



Cities in Revolution

Zabadani

Paths of a Revolutionary Movement

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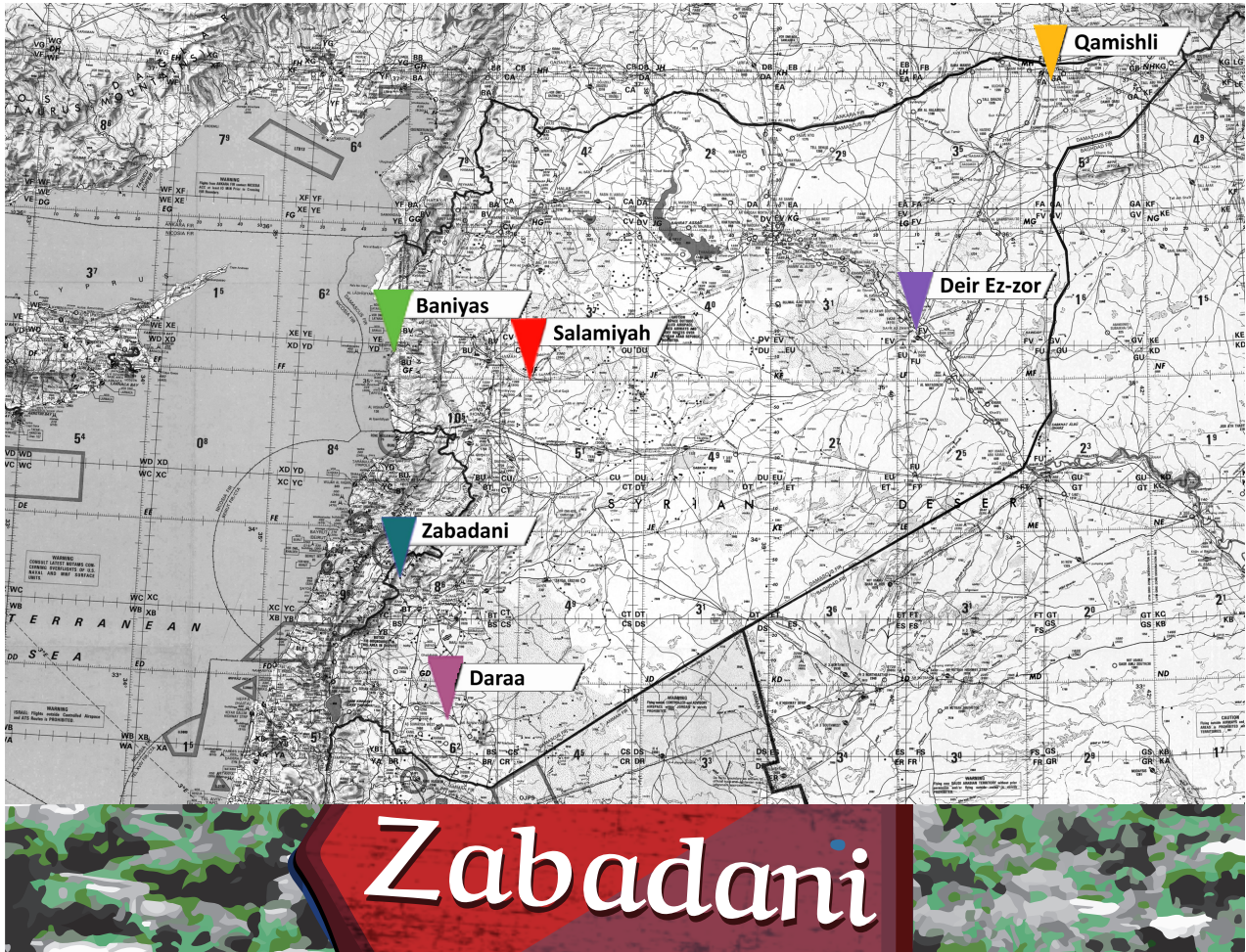
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Introduction



Northwest of the capital Damascus is the city of Zabadani, leaning against the foothills of Mount Lebanon to the west, and overlooking vast plains to the east. Those plains were once famous for cultivating apples, cherries, peaches and other agricultural products that are of special significance to Syrians. The city's population had reached 30,000, and was made up of people from a variety of social and religious backgrounds.

Zabadani is considered to be one of the most dynamic Syrian cities. On a touristic level, it is considered an attractive destination all year long, known for its mild climate in the summer, and its plentitude of snow in the winter. Its expansive middle class and high average income reflected positively on the city's

educational level, especially with regards to their achievement in higher education.

Until the onset of 2011, Zabadani had led a tranquil existence both politically and economically. Nonetheless, many of its people have been subject to long periods of detention, especially those who have voiced dissent against the Assad regime, such as Kamal Labwani, the liberal dissident, and Khaled Kuweifi, who was accused of belonging to the Jihadist movement, incarcerated in Saydnaya Prison, and subsequently released.

It was in the beginning of 2011, during the months leading up to the eruption of the Syrian revolution in mid-March 2011, that the opportunity arose for the sons of Zabadani to participate in various direct political actions. Many young men and women from Zabadani took part in the sit-ins held in front of the embassies of Arab Spring countries (Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Egypt). When the first popular protest in Syria took place on March 15th, 2011 in al-Hamidiyah Souq at the heart of the capital Damascus, several of the sons of Zabadani participated.

The city of Zabadani has lived through all the stages of the Syrian revolution, witnessing some of the most vigorous and vivacious peaceful protests that occurred between the middle of March 2011 and the middle of 2012. During this time, it was subject to many detention campaigns that targeted activists and included women, men and even those in the prime of their youth. In 2011 alone, the number of the detainees from Zabadani exceeded 200 men and women¹. The city has also endured the experience of armed struggle, since the formation of armed opposition forces around the end of 2011, which engaged in violent battles with Assad's forces as of the beginning of 2012.

Around mid-2012, armed opposition forces were able to consolidate their control over the city of Zabadani, and the city experience liberation once again. Following this "liberation," most of the city's families were displaced, while the remaining civilians formed the first Local Council in Syria. Its duties were to

¹ List of individuals from Zabadani detained in 2011 (Arabic): <http://cutt.us/ivAKW>

manage the city's affairs and to negotiate a local ceasefire with the Assad regime. They also worked to facilitate the return of the displaced, but did not succeed. It was at this time that the city started experimenting with local truces, where activists made a series of agreements with the Assad regime, none of which was destined to last.

The rebels retained control of the city of Zabadani until around the beginning of 2016, when the most violent battles erupted. These encounters were led by Lebanese Hezbollah militants working alongside Assad's regular troops, and caused the near-total destruction of the city and its agricultural industry, as well as dozens of deaths. After months of intense fighting, the forces of Hezbollah managed to infiltrate the city's neighborhoods and take control, while a few dozen opposition fighters remained entrenched in a single neighborhood, subjected to severe besiegement. This may eventually lead to their withdrawal from the city if they make an agreement with the Assad regime.

The story of the city of Zabadani revolves around these details and pivotal moments. It is a story that Syria Untold seeks to piece together by publicizing testimonials from the people who experienced its events, either through direct participation or close witnessing. It is a story that will remain unfinished, awaiting its completion through the efforts of other researchers and storytellers who want to narrate this tale of woe.

Chapter One: The Good Old Days; The Revolution's Initial Setting

The passion of beginnings

On March 15th, 2011, near the Umayyad Mosque at the heart of Damascus, a son of Zabadani, named Anas Bourhan², joined in the first protest that took place in Syria at the time. The protestors were a very small group of men and women, and at least two of them were from Zabadani: Anas and his uncle Dr. Radwan Bourhan. Dr. Bourhan is one of the most remarkable activists of Zabadani, and today he languishes in the prisons of Assad regime, one of the thousands of Syrians who are missing or unaccounted for.



