it’s happening in my lifetime. This needed to happen. It’s hard. But it’s a good thing.”

Endnotes

- 1 The names used in this article have been changed to protect the identities of Syrians in the country.