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The days of Abd al-Basit

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al-Jumhuriya Collective
ترجمة: أليكس راول

Al-Jumhuriya details the short but unique life of Abd al-Basit Sarout, the Syrian goalkeeper, protest leader, and militant killed fighting the Assad regime this month, and examines the meaning of the “narrative war” that erupted following his death.

The mourning over the loss of Abd al-Basit Sarout, the larger-than-life Syrian opposition figure killed fighting Assad regime forces earlier this month, has encompassed at least

three distinct forms of grief, in isolation or combined.

First, there is the straightforward sorrow for the death of a 27-year-old killed fending off the advance of the regime in the countryside north of Hama, after eight years of total immersion in the revolution; a sorrow naturally compounded for those who knew him personally.

Second, for a wider number of people, there's the melancholy produced by an unexpected return to the foundational moments of the revolution, and its crest, in the years 2011 and 2012; years that will forever be associated with the voice of Sarout leading the chants in Homs' demonstrations. Many may have had no idea what became of Sarout after Homs—some are no longer able to follow the news in general—yet 2011 was nonetheless a transformational moment for them, as painful as it was necessary.

Third, there is an additional anguish piled on top, resulting from the war declared on Sarout by Assad loyalists from the moment his death was announced, obsessed as they are with destroying any and all meaning, memory, and thought outside their fevered accusations of "terrorism." A well-coordinated campaign was fought online, leading to countless Facebook photos and tributes to Sarout being deleted from the website, and the blocking of users who persisted in posting about him on social media. This was not any sort of discussion about the meaning and symbolism of Sarout, nor an examination of any objectionable positions or indefensible remarks he may have uttered here or there. It was a war against every version of history inconsistent with the regime's absolute insistence that all who rose against it were "criminals" and

“terrorists.”

Faced with this situation, we at Al-Jumhuriya believe there can be no better response than to set out the chapters of Sarout’s life to the fullest extent possible, thereby preserving them outside the ephemeral world of Facebook posts and fleeting verbal conversations. To do justice to Sarout’s legacy, we feel, means attempting to narrate his story and examine it, neither with excessive glorification nor subjective prejudice, retaining for ourselves—we, the people of the revolution—the right to reclaim that story; deconstruct it; critique it; review it; and protect it as well as ourselves from the hostility of those who would see it, and us, annihilated altogether.

Above and beyond the personal aspects of Sarout’s biography and the choices he made—for better or worse—his story contains features of the story of us all. This is our biography; our anxiety, confusion, and stumbles; our siege; our catastrophe. The fevered attacks against Sarout by the Assadists; which have now extended even posthumously to getting Facebook posts deleted, and their users’ accounts frozen; this too is part of the war against us all, including those of us with unfavorable opinions of Sarout, or those wary of uncritically canonizing him. It is a war on our present, on our memory and story, and therefore on our future.

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Abd al-Basit Sarout was born in 1992 in Homs’ al-Bayada neighborhood, one of the many impoverished districts that sprung up haphazardly in and around Syria’s major cities over the course of decades, to the point that, by 2011,

around half of the residents of Damascus and Aleppo were housed in these run-down, poorly-constructed suburbs, in which life was a daily nightmare.

Homs in general had suffered great misgovernance under Hafez al-Assad's rule, when its surrounding poverty belt ballooned from the mid-1980s onward, and the small neighborhoods built without governmental planning by new arrivals from the countryside steadily grew in size. Al-Bayada was one of these, to the northeast of the city's older quarters, initially constructed by members of Homs Province's eastern clans, later expanding in ad hoc fashion, neglected by the government whose policies further impoverished it under Hafez's son, Bashar, who succeeded his father upon his death in 2000.

In the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the uprising in 2011, al-Bayada faced additional neglect, with the governor of Homs Province preventing the expansion of the neighborhood by refusing to issue permits for the installation of water and electricity meters.

"You could see entire buildings in al-Bayada whose residents lived without electricity," says Mazen Ghariba, a civil society activist from Homs. "They would leave food out on their balconies so it wouldn't get spoiled."

Such were the conditions in which Sarout's childhood and adolescence were spent. Unable to complete his education, he was forced to work instead from a young age, transporting construction blocks and iron. At the same time, he joined Homs' al-Karama ("Dignity") soccer club, where he showed talent as a goalkeeper, a position he would go on to play for al-Karama's youth team, then also the Syrian

national youth squad.