A son of Zabadani, Anas Bourhan joined in the first protest that took place in Syria alongside his compatriots in Damascus.

The protest of March 15th was the stone that stirred the stagnant water and launched, simultaneously with mobilization in the Dar'aa Governorate, the spark of the revolution. After that day most Syrian cities and towns rose up against the Assad regime. While, Anas managed to escape the secret police and regime thugs, many other protesters were detained. This incident constituted Anas' first experience of direct action. It spurred him to incite his friends and family members in Zabadani to go out and take part in the wave of protests that

broke out in the streets of Syria following the mass movement of the southern region since March 18th, 2011.

On the 16th of the same month, Syrian activists organized a protest in downtown Damascus to demand the release of detainees. Some of the participants

² Testimony of Anas Bourhan, an activist from Zabadani (Winter 2016).

were members of the Zabadani's Labwani family, which was pushing for the release of Kamal Labwani from the regime prisons. The participation of the Labwani family in this protest, and the subsequent arrest of a group of women, also paved the way for Anas and his compatriots to incite the people of Zabadani to protest. They agitated to demand the release of the women who were detained in the March 16th protest.

These events preceded the first protest in the city of Zabadani and created a framework that gathered activists and cemented their relations. This group became one of the first and most significant revolutionary hubs in the city, which will be leading the popular movement that mobilized in Zabadani on March 25th.

The city's districts

The city of Zabadani is divided into two areas: Zabadani al-Balad (Downtown Zabadani), which includes the city's old districts, and Zabadani al-Mahatta (The Station), the modern section of city. Most state institutions are located in al-Mahatta, as well as the secret police and border control buildings.

Al-Balad includes several traditional districts, most notably al-Gharbiyah, al-Jisr, al-'Ara, al-Qasaqis, 'Ayn Jaber, and al-Nabou'. The long-established families of Zabadani such as Bourhan, Kheito, Dalati, Ghanem, and others inhabit these districts. Revolutionary movement began and remained concentrated in this section of the city, with al-Jisr and al-Gharbiyah being the most active and radical neighborhoods.

Many of the families that inhabit al-Balad own agricultural property on the outskirts of the city and are considered relatively well-off. These families' education rates are considerably higher than that of the families who inhabit al-Mahatta. The people in this latter area mostly work in the tourism sector and enjoy close-knit relationships with the security apparatuses in the city. According to Anas Bourhan, there have been many marriages between security officers and women from these families.

Zabadani is renowned for its high rates of higher education. Following the events of the Arab Spring which began in Tunisia and Egypt, and later erupted in Libya and Yemen, heated debates took place among the city's university students. During the months leading up to Syria's uprising, intense polarizations separated the youth who support the Arab uprisings and those who denounce them. On the other hand, student groups became active, and youth groups took shape both within Zabadani and in the larger university milieu. Additionally, a network of new relationships emerged out of the recent developments witnessed in the region.

Things went beyond political debates and discussions in Zabadani. Anti-Assad graffiti slogans proliferated on the walls of the city. In the area of Tal'et al-Selan, according to the testimony of Omar Diab³, walls were covered in writing, disseminating anti-regime sentiments. The people of Zabadani also witnessed the deployment of secret police agents in the streets of the city as early as mid-February. They were most visible after midnight, when they would stop young men and demand identification.

Another event that Zabadani witnessed in the months preceding the Syrian revolution was the murder of one of its children, 11-year-old Hani Bourhan⁴. According to Omar's account, the child was kidnapped on his way to school by an unidentified party. The child's family then put pressure on government agencies to uncover the kidnappers and retrieve the child, whose corpse was later found in a desolate part of the city. This sparked a wave of anger from the people of Zabadani, who held a demonstration demanding that the perpetrators be located and arrested.

All of this indicates that, before the formal onset of the revolution in Dar'aa on March 18th, Zabadani experienced several protest activities that paved the way

³ Testimony of Omar Diab, an activist from Zabadani and a former student at Damascus University's Faculty of Dentistry (Winter 2016).

⁴ An MBC channel news report detailing the kidnapping and execution of child Hani Bourhan (March 11, 2011): <https://youtu.be/mUBClxAGSGs>

for the city’s wider protest movement. The first formal protest mounted by the people of Zabadani against the Assad regime took place on March 25th, 2011.

The might of the masses

On March 24th 2011, a handful of young men from Zabadani held a meeting to discuss holding a protest in the city. Among these men were Anas, his cousin Amer Bourhan and others.

The discussion that night was not about whether or not to demonstrate against the Assad regime, or about a mere act of solidarity with the city of Dar’aa (where the first martyr fell on March 18th). They were in unanimous agreement about taking to the streets. Instead, the subject of conversation was about how to organize the protest; how and from where to begin.

The young men chose to begin the demonstration at al-Jisr Mosque, which is one of the oldest in the city and is located in the heart of Zabadani. The time was set to directly follow Friday prayer on March 25th. The imam of al-Jisr Mosque at the time was Sheikh Abdulhadi Kan’an, and he was later martyred under torture inside Assad’s prisons.

At the scheduled time a group of worshipers gathered in front of the Mosque’s main gate. They were joined by dozens of young men who had been waiting outside the mosque. Suddenly, one of the men issued the city’s first cry of protest. Activist Wissam Bourhan stood amid the masses and shouted, “Allahu akbar, freedom!” Then the crowd around him shouted “Allah, Syria, freedom and nothing else!” In their first demonstration against the Assad regime, the people of Zabadani continued chanting and pushed towards the city-center⁵.



Around 200 young men take part in the city's first demonstration at al-Jisr Mosque.

⁵ The young man Wissam Bourhan was martyred on January 1st, 2013. A video showing his death can be found at this link: <https://youtu.be/SceCsNghYxQ>

According to Anas Bourhan⁶, this demonstration was made up of around 200 young men. It marched past the border police building, which was surrounded by Security agents affiliated with the Syrian secret police. When it reached the city-center, Security agents and thugs assaulted and dispersed the demonstrators. Some of the protesters were arrested, subjected to beatings, and taken to various branches of the Syrian security apparatus.

Among the young men arrested by the Security forces was Anas Bourhan. He was then taken to Zabadani's Political Security branch, and had his first experience of detention. This news spread rapidly throughout the city. Many of the activists spontaneously reorganized themselves and went to the branch. There they demanded the release of the detainees. That night they managed to put enough pressure on the command of the Security branch that they released Anas Bourhan and the other detained activists. This was the masses' first experiment in feeling their own strength. They relished the feeling, hoisting the freed-detainees onto their shoulders, and raising their voices in cheers of freedom. For decades no one had challenged Syria's notorious Security apparatus.

After the success of the activists on March 25th in demonstrating in the name of freedom and then demanding the release of detainees, the youth of Zabadani intensified its activities. They began to organize themselves for another demonstration. However, the following Friday on April 1st 2011, they were not able to carry out a demonstration due to a heavy security presence surrounding al-Jisr Mosque. One week later, on April 8th, they were also unable to demonstrate, and again they were thwarted on April 15th. They tried changing the protests' starting point, replacing al-Jisr Mosque with al-Nabou' Mosque, but security forces impeded their action once again. The activists did manage to carry out one form of active dissent during these weeks, however. Despite the intensity of security presence in the city, they took the dark of night as an opportunity to transform the walls of the cities into graffiti, publicizing anti-regime slogans and phrases.

