



Cities in Revolution

Daraa

Rose of the South

Researcher: Sabr Darwish
Project leader: Mohammad Dibo
Translator: Lilah Khoja

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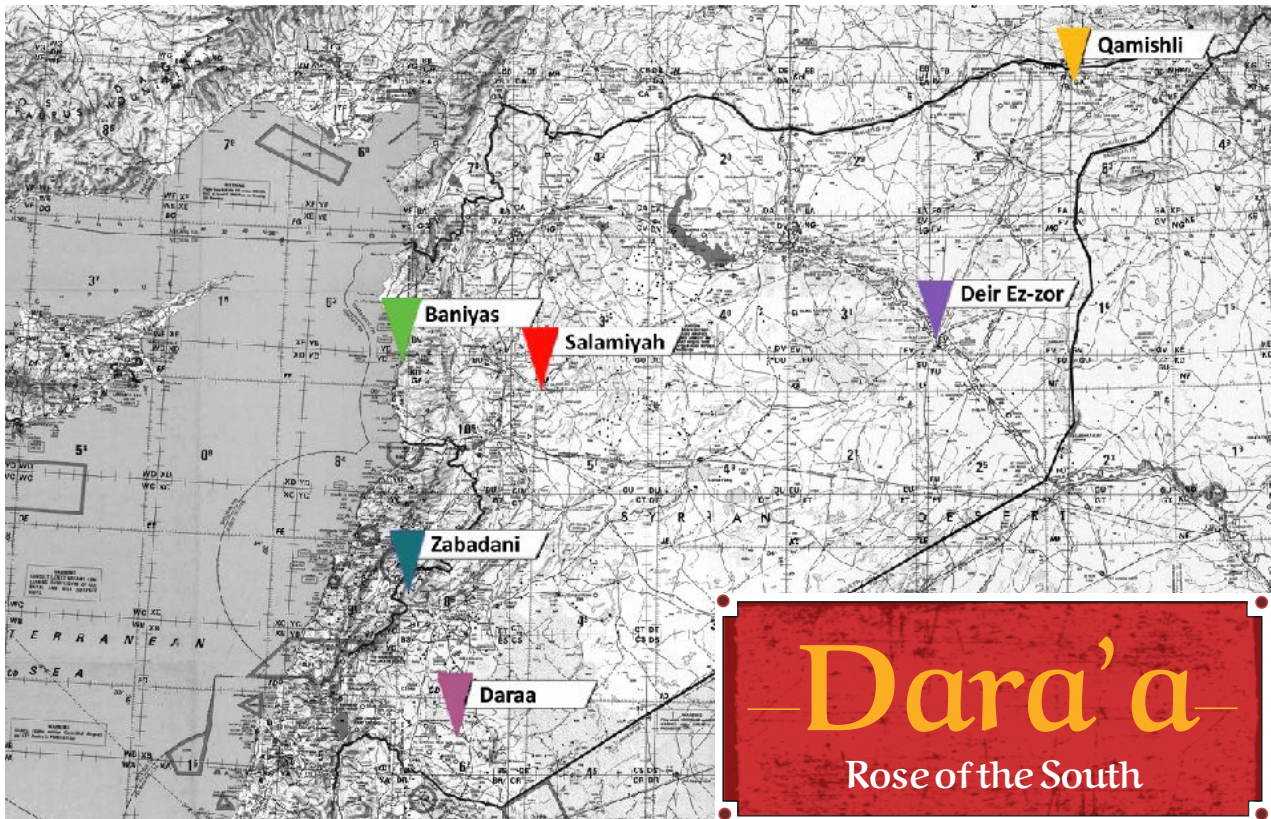


Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Chapter One: Age of Transformations	5
The South Sings of Freedom	5
The Martyrs Awaken the Neighborhoods	6
Escalating Conflict: The Road to Revolution	8
Military Convoys Occupy the City	10
Siege of Dara'a	12
Chapter Two: Age of Resistance	14
Major Shifts: The First Demonstrations of the Free Syrian Army	14
Most Important Military Formations	16
The Southern Front and the Last FSA Configurations	16
The Most Important Military Formations of the Southern Front	17
The Development of the Southern Front	18
Chapter Three: Civil Society Organizations	19
Lights of Syria	19
General Council for Civil Defence	20
Israr Volunteering Division	21
Olive Branch Foundation	22
Conclusion	25
Methodology	26
Team	28
Cities in Revolution	29
SyriaUntold	30

Introduction

Dara'a, in Southern Syria, was the first swept by the winds of freedom. It was the south where Syrians, oppressed for decades, that first came out with the chants: "Death, Not Humiliation" and put forth the protesters first demands.



Dara'a, situated 100 kilometers from Damascus, was the first to rise against the Asadist rule. It was the first city to bury a martyr for freedom and dignity. All eyes were on Dara'a, aspiring to take their future into their own hands and to overthrow the regime.

Dara'a is composed of two sections: Dara'a al-Mahatta and Dara'a al-Balad. They are separated by a valley known as Zaidi Valley. Dara'a al-Balad is home to the old quarters of the town, while al-Mahatta features modern buildings, the university, and governmental departments and the centers of the city's economic activity.

Dara'a al-Balad is home to the well-known Dara'a families; many families from the countryside of the province traveled to this part of the city as well. Dara'a al-Balad is governed by a network of relationships and traditions, many of which are tribal. Entire families are the makeup of certain neighborhoods, such as the Abazeed and neighborhoods and the Siba area where the Masalmeh family lives.

In this section of Dara'a al-Balad one finds the Omari mosque, a focal point of the revolutionary movement in the city and a symbol of the revolution.

