

الجمعة

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What's in a (Friday) name

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With the return of mass peaceful Friday demonstrations in Syria, disputes have emerged regarding the tradition of giving each protest a name, with complaints that armed factions and foreign powers are trying to impose their agendas on civilian activists on the ground.

Ever since the Egyptian “Friday of Rage” on January 28,

2011, the Arab Spring revolutions in general—and the Syrian revolution in particular—were distinguished by the weekly event of the Friday demonstration, when mass crowds came out across the country's cities and towns. Among the most important rites of this tradition was the selection of a single name for the day under which the demonstrators would unite, and which would be conveyed by local and international media, becoming a message bearing a particular stance regarding the issues of the moment.

Neither the vast distances separating these towns and villages, nor the factional differences following the revolution's turn toward militarization, prevented adherence to a single mechanism for selecting the name of the next Friday, over the course of more than 100 Fridays starting with the "Friday of Dignity" on 25 March, 2011, followed by the "Friday of the Martyrs," and then other Fridays, of "Rage," "Resolve," "Defiance," and so on. Despite some disputes over these names among revolutionary activists, and certain local groups of organizers (known as "coordination committees") departing from the general consensus at times, it was the public vote on the Syrian Revolution's official [Facebook page](#) that decided between the various names proposed.

With the return of demonstrations in Syria over the past three weeks, after a decline and near-total disappearance for more than three years, there has been a state of disquiet, developing into accusations of subservience to agendas aimed at aligning the demonstrations with a certain movement, or military faction, or foreign entity. This became evident in the adoption of multiple names for the same Friday, with different groups adopting different

names. The matter went beyond the quibbles that used to occur in the past over names, becoming a serious controversy brought out into the open on social media, with those managing the revolution's Facebook page being accused of Muslim Brotherhood sympathies, and others of promoting names imposed on them by certain military factions or foreign states.

"We stayed away from the naming during the last two weeks, after certain political and military groups intervened in it, and some individuals sought to exploit the popular movement for their own interests," said Abd al-Rahman Jibrini, a media activist and former member of a coordination committee, to Al-Jumhuriya. One current member of the West Aleppo Province coordination committee, Rami al-Ahmad, expressed his bewilderment at the failure to agree on a name in spite of the smaller territorial areas involved and lower number of activists compared to the revolution's early days.

Omar Biski, another activist, likewise lamented the vastly differing orientations that have emerged in the debates over the Friday names, seeing therein "a sign of weakness and division among the revolutionaries." A fourth activist, who asked to be identified only as Bilal, attributed this division to "the intervention of international powers into the revolutionaries' selections, with an aim to impose their political orientations on them;" a problem that can only be resolved by activists confronting "the military factions, and some individuals, who entered the movement in order to take control of the street."

For his part, Uthman al-Sallum—former head of the coordination committee of al-Latamina in Hama Province,

and still an active member of Hama's revolutionary movement today—told Al-Jumhuriya he doesn't know who comes up with the names of the Friday protests, for "the movement arrived suddenly, and within no time unions of coordination committee and WhatsApp groups were formed, each one of them voting separately for their choice, selecting a protest name aligning with their interests" and "trying to win a slice of the pie."

"Each town and geographic sector now has its own intellectual tendency and demands," the media activist Muhammad al-Asmar told Al-Jumhuriya. "The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces has its supporters, and the local people of the revolutionary movement have theirs, while the military factions have their followers, and the political parties have their agendas." Al-Asmar tells of an incident at one of the protests in northeast Hama Province, where demonstrators were surprised to see placards for a new party, the "Syrian Independence Party," being distributed by its members (whom he didn't know) to protestors after pledging to provide aid and open schools for them.

Meanwhile, on social media, a debate of another kind ensued, after many activists said they didn't know the source of the Friday names; some attributing them to the Muslim Brotherhood, while others sought to revive the "National Coordination Committee" name, after its long absence, while others still requested "the revolutionaries outside [the country] not to impose their agendas on the demonstrators on the inside." For example, many on social media said that "military factions seek to ingratiate themselves with Turkey by imposing names aligning with Turkish government policy, and raising Turkish flags in the

demonstrations,” referring to one protest named “The Revolutionaries Are Our Hope and the Turks Are Our Brothers.” Others denounced the most recent Friday protest name—“No Constitution and No Reconstruction until the Downfall of Bashar”—describing it as a “feeble” slogan “pushed for by the Muslim Brotherhood just for the rhyme [in Arabic], devoid of content.”

On the name selection mechanism, Rami al-Ahmad, a member of a coordination committee in west Aleppo Province, said, “A number of WhatsApp groups were created for the purpose of coordination, such as those for the western, southern, and northern provinces of Idlib and Hama, and these groups meet in a single group to suggest the Friday names.” Regarding the selection of more than one name for the same Friday, al-Ahmad said, “the Syrian Revolution Facebook page issues a name for the Friday, and the Idlib News Network issues a different one, and on both pages the choice is made by a vote.” In order to resolve the differences, “the two sides reached an agreement to put both names up for voting, and thus does a single, unified name get decided.” According to al-Ahmad, in western Aleppo Province, for example, “an activist was appointed for each village, who has a role in organizing the demonstrations and mobilizing the people, and a coordinator is also chosen and tasked with communicating with the coordinators of the southern and northern provinces, to unify the names and slogans.”

As for Arif Sharifa, a rights activist, he believes the main headline of every demonstration is “Toppling the Regime,” with the Friday names being merely “sub-headings” chosen by the “coordination committees in every liberated area, originating in the demonstrations coordination group that

combines hundreds of people, in which the idea is put forward, and names related to the idea are discussed, and after agreement they are spread to all the other groups.” Sharifa describes the existence of more than one name for the same demonstration as something that “causes no problems,” because despite the different names, demonstrations occurred in more than 180 locations over the past few weeks, producing a huge popular reaction, and expressing the people’s stances on political events.

The naming mechanism adopted doesn’t appear very effective, especially the different groups in which discussions are held about varying names. This has prompted many activists to call for cancelling the Friday naming tradition altogether, for “the original point of demonstrations is for the people to go out and express their opinions and ideas,” as the media activist Ahmad al-Hamadi put it. “The objective of the naming is documentation, not the sending of messages; the message is conveyed by the spectacle of the peaceful protestors and the signs and slogans they use.”

Many are of the view that there’s no harm in adopting more than one name for each demonstration, for, as Ibrahim Tadifi says, “Naming is not as important as the return of the peaceful movement.” Fellow activist Samer Zaydan agreed, telling Al-Jumhuriya, “There are many ways of wording things. The objective is not the name, but rather the overthrow of the regime.” As the rights activist Yusuf Husayn put it, “Thousands go out to demonstrate without looking at the names.” In spite of this, many revolutionary activists hope for the adoption of a single, unified name for each of the protests, to bring back their original character, and to achieve what the demonstrators aspire for; namely,

that their demands be stated and their voices heard.

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