⁶ Video showing the first demonstration in the city of Zabadani (March 11, 2012): <https://youtu.be/QirZk1SgorY>

After many failed attempts, the activists finally succeeded in holding a mass demonstration on April 22nd 2011. They began at al-Jisr Square, downtown. This site would later come to be known as Freedom Square and act as the setting for most revolutionary activity in the city. On this day, the voices cried out their desire to “topple the regime” for the first time in the streets of Zabadani. The crowd held fabric and cardboard banners that were written and designed inside one of the city’s auto repair shops by activists Yasser Zlikha and Khaled Kheito (known as Abou Abdo). That day there was almost no security presence in Zabadani⁷. The demonstrators stayed in the streets until evening, when they performed a group prayer in the public square to end the demonstration as the scant security forces looked on.



A mass demonstration takes place in al-Jisr Square and the demonstrators perform a group prayer there.

The first raid on the city: May 2011

Between April 22nd and May 2nd 2011, Zabadani lived its revolution’s most vibrant days. The demonstrators reached a point where they protested nearly every day, and sometimes twice a day⁸. The walls of the city were also adorned with paintings and slogans that expressed the original spirit of the revolution. The city’s revolutionary movement was becoming more and more organized with every passing day. The first coordination-committee appeared in the city, many media activists and graffiti artists emerged, and demonstra-

⁷ Video showing the people of Zabadani demonstrating (April 22, 2011): <https://youtu.be/COqAgZyonzs>

⁸ Various videos of demonstrations that took place in the streets of Zabadani between April, 22 and the beginning of May 2011:

- Demonstration (April 22, 2011) <https://youtu.be/raYjwZvuYD8>
- Nightly demonstration (April 23, 2011) <https://youtu.be/PjL0zy975a0>
- Nightly demonstration (April 26, 2011) <https://youtu.be/XDFY6OkHLuI>
- Demonstration (April 29, 2011) <https://youtu.be/lvqLcunnAcQ>

tions gradually turned into something like a festival, something we will discuss in detail later on.

According to Mrs. Maryam Bourhan⁹ the sounds of intense shooting were heard in the early morning hours on May 2nd, emanating from al-Mahatta Square in the city center.

Hundreds of Assad troops entered Zabadani, supported by agents of the Syr-

ian secret police. The heavily-armed soldiers headed from al-Mahatta Square to the old city, sweeping civilian households on the way under the pretext of searching for arms.

Ms. Maryam recounts how, while the inhabitants were still in their bedrooms, the soldiers broke down the doors of the homes, and stormed in and proceeded to disrupt and damage the people's belongings. The soldiers then arrested dozens of young people and transported them to detention centers. It was more of a broad detention campaign than one that targeted specific wanted individuals, seeking to terrorize the city, pacify its population, and make them stop their anti-Assad activities.

The regime forces efforts to suppress the popular movement in Zabadani did not have the desired effect. The activists reacted counter to what the regime had anticipated. As soon as the secret police's detention and inspection campaign ended, the families of the detainees did nothing but intensify their communications, and decided to immediately hold protest and sit-in around the building of the Political Security branch.



The first raid on the city and a wide, random detention campaign.

⁹ Testimony of Maryam Bourhan (pseudonym) (Summer 2016).

According to Mrs. Rawda Bourhan¹⁰, the women of Zabadani played a significant role in the events of that day. Wives and mothers of the detainees assembled and marched towards the Political Security branch, joined by many other women who had no detained family members. A large portion of the local community stood in solidarity with the families of the detainees, as dozens of the city's men, young and old joined the demonstration. The people marched through the streets of Zabadani, chanting for freedom and the release of the detainees¹¹.

This was by no means the first time the women of Zabadani participated. They took part in the revolutionary movement since its birth. But this day did mark the bravery of these women, who would later play an even more significant role in the city's revolutionary movement.

The build-up of the city's revolutionary action

The detention campaign that the Assad regime launched against the city of Zabadani in May 2011 did not achieve its goals. The activists did not cease to go out in anti-Assad demonstrations, and the demonstrations decrease in number. Between mid-May and mid-July 2011, the largest demonstrations ever in Zabadani were recorded. Instead of just one demonstration on Friday, activists also began demonstrating on weekdays.

According to the testimony of activist Khaled Kheto¹², no significant changes in the nature of the direct action occurred during this period. The mobilization continued with its peaceful, civil character. In those days, Khaled recalls a demonstration wherein one young man raised a black banner with a religious phrase written on it. The activists were quick to object and forced the man to take the banner down.

¹⁰ Testimony of Rawda Bourhan (Fall 2016).

¹¹ Women's demonstration demanding the release of detainees (May 2, 2011): <https://youtu.be/bBGZt5pCSa8>

¹² Testimony of Khaled Kheto (Summer 2016).

During this time there were no clashes of an ideological nature between activists in Zabadani. All the groups constituting the local community of Zabadani played a role in the peaceful, civil movement. Most of the coordination-committee's founding members were enlightened and subscribed to the "democratic trend," so to speak. They played a huge role in organizing the mobilization, writing the banners, choosing the proper slogans, and so on. But that does not mean that civil activity can be attributed solely to this group. According to Khaled, the mosque preacher Sheikh Muhammad Ali, known as Abu Ma'moun al-Darsani, played a significant role in inciting the youth to speak out against the regime. He was aligned with the revolutionary movement of the city since its earliest days. The imam of al-Jisr Mosque, Abdulhadi Kan'an, also played a role of mediation between the activists on one hand and the Assad regime on the other. He sought to support the activists who were targeted by the regime's security forces. Unfortunately, Sheikh Kan'an was later detained and martyred under torture, while Sheikh Muhammad Ali al-Darsani stayed by the side of the city's revolutionaries even in their darkest days. After the liberation of the city, he headed up the Local Council that the activists established in the middle of 2012, which is discussed more in depth below.

From both the democratic left and from Islamist groups were people who stood by Assad regime's, against the revolution. One of latter was the imam of al-Mahatta Mosque, known as Muhammad Barniyya. He publicly aligned himself with the regime and worked against the revolutionaries in Zabadani. The magnitude of the mobilization that happened in the city, however, as well as the size of the crowds that participated in the demonstrations, indicate that the majority of the families of Zabadani shared a consensus. They agreed with the slogan of "toppling the regime." It seems that those who stood against the demonstrations were a minority among the locals of the town. And for a variety of reasons, there was also a third group that took a neutral position, like Zabadani christians who tried to maintain distance from both the revolutionaries and the Assad regime.

The second raid on the city: July 2011

Around the middle of July 2011, Zabadani experienced the most violent raid carried out against it by Assad’s army and secret police. Approximately 9,000 regime fighters carried out the campaign over three days. They were armed to the teeth, taking many detainees and leaving many martyrs in their tracks.

In the beginning, according to Khaled Kheto, army troops were deployed around Zabadani. They erected checkpoints at the city’s entrances. Then the army and secret police agents spread across the city’s neighborhoods and main streets, and dozens of military checkpoints were established within the city. From there secret police forces began raiding civilians’ homes. They broke down doors, vandalized private property, and arrested dozens of young people in different age groups, who were later incarcerated in dungeons and detention centers in Damascus.

Due to the tense atmosphere, specifically among army soldiers, a few local young men were injured or martyred at the hands of soldiers stationed at the checkpoints surrounding the city. As Anas Bourhan recalls, “I was walking with two friends of mine, trying to get out of the city because we had heard about the detention campaign. Suddenly we noticed a military checkpoint a few meters from us. We got confused and tried turning back to stay away from the it, so the soldiers started shooting at us. One of my friends was martyred and I was arrested and taken to Damascus.”

This campaign was different from those that preceded it, because it lasted for three days, during which soldiers were deployed in the streets and neighborhoods of the city. The fact that they resided in the city among the families was at that point unheard of in the course of the Syrian revolution. According to Khaled, “during that raid many people served the soldiers in the streets with

15 July 2011

The city endures the most violent raid carried out against it by the army and the secret police.