This sporting success, however, made little difference to Sarout's financial situation—his monthly salary from al-Karama was just 1,500 Syrian pounds, equivalent at the time to around US$30, according to Ghariba, who remembers well how Sarout and others from al-Bayada were a crucial force in the demonstrations that broke out in several Homs neighborhoods in late March 2011, including al-Khalidiya, Dayr Ba'alba, and al-Bayada itself.

Perhaps the first video of Sarout to circulate widely on the Internet was one filmed in al-Bayada in early June 2011, in which he ~~appeared~~ standing on the shoulders of demonstrators, chanting in support of various Syrian cities, calling for the revolution to spread. At the time, it was decided to blur his face, to protect him from reprisals at the hands of the regime's intelligence agencies. Yet it didn't take long for word to spread that the owner of this distinctive voice; tender and powerful at one and the same time; was none other than Abd al-Basit, goalkeeper of the Syrian youth team.

From that point on, the videos of Sarout were unending, and he ~~no longer~~ concealed his face, unlike most other demonstrators, who were still taking precautions against arrest in the early months. Sarout's face became the face of them all, and his voice their collective voice.

"When people learned Sarout would be chanting at a demonstration, they would head there straight away," said Ghariba. "His mere presence would multiply the turnout." Without doubt, the fact he played for the local soccer team was a key factor in his popularity; Homs being a city of

keen soccer fans.

“He was the best goalkeeper on the Syrian youth squad, and was on his way to becoming goalie for al-Karama’s first team, and probably the Syrian national first team too, considering the history of al-Karama, which has given the national team a number of its keepers,” said Wa’el Abd al-Hamid, a Homs native and Al-Jumhuriya ~~contributor~~. “As an al-Karama supporter myself, Abd al-Basit’s participation in the revolution was immensely significant. Our affiliation with the club was part of how we defined ourselves, and so to see players from the club present on the ground in the revolution was pivotal for us.”

At the same time, Sarout’s popularity was also inseparable from his stirring voice, and the songs and chants he would invent, and his courage in standing up on the crowds’ shoulders, making him an obvious target for the regime and its security agencies. Indeed, regime media outlets and loyalist Facebook pages soon began calling Sarout a “Salafist terrorist.” This prompted a ~~video~~ in July 2011 in which he addressed the camera directly, denying the charges and affirming his rejection of sectarianism, and his support for peaceful protest. The video cemented his status as a leader of the revolution in Homs, and one of the regime’s most-wanted opponents.

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By the fall of 2011, Sarout found himself in the heart of those Homs neighborhoods that were starting to appear as though under siege. To protect demonstrators from the regime’s increasingly murderous attacks against them, certain armed groups began to emerge under the “Free

Syrian Army" name, as the regime fragmented the city, erecting military checkpoints on the roads and at the entrances of various districts. Around this time, Sarout also found himself amid sharp sectarian polarization, with the city's neighborhoods split into those of an Alawite majority supportive of the regime, and those with a Sunni majority opposed to it. This reflected the broader trajectory of the revolution as a whole, which saw a gradual increase in sectarian religious rhetoric in parallel with the growing militarization of the conflict, including tit-for-tat killings and kidnappings.

In contrast with this wider drift, or rather in resistance to it, Sarout began appearing in public at this period alongside the late actress Fadwa Suleiman, who hailed from the Alawite community. A ~~video~~ from December 2011, for example, shows them chanting together against the regime in Homs' al-Khalidiya neighborhood. As much as this was a clear message against the widening sectarian polarization, it also placed Sarout under a permanent microscope from that point on, one through which his every act and chant and utterance would be closely scrutinized.

By the end of 2011, Sarout had seen a large number of his friends and fellow residents of al-Bayada buried. His eldest brother, too, and several other relatives were also killed in a raid carried out by regime security forces in the neighborhood. The first months of 2012 marked a definitive shift toward the militarization of the standoff between regime and opposition. As armed battles liberated numerous Homs neighborhoods from regime control, a carnival-like atmosphere descended on the ~~mass demonstrations~~, Sarout at the very center of many of them, chanting the songs that became anthems of the revolution

nationwide, such as “Our Homeland is a Heaven” and “Longing, Longing for Freedom,” two which were especially associated with his name.

