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Aram
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Who exactly are the people of the occupied Golan Heights? Local writer Aram Abu-Saleh charts their history, including the profound transformations brought about by the Syrian revolution in 2011.

When discussing the fable known as the “October War of Liberation,” the Syrian regime, in its rhetoric and

propaganda, invariably leaves out a matter of utmost importance; namely that its “valiant army” (as it calls it) failed to liberate most of the Syrian territory occupied by Israel during the June 1967 War. After the October 1973 war, six villages inhabited by Syrians, located in the far north of the occupied plateau, remained under Israeli occupation. These were (and are) Majdal Shams, Buq’ata, Mas’ade, Ein Qiniyye, Ghajar, and SuhaytaThe inhabitants of Suhayta were forcibly displaced by the occupation army in 1974, and resettled in the other five villages after the confiscation of their land, which became part of the demilitarized zone following the Agreement on Disengagement signed after the 1973 war., excluding the 169 villages whose inhabitants were forcibly expelled in 1967, along with around 170 farms.Here is a detailed map of the Golan, with a list of its villages and farms before and after the occupation.

An elderly man in my village of Majdal Shams used to tell a story. He had once accompanied his brother, who worked as a truck driver, to the demarcation line on the anniversary of the “liberation” war to watch a ceremony organized by the Syrian regime in the city of Quneitra, just east of the line, during which Hafez al-Assad raised the Syrian flag atop the municipality building. When the two brothers, who came from Majdal Shams, approached the border and tried to talk to those attending the celebration on the other side, the Syrian soldiers shouted and pushed them back. They then yelled at the attendees not to “talk to the Israelis in any way, shape, or form.”

Much can be said about how the disaster that befell the Golan is overlooked, and the issue of its displaced inhabitants is marginalized, and those who remained there

to fight the occupation alone were abandoned. But the most significant result of these dynamics was the exclusion of the cause and suffering of the Golan's people from the collective Syrian consciousness, and from the Syrian political arena as well. The cause of the Golan's displaced people—who today number more than half a million—and of Syrian prisoners from the Golan in Israeli jails are arguably the best examples of this negligence and marginalization, and of the hypocrisy of the "defiant and resistant" regime.Dozens of residents of the small villages of the Golan were taken prisoner during the struggle against the occupation, including some who spent their lives behind bars and died as martyrs, such as Seitan al-Wali and Hayel Abu Zeid. The regime never sought to include the names of Syrian prisoners from the Golan in any prisoner exchange; they were left alone with their families to face the ordeal of imprisonment.

In this article, I will attempt to introduce the Syrian community living in the occupied Golan, in a broader way than the usual clichés and stereotypes that predominate on the rare occasions when the issue is discussed at all. These stereotypes draw on a narrative of "steadfastness" and "resistance" against the Israeli occupation, one which the regime has exploited a great deal in its self-promotion, while at the same time neither lifting a finger to liberate the Golan, nor supporting its people in their struggle against the occupation.

This doesn't mean the narrative of steadfastness and resistance against the Israeli occupation is unfounded. It's perfectly true, and of utmost importance, as reflected in such songs as The Pomegranate Flower and O Golan, You Are Dear to Us by Samih Choukeir. But this popular version

of the narrative overlooks many of the interesting social characteristics of this small and remote Syrian community of around 25,000 people. Moreover, the narrative is now old and tired, relevant only for the period preceding the Syrian revolution of 2011.

The key idea I would like to put forward in this text is that the Syrian revolution has had a profound impact on the Golan community, producing an irreversible change. Since I hail from the village of Majdal Shams, I will write about it in particular, and about the transformations and interactions that have impacted its social makeup and dynamics since the start of the revolution. I apologize, therefore, to the rest of the Golan's villages and social strata.

Comparing the Syrian community in the occupied Golan with other Arab communities in occupied territories (i.e. the Palestinians of the 1948 territories, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip), we find that Palestinian communities did not interact as a whole with the events of the Arab Spring, neither at the political level nor in terms of demonstrations and protests against the status quo.There were a few demonstrations in the Gaza Strip at the start of the Arab Spring, but these, which were mostly a reflection of the relationship with the rest of the Arab peoples, had largely subsided two years on from the revolution in Tunisia. The "contagion," in other words, didn't infect Palestine. This can be explained in a number of ways, but in any case it points without doubt to Israel's success in isolating Palestinians from their Arab surroundings.

As for the Syrian Golan, however, there was a great deal of interaction with—or what I would rather call active participation in—the Arab Spring in general, and the Syrian

revolution in particular. This was in spite of the near-total isolation of the Golan's Syrian villages from their Syrian homeland and wider Arab connection. This demonstrates clearly that even after half a century of Israeli occupation, displacement, and living "geographically" as Palestinians, the people of the Golan have maintained their Syrian identity, politically and culturally.