A detention campaign for around 3 days;



9,000 soldiers involved;



Dozens of detainees and many martyrs left.

food and drink. They were dealt with very kindly and respectfully. There wasn't yet this schism between Syrian civilians and the Syrian Army. The slogan 'The People and the Army, hand in hand!' was still legitimate, and a distinction was often made between the military forces on one hand and secret police agents on the other."

The military left Zabadani in the same way they had entered it, abruptly. They suddenly withdrew all of their checkpoints and life was immediately restored to its natural rhythm. The demonstrators reconvened their occupation of the squares, chanting in a single voice that had accumulated passion over time, "The people want to topple the regime!"

Chapter Two: Disintegration of Nonviolent Activism

In the period between March and the end of the year, Zabadani was subject to various attempts by the regime to suppress the civil movement and prevent activists from demonstrating against Assad. Raids and detention campaigns were often repeated. The city underwent the final detention campaign in November 2011, which did not differ from the raids described above.

Revolutionary activity receded somewhat in the last third of 2011 due to various pressures exerted by the secret police apparatus on activists and civilians, especially on employees in state institutions. The city, however, continued to play its role in the Syrian revolution. Demonstrations continued to emerge although the number of participants dwindled.

As a result of all of this, and due to the failure of the Assad secret police in containing the city and suppressing its revolutionary activity, a decision was made in the beginning of 2012 to shell the city with heavy artillery weaponry. The regime withdrew the checkpoints and soldiers from the city and deployed them in the surrounding mountains and hills. From there, they relied on a shelling and a besiegement strategy that rendered Zabadani a violent and belligerent frontline. These military operations led to the end of nonviolent activity and a shift towards military action.

This shift in the regime's method of dealing with Zabadani, from a strategy of raids and detention to one of bombardment and destruction, occurred due to various factors. The activist Khaled Kheto identifies one of these factors as the blowing up of a military bus affiliated with Syrian regime forces, executed by opposition fighters near one of the checkpoints in the city. Activist Anas Bourhan points to another incident that played a role in the shelling of Zabadani, which was the execution of an armed assault against a gathering of Assad forces, close to the Council of Ministers' Rest Stop between Bloudan and Zabadani and carried out by someone called Ma'moun al-Khatib and his affiliates. In this incident, young men clashed with Assad soldiers, managing to

kill several of them, while Ma'moun al-Khatib sustained a fatal injury which led to his immediate death¹³. After that the Assad regime decided to withdraw its soldiers from the city and began to deal with it as a military frontline.

The military wing in Zabadani

There is no detailed record about the formation of the first armed groups in Zabadani, and we do not have sufficient information about the real motivations that pushed certain activists to take up arms, or about the social categories to which they belonged. Yet some circuitous testimonies collected by Syria Untold's "Cities in Revolution" project might shed light on weaponization in Zabadani and reveal more about the individuals who decided to take up arms, including their social and class positions within the community.

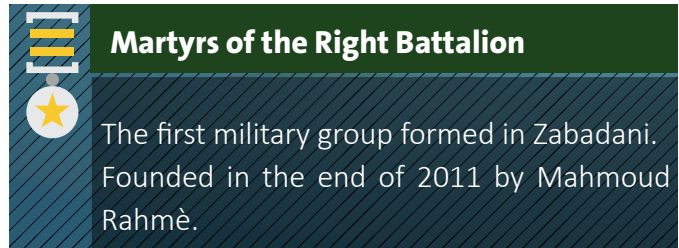
However, a fundamental distinction needs to be highlighted between the first generation of the armed opposition, their nature, social origins and motivations, and subsequent generations, who decided later on to take up arms and to work within military formations that gradually started to form in the beginning of 2012. There is also a distinction between the initial leaders of armed action initiatives and the second generation of military leaders. We will see the significance of this distinction in the context of this research.

According to the testimony of Anas Bourhan, activists started noticing the presence of armed men (carrying both handguns and hunting rifles) around August of 2011. They were seen mainly in the areas where demonstrations used to happen in the city. In the beginning, they focused on protecting the demonstrations as their sole aim. With time the number of armed men increased, and their weapons developed. By the end of 2011 these men were organized into different groups that served as the basis for various military battalions, the formation of which would be announced in the first half of 2012.

The first military group formed in Zabadani was called the Martyrs of the Right Battalion. Formed in the end of 2011, within the context described above, it was a small group of men that announced its existence around the middle of

¹³ Video showing the funeral of martyr Ma'moun al-Khatib (January 29, 2016): <https://youtu.be/ElEaoxRv-Fo>

2012¹⁴. Its stated aim was to protect the demonstrations and defend the city. Up until the end of 2011, the men were armed solely by light and medium-weight weapons, all of which were already owned by the group-members prior to the eruption of the Syrian revolution.



The battalion was founded by Mahmoud Rahme, one of the sons of Zabadani who was nicknamed “al-Rayyes” or “The Boss”¹⁵. According to information collected from witnesses who prefer to remain nameless, The Boss worked in the smuggling business before the revolution began, where he would smuggle heavy machinery such as trucks and other items from Lebanon to Syria. He also owned a gallery for selling used machinery. When the brother of The Boss, Seifeddine Rahmeh, was killed in a trap executed by Assad forces, he moved back to Zabadani and started his quest to revenge his brother’s murder.

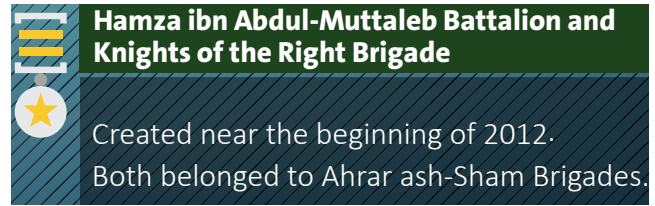
In those days a group of figures who were known by local community in Zabadani became prominent. With a closer look at a cross-section of these men, we can see that taking up arms was limited to a specific social group, because they were people who already owned them in the first place. In Syria, owning firearms is generally limited to specific and narrow groups of the society, specifically people who work in smuggling and shepherds or agricultural landowners operating in rural areas, etc.

Looking closely at the names of the people who first took up arms, therefore, we see that most of them share a vocation and social origin with The Boss: They are mostly uneducated, working in addition to smuggling in trade sectors as auto-mechanicians and construction workers, etc. This does not mean, however, that there were not some educated people among those who first

¹⁴ Video showing the announcement of Martyrs of the Right Battalion (June 14, 2012): <https://youtu.be/oql9aT4glA>

¹⁵ Some of the information in this paragraph was taken from an interview with the leader of Martyrs of the Right Battalion, Mahmoud Rahmeh, conducted by journalist Sirine Bakr. The Arabic-language interview was published in *Oxygen* magazine (September 2012): <http://syriaoxygen.com/archives/1124>

took up arms. Khaled Kuwaifi, for instance, was one of the most notable leaders of the militarized opposition during that period. Kuwaifi was an agricultural engineer, who will be describe in further detail below.



The decision to take up arms created several dynamics that would later affect the larger revolutionary movement in Zabadani, and have a significant impact on its future.

Before the decision to take up arms was made under the pretext of protecting the demonstrations, a group of male and female activists was responsible for organizing revolutionary activities in the city, and there were less than twenty. The authority of the individuals who made up that group was mostly derived from their social standing. These activists tended to be respected by the community. They were university students and intellectuals, or people concerned with public affairs such as state employees, etc. It could be said that most (but by no means all) of them belonged in some way or another to the middle class. It was in this way that the first groups which organized revolutionary activity in Zabadani derived their social and political legitimacy.