The city, then, transformed gradually into an arena of open warfare, with pro-regime militias perpetrating horrifying sectarian massacres of civilians with knives and other mêlée weaponry, while regime rockets, artillery, tanks, and eventually aircraft carried out countless assaults on rebellious districts. This led to Assad’s forces re-occupying several quarters, including al-Bayada, most residents of which were displaced by attacks that laid waste to vast portions of its infrastructure. The neighborhoods remaining outside regime control, meanwhile, were subjected to a steadily tightening siege, their exit and entrance points closed off and ringed with snipers.

It was abundantly clear by the spring of 2012 that the regime sought to kill and displace as many residents as possible of these insubordinate neighborhoods, and to isolate and besiege the areas it was unable to recapture by military force. While continuing his involvement in the peaceful demonstrations, Sarout began at this time to take up armed resistance as well. His faction, named the “al-Bayada Martyrs’ Brigade,” took part in attempts to liberate his neighborhood anew, during which he was wounded for the first time by a bullet in his foot.

By mid-June 2012, the regime had essentially succeeded in encircling Homs’ Old City, which no longer had any channels to the outside world except a few roads monitored around the clock by regime snipers, who prevented the entrance of any meaningful quantities of food, medicine, or ammunition. The city had now lost hundreds of residents to

the killing, and tens of thousands more had left to seek refuge elsewhere—in Homs' other neighborhoods; in other parts of Syria; or in the world at large outside Syria—leaving a few thousand civilians, and a few hundred fighters, remaining under the siege.

Abd al-Basit and his comrades tried repeatedly to break the siege without success. He decided, therefore, to leave Homs with a few others through underground tunnels and sewers, heading for the countryside north of the city, where he hoped to obtain assistance to confront the ever-tightening siege. "He wanted, ideally, to secure military aid that would bring about the breaking of the siege," says Khaled Abu Salah, a political activist from Homs who was also a friend of Sarout's. "If that wasn't possible, he wanted at least to procure the food and ammunition needed to keep facing the siege. But these attempts didn't pan out as hoped. He wasn't able to get the necessary assistance, and it didn't seem there was anything he could do from the outside to end the siege."

Accordingly, in the fall of 2012, Sarout and a few others took the decision to return to the besieged city to help resist the now-total siege by whatever means were available. Once inside, he and his brigade waged a suicidal battle against regime forces that failed once again to break the ring of steel. Many of the brigade's fighters were killed, and Sarout lost his second brother. He was also injured himself by yet another bullet to the leg. The 2013 documentary film ~~Return to Homs~~, directed by Talal Derki, follows Sarout at this time. At the end of the film, Sarout is shown laid out on a makeshift hospital bed, waking up after an operation on his wound, which the field surgeon was unable to mend properly. Heavily anesthetized, slurring his

words, but with tears of grief in his eyes, he tells those around him not to let “the blood of the martyrs go in vain.” Raising his voice, he yells, “We don’t want money, we don’t want anything else; kill me, but open a road for the people [under siege].”

Design: Tammam Alomar

Once the winter had passed, and Sarout’s leg had healed, he and his fellow fighters resumed their attempts to break the siege, again without success. By the spring of 2013 the regime’s chokehold was so total that those inside the Old City were resorting to eating tree leaves and cat meat.

Despite the bleakness of the circumstances, Sarout never ceased to sing in parallel with his armed activity, appearing in numerous videos in which he performed renditions of songs, perhaps the best-known from this particular period being “For the Sake of Your Eyes, O Homs.” It was also at this time that his lyrics and general speech grew increasingly peppered with the symbolism and rhetoric of Salafist-jihadism, including explicitly sectarian language, in an apparent embrace of the jihadist currents that were then on the rise across the country, as the nationalist framework of the conflict disintegrated, particularly after the infamous chemical weapons massacre in the Damascus suburbs on 21 August, 2013, and the perception that an indifferent international community was abandoning Syrians to their fate.

In late 2013, talk spread of negotiations underway to remove the besieged fighters and civilians from Homs by means of an agreement with the regime. Sarout and the al-

Bayada Martyrs' Brigade were among those opposing the idea of leaving, not just rhetorically but physically: in January 2014, they launched the so-called "Battle of the Mills," in which their fighters dug a tunnel toward the city's flour mills, hoping to break the siege, or at least transport an amount of flour back to the hungry residents of the encircled neighborhoods.