Majdal Shams before the revolution

The five remaining populated villages in the occupied Golan today are inhabited by a Druze majority alongside minorities of Alawites and Christians. The location of these mountain villages in the far north of the plateau in the foothills of Mount Hermon, together with the efforts of community elders to persuade the population not to leave, have played a major role in keeping a proportion of residents in place, and thus preventing the villages from being emptied and destroyed.The village elders speak constantly of the role of Sheikh Ahmad Taher Abu-Saleh and Kamal Kanj Abu-Saleh in returning a number of the people who fled the war to Majdal Shams; it's thanks to them that the village survives to the present day. However, they didn't succeed in convincing all residents to return, and so a large proportion were displaced and today live in various parts of Syria. The partial displacement of these villages brought about a humanitarian tragedy, with families separated across the two sides of the border, embodied in the area known as the "Hill of Shouts" or "Valley of Tears," where members of the same family communicate by shouting between the two hills separated by the border strip.

My own village, Majdal Shams, is predominantly Druze-populated, with a small Orthodox Christian minority. Ever since the village was founded at the feet of Mount Hermon in the seventeenth century, Majdal Shams' community has been a traditional, hierarchical Druze one, governed by the elders and their fatwas, where women are oppressed, and a strictly "chaste" dress code is enforced, and religious restrictions and prohibitions prevail. This continued to be the case after the Israeli occupation of 1967, although the community gradually adapted to modernity and technology as the years progressed.

As for the legal status of the Golan's people, it was determined by Israeli Civil Law after Israel declared its annexation in 1981, which it implemented in 1982. Until that point, ever since the occupation began, Israeli military law had been in effect. The people of the Golan responded to the annexation by declaring a strike and major civil disobedience campaign, in which 13,000 Syrian men and women stood against Israel and its army, which sought to impose its national identity upon them by force and conscript their children into the occupation army.

This confrontation persisted for half a year, during which time Israel besieged and starved the Golan's villages, and declared them closed military zones, in order to subject them to the annexation, though without success. The strike, which was called the "Strike of Dignity" or the "Great Strike," saw Golan residents gather up their Israeli nationality documents and burn them in the village squares, in front of the occupation soldiers.

In the end, Israel caved to the demands of the Golan residents in 1982 and withdrew its army, retracting its

decrees on naturalization and forced military conscription. Still, it formally annexed the Golan to what it defined as its “non-occupied” territories. In light of these circumstances, and Golan Syrians’ absolute rejection of Israeli nationality, Israel legally defined them as “permanent residents.”This classification was a new one for Israel, created solely for the Syrians of the occupied Golan, and the Palestinians of East Jerusalem. In legal terms it falls between the categories of “Israeli citizen” and “temporary resident,” the latter being a tourist or student or equivalent. I should add that this doesn’t apply to the inhabitants of the village of Ghajar, who are subject to special conditions differing from those of Majdal Shams, Buq’ata, Mas’ade, and Ein Qiniyye. In other words, our Syrian travel documents and identity cards were confiscated, and we were given documents under Israeli “supervision” instead. These weren’t passports but rather mere travel papers, in which our nationalities were recorded as “undefined.” These documents are held only by the Syrians of the Golan and the Palestinians of East Jerusalem, and are referred to locally by the French term “laissez-passer.”This laissez-passer is one of the worst travel documents in the world. Golan residents need visas to travel everywhere. Additionally, they are denied the same rights as Israeli citizens, being forbidden from voting, taking part in elections, and moving freely. On top of that, this “permanent residence” can also be withdrawn, and its holder expelled from the Golan to Syria, without a serious trial, in the event that they “breach” Israel’s security or are found guilty of other charges. The document has influenced the cultural and artistic consciousness of the Golan’s people, becoming the subject of many works of art and music, such as the album titled “Laissez Passer” by the emerging band from the Golan, TootArd.

In terms of relations with the occupation forces and with Syria, as mentioned there was and still is a general consensus against normalization with the occupation. The people of the Golan celebrate all Syrian national holidays and occasions (e.g. Evacuation Day and Martyrs' Day). Apples from the Golan used to be sold to Syria through the Quneitra crossing every year. And many students from the Golan attended Damascus University to study free of charge, through a special and unique permit under an agreement reached between Israel and Syria in 1989 in coordination with the International Red Cross. In other words, up until 2011, relations between the people of the Golan, the state, and the Syrian regime were generally stable.With the exception of certain matters, such as the issue of the prisoners from the Golan held in Israeli jails, which the Syrian state intentionally ignored and tried to make disappear. Great animosity towards the Syrian state is shown in these prisoners' letters.