The aim of this paper is to present to the reader “miniatures” to contextualize the revolutionary movement in Dara'a, and to shed light over the major developments that have characterized the movement within the city. To include all the details of the city and its countryside is difficult due to its sheer size and importance. For this reason, we have turned our focus on Dara'a to document the revolutionary shifts within the city and to fill the gaps in knowledge related to Dara'a.

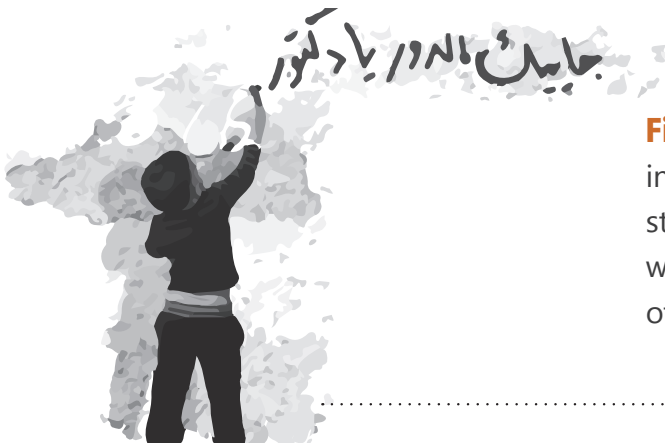
Narrating the details and stories witnessed by the city's youth remains difficult; many were hard to reach and others were subjected to the same heart wrenching conditions imposed on the rest of the country, and are now displaced across the country. For this reason, the research team has sought to execute extreme caution when presenting these facts, confirming and fact-checking the information and testimonies obtained as much as possible, in order to present as truthfully as possible. Despite all efforts, this work remains merely a simple step towards documenting the story of the Syrian people and the transformations that took place over the past few years.

Chapter One: Age of Transformations

The South Sings of Freedom

When the people of Dara'a cried out, "Death, Not Humiliation" it did not occur to them that this chant would wake Syrians from a slumber, and that it would be the start of a series of unpredictable changes.

The events preceding March 18, 2011 may seem confusing and controversial to many; but most Syrians today agree, especially those who rose up against Assad's rule, is that the children of the city of Daraa sparked the uprising when they wrote on the walls of their school: "It is your turn Doctor" in reference to the country's president, and "the people want to overthrow the regime."



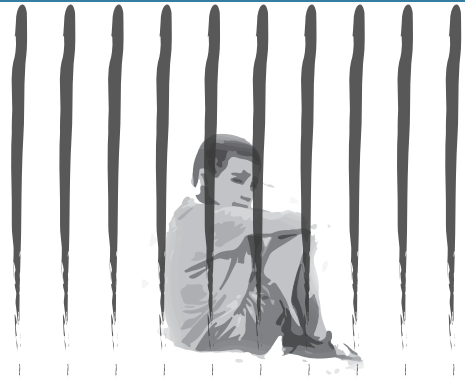
First Events: The Syrian mukhabarat, or intelligence security, arrested a group of students while in class. The students had written phrases critical of Asad on the walls of their school.

According to various narratives about the events preceding the first demonstration in Dara'a, and according to the testimony of Hind Majali¹, the event that sparked the anger of the people in Dara'a was the arrest of several students from their classrooms, accused of writing anti-Asad slogans on the walls of their school. According to Majali, the students were between the ages of 11 to 15, with one 19 year old. The total number of arrested students was 25.

According to Majali, another incident was overlooked because it coincided with the students writing the slogans: a group of young men assaulted a soldier at a

¹Hind Majali's, an activist and former detainee, testimony obtained by a researcher in Dara'a. May 2016.

Second Events: A group of boys attacked a security guard at one of the security checkpoints. They were arrested, interrogated, and tortured.



checkpoint and burned it down. However, it was the arrest and subsequent interrogation, torture, and humiliation of the children that caused the people to revolt in anger.

In the weeks leading up to March 18, 2011, the parents of the disappeared children sought their release by communicating with the intelligence officers led by Atef Najib. Najib, head of the political security branch, insisted on keeping the young boys in custody. He insulted the families of the arrested and humiliated them. When the families went out on the 18th of March, chanting “death, not humiliation” it was due to their treatment at the hands of Najib and was in clear defiance of the security authorities of the city.

The Martyrs Awaken the Neighborhoods

Since 1982² Syria has not seen any open casualties at the hands of the regime forces. Generations growing up under decades of Asadist rule had not seen a protest against the regime. All they knew were the rallies staged by the regime, imposed on the people to show their support for the government. It is in this context that March 18 becomes even more important. On that day, Syrians came out against the regime and witnessed their “national army” that is, the Syrian Arab Army open fire on peaceful protestors, killing and injuring civilians.³

According to Hend, the parents pleaded with Najib for the release of their children. All their efforts to release their children failed, and it was because of

² 1982 refers to the year of the Hama massacre at the hands of the Asad regime during its conflict with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

³ A video showing the security crackdown on the first demonstration on March 18, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnCJ5K1tKXE>

March 18, 2011



The first protest emerged from "Abu Bakr" and "Bilal" mosques in Dara'a Al-Balad, marching towards Omari mosque and the mukhabarat headquarters. The security forces opened fire and the first martyrs of the Syrian uprising were killed: **Hussam Ayish** and **Mahmoud Jowabreh**.

this that they decided to rally in the streets. They wanted to exert pressure on the security forces in the city, to force them to release their detained children.

