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Sweida: The Static Revolution (2)

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This is **the second episode of a longer research**, commissioned by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, about the Druze community in Sweida-Syria. The study, which will be published soon as a chapter in a book about Syrian minorities, covers the impact of the Syrian Revolution on the southern province from March 2011 until June 2013.

The first demonstration in Sweida took place in Sultan Al-Atrash plaza outside the government house on Thursday, 14 April 2011 with 150 people **gathering** at one o'clock. They chanted for freedom, Dar'a, and the besieged towns. The demonstration did not last for more than 15 minutes, after which it was attacked by the volunteer 'Shabiha'. Some activists were physically **assaulted**, while others were arrested.

Rami, a mechanical engineer, was driving his car near the area when he saw the demonstration. He stopped the car and joined the crowd. He recalls: "it was an overwhelming feeling. I don't know how I joined them. I felt my feet

trembling, but I was led by a burning desire!”

Not everyone felt the way Rami did. Hassan, a state employee in the ministry of education, was also very close to the demonstration describes his reaction: “I felt the blood rushing to my eyes. They were finally in front of me; those rascals who support terrorism and the armed gangs, and want to disturb our Syrian co-existence. They did not amount to more than 20 people. I looked around and shouted: God, Syria, and Bashar. I almost assaulted them. I looked around for a stick or anything else; but the security rushed in and taught them a lesson.”

The April 14th demonstration was a shock to Sweida’s almost completely closed society. There they had a real demonstration in front of them; not fabricated, neither led by people from other areas nor by others of different nationalities, as the state media continued to claim. Nevertheless, false reports spread about the demonstration after four were arrested and others were pursued in the streets. Twenty-five-year-old Yazan was one of the activists who fled from the Shabiha who called them thieves hoping to solicit the help of a passerby.

From that moment onward, rumors shaped Sweida’s public opinion, affecting reality and the unfolding of events. In addition to media, personal relationships and their imagination contributed to the unfolding events.

Reslan, a 28-year old merchant, confirmed that he saw on that day a group of people from Dar’a “Hauranis” orchestrating a demonstration in front of the government house so that they could film and send it to the “devious TV channels” (referring to Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya). This

version of events, among the regime loyalists, appeared frequently although the demonstrators were often alleged to be from Douma or Homs, and were blamed for instigating unrest.

The second demonstration took place a few days afterwards, on 17 April 2011, Independence Day, and this time it began in two different places as activists failed to coordinate, and according to Hammoud, a member of the unauthorized Communist Party, due to divisions between the two groups. Hammoud tried to reconcile differences in opinion about the location of the gathering place in order to achieve a huge demonstration that befits the importance of independent day, which “the people of Sweida feel proudly that they have made”. But the bigger bloc of dissents in Sweida belong to the communist and leftist opposition parties, and still have their historical disputes which prevent them from attaining unified attitude towards the novel events. They miss the spirit of team work, so the activists failed to reach an agreement that day.

Thus there were two separate demonstrations, with the larger one amounting to around 300 people and starting from al-Shu’la

Plaza. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaYo0V0JXx8> The demonstrators carried olive branches and pictures of Syria’s independence heroes, and managed to congregate and chant for around 30 minutes before security forces and shabiha used cars and busses to surround the protest and physically assault the participants.

http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5imaJG8o0qs3WveSf_z4mHVb6ziFA?docId=CNG.20af4d9a21c5eb93ed9eb1cf491307d3.261&hl=ar Maha, a 35-year-old mother of two recalls: “there were many women among the

demonstrators, and the shabiha attacked them too using bats and stone. In many incidents they tore the pictures of the leaders of the 1925 revolt and stomped on them. The security forces did not interfere but just watched, while our relatives enjoyed beating us". A Facebook status from that day describes: "It was a barbaric ritual. They took a banner that says yes to freedom and dignity and they beat you up with it, they being our neighbors and relatives".

Maha insists that those responsible for the beatings were ex-convicts and illiterates and this incident confirms the impression in the area that those described as "Shabiha" were comprised of the society's least educated segments of the population, and suffer in general from inferiority complexes towards the local intellectual elite. Most of them were either unemployed or had just been released from prison. It was one of the regime attempts in the early days of the revolution, to shuffle papers, and make a confusing situation.