This quixotic effort ended in great tragedy, with over sixty of the brigade's fighters killed in the botched operation, including two more of Sarout's brothers, bringing the total number of his brothers killed at the regime's hands to four. The failure of this final attempt to break the siege was accompanied by much talk of betrayal from inside the besieged quarters, and among the rebel brigades of Homs' northern countryside, who were seen as having exerted no efforts to break the siege. Sarout appeared in a ~~video~~ shortly afterward, rejecting the hurling of such accusations, calling for the unification of the ranks and for moving on from unspecified "errors."

Several subsequent videos showed Sarout standing amid the rubble of the city ~~declaring~~ his rejection of withdrawal and criticizing the opposition entities negotiating its terms. In February 2014, he appeared in a ~~video~~ chanting before a crowd against withdrawal from Homs, negotiation with the regime, or reconciliation with it. Evident in the video is the stark transformation Sarout had undergone since losing his city, four of his brothers, and untold numbers of friends and comrades: the only flags visible in the footage are the black-and-white banners of hardline Islamism. The besieged, he said in effect, would place their faith in God alone from now on, and would not accept to enter into truces with the regime as had happened in Barzeh and al-

Moadamiya in the Damascus environs.

Less than three months later, in May 2014, the regime's green buses were carrying out the first of their forced displacement operations, taking Homs' remaining fighters and civilians to the north of the province. Sarout made no appearances in any of the videos depicting this exodus, though it was clear he'd been obliged to go along with it, after the majority of the besieged agreed to cut a deal, seeing no alternative to it but death by starvation, sniper, or shell.

A few hours before this departure, Sarout was filmed ~~speaking~~ with unusual sorrow and desolation about his disappointment with the jihadists of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS; soon to be renamed the Islamic State). He had thought, he said, that they shared the goals of those besieged in Homs, criticizing them for denigrating Homs' revolutionaries as "potheads and infidels," going on to say Homs should not be left for "Alawites, Christians, Shiites, Lebanese, and Iraqis" to inhabit.

The video reveals several important facts. First, if Nusra and ISIS were accusing Sarout and his fellow fighters of being "infidels," then evidently the latter had not pledged allegiance to the jihadists at that time, as is often claimed by Sarout's detractors. Second, Sarout's stated rejection of what he termed "politicization" implied his refusal to join any organization that did not have the overthrow of the regime by force as its central objective. Third, and rather contradictorily, Sarout was clearly deeply immersed at the time in extremist Islamist discourse, speaking of the need to "implement God's law on Earth," and seeing the conflict

with the regime as a religious and sectarian one in which "the Muslims" needed to stand together and join forces, even with Nusra and ISIS.

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After arriving in Homs' northern countryside, Sarout moved between various locations and frontlines, among them al-Dar al-Kabira and al-Rastan. Since the province itself was also besieged, conditions for the opposition brigades therein were dire.

"The fighters suffered a great shortage of arms. They lacked the heavy weaponry needed to fight the regime, which was besieging us from almost all directions," says Samer al-Homsi, a media activist from the al-Houla region of northern Homs Province. "When ISIS took over the Uqayribat area in the desert to the east, this enabled them to send money and arms to their few members in northern Homs Province."

Sarout had just participated in the founding of a new brigade, the "Homs Legion." This brigade flew the green, white, black, and red flag of the revolution, rather than the black banner of jihad, and had no ideological objectives beyond the wish to topple the regime, according to Khaled Abu Salah, the political activist and friend of Sarout's. The latter's aim "was to return to liberate Homs City," Abu Salah tells Al-Jumhuriya. "But the difficult conditions, and ineffectiveness of the armed factions in the province vis-à-vis that goal, drove Sarout and his group to work alone, carrying out sporadic operations against regime forces on the fringes of the area to seize weapons and keep the fight going."

With the arrival of ISIS on the eastern desert frontier, Sarout was contacted by an individual promising him weapons in exchange for allegiance to the group, says Abu Salah. Sarout told this individual he was prepared to do this, so long as the sole intention was to fight the regime; an arrangement known as bay'at al-qital ("fighting allegiance"), a term used by Syrian factions to describe tactical cooperation with ISIS for the express purpose of fighting the regime, with no further involvement in the group's organizational structure or political project.