After Friday prayers on the 18th, the worshippers from Abu Bakr and Bilal mosques gathered together, heading towards Omari mosque. The crowds then moved towards the Ba'ath Party headquarters building in the city. According to Bilal Ghamza⁴, there was a large security presence on that day. The city was separated into two parts: Dara'a al-Balad, where the Omari mosque is located, and the area where the parents gathered, and Dara'a a al-Mahatta, where state institutions lay.

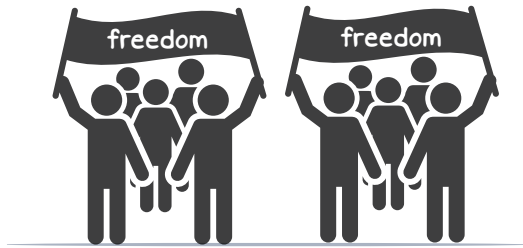
The parents gathered near the intelligence headquarters and attempted to communicate with the security branch's officers. They were hoping there would be a response to their demands. Some members of the security forces, however, opened fire on the crowds of peaceful protestors. Many were wounded and the first two martyrs of the Syrian uprising were killed: Hussam Ayyash and Mahmoud al-Jawabreh, two young men in their twenties.

The people of Dara'a transferred the wounded to Omari mosque and other nearby hospitals. They gathered the bodies of the dead in the courtyard of the mosque and were able to rally thousands to stand in between the dead and wounded and the security forces.

⁴ Testimony gathered by the research team in Dara'a; Spring 2016

March 19, 2011

Tens of thousands of Dara'a residents gathered for a funerary march towards the city.



There is nothing to indicate that the actions of the people in those moments was anything by spontaneous. The entire series of events reeks of unpremeditated situations: insults against the people and unjustifiable violence against them and the insistence to rebel in the face of the fascism and arrogance of the security services.

People gathered in the courtyard of the Omari mosque, many of them unable to believe what had happened. The news of the clashes and the martyrs spread across the Dara'a's countryside and the entirety of Syria. Anger billowed across large segments of Syrian society, emanating from Dara'a outward.

On March 19, 2011, tens of thousands of villagers went to Dara'a and gathered at the Omari mosque to walk in the funerary march of the protesters who had been killed. Those who could not make it to the funeral sat in anticipation, waiting for any news.

Escalating Conflict: The Road to Revolution

Much of the importance of the events in Dara'a lays in what it meant for the rest of the country. The actions taken by the regime forces on March 18, 2011 sparked outrage that spread across the entire country. Just one week after the first demonstration, that is, on March 25, 2011, dozens of protests were carried out across different towns and cities in Syria: in the Damascus outskirts, Deir Ez Zor, Baniyas, and Hama to name a few. All chanted for Dara'a and expressed their support for the protestors.

Dara'a spearheaded much of the burgeoning revolutionary movement in Syria, whose eyes were fixed to the south waiting to be led. The protesters in Dara'a

March 23 - 22, 2011

The security forces surrounded and stormed the mosque, opening fire upon the crowd.



did not let down the rest of the country. They defied the security forces in the city despite being wounded and targeted. On March 25, 2011 massive protests broke out which increased the momentum and led to the rural areas joining the uprising in the areas surrounding Omari mosque.

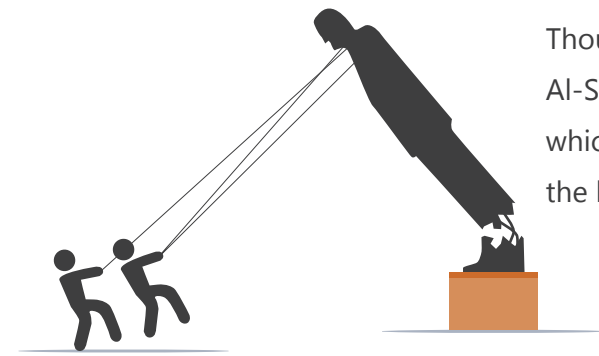
After the funerals on March 19 and 20, Omari mosque turned into a hotbed of revolutionary activity in the city. In those days, the mosque was turned into a field hospital with many of the injured treated there. Volunteer doctors tended to them. The mosque and surrounding square became a meeting place for the thousands of people who gathered from across the province, hanging up pictures of the martyrs. It is with this that the Omari mosque became a symbol of the nascent revolution.

The Asadist forces were quick in their attempt to dismantle this, beating protesters. On March 22 and 23, 2011 security forces stormed the mosque and opened fire on the crowd. Dozens were killed and wounded. The Asadist forces entered the mosque and vandalized the property. The regime's media filmed the mosque as a "hotbed of terrorists." They planted automatic weapons in the mosque hall as well as satellite communication devices. The levied charges of terrorism against the protesters.^{5 6}

Despite the heavy security presence and the proliferation of barriers to prevent those from the rural outskirts to entire the city, those outside of Dara'a were able to come rescue their brethren at the Omari mosque. According to al-

⁵ Video purporting to show the storming of the mosque by regime forces, March 23 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SSZLHu3rf0>

⁶ Some of the killed on that day were: Dr. Ali Mahamid, Mohamad Abu al-Ayn, Hamid Abu Nabout, Taher Masalmeh, and Sir Ibtisam Masalmeh

March 25, 2011

Thousands of people were injured in Al-Sanamayn, in the Dara'a outskirts, which led to people toppling statues of the late president, Hafez al-Asad.

Ghamza, the residents of the Dara'a outskirts sought to support and stand by their compatriots in the city. Those that could not get to the city had their own protests and demonstrations in their areas, chanting against the regime and the security forces. The sheer number of these crowds caused the security forces in those areas to simply watch, simply because they were surprised by the number.