No one was arrested or killed in al-Shu'la Plaza. Live ammunition was not used in the way it was in other provinces. Ghazawn even noticed a security officer rescuing one of the demonstrators when the latter nearly died at the hands of the shabiha. Gazawn felt that the ability of the security officers to restrain themselves and completely rely on the shabiha succeeded in stemming the tide of protest, and make it appear as an intra-Druze fight. From that moment, the regime adopted this approach in Sweida: to put the shabiha and the dissents of Druze in front of each other's. In this way the regime will shift the confrontation with the Druze dissents, to a local conflict in a closed community.

The other demonstration that day took place in al-Karya. The demonstrators entered the shrine of Sultan al-Atrash, and observed a moment of silence for the martyrs of the Syrian revolution. When they exited the shrine they were physically assaulted by the shabiha just as in Sweida.

Abdullah, a taxi driver who participated in the attacks on demonstrators says: “they told me that the demonstrators were foreigners, and they had come to our area to cause trouble, scare civilians, and plant explosives, so I did not mind participating. Especially, when they promised me a job as a night guard. I felt terrible however when I found my cousin, a schoolteacher, injured on the ground. He would never hurt anyone, and spent his entire life reading books and teaching. He had been imprisoned for his political views before. I could not believe that my friends were assaulting him. Since then I stopped beating up anyone, and realized that the matter is too complex for me to understand.”

Under the new Syrian revolution calendar, Friday the 20th of May was named “Azadi Friday” and on this day, a demonstration took place in Sweida.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=emih9-sydus> It started in the Al-Mal’ab Plaza and proceeded for around 500 meters before the shabiha and security forces forced the people to scatter. Thirty-three year old engineer and activist Ramez explains: “The biggest problem in our province is the scarcity of mosques, and thus the inability of people to gather spontaneously. This made every demonstration require a high degree of coordination in order to select the time and place, and even then security forces were mostly able to know all the details beforehand”.

Although the city is usually quiet on Fridays and the streets

half empty, there were many shabiha waiting for the demonstration. Azadi Friday also witnessed a new level of violence with activists being savagely beaten before they were transferred to the security forces. Five activists were arrested that day. Issam Khaddaj and Marwan Hamza from Shahba city, both from the Nasserite Socialist Union party, and Adnan Abou Assi from the People's Party one of the communist parties in Syria, all three of whom were transferred to Damascus for further interrogation, and two younger non-partisan activists who remained in local prisons.

The arrests and physical attacks were deliberately aimed at the old and more experienced opposition activists. The Socialist Union Party was about to face a major split in its ranks due to the accommodating position of its leadership vis-à-vis the regime. The leadership of the party sooner joined the "General Coordinator of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria", which known for its moderate positions, and this attitude did not convince its partisans. So they prefer to split from the mine body of the historical opposition party. The same was happened to the different communist parties.

Sweida witnessed several other demonstrations shortly thereafter. On 27 May 2011, for instance, on the "the Army's Friday" the demonstrators gathered in Tishreen Plaza. The shabiha and security forces had already besieged the area, and prevent the people from gathering, and making their demonstration.

On 7 July 2011, more than five hundred demonstrators gathered in Al-Fakhar Plaza

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K54wiASGUZA>,

chanting for the city of Hama and for freedom. Because they didn't know the exact date of the demonstration a very few number of shabiha were at the plaza. It was a very different demonstration

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAUhFYLcXWo> because protestors were able to scare the shabiha away, they managed to beat the shabiha when they tried to scatter the demonstration, and to march uninterrupted for a long distance. Muhammad and his sister Khoulood remember that they were at home near the demonstration when they heard the chants. "They soon joined in and it was euphoric! Some of the neighbors threw rice on us while girls on the balconies started the traditional cries of joy. I hadn't known that my neighbors supported the revolution." Khoulood said.

The security forces belated too, and did not intervene; it was a complete surprise when the shabiha was beaten by the protesters. Keeping the date and place unknown was an advantage for the revolutionaries, but it required a high degree of coordination.

On the afternoon of the same day, groups of shabiha circled a gallery of modern art called Alfa. The gallery had a café on its second floor where many opposition politicians and activists often gathered. The siege lasted for hours. Marwa was among the people trapped inside, she remembers feeling terrified: "the power cut in the gallery and the café, and through the glass we could see all these angry people waiting outside. We were all terrified, killing was everywhere in Syria, and we just didn't know if was going to be our turn".

Muhannad, a 23 year-old college student arrived at the gallery having heard about the incident on an opposition TV

station. He remembers seeing the shabiha everywhere, along with some security officers giving directions and carrying walkie-talkies. Muhannad believes that the reason behind all of this was the anger the security forces felt about the earlier demonstration. "They must have believed that the people in the gallery were participants" Muhannad said. The quick popular reaction, however, made people surround the shabiha and the security officers, which forced them to break the siege of the cafe by midnight, and let the trapped people to leave. The security forces preferred not to provoke the peaceful huge number of people gathered around them, and decided to withdrawal from the place.