Unlike the nature and composition of the nonviolent action groups, the first groups that took up arms acquired their legitimacy from the force of the firearms themselves. With time these groups, which were formed under the pretext of protecting the demonstrations, started to share in the authority enjoyed by the other civil groups who originally organized revolutionary mobilization. With time the power of these groups grew, until eventually they had full authority over decision-making, and a big section of the peaceful, civil movement was excluded from the process. According to the testimony of activist Thawra Kurdiyaa¹⁶, the activists of Zabadani started to feel the influence of the armed opposition, as well as their interference in the process of civil struggle,

¹⁶ The testimony of Thawra Kurdiyaa, an activist from Zabadani and the wife of the previously mentioned detainee Dr. Radwan Bourhan (Fall 2016).

beginning in the last third of 2011. Thawra recalls one demonstration wherein a young man raised a flag similar to that of al-Qaeda, which irritated a lot of activists who intervened and forced the guy to bring the flag down. It also spurred a debate between activists at the time. The issue was settled peacefully, but it was but one among several similar incident that followed it.

From the onset of 2012 particularly, changes started to occur in the kind of slogans chanted at the demonstrations and the type of banners and political signs they raised. This was an indication that the revolution's political discourse in the city was beginning to transform from the democratic, civil tone, which it began with, towards a more Islamist bent that tended gradually towards extremism. This shift continued until revolutionary activities in the city entered a phase wherein the institution of the caliphate was announced as one of the insurgent's main demands. These were changes that were occurring on the level of organizational structure within the dynamic revolutionary movement.

These changes, and the emergence of the first generation of armed opposition leaders, did not only affect the nature of slogans and banners used during demonstrations. They also affected the destiny of the city itself, through a series of negotiations that the Assad regime initiated with the sons of Zabadani. Anas Bourhan recounts that Assef Shawkat tried to negotiate with Zabadani's activists, and that the negotiation revolved around specific and simple points. These included ridding the city of Zabadani of any armed opposition, in exchange for a pledge by the security forces to not attack demonstrators. This measure was accepted at the time, as it was considered to be in the best interests of revolutionary activity and a gain for the revolutionaries. But sadly these negotiations were not destined to succeed. Individuals belonging to armed action groups carried out several military operations against the state forces, which, among other factors, led those to invade and shell Zabadani at the beginning of 2012.

A careful reading of developments in Zabadani since the beginning of 2012 indicates that the transformation of the city into a fighting front occurred as an indirect harmonization between armed action groups on one hand and the As-

sad regime on the other. The latter successfully shifted the conflict in Zabadani to the field of military battle where it has an upper hand. Because the sons of Zabadani lost their ability to continue peaceful action, most activists from the first generation of the revolutionary movement were excluded from the revolution's future. Others joined the military battalions whose establishment was announced in early 2012, thus bringing a close to the phase of peaceful action in Zabadani and inaugurating the era of military conflict.

Until the first quarter of 2012, the Assad regime had managed to assassinate many of the armed movement's early leaders, most noteworthy of whom was Khaled Kuwaifi. This led to the emergence of a new generation of military leaders that considerably differs from the first, on the levels of both their social origins and the discourses they adopted. Thus was founded the next stage in the city's revolutionary activity.

One of the most prominent military formations that was created near the beginning of 2012 was Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttaleb Battalion and Knights of the Right Brigade, both of which belonged to Ahrar ash-Sham jihadist brigades, which were newly founded at the time. Among the most famous names that surfaced were Ghiath Kan'an and Muhammad Adnan Zeitoun, also known as Abu Adnan. The latter was one of the most distinguished military leaders at the time, and he later gave himself the nickname "Commander of Zabadani."

Abu Adnan Zeitoun was born in 1977, went on to graduate from the faculty of agricultural engineering then continued to study Islamic law. In 2006 he was arrested by the Syrian secret police and held in Saydnaya Prison under charges of working with jihadi movements in opposition to the State. He was subsequently released, at which point he returned to his life in Zabadani. It is clear that he built a solid network during his time in Saydnaya Prison, a network of men who later became known as leaders of Ahrar ash-Sham Movement, of which Abu Adnan became regional-commander for Zabadani and its environs.

The life of Abu Adnan follows the pattern of most of jihadi leaders in Syria, the majority of whom had been previously detained in Saydnaya before 2011 and

then released after the eruption of the Syrian revolution. Immediately after their release from Saydnaya they contributed to forming military factions that subscribed to jihadist schools of thought and aspired to institute the caliphate. One example of such a leader is Zahran Alloush, from Douma, who formed The Islam Brigade which later became The Islam Army. Another example is his colleague Hassan Abboud, who hurried to form the jihadist movement Ahrar ash-Sham following his release from Saydnaya. There are dozens of other jihadists who follow the same example and populated the scene of military conflict that emerged in Syria at the beginning of 2012.

The new military leaders created a group of belligerent armed battalions. The three most noteworthy of these are: the aforementioned Martyrs of the Right Battalion, which belonged to what came to be known as the Free Army, the Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttaleb Battalion, which contained the new generation of military leaders, and finally Knights of the Right Battalion. The latter two both joined Ahrar ash-Sham later on.

The battles of early 2012

Following the two incidents mentioned above (blowing up the military bus of Assad troops, and attacking the Council of Ministers' Rest Stop), the Assad regime decided to attack the city. Withdrawing its forces and re-deploying them on surrounding hills, the regime began to shell the city in January 2012.

It was during this time that violent battles erupted between Assad forces and opposition fighters. The former consisted of thousands of soldiers equipped with armored cars and heavy weaponry, while the latter consisted of only dozens of men using light weaponry and homemade explosives. The opposition fighters managed to hold back Assad's troops, preventing them from raiding the city. They even managed to inflict heavy material and human losses upon the regime forces.

According to the testimony of Anas Bourhan, who was among the rebels at that time, "everybody was surprised by the amount of losses suffered by As-

sad's forces. Abu Nadim Haj Mahmoud¹⁷ informed me (the words are Anas') that around 800 men from the Assad forces were killed, and many military vehicles were destroyed, including at least one tank."¹⁸

The question remains, however: How were a few dozen untrained fighters using only light weapons able to stay steadfast in front of trained and heavily armed military forces? Moreover, how did they manage to prevent them from entering the city?

Based on the activists' testimonies acquired for this study, in the days preceding the battles of early 2012, the rebels managed to storm the building of the agricultural bank and confiscate thousands of tons of agricultural fertilizers. They then succeeded in using those fertilizers to manufacture mines and other explosive devices. This was thanks to the military leadership of Khaled Kuwaifi. He and his fellow fighters encircled the Zabadani plain with their explosives, successfully preventing Assad troops from advancing. According to these testimonies, when Assad forces advanced, many of its military vehicles and bulldozers were lost due to exploded landmines, in addition to hundreds of soldiers who were killed by the booby-traps.

In these battles, the men led by Khaled Kuwaifi showed great courage. Khaled himself destroyed the first tank using a remotely detonated improvised explosive device that was made from a household gas canister. In this way he inflicted a great deal of harm on the Assad troops. On August 2nd, 2012 Khaled Kuwaifi was martyred¹⁹. After heroically breaking into and crashing a regime tank, its internal shells exploded. He died immediately²⁰.

¹⁷ Abu Nadim Haj Mahmoud is a Zabadani local and a former officer in the Syrian Air Forces Intelligence. During the revolution, he was a member of the reconciliation committee that was formed to mediate between the regime and Zabadani activists.

¹⁸ Video showing the destruction of a tank affiliated with Assad forces in Zabadani (February 22, 2012): <https://youtu.be/w7FTNEHq-A0>

¹⁹ Video showing the death of Khaled Kuwaifi (February 8, 2012): <https://youtu.be/nqYupn9Sxrl>

²⁰ Video report produced by Zabadani coordination-committee showing part of the bombardment of Zabadani by Assad forces (February 9, 2012): <https://youtu.be/RoiXGrvpdo8>

The death of Kuwaifi marked a severe blow to Zabadani revolutionaries. A few days after this incident, on February 2nd, 2012, Assad troops managed to enter Zabadani. They did this through trickery, however, and not through a military victory over the fighters.