On March 25, 2011 the rebellion in Dara'a escalated when people heard about the dozens killed and injured in al-Sanamayn, after a protest in support of the people in Dara'a al-Balad. The people of al-Sanamayn, in the Dara'a countryside, toppled and burned a statue of the late president, Hafez al-Asad⁷

The burning of the statue indicated that things in Syria had reached an irreversible turning point and a painful slap in the face for the security and intelligence services, who were not prepared for an uprising. According to several testimonies, Maher al-Asad, the brother of Bashar al-Asad the current president and the commander of the notorious 4th division, came to the city of Dara'a with crowds of armored vehicles and military forces. Though early, this was the first public participation of the specialized regime forces suppressing the popular uprising in Dara'a.

Military Convoys Occupy the City

⁷ Video purporting to show the fall of the Hafez al Asad statue on March 25, 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fGn0y2_d0

The burning of the statue and the escalation of the demonstrations in Dara'a⁸ were viewed as a provocation and a direct challenge to the Asad regime, which led to the involvement of the military and its elite forces to counter this movement.⁹ It was clear that the Asad regime made a choice to follow the security option, which meant the repression and prevention of the uprising from spreading to other parts of the country. The forces worked hard to nip the uprising in the bud.

Ultimately, they were unable to quell the uprising and prevent people from going out in mass demonstrations against Asad. Thus came the decision to storm the city on April 25, 2011.

On the 25th, the military convoys and armored vehicles entered the neighborhoods of the Dara'a al-Balad and bombed the city using heavy weaponry. The security services launched a city-wide arrest campaign, detaining almost every young male civilian. Dozens were killed and wounded. According to testimonies, a sniper belonging to the Asad regime wreaked havoc on the civilians. A number of witnesses told Human Rights Watch that there were snipers on the roofs of government buildings near the demonstrations who targeted and killed many demonstrators. From video clips and images gotten from smuggled mobile phones show head, neck, and chest wounds indicating deliberate targeting.¹⁰

In the heat of anger and the desire for self-defense, some youth took up arms to defend themselves against the invasion. There were clashes between the people of Dara'a and the regime troops who were armed to the teeth. 25 members of the army and 90 civilians were killed. A number of buildings and

⁸ Video purporting to show military helicopters landing loaded with soldiers in the courtyard of the municipal stadium of Dara'a, March 18 2011

⁹ Testimonies obtained by the research team from activists and those who deferred from the army; the witnesses preferred to remain anonymous.

¹⁰ For more details, see the Human Rights Watch report issued on June 1, 2011: <http://cutt.us/sRldy>

military vehicles belonging to the regime were burned, and some people killed.¹¹

The confrontations between civilians and the regime army cannot be seen as 'armed confrontations' -- on one hand, the regime was heavily armed and prepared, while the civilians had basic light weaponry. There were no more than a few dozen young men carrying weapons, no match for the storming troops. They did not pick up arms ideologically but rather from a desire for self-defense. They were ultimately run down by the army.

For a few moments, the regime succeeded in suppressing the movement in the city of Dara'a. But the reality was the uprising had spread to every geographic area of Syria in a short time, rendering the regime unable to completely stamp it out.

Siege of Dara'a

On April 25, 2011 the regime took the decision to storm the city of Dara'a after failing to suppress the revolutionary movement in the city. The army entered the city with armored vehicles and tanks and various types of heavy weapons, supported by elite troops and the different security agencies. Hundreds of snipers spread on the roofs of various government buildings and some civilian houses.

Military checkpoints were erected in every vicinity of the city. All city entrances were closed, and military forces and soldiers were deployed in all the neighborhoods and main streets. The blockade and the snipers were imposed on the population to prevent them from leaving their homes; dozens of victims were shot by snipers in this way.

Meanwhile, the intelligence agencies launched indiscriminate arrests against the city's residents, arresting hundreds of young men. Some were released after a few weeks while others remain in prison at time of writing.

¹¹ A video showing the burning of a cart belonging to the regime. April 8, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmZfW2Km75I>

The raid was carried out systematically. The forces opened fire on the civilians and dozens were injured.¹² The Asadist soldiers targeted medical personnel. The snipers targeted the city's water tanks, resulting in a severe shortage of potable water. The intensity of the siege meant the medical personnel in the city lacked most of the important materials they needed. It was clear that the Asad regime needed every way possible to suppress the revolutionary movement in Dara'a.