The Syrian revolution and the communal rift

The Syrian revolution of 2011 shook the Golan street as never before. From the very beginning, it provoked discussions, arguments, and skirmishes. I was still at school at the time, and I remember well how the revolution was the only thing we talked about every day. Back then, I had great hope for a free and democratic Syria that could liberate my town and return it to its natural homeland, and erase the barbed-wire border I saw every day from the windows of my house.

In the earliest days of the anti-regime demonstrations in Syria, a statement was issued signed by Syrians in the

occupied Golan, titled, “You Are the Voice and We Are its Echo.” The below excerpts from the statement shed some light on the language adopted by the young men and women of the revolution in the Golan (emphasis added by this author):

> To our great Syrian people,
> (…) Because we are an inseparable part of our Syrian homeland and its social fabric, and because we are one and the same, we firmly believe (…) that whoever attacks our Syrian people by killing, massacring, arresting, torturing, displacing or looting is an enemy, not one iota different from the Israeli occupation. That we are under Israeli occupation does not in any way mean we remain neutral. We are a natural and indispensable extension of our Syrian people, and of the broad segments of whom believe that the perpetuation of the status quo, and its normalization as a reality, have played a major role in bringing us to the low point we have now reached; and that Israel was the principal beneficiary of this situation. It is our national, humanitarian, and moral duty to side entirely with our people against their oppressors, and to echo their voice loud and clear (…)

> This position we take is a sincere expression of our attachment to the concerns of our Syrian people and their legitimate aspirations for the restoration of their freedom and rightful stature among the nations, consistent with the spirit of our “National Declaration”The National Declaration is a social covenant of sorts, written by the people of the Golan during the Great Strike of 1982. It proclaimed adherence to the Syrian identity, resistance to the occupation, and rejection of Israeli citizenship and all Israeli projects. The complete text can be read here (Arabic). (…)
> We are fully aware this initiative may constitute a sensitive issue for people living in occupied territory. (…) However, our remaining under occupation does not mean we must keep silent about the violations committed by the Syrian regime against our people. The occupation and persecution over here are the counterpart of the humiliation, brutality, and oppression over there (…)

Hundreds of men and women from the Golan added their signatures to the statement, proclaiming their support for their people’s revolt against Bashar al-Assad. The youths of the revolution began to organize sit-ins every Friday, as was happening elsewhere across Syria, each sit-in adopting

the name announced by the revolutionary coordination committees and Facebook pages. This pro-revolution movement soon came under fierce criticism, and even violence, from the regime's supporters in the Golan, who also began assembling and forming their own camp.

Thus an opposition bloc was formed, comprising both men and women, a large proportion of them young. The majority were secular, or at any rate rejected the traditional conservative social structures. It also included most of the prisoners released from Israeli prisons, and many university graduates, academics, intellectuals, and artists. The pro-regime bloc, on the other hand, was mostly made up of traditional and socially conservative individuals, most prominently the Druze clergy and senior sheikhs, plus a small proportion of the freed prisoners and women.This division is a general and inexact one. To formulate a more precise one would require redefining the categories of "traditional" and "conservative" and specifying the meaning of social and political conservatism in the context of the Golan, which is outside the purview of this introductory article, and would indeed require a full article of its own.

At the individual level, all those who signed the above statement, and took part in pro-revolution activism, and expressed their opposition to the regime, faced abuse and repression, ranging from insults and slander and verbal abuse to physical violence and intimidation, and in some cases total ostracization by their families, or at least the religious relatives among them.

Collectively, too, the opposition movement in Majdal Shams met with intense repression, leading to the first violent

confrontation between dissidents and loyalists on 23 December, 2011. Regime supporters could no longer stand the ongoing Friday demonstrations in the town's Martyrs Square, and obstructed their march from that square to the central Sultan Pasha al-Atrash Square. They chanted "God, Syria, Bashar, and nothing else!" while the demonstrators replied, "The people want to overthrow the regime!" This was met with, "You traitors, you cowards, you've sold the country for dollars," to which the revolutionaries responded, "Freedom, freedom, freedom."

The below video documents the events of that day, showing clearly the divisions outlined above in terms of the general characteristics of the opposition and pro-regime blocs:

[video:www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWrLDQXmh0s align:center]

Since that day in late 2011, the communal rift in Majdal Shams has only widened further, as has the repression of the pro-revolutionary movement and its activists through demonization, accusations of treason, death threats, and the writing of security reports for Syrian regime intelligence. This last act may seem bizarre; why would a resident of the occupied Golan fear the Syrian regime's security? There are several reasons, in fact, the most important being the ongoing tragedy of separated families. The regime uses members of our families residing in Syria to silence and terrorize us. Many Golan activists opposed to the regime have suffered the arrest and torture of their relatives living in regime-controlled areas.

The violence persisted until the protest movement was broken, following several repeated and severe assaults. In

2013, the demonstrators withdrew from the public squares of Majdal Shams, in parallel with the general frustration and decline of the peaceful movement in Syria as a whole. Regime loyalists, supported by the clergy, took over the political space.