By way of intermediaries (such as the aforementioned Abu Nadim), the Assad regime asked the Zabadani activists to stop the fighting and allow its troops to enter the city. Its media would then take footage of their entrance to the neighborhoods of Zabadani and broadcast it on television to demonstrate the success of the Army in entering the city and expelling the militants. The battle would then be de-escalated and the people would then be allowed to safely return to their homes. Even though this is unbelievable and would look like what happens in an action movie, the people of Zabadani agreed to it, since the nearby town of Madaya had made a similar deal with the Assad troops a few days before. In the case of Madaya, the regime did actually enter the town, take its footage, and leave the city without detaining any activists.

Based on Madaya's example, the city's activists accepted the Assad forces' request to enter, film and broadcast with its media, and then withdraw from the city. At that point the people and activists would be allowed to return to the homes they had fled due to the ongoing battles.

Indeed the Assad forces and tanks entered the neighborhoods of the city, and its soldiers were deployed in its streets. The regime placed around six tanks in al-Mahatta Square and deployed more checkpoints all over the city, encircling al-Gharbiyah neighborhood, which was the stronghold of the city's revolutionary movement. They did not stop there, however, and they did not withdraw.

After the deployment of Assad's soldiers throughout the city, agents of the secret police started sweeping the neighborhoods, entering the homes one by one, and searching for young men and activists. They arrested dozens of men and took them to detention dungeons in the capital Damascus. Among the detainees was Anas Bourhan, who spent around 45 days in various holding cells, and who was subject to torture, as were so many other detainees. Thus, the

Assad forces managed to fully control the city and stop the combat operations against them, so that the city returned to the regime's grasp.

The struggle for life

Given these transformations in the field of struggle since the end of 2011, Zabadani was now subjected to warfare and besiegement, which resulted in the displacement of a great number of the city's people. Out of more than thirty thousand individuals who had inhabited Zabadani, only a third of them remained after the intensification of fighting, according to Khaled Kheto and his description of the city's transformation due to the battles.



According to the information acquired for this study, the people of Zabadani have had been through several waves of displacement. Most families were displaced after the battles in the beginning of 2012. After the return of the Army to the city on February 12th, 2012, some families returned to their homes. According to activist Thawra Kurdiyya, these families came home to an all-but destroyed city. Battle debris covered the city. The streets were full of holes due to shelling, and parts of civilian houses were destroyed, their contents open to the wind. Despite that, the vast majority of the city's people insisted on returning and carrying on with their lives.

The city suffered from difficult conditions during this time, as the people had been deprived of water and electricity for approximately two months. According to Thawra, during these troubled times the people were driven to melt snow for drinking water, or else depended on wells in some of the old houses. The city also suffered from a lack of basic necessities like drugs and fuels. These situations continued until around April 2012, when skirmishes between opposition fighters and Assad forces led to the withdrawal of the latter from the

city. As the regime forces encircled and shelled it once again, opposition fighters finally managed to regain control over the heart of the city in May.

After the opposition forces established control over Zabadani, dozens of families were forced to leave their homes, and the city nearly emptied of its inhabitants. According to a woman named Maryam, who remained in the city with her family until the beginning of 2014, the activists who chose to stay in the city made several decisions regarding how to manage life and meet the needs of the besieged families. "At the beginning," says Maryam, "a woman from each family who wasn't wanted at the checkpoints would go to the town of Madaya or Bloudan, and bring whatever food they could to the city." But later on the army checkpoint of Assad forces did not allow any food to enter, even one bag of bread.

Because of that, the families were forced to use the mountain roads. Women often walked to the villages surrounding Zabadani to get some food. According to Maryam, the journey would take 3-5 hours on foot due to the snowy and stormy conditions. All of this is not to mention an additional two or three hours waiting in line to get one bag of bread. Then began the return-journey, which was often perilous, due to both the rugged nature of the mountainous terrain and the Assad soldiers who were waiting in ambush for bread and baby milk.

At a later stage, as the siege on the city intensified, the newly formed Local Council imposed various strategies to confront the siege, which are discussed in more detail below. The Local Council collected most of the foodstuffs that the people of the city had left behind in their vacant homes, as well as flour from bakeries and shops. It then redistributed these food materials to the families and fighters who remained in the city.

Despite all these procedures, the families who remained in the city suffered a great deal from the lack of basic needs such as food, drugs and fuels. So they had to rely on smugglers who managed to bring in some food and other requirements. These smuggled goods were overpriced, however. For example, according to what Mrs. Maryam told "Cities in Revolution," a few bags of bread and a couple of sardine trays reached around \$100.

The time of bitter truces and protracted battles

Since around the second half of 2012, the opposition forces in Zabadani managed to consolidate their control over the city. The last regime troops withdrew from the city, and the checkpoints that were previously spread in the streets and neighborhoods were removed. These were all re-stationed in the surrounding mountains and hills. At this point Assad forces tightened their grip over most of the main entrances to the city. From then on, Zabadani was subject to systematic siege and shelling by Assad forces.

Consistently up to the writing this paper, Zabadani fighters have shown great courage and unrelenting persistence in protecting their city and preventing Assad forces from entering it. The city did have to experiment, however, with a number of truces that were agreed on between its fighters and the Assad regime. In most of the experiences the city had to go through, the truces were nothing more than fragile ceasefire agreements that did not last for more than a few days. Then the battles inflamed the fronts once again.

After the intervention of Lebanese Hezbollah forces in Zabadani battles, alongside Assad forces, it became clear just how determined the regime was to regain control over what came to be known as “the last fortress in Syrian Qalamoun.” The combined forces of Hezbollah and the regime had managed to establish and maintain control over all the villages and towns along the Syrian-Lebanese border, making Zabadani the only city that had evaded their grip. Therefore, the city experienced the most fierce battles against Assad and Lebanese Hezbollah forces that it had ever known.

At the time of this study’s writing, Assad forces have successfully reduced the areas of Zabadani controlled by the opposition. The presence of Zabadani fighters has almost been confined to a few districts. It is possible that in the light of the current situation in Zabadani, the city will make a truce agreement with the regime, as did some nearby cities like Darayya and Muaddamiyya, and put an end to the battles that have continued for more than four years.

According to the testimony of Amer Bourhan²¹, with whom we managed to communicate while he was in Zabadani, the city today seems totally destroyed, and almost empty of any inhabitants. Only a few opposition fighters remain, stationed in a narrow area in Zabadani. Most of the farmers' orchards have been damaged, and homes have been demolished. The city has been transformed into ruins. The fighters who remain are undergoing a severe siege by Assad forces, which are reinforced by the militia of Lebanese Hezbollah. As Amer told "City in Revolution": "I walk today in the streets of the city and feel nothing but a desire to cry. The war and the regime's brutality have destroyed everything, including our dreams of emancipation and freedom, and today we wait for nothing but a miracle that could put an end to this hell we have been living for years."

²¹ Testimony of Amer Bourhan, one of the first participants in Zabadani's revolutionary movement and the current head of the medical committee in the city (Fall 2016).

Chapter Three: Back to the Good Old Days

In the period between the middle of March 2011 and the end of that year, the city of Zabadani witnessed the beautiful civil expressions of peaceful revolutionary movement. Demonstrations became festivals where activists' voices echoed through the streets, calling out for freedom and raising demands for change. The city's artists used their powers of creative expression to compose paintings and inscribe banners, while activists ornamented the walls of Zabadani with revolutionary graffiti.

On an institutional level, a number of civil organizations were founded in Zabadani, some of which had to do with culture, and others with media or politics.

A Facebook page was created under the name "The Coordination-Committee for Zabadani and its Environs." This page played a significant role on the level of media. Activists also established a magazine called Oxygen, which dealt with various topics that are relevant to Syrians. All of this is in addition to many other activities, some of which we will elaborate on below.