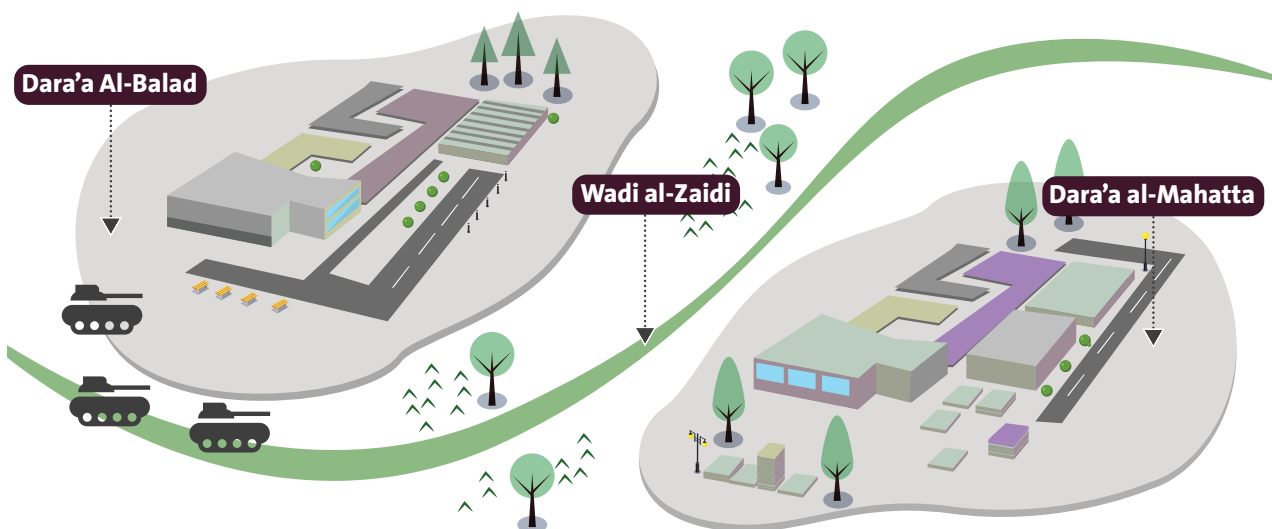
From March 18, 2011 until the end of May 2011, that is, until the last of the military incursions, 418 deaths at the hands of the regime forces in Dara'a were documented. 200 people were killed in the few days following the initial storming of the city in late April 2011. This figure does not include the missing. There is no way to independently verify the information received from Dara'a during this time, as no journalists or independent organizations were allowed entry into the city and most communications, including the internet, were cut.

¹² Video purporting to show the regime attacking protesters and medical personnel, on March 18 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPeZlf9ohqY>

Chapter Two: Age of Resistance

Major Shifts: The First Demonstrations of the Free Syrian Army

When Asad's forces withdrew from Dara'a al-Balad in mid-May 2011, they withdrew in the direction of al-Mahatta, which included most of the buildings and headquarters of the intelligence services. They kept a group of military posts in Dara'a al-Balad, in the strategic areas of the city. The regime cut the road between the two different parts of Dara'a, putting up roadblocks and military checkpoints in the Zaidi valley. Asad retained his forces in the busy and economically profitable parts of town, surrounded by the state's institutions and its security forces. The second part of town remained under observation and partial siege as the revolutionary movement emerged from al-Balad.



The people of Dara'a al-Balad had bitter experiences during a raid carried out by the regime forces. They made sacrifices and it was in this period that they decided to take up arms and defend themselves from the regime. When the regime stormed the city, they witnessed a large number of abuses against civilians, including mass killings. These graves were discovered by the people of the city, who found the bodies of many missing residents.

After the army withdrew from Dara'a, the demonstrations returned to the streets of the city albeit in smaller numbers. The people were apprehensive

and anxious, and it was within this climate that the first armed opposition groups were formed. They did not have any names and were limited in mission to the protection of the demonstrators, and preventing the regime from recommitting new massacres against the civilians in the city.

According to testimonies¹³ gathered by the author, these groups were made of small numbers of young men in the city who only possessed light arms such as hunting rifles, or machine guns that had been taken from Asadist military checkpoints.

Between mid-May until September 2011, the population of Dara'a al-Balad lived in a state of apprehension and anxiety, fearful of a secondary attack by the regime. In the meantime, the large scale demonstrations ceased to be and were replaced by fly-by protests. These involved a smaller number activists, and took place in the evening or night time. Small groups of armed persons protected them, while others took pictures to broadcast and send to media outlets.¹⁴

The fraught environment and the partial siege of the city forced dozens of families to flee the city to the nearby countryside, over the Jordanian border, and others to Damascus and its environs.

By the end of 2011, the revolutionary movement and the militarization of the movement was more visible all across the country. The Omari Battalion was the first military group formed in Dara'a al-Balad. The group later became the Omari Brigade and included a number of local military factions.

Until the end of 2011, these emerging military groups limited their work to protection of demonstrations and to the occasional attacks of Asad's military points. By 2012, the armed groups intensified their attacks and the conflict started to resemble a pattern of war and military operations, which lead to the

¹³ Testimonies from activists and army defectors obtained by the field group who preferred to remain anonymous.

¹⁴ A video showing a fly by protest on August 9, 2011 <http://cutt.us/W9AtB>

intensification of Asad's bombing campaign on Dara'a's districts and its exposure to air raids.

With time and the intensification of fighting, the city's displacement rates went up. Entire urban areas fell to the control of the opposition which resulted in the large-scale destruction of Dara'a al-Balad. The siege disrupted people's livelihoods and the city was gradually emptied of its population. Through fierce fighting, the armed groups, who became known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) managed to gradually control the city's neighborhoods.

Most Important Military Formations

It is difficult to discuss the most important military formations without taking into account the fact that most of these formations exist beyond Dara'a and extend to the countryside. Most of the armed opposition groups in fact originated from the countryside from where they launched military operations, ultimately entering the city of Dara'a al-Balad and repelling Asad's forces after fierce battles.

In Dara'a province alone there were more than 50 military factions, ranging from Free Syrian Army formations such as the Southern Front to the Salafi Jihadist groupings, such as Martyrs of Yarmouk, and those who have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL). The military formations in Dara'a can be broken down into three basic categories: the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the local Islamist military formations, and the internationalist Jihadists.

The Southern Front and the Last FSA Configurations

By the end of 2014, on December 6, the military formations signed a charter of cooperation under the title of the "Southern Front". It included a number of items which the groups decided were the most important and were related to the logistical mechanisms of the coalition to combat priorities and the principles that defined the relationship of these military formations and their relationships with the civilian residents of those areas.

37,000

Fighters



16

Military Formations



2014 /12/6

Foundation



16 major groups make up the Southern Front alongside dozens of battalions and other brigades. 37,000 fighters were deployed in the Hawran and Quneitra regions, which has become known as the triangle of death and extended between the countryside of Dara'a, Quneitra, and the outskirts of Damascus.