The same gallery was attacked on 13 November 2011. A military car broke in, and the shabiha started to destroy all the artifacts inside. They also burnt all the books.

<http://al-mashhad.com/News/-الشبكة-العربية-تطالب-بتحرير-سوريا-من-33570/قبضة-الأسد-.aspx> A statement on Facebook page

appeared with a

title, <https://www.facebook.com/Killing.book/posts/318774641472760>

"my name is the book and the shabiha of Sweida have killed me": "They set me on fire with my friends in front of the statue of Hafez Al-Assad in the Sweida province of the Syrian Arab Republic in the 21st century, just as Hulagu Khan The Mongol ruler (1217-1265) who occupied Baghdad and destroyed its

library.http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/هولاكو_خان drowned the books of Baghdad. Don't forget my name in a future Syria and remember this date well, 13 November 2011. Write on my grave that I was killed by the shabiha of Assad".

Social realities and the crisis of the revolution

Rashid has a certain view concerning the problem of

Sweida: “With time, we started to consider the possibility that we had a security breach, that there was a mole inside our ranks informing shabiha and security officers of our plans. Our situation was utterly different from anywhere else in Syria due to the lack of mosques. At a time when other areas in the country were perpetually in protest, with people gathering, chanting, holding festivities, and protecting themselves, our dream was just to organize a sizeable demonstration that could withstand any likely attack, mainly by coordinating with all the new activists that we met during the first demonstrations. It was like walking in a minefield, we had not known each other for long, and yet we had no option but to completely rely on each other.”

In the early days, no one could estimate the size of the opposition in the province. There were many calls for demonstrations, and many pages of “local coordination committees” began to appear in the social media, along with flyers and graffiti. The revolution in Sweida was evolving in a unique way.

Soon after the Syrian uprising has started, the activists invented committees to organize the demonstrations, and to conduct the events through the media and the social media websites. Those committees have improved into “local coordination committees”, and other organizations, and became very powerful, attaining its strength from the leadership of the civil resistance.

Maha reminisces about these early days with a lot of nostalgia, because it were very promising moments. She thinks that they focused on the full half of the glass, making a lot of daily political meetings that mixed the old legacy of

opposition with the new reality of the revolution. They planned for tens of demonstrations and sit-ins, thinking that the moment when the Mountain would just turn around and rise was coming. It was very close when they could bring about this moment; they did not pay enough attention to the real rift in society, the real polarization that was getting more and more entrenched.

The regime on its part interpreted the situation in the country in purely sectarian terms; it made up its mind not to antagonize the minorities, including the Druze. Rashed explains: "The reason protests grew bigger in Syria was blood, the more people the regime killed the bigger the protests became, until entire regions became entirely out of regime control. The first demonstrations in Syria were not bigger than Sweida's demonstrations, but murder and the savage violations of human rights gave it momentum, whereas in Sweida, the regime attacked the demonstrators and arrested some of them but never killed anyone. Thus, there was never a big revolutionary take-off in the area."

He continues: "Out of the half million people who constitute the population of the mountain, there's more than 100,000 young men working in the Gulf or in Venezuela. Those who are most affected by the economic and political malaise are outside the country, the remittances they sent to their parents is a safety valve that releases the social and economic tensions in the area."

Thus, there was only a small segment of young revolutionaries working against all odds to awaken the genie of revolution in the mountain. With time, this segment started to feel the limitations of its methods and possibilities, and the formidable impasse it was facing. The

local community was divided and began to turn its back on the activists. "It was better for them to bury their heads in the sand" according to Rashed. What appeared later as a form of neutrality was greatly contested at the time.

Muhammad, a philosophy graduate, believes that the regime succeeded in creating a network of interlocking interests at the mountain that provided a social security valve. Over time, everyone became connected to the regime. The long lines of civil servants waiting in front of ATM machines at the beginning of every month are enough to realize the extent to which people had become dependent on the state. Agriculture is not generating profit anymore, nor is there a manufacturing sector that could employ thousands of employed people. There is an employment office where one can go to submit an application; the number of applications is around 20,000. Out of 500,000 people living in the province, there are around 20,000 unemployed people waiting for a job in the public sector, where the salary would not exceed 100 dollars a month!"