Thereafter, the effects of this communal divide have been felt at all levels and social structures in the Golan, nearly destroying the anti-occupation movement, having paralyzed its independent cultural and political activity that had been ongoing for several years.For example, Golan residents would hold an annual summer camp called “al-Sham Camp” at which the Syrian flag was raised and the national anthem was sung, to which the occupation authorities responded by carrying out arrests more than once. The camp was halted in 2011 after a sharp and violent discussion among locals about stances towards the developments in Syria, which led to a great schism between the residents that also affected the camp’s activities. Eventually, the camp was cancelled indefinitely. This camp and other similar activities constituted an important part of the Syrian national consciousness among the people of the occupied Golan, and its suspension over the past years has led to a decline in attachment to Syrian identity for many young people. This gave Israel the opportunity to try to fill the vacuum, and exploit the tragedy and massacres in Syria to present itself as the “sole democracy in the Middle East,” targeting the younger generation with this discourse. It began introducing “civil service” schemes that paved the way for military service in the occupation army, and other initiatives coating normalization with a “cultural” cover, taking advantage of the cultural stasis arising from inactive national institutions to try and complete what it wasn’t able to in 1982.

Majdal Shams after the revolution

The Syrian revolution became an “idea” in the Golan’s collective consciousness, even in the minds of those who weren’t activists. The idea is the most radical form any revolution can take. The people of the Golan have experienced the revolution from afar; meaning far from the killing and destruction. Yet they have nonetheless experienced it, and continue to experience it to the fullest, with all its essential ideas and concepts, and what may emerge from them. We need only understand this in order to understand the post-2011 world as lived by the people of the occupied Golan today.

The deeply embedded status of the revolution as an idea and way of life, in addition to the divisions described above, the clerics’ support for the regime, the paralysis of traditional national institutions, the horror of the massacres and bloodshed in the images reaching us every day from the homeland; all these have combined to produce a radical disintegration (or collapse) of centuries-old traditional social structures. The most important of these disintegrating structures and dynamics is the clerical monopoly over public space and social leadership in Majdal Shams.

Various interrelated factors have contributed to this disintegration, including the clerics’ opposition to the revolution; their domination of the national public space; their turning every national occasion into an opportunity to celebrate “The President and Leader, Dr. Bashar al-Assad;” and their severe repression of dissent. But the most important factor was their opposition to everything that the revolution came to represent as an abstract idea in the minds of many men and women in the Golan, such as

women’s rights and sexual freedoms.

Everything became possible in Majdal Shams after the Syrian revolution. There were no more givens or strict impositions; even our national identity, which was once unshakeable and unquestioned, has become a subject of discussion among the younger generation, whose awareness of the wider world was broadened in the wake of the revolution.

In Majdal Shams, after 2011, the religious elders no longer hold real authority, nor is there any obligation to adhere to their dictates or attitudes. The stances of the religious authority and its oppressive practices against the backdrop of the new situation have produced negative reactions towards it, and a strong will to be independent of its control, which has led to a certain “opening-up” and public practice of what used to be considered “forbidden” or “taboo.” As such, we see dozens of alcohol stores and bars in the town today, in addition to other social phenomena related to women’s emancipation, dress codes, marriage to non-Druze spouses, and even gender and sexual freedoms.Some young men and women now publicly declare their gay or trans identities after 2011. This is a multi-faceted phenomenon with more than one cause, but I personally see it as one of a series of events that began in 2011 and brought us to this sudden and rapid “opening-up.”

The collapse and redefinition of givens and taboos, and the rapid “opening-up” that followed, cannot be separated from the events of the Syrian revolution in the Golan context. I will conclude with the story of the first real women’s sit-in in Majdal Shams, which was the only Friday with a name

differing from that adopted by the coordination committees in the rest of Syria.

On Friday, 24 August, 2012, the pro-revolutionary movement in Majdal Shams decided to call that day's demonstration "They raped you, because the revolution is female." The title aimed to emphasize the link between the political revolution and the issues of gender and sexual liberation. One of the banners raised alongside the revolution's flag read, "If your manhood depends on my hymen, then it will definitely vanish once it's lost (Signed: The sold/occupied Golan)." This sit-in demonstrated a deep understanding of the general concepts of revolution, and a desire to propel it to the next stage. Interestingly, the harsh criticism of that day was two-fold; both male-chauvinist and Assadist.

And yet, in post-revolution Majdal Shams, women are closer than ever to gaining their independence. The bars are crowded on Thursdays, and the power of the clerics and religious authorities applies almost exclusively to their adherents alone. The new generation is almost entirely devoid of regime supporters, and proponents of militarization. Everything is subject to debate and question. It's a situation one might describe as alternating between disorientation and freedom.

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