The Southern Front is considered to be the last of the Free Syrian Army, which has since been mostly transformed by Islamist extremists. The FSA has faded and decayed, and no longer refers to moderate opposition military formations but has become an umbrella term, referring to any armed group regardless of ideology and belief.

THE MOST IMPORTANT MILITARY FORMATIONS OF THE SOUTHERN FRONT

The most important military member of the Southern Front are the Omar Brigades, Ansar Islam Front, Saif al-Sham Brigades, Ansar al-Sunna Brigades, the 1st Army, Yarmouk Army, the 1st Corps, and the Fajr Al Islam Division, among others. The Southern Front is composed of more than 50 factions.

1. **Omari Brigades:** Formed in the second half of 2012, it was led by Qais Qataneh, a defector from the regime army. He was killed in battle. His successor was Jihad Qataneh. Omari Brigades are considered to be the part of the Free Syrian Army and is one of the Southern Front's strongholds. The brigade includes a number of battalions, such as the Suqoor Lajat battalions, led by Murhaf Awad, Mohamad Adel Hariri Battalions led by Jihad Qataneh, the Swords of Righteousness Battalion led by Bassem Oudeh, and the Sadeeq Battalion led by Jalal al-Mowaj.
2. **Yarmouk Army:** One of the first military groups to come out of Southern Syria. It was initially led by Bashar al-Zoubi, a civilian from Dara'a. Following him was Abu Kinan, or Suleiman Sharif. Yarmouk Army boasted a few thousand fighters, with heavy machinery.

3. **Hamza Brigades:** The Hamza Brigades were formed on March 24, 2014 under the direction of Saber Safr.¹⁵ It was composed of six brigades that worked mostly in the northwestern region of Dara'a: Hamza Battalion, Lions of God, led by Abu Farouk; Hawran Mujahiddeen, led by Abu Mohamad; and Ahfadh Omar Bin al-Khattab, led by Farouk a-Assi. It was part of the Dara'a Military Council and a leading member of the Southern Front.
4. **Fajr Al Islam Division:** Announced in September 2014, led by Mohamad Salameh, from Dara'a.¹⁶ Includes a number of military factions such as the Fajr Al Islam Battalion led by Hussein Hassan; Islam Battalion, led by Fadi Mansour; and the Majd of Hawran, led by Ahmed al-Hariri.
5. **Ansar al-Sunna Brigade:** Its formation was announced on August 30, 2013, led by Ahmed Rashid. The brigade took part in major Dara'a battles. It is composed of 350 fighters.¹⁷

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTHERN FRONT

Though the Southern Front was one of the most important military formations in Syria, as evidenced by the significant progress they made in the face of the Asad regime and its allies. However, despite the moderate and comprehensive national discourse, the front was fragile as reflected by the withdrawal of various formations from the alliance.

The Front's military progress declined gradually following their cessation of fighting in the triangle of death in 2015, when it was made clear what the limits of the support from regional powers that affected the formation of the Military Operations Command.

¹⁵ Video announcement of the Hamza Brigades, March 24 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37ib1RpDj6o>

¹⁶ Video announcement of Fajr al Islam Division September 28, 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BHW-Pdx_img

¹⁷ Video announcement of Ansar al-Sunna Brigade, August 30, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MstB-v01b24Q>

Chapter Three: Civil Society Organizations

Lights of Syria

The Lights of Syria organization is an independent humanitarian non-profit organization that provides relief, development services, and educational support alongside psychological services for all spectrums of Syrian society, regardless of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or language. It includes about 39 personnel, including administrators and teachers in the field, all of whom are volunteers.

According to Awad Bardan,¹⁸ the organization “Lights of Syria” focused its efforts mainly on the educational process, specifically in areas controlled by the opposition. Their projects target children between the ages of 5 to 16.

For children aged 7 and above, they were given courses in Arabic, English, and French alongside mathematics, general science, and the principles of human rights and the Conventions on the Rights of the Child. They implemented many important recreational activities and sports such as football, martial arts, painting, singing, and acting. The number of students who have benefitted from this program are about 300.

In addition to the education activities, the organization offers psychological support which they provide to children between ages 4 to 14. The support is offered by specialists who have undergone several training courses in cooperation with the organization “Guards of Childhood.” Implementation of

A women’s organization that offers educational, aid, development, and mental health programming.



Their programming is mainly for Syrian children between the ages of 14 - 4



39

Members

¹⁸ This information was gathered by the research team from Awad Bardan, head of the organization. Date: August 2016.

the program involved creating a safe and friendly place, and programs for adolescents.

In addition to the aforementioned activities, the organization is constantly expanding and seeking new activities for the organization. They are trying to now focus on wellbeing of the citizens, building partnerships and coordinating efforts with various agencies, and the development and implementation of educational and developmental projects that serve Syrian society and allows for job opportunities and the establishment of human rights principles within society to share with the organizations, councils, and institutions in order to achieve a civil society governed by law, justice, and democracy.

General Council for Civil Defence

At the end of 2012, a group of activists began to think about the establishment of a general civil defense group due to the growing needs of the region's population, especially after the regime forces withdrew from many neighborhoods in al-Balad. The group launched in April 2013 the General Council for Civil Defense was launched and limited its work to the city's neighborhoods.¹⁹

The General Council for Civil Defense focused its work on the wounded, securing treatment for them, and later expanded their mission to include neighborhood clean up, service provision, and collecting garbage to dispose of it.

With time, the number of volunteers increased and they now provide water and power maintenance services through volunteers and specialized technicians.