The Coordination-Committee for Zabadani and its Environs

The Zabadani Coordination-Committee was established around June 2011 in order to meet the revolutionary movement's media demands²². It was initially established by a group of young men and women that included Omar Kheto, a media activist from Zabadani. The workload and projects were distributed between them, so some people were responsible for filming the demonstrations and other revolutionary activities in the city, while others undertook the task of communication with media. Anas Bourhan, whose testimony is used in this research, successfully conducted many interviews in English with various media outlets. Maryam Bourhan, whose testimony we also heard in this paper, had the task of the administrating the page.

²² Zabdani's coordination-committee Facebook page: <http://cutt.us/xCNVh>

According to Mrs. Maryam’s testimony, the Coordination-Committee made great efforts to deliver the voice of the Zabadani people to the world. Given that most of the team were either reporters or university graduates, the committee’s website was highly professional, and managed to gain the trust of followers. With time it came to be known as highly reliable resource for journalists and the media.

The Coordination-Committee’s website is still working at this time. Maryam says that its continued operation is a reflection of the people’s determination to contribute in one way or another to reporting the city’s events to the world, despite the hugely difficult and complicated circumstances.

The Civil Local Council

The first revolutionary local council in Syria was established in the city of Zabadani, concurrently with the battles that erupted in the city between Assad forces and Zabadani fighters at the beginning of 2012. According to Amer Bourhan, the formation of the Local Council in that time was due to the new circumstances the city was experiencing.

Civil Local Council

It consisted in early 2012 of nine members, and was reorganized after mid-2012.

 A military council was formed and was headed by Abu Adnan Zeitoun.



The Council was essentially tasked with dealing with the Assad forces and representing the city’s rebels and their demands in negotiations²³.

The first city council consisted of nine members who represented the overall revolutionary spectrum in the city. They were respected and valued individuals within the local community. According to Maryam, many of the city’s men and activists nominated themselves for the council, and the elected members were then chosen by people of the city in a voting process.

The Local Council was reorganized after mid-2012, when the city became under the control of opposition forces. Sheikh Muhammad Ali al-Darsani, known

²³ Zabadani’s local council Facebook page: <http://cutt.us/X89B>

as Abu Ma'moun, was appointed as the head of the Council. Meanwhile the region's oppositional military forces formed a military council in Zabadani. The military council was headed by Abu Adnan Zeitoun, and included representatives of most military groups and battalions in Zabadani.

According to the testimony of Amer Bourhan, the tasks of the Local Council were originally focused on one specific function: negotiating with the Assad regime. They were the delegates of the people, authorized to sign any agreement in their best interests. Later on, after Zabadani became totally out of Assad forces' control, the council mainly played a relief role. It then formed a committee it called "The Criminal Court," which is similar to a police force. Its job is to resolve conflicts and protect properties, as well as holding accountable those who transgress the laws. But the authority of the council did not extend to the remaining civilians in the city, for it had no power over the military brigades that adhered to the military council.

The Collective of Zabadani's Women Revolutionaries

Youth action groups were formed beginning in the earliest stages of the Syrian revolution. They were primarily made up of male and female activists who had personal relationships and mutual trust that made their collaboration possible. In Zabadani in particular, a group of female activists were bound together in the early days of the revolution by their oppositional position to the Assad regime and their personal and family connections. According to the testimony of Nour Bourhan²⁴, one of the founders of "Collective of Zabadani Female Revolutionaries," the group's work began spontaneously and without a formal group designation, so

The Collective of Zabadani's Women Revolutionaries

Founded in mid-2011 by a group of female activists 

 Securing the requirements of the displaced families and their children;

Supporting medical action. 

²⁴ Testimony of Nour Bourhan, a female activist from Zabadani (September 2016).

they used to participate in revolutionary actions as a group without a name. Around the middle of 2011, they decided to formally name themselves.

According to Nour, this name was chosen in response to the derogatory name of “haraa’ir” [free females, with patriarchal subtones] that was commonly used at the time by male activists to label the Syrian women participating in the revolution. According to Nour’s point of view, the female activists were opposed to that naming because it aimed at stereotyping women, especially revolutionary ones. This pushed the female activists of the Collective to claim the title of “women revolutionaries” instead, since it indicates the revolutionary force of these women and their role in the Syrian uprising. “Harra’ir” denigrates female activists and casts them as lesser than their male counterparts.

The female activists of the Collective played a crucial role in revolutionary movement in Zabadani, participating in all of its activities without exception. They went out in demonstrations alongside their fellow townspeople. When Assad’s secret police apparatus waged its first detention campaign in May 2011, it was these women who took to the streets and headed to the security branch building, holding a sit-in and demanding the release of the detainees.

They also composed expressive paintings, contributed in making and choosing the proper words for the revolution banners, and generally spearheaded the fight. For this they have payed a heavy price. Many of the women of the Collective were martyred, while others joined the list of Syria’s disappeared and continuously tortured persons. Despite all of this, they continued their work and activity.

At the end of 2011 the Collective decided to create a magazine which Nour explains was meant to be a platform for free thought, carrying the principles of the revolution and safeguarding it from going off-course. Thus arose Oxygen, a bi-monthly magazine that will be more deeply discussed in a separate section. Until the end of 2012, the magazine was produced under the management of the Collective. At this point most of the Collective’s activists withdrew from the magazine and its management was transferred to Mr. Rawad Alloush, an activist from Zabadani.

The failure of Oxygen did not cause the activists of the Collective to give up, they rather continued in their work, conceiving of new projects. In the end of 2011, the Collective spearheaded a “dignity strike,” which encompassed all of Syria. It was called for by Syrian activists at the time to put pressure on the Assad regime by exacerbating its economic crisis.

In a demonstration that went out to call for the dignity strike, the Collective read a political statement which explained the importance of participating in the strike. They also composed many artistic paintings that carried revolutionary symbols, including representations of the power and importance of peaceful action.

The Collective evolved and became more organized as the events of the revolution itself developed. It gathered momentum towards the end of 2011, then there was the breakout of battles between the opposition fighters and Assad forces in and around Zabadani, and then the emergence of the “displacement” phenomenon. According to Mrs. Sirine Bakr²⁵, the manager of Damma organization, the Collective worked in relief, trying to secure the requirements of the displaced families and their children. The Collective also contributed to supporting medical action, so many of the activists conducted first aid workshops in how to care for the injured. They also secured needed drugs and medical equipment by securing donations from various parties. During this time the Collective played the practical role of the Local Council. They get the credit for all of the aforementioned activities, just as they shoulder the huge responsibilities. Ms. Sirine Bakr was one of the Council’s most active members.

With the increase of violence and inflammation of battles in mid-2012, the Collective’s work also expanded. As the field of battle largened, so too their activity exceeded the borders of Zabadani city, touching surrounding villages and towns, specifically the towns of Madaya and Sarghaya. With the increase in the number of the displaced and affected families, and the intensification of the siege on the rebel towns, the Collective’s activists decided to create a new organization. Damma organization came out of the Zabadani Collective of

²⁵ Testimony of Sirine Bakr (pseudonym), a female activist from Zabadani (September 2016).

Women Revolutionaries and is concerned with education, relief, and psychological support. Damma will also be discussed further in a separate section.

During their experience, the Collective female activists were subject to different pressures and risks, and they succeeded in challenging most of them, managing to continue their work until the moment of writing this paper. This indicates the crucial role played by Syrian women in the revolution of their people, contrary to the stereotypical conceptions that made Syrian women subordinate and peripheral to others.