Isn't that reason enough to revolt? Muhammad is at a loss and does not answer. He himself is unemployed, and can't find in his philosophical toolkit an answer to Syria's changing realities. At this revolutionary moment, the majority of people in Sweida seem primarily confused, frustrated by their lives, and yet at a loss for an answer.

The regime began to raise the salaries for its general company's employers. There was no compare between the huge decline of the Syrian Lira value and those small raises. The inflation hit the economy and the people began to hit the ground .The rate of exchange for the US dollar declines

from 45 Syrian pounds before the uprising to 170 S.P during it. And the averages of salaries were 200 U.S dollars before the uprising. This means that the people lost their purchasing power .The prices were going so high, and the regime resorted to distribute vouchers for diesel fuel to calm down the people anger.

Did the regime's little bribes - as the activists called the salaries rise and diesel vouchers - play a role in neutralizing the province? This is another question that troubles activists who feel guilty towards the revolution. Some feel ashamed of what is happening, others prepare to leave to other more exciting places, while others choose to participate in the demonstrations in Damascus and Dar'a and bring back with them stories that excite the activists in Sweida; they too yearn for their own mass demonstrations.

Abou Said, 40 years merchant, summarizes his view of the Druze of Syria in what he calls the "jars theory". He recounts a joke of how the different peoples of the earth were imprisoned in closed jars as a divine punishment for Judgment Day, except for the Druze whose jar was left open. Some wondered why God had done that, what if the Druze escaped. The answer was that this is impossible, for whenever an individual manages to climb to the top, the Druze will automatically pull him or her down. It is an angry and pessimistic joke, but speaks of a certain reality in the area. Abu Said confirms, in our time, the towns of small minorities are turning into hell for their residents.

Three girls

Louai, a 21-year-old student of sociology, was present when the three girls held their own

sit-in.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrpQWYluell> It was a silent one near the engineers syndicate on 11 December

2011.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jdYDe7Fyyc

Three girls, who had decided to express their condemnation of murder, raised a banner that said: Homs is being slaughtered, save our children. Louai believes that the courage of these women was exceptional: to stand alone without anyone to protect, to say no to dictatorship, this is a heroic act that only those who have lived in Syria can understand. What is striking in the videos of the event and in Louai's account is the insults and attacks the three women faced.

In one video, a cab driver who appears in traditional Druze attire We should distinguish between those who were the traditional Druze attire for 'marketing reasons' and those who are truly religious men. The latter would never attack a woman, regardless of the reason. tries to pull the banner away from the girls, and then tries to assault one of the girls. A nearby butcher also dressed in traditional Druze attire, shouts from his store at them, inciting people against them. A middle-aged woman passes by and curses them, and others do the same. One woman asks loudly, "Is there no one to control those bitches"?

The girls showed great courage and fortitude. No one intervened to support them. Louai describes, "What happened was a test for a random sample from the street; no one could have anticipated the amount of negativity and repressed violence against the girls, and against the revolution. It was really shocking."

One of the people present shouted: "someone should call

the security, let them come and arrest these bitches.” Another woman shouted from the other pavement, “are you looking for a photographer to send your video to Aljazeera?” Louai explains: “One o’clock in the afternoon was a peak hour in the street, hundreds were passing by, and the street near the mall is a central one in the city. The violent reaction against a sit in of three girls who carried a simple banner, along with other facts and observations, made us lower our expectations of the local community’s acceptance of the revolution.”

A young man named Khaldoun from the town of Shahba confirms this with his own account: “we were subjected to a lot of harassment, and many of those who were part of the silent majority took advantage of the weakness of the revolutionary side and handed them over to the regime. Fifty years of military dictatorship ruined the moral compass of many people, and many became unpaid agents.”

Khaldoun continues: “there is also a second type of people, those who simply believe the regime’s propaganda; they know the entire story, but upside down.”

Muhammad for instance mentions that a middle-aged woman in black shouted at the demonstrators of Shahba: “you dogs, you gangsters, you want to bring the US here, you want to bring Israel here! People were completely brainwashed. Suddenly, regime TV channels became highly popular, and people started repeating their vocabulary: ‘terrorists’, ‘military gangs’, and ‘intimidating civilians’. For instance, a simple neighbor of ours appeared on public TV declaring: ‘The army should strike these gangs with an iron fist’. This neighbor was a member of the Baath party; he

never left his hometown, or read a book or a newspaper; all his children worked in the Gulf, and yet he never interacted with Syrians from outside his area. Someone like this can be easily made to fear salafis and terrorist groups; he is ready to believe such stories”.