During a short period of time, the General Council was able to expand its activities and became active in 25 towns and villages across Dara'a province. They were able to build links with local institutions in these areas and solidify



Primary care and assistance for the injured, neighborhood cleanups, and maintenance of the electrical and water systems



2013

The council was formed in April 2013

¹⁹ Follow the group's activities here: <https://m.facebook.com/scsyrain/>

their relations with the local councils and with civil society organizations to coordinate efforts. They enjoyed good relations with the local armed opposition groups. The group has authority and respect due to the nature of their work and the integrity of their employees.

The General Council for Civil Defense suffers from a lack of stable financial and logistical support. They rely on support from the partnerships they have with local and international civil society organizations, but that is not enough due to the obstacles they face.

Israr Volunteering Division

Differing from the official organizations, and removed from the political forces and alliances, the Insistent Volunteering Division was born out of the youth's desire to provide a helping hand to Syrian children, especially those in the displaced camps in Dara'a.

According to Ghamza²⁰, one of the founders of the team, the team was established at the start of 2016 because of the camps and the children in them that need psychological support, due to the impact of adverse effects on their lives. "The name's team was chosen in a democratic manner," said Ghamza.

According to a number of humanitarian reports, children are often the most affected by war. It goes beyond physical damage, to psychological damage. The effects of which accompany them throughout the remainder of their lives. Dozens of civil and international humanitarian organizations have sought to provide a helping hand to the victims.



Assistance for children and food assistance for those within internally displaced camps in Dara'a province



14

Members

²⁰ The information in the is paragraph was obtained by a researcher from an interview with an activist in the team

According to one of the team members, the volunteer work is necessary to see “the smiling faces of the children and to keep them away as much as possible from the atmosphere of the violence in their surroundings.”

The Insistent Volunteering Division works within their limited, modest means since they do not receive money from any party whatsoever. The activities that they do are fairly simple, so says Ghamza. They play games and offer mindfulness sessions for the youth. They show them animated movies and sing songs together.

The group is working on developing their capabilities with the Olive Branch Foundation. The team frequently takes training courses in order to properly serve the children.

Olive Branch Foundation

The Olive Branch Foundation was started when three activists met in a cafe. The activists, from Dara’a, chose the name because of a serendipitous incident that reminded them of the uprising and how representative the name Olive Branch was to the reality of the revolution.²¹



6

Cultural centers



2012

Formed in
October 2013



39

Members

The group was founded to “return to the essence of Syrian civil society, which brings everyone together.” The name was representative of their goals and hopes. One of their friends, Iyad al-Haj Ali had originally been a peaceful activist, with lots of demonstrations and relief but he ended up joining the Free Syrian Army, only to be killed later. This prompted the three to think about

²¹ For more details, see more information on the organizational website: <http://obbranch.org> and their Facebook page <http://cutt.us/c23b>

the military climate that did not provide them with options. As such, they started the organization in October 2012, according to Aws.²²

They started with a campaign called “My Room is My Class” aimed at those students who had dropped out of school as a result of shelling and fighting near their homes, rendering them unable to attend school. They took on three teachers to help with the campaign. Unfortunately, the first teacher was arrested, the second hit by a shell and the third married. This pilot program, though ultimately unsuccessful, helped them. “The detainee was let go and the one hit by a shell was healed,” Aws told the research team.

The Foundation met again in August 2013 amidst a pessimistic atmosphere due to the worsening conditions in Syria. In the end, they decided to continue their programs. “We decided to go against all odds, because we want to work. We collected 10,000 Syrian pounds and started our campaign, ‘We Want to Live’, which is focused on the child’s right to life, the most basic of rights.” Over time, the group has been able to raise money to continue this campaign and others, such as “I want to Play and Draw” which led to the establishment of drawing lessons for the children and a competition that culminated in an exhibition of their art. Another campaign the organization did was the “New Hope In Eid’s Laugh” which included concerts for children on the first day of Eid in Dara’a (350 children), Zabadani (150 children), and al-Tal (100 children) and included drawing on the faces of children, playing, reading, and drawing stories. “We not only saw joy in the children’s faces, but joy in their parent’s faces who saw their children innovate and rejoice. Many told us that it has been a long time since they have seen joy in the eyes of the children,” they told the research team. They wanted another to host another festival, but did not have the funds to do so.

In December 2013, a paradigm shift occurred in the work of the team. Anas, one of their friends in Beirut, collected 10 dollars from many donors in order to develop the “Olive Branch House of Education” which included a kindergarten,

²² Aws is a pseudonym for an activist from Dara’a, who was studying at the School of Dentistry before his expulsion for taking part in protests

primary school, and a children's club. Approximately 950 children were enrolled. The group established "Rainbow" a children's magazine that had a distribution of over 1500 free copies a month. Today, they are in the process of establishing a "Olive House for Special Needs" and are currently in the process of securing funding.

Though the activists worked primarily on childhood education, that did not stop them from paying attention to other things. When they witnessed the environmental devastation, they launched the campaign "Planting the Future" during which they planted eucalyptus and olive trees. "Agricultural projects do not need large sums of money, and the children and their families learn a beautiful culture," according to Aws. They also launched winterization campaigns that secured blankets and winter clothes for the displaced in the camps along the Syrian-Jordanian border, and for the Syrian-Palestinians discriminated against the Jordanian government.

The team of the "Olive Branch Foundation" works with different students to register their educational data, and helps them prepare transcripts in order to apply for other schools and universities later. The group is working towards adjusting the formal curriculum of the Syrian state, despite the process. They have a group of 45 certified teachers who are working together to teach at their schools and develop a new curriculum.