Oxygen magazine

Oxygen was established on January 16th, 2012 by a group of young people from Zabadani²⁶. On January 22nd the first issue was released, and the editors succeeded in printing and distributing it inside Zabadani city²⁷. The magazine was established with collaboration between the activists of the Collective of Zabadani Women Revolutionaries and Rawad Alloush, an activist from Zabadani who was arrested in July 2011 by Assad forces and released a few months later.

Rawad says: “The idea started from inside the regime dungeons, specifically inside Branch 48 where I languished. My life opportunities were vanishing due to the injustices and torture I suffered during that time. One of

Oxygen magazine

Founded in January 2012.

The first issue was released on January 22th, 2012.

It is committed to the humanitarian stories about the marginalized, like the daily life of the besieged and the problems of the displaced and refugees, in addition to the political and artistic sides of the revolution.

²⁶ For more about *Oxygen* magazine: <http://syriaooxygen.com>

²⁷ The archive of *Oxygen* that includes all the previous issues: http://arshefzabadanioxygen.blogspot.fr/p/blog-page_781.html

the torture methods they used daily in that detention center was cutting off the oxygen from the detainees by disabling the air pumps that pushed it through slots in the ceilings, down into the dungeons where hundreds of detainees were piled up. After a short while, around a month, I was deported to Saydnaya Military Prison, with the charge of “dissent writings on social media” and the dream I had barely conceived seemed so difficult to attain. At that time I was certain that it is the end of life, just as all other detainees felt. I got out of Saydnaya Prison after three months, carrying this dream with me, holding to the principles of our great revolution and looking for friends who thought the same way and believed in pen. I met with many people who supported the idea, and we sought to actualize it with the first issue of Oxygen on January 22nd 2012.”²⁸

According to Nour, establishing the magazine came in the context of many activities carried out by the Collective of Zabadani Women Revolutionaries. This happened during the second half of 2011, at one of the meetings that included a number of the Collective’s activists, including Rawda Bourhan, a philosophy teacher, Nour Bourhan, Tahani, Sarah Alloush, Sirine Bakr, Mu’mina, among others. They discussed establishing a free and independent media platform that carries the spirit and principles of the revolution. They agreed on issuing a bi-monthly, printed magazine, from which they could stand against obscurantist thinking that was starting to spread at the time. At the same time, the magazine would work on presenting a democratic discourse that calls for social justice and freedom for all Syrians.

That is what distinguished the editorial policy of Oxygen magazine, about which Rawad says, “it stood at a distance from the current news, committing to what is behind the news, whether that is humanitarian stories about the marginalized, like the daily life of the besieged and the problems of the displaced and refugees, or the political and artistic sides of the revolution. The principle of the magazine is summed up by the first freedom shouts of the Syrian revolution, for the sake of which hundreds of martyrs died and thousands

²⁸ A written interview with Mr. Rawad Alloush (September 2016).

of detainees disappeared. So the magazine relies on the memory of the revolution as its constitution.”

On the level of professional expertise, Nour says that “in our group we had no journalists, and we did not have any experience working in media, but we worked hard to remedy that. Some female activists conducted workshops in journalistic work, getting help from the expertise of other media activists. Then we actually launched the magazine, and started to learn how to work through direct experience.”

Regarding the technical and printing operations, Nour says, “activist Rawad Alloush had a computer shop, and he had the responsibility of designing the issue and then printing it. The rest of the female activists shared the remaining tasks between them. Some would edit the materials, some would choose the photos, one would write the editorial, etc. Until the second half of 2012, the magazine continued to be composed, printed and distributed. At this time the team of the magazine managed to secure simple financial support through individual donations and the sales of some issues.” According to Rawad, “in the beginning the printing used to take place in a rural homes that is out of the sight of the regime and its centers. The distribution would be done secretly in the homes of neutral people in Zabadani and Madaya. The activists would take the smallest share of the copies, since the magazine’s editorial policy aimed to shed light on the goals and principles of the revolution, narrating the stories of the martyrs and detainees and denying what the regime propagated through its media.”

After the intensification of the battles in Zabadani and its surroundings, it became difficult to print and distribute the magazine, so its staff decided to keep the electronic version and launch a website, where the publishing of the magazine would be done only electronically.

Towards the end of 2012, and with the introduction of the “funding” issue, a disagreement took place between the female activists of the Collective who began the magazine and Mr. Rawad Alloush. The conflict led to Rawad Alloush

taking over the magazine, and all the founding female members withdrew from the management of the magazine’s website and Facebook page.

Damma Organization for relief work

In October 2013, the female activists of the Collective decided to announce the establishment of their new organization, “Damma,” which works in the areas of education, relief and psychological support. According to the manager Sirine Bakr, the name “Damma” (embrace) refers to the feelings of solidarity and compassion. It means a mother’s warm lap. These are the meanings that the organization seeks to actualize.

Damma Organization for relief work

Established in October 2013.

It works in the area of psychological support.

It inaugurated a number of schools, kindergartens and other educational institutes.

Among the most important principles that oriented Damma Organization’s work was a commitment to carrying out civil, peaceful work, and having faith in a free, independent Syria. They focused their activity on psychological support, trying to mitigate the effects of the ongoing conflict in Syria and the accompanying that was inflicted upon Syrians, especially upon children and women, the most vulnerable victims in this war²⁹.

Among the most important goals that Damma Organization set out to realize was building peace in the Syrian society, promoting the role of Syrian women, given their crucial position in the future of Syria, and mitigating the effects of violence and war on Syrians. They did this through relief and psychological support efforts. In addition to promoting education, Damma also aimed at supporting small developmental projects.

On a practical level, the organization executed a large number of projects. According to Sirine Bakr, Damma opened a number of schools, kindergartens

²⁹ For more about Damma Organization’s activities, its Facebook page can be found on this link: <http://cutt.us/YPOj>

and other educational institutes. They did this within the wider context of the organization's support for the educational process, especially within Zabadani city and the town of Madaya. According to Sirine, the organization conducted training events for a group of its members through their participation in workshops in psychological support. Those trainees later supplied the organization with the expertise it required for its work.

Damma Organization included approximately 56 staff members, around 15 of whom were managerial. Most of the workers in the organization were volunteers who did not get payed except for small, symbolic sums. Concerning the funding, Sirine says, most financial support for our organization was obtained from international civil organizations, as well as governmental organizations that support such activities. Sirine reassures that financial support did not affect the independence of Damma at all, and that most of the funds went towards the relief and support of local communities.

Damma works in extremely difficult circumstances, beginning with the siege imposed on the area of their work and continuing to the security threats facing its members. Despite that, the female activists of Damma valiantly continue their work, and hope to continue until Syrian society regains its health and embraces its freedom.

Conclusion

Nothing is more saddening than a city emptied of its inhabitants. And nothing is more bitter than seeing families forcibly leaving the city where their dreams and the small details of their daily lives were nourished, with their young and old in tow. Today Zabadani is just like its sister cities in Syria, which rose up against tyrannical rule and payed a heavy price in the blood of its sons and the souls of its revolutionary male and female youth. It is a destroyed city, nothing remained intact, and nothing has been spared by the death machine, not even stones or trees. The last people to remain in the city describe how, “in the nights, we would hear the sounds of electrical saws cutting the trees of our plains, as if they were cutting our veins, while we could do nothing but bear witness to our slow death.” Only two hundred men remain in the demolished city, continuing against all odds to stand against one of the world’s bloodiest killing machines: the Assad regime and its allies, most notable of which are the militias of Hezbollah.

Zabadani city is today a ruin, everything is in rubble, and its tortured inhabitants who escaped death are scattered throughout faraway lands, with no hope in sight for a return to the afflicted city. All of the details and contextual information about the revolution that the witnesses from Zabadani shared for the sake of this research is merely tip of the iceberg. The city of Zabadani is still filled with events that await someone to narrate them, someone to narrate the story of an oppressed population that once dreamed of freedom.

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

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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.