The schools founded by the organization have not been subject to harassment by religious militias, and the parents of the children have no qualms about sending their children to the school. The main difficulties the group faces are due to the repression from Damascus and the inability of the activists to go to Jordan for materials and workshops.

Ultimately, Olive Branch tries to be free of external interference, and seeks to build the foundation of Syria.

Conclusion

On March 18, 2011 the revolution started in the Hawran, south of the country. Since then, Dara'a has passed through all stages of the revolution: local protests, martyrs, and a revolutionary movement that took to the streets.

Like other cities in Syria, the revolution's paradigm shifted and the people of Dara'a took up arms and formed battalions and military groups. Within a few months, the city attempted liberation which ended the 'peaceful' stage of the revolution. Dara'a engaged in a fierce war with Asad's forces and as such, the city was subject to a crippling siege which destroyed the infrastructure of the city and forced thousands of families to flee the city.

Even today, half of Dara'a is under the grip of the Asad regime. The other section is in ruins, subjected to violent war and continuous bombardment.

Despite the decline in the revolutionary movement of Dara'a, and despite the criticism that the city has faced because of the decline in revolutionary activity, the city remains in Syrian collective memory as one of the most important cities: the birthplace of Syrian consciousness, whose voices drove Syrians to march against the tyrant of Damascus.

Methodology

Since mid-March 2011, Syrian cities -- their social formations and geography -- have been in flux. Though the revolutionary processes have resembled one another and intersected at many points, each city contains its own idiosyncrasies and distinctions. Thus, a macroscopic study of each city is needed to tell the story of what unfolded in each city.

The beginning of the revolutionary movement in Syria is characterised by the suppression of free speech and independent media by the Asad regime. Media teams and researchers are banned from entry and work in Syria, and thus it is a new independent media that sought to document and broadcast daily events.

For decades, Syria was a 'kingdom of silence' and Asad, both father and son' succeeded in maintaining it as such despite various activities in the country. After the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the regime failed to contain the story and civilians took on the task of producing knowledge about what was happening in the city.

This project, "Cities in Revolution", was born in this context. At first, different cities were selected for targeted research and later, each city had independent teams conduct fieldwork in order to gather information, verify information, and obtain photographs and video footage.

The primary source of information is eyewitness testimony, which was obtained and recorded by activists involved in the city's transformations. These testimonies were verified and thus became valid to use in research. The secondary source of information was electronic references, that is: videos and written testimonies. After information was gathered about each city, there were comparisons made across the different events and the events that were corroborated by a number of different sources and had consensus amongst eyewitnesses were ultimately used. Any gaps were

filled in by the research team, who relied on exclusive sources and electronic sources.

In any case, it must be noted that we are unable to claim neutrality and absolute objectivity in the production of this project: the team doing this work is biased to the revolution of the Syrian people. Those whose testimonies are present in the work are opposed to the Asad regime. That said, as much research and measures as possible were put in place to remain as true as possible to ethics of objectivity, hence this disclosure.

“Cities in Revolution” does not claim to portray the complete objective truth. And we hope that our efforts will be used by Syrian activists and movements as a means to fill at least some gaps in knowledge.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the eyewitnesses, who donated precious time and effort to relay their stories to us. We would like to also extend gratitude to the different downs who rose against tyranny and to all who contributed to the success of this project.

Team

SABR DARWISH

Syrian researcher and journalist. Darwish co-edited two books: *The Experience of Liberated Cities*, Dar al-Rayyes 2015, and *The Tragedies of Besieged Aleppo and the Messages of the Besieged*, with Lebanese journalist Mohammad Abu Samra, Dar al-Mutawasset 2016.

MOHAMMAD DIBO

Current editor-in-chief of SyriaUntold (Arabic), and an editor at al-Arabi al-Jadid. Dibo is a Syrian poet, writer and researcher interested in Syrian culture and economy. Dibo's latest work is an autobiographical book, "Like He Who Witnesses His Own Death", about his experience in prison during the early days of the Syrian uprising. He is a regular contributor in many Arab and international newspapers.

Cities in Revolution

The complexity of the situation in Syria, the regime's efforts in dividing the opposition as well as the growing militarisation of the conflict has led to very various forms of revolutions depending on the geographical areas or cities where the uprising took place. In this multifaceted context, the narrative on the Syrian events often tends to simplify what actually is a complex and varied reality on the ground. Moreover, the overabundance of information on Syria and the fast pace of news production make it difficult to ensure the validity of facts and figures and to establish a chronological, as objective as possible account of the events since March 2011.

Through the use of innovative forms of storytelling mixing research-based written content, infographics and documentary videos, the *Cities in Revolution* project's objective is to fill this gap by documenting a comprehensive, chronological account of the events as they happened in six different cities, in all their complexity and diversity, with a focus on civil movements and creative disobedience. Each multimedia documentary file will rely on content already available, but also on research and information collected by activists on the ground for this specific purpose.

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SyriaUntold

SyriaUntold is an independent digital media project exploring the storytelling of the Syrian struggle and the diverse forms of resistance. We are a team of Syrian writers, journalists, programmers and designers living in the country and abroad trying to highlight the narrative of the Syrian revolution, which Syrian men and women are writing day by day. Through grassroots campaigns, emerging forms of self-management and self-government and endless manifestations of citizen creativity, a new outspoken Syria has emerged, after decades of repression and paralysis. With mainstream media focusing increasingly on geostrategic and military aspects and less on internal dynamics developing on the ground, we believe there are many aspects of the Syrian struggle that remain uncovered, many stories that we would not like to see forgotten.