This relationship, such as it was, lasted no longer than a few weeks, after which Sarout severed ties with the individual and everyone else who had declared their readiness to join ISIS in northern Homs Province. "When religious clerics from ISIS later entered the north of the province, and asked Sarout to pledge allegiance, he refused, and took a firm stance against them," says Abu Salah. In a ~~video~~ released in August 2015, Sarout affirmed the total independence of the al-Bayada Martyrs' Brigade from any other entity or organization. The following year, when Sarout was temporarily in Istanbul, Abu Salah filmed a lengthy ~~interview~~ with him, in which he explained the ISIS story in detail, saying he changed his mind about pledging allegiance when it became clear to him the organization's goal was to rule over the people of the northern province, not to fight the regime, and when he witnessed unspecified "excesses" and "mistakes" perpetrated by its members and associates. Similarly, in a 2018 ~~interview~~ with Orient TV, he said he backed away from pledging allegiance to ISIS after coming to believe the latter sought "to fight the revolutionaries, and the Muslims, and the people who were with me under siege."

Despite these public disavowals of ISIS, Sarout faced problems from the other armed factions in the area, especially Jabhat al-Nusra. These led eventually to a full-blown campaign against Sarout's brigade, in which nine of his comrades were killed in November 2015, ending with Sarout leaving the province and winding up in Turkey at the start of 2016.

In Turkey, he moved between Gaziantep and Istanbul, where he took part in ~~demonstrations~~ supporting the city of Aleppo, the eastern half of which was then under siege and soon to be re-occupied and emptied of residents by regime forces after a devastating offensive. According to Abu Salah, Sarout had no wish to remain in Turkey, but the threat of arrest by Jabhat al-Nusra prevented him from returning to Syria.

"After the fall of Aleppo, demonstrations started up again in northern Syria, and Abd al-Basit and I were able to enter the country and take part in them. I tried to plead his case through numerous intermediaries from Homs known to the factions, but Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham remained determined to arrest him." Sure enough, a few months after his return to Syria, Sarout was detained by a Nusra-linked patrol, and imprisoned in solitary confinement for 37 days, only to be released after the intervention of family intermediaries, according to Abu Salah.

After leaving Nusra's custody, Abd al-Basit decided to move with a number of al-Bayada Martyrs' Brigade fighters to northern Hama Province, which was the closest he could get to Homs. There, he and the brigade fought in a number of battles alongside various factions, albeit independently, until in late 2017 they merged with Jaysh al-Izza ("The Army

of Glory"), a Free Syrian Army-linked faction active in the province.

"Abd al-Basit would say this is a faction with no security apparatus or prisons […] we don't rule over civilians, we defend them," says Abu Salah.

Indeed, Sarout's choice of Jaysh al-Izza was of a piece with what had always been his first priority, namely the toppling of the regime. The faction was known for its refusal to take part in any fighting against any other brigades opposed to the regime, including ISIS and Nusra. It also had a clean reputation insofar as it didn't seek to lord over civilians in its areas of activity. While its discourse and ideological leanings were (and are) clearly Islamic, it continued (and continues) to fly the flag of the revolution and to remain formally within the Free Syrian Army umbrella. It has also repeatedly declared its opposition to the Russian-Turkish agreements reached through the Astana and Sochi political processes, even if it has had little choice but to adhere to them in practice.

As always, Sarout's military activity at this time did not keep him from singing and chanting. Videos from the period show him ~~reciting~~ martial-themed poetry on the frontlines, rifle in hand; and ~~singing~~ the classic "Our Homeland is a Heaven" at peaceful demonstrations. To the end, he remained as active as possible in confronting the Assad regime by any and all means available.

During the final battles he fought in the north and west of Hama Province in 2019, Sarout was on the frontlines with Jaysh al-Izza, appearing in a ~~video~~ in early June speaking excitedly of progress made in the Tal Malah region.

“After the liberation of the area between Tal Malah and al-Jubbayn, Sarout learned that a group on the rear lines had been injured by bombardment, and so he decided to head there in his car to aid them,” Abu Salah tells Al-Jumhuriya. “As soon as he turned on his car, the area he was in was shelled, though without injury to anyone. When the car began moving, however, there came a second wave of shells, and Sarout was wounded in his stomach, leg, and arm, and taken to a medical site in Khan Shaykhun.”

Those aiding him then wanted to move him to the al-Dana Hospital in northern Idlib Province, but Sarout’s heavy bleeding forced them to stop in Ma’arrat Misreen along the way to give him blood. Once at al-Dana, his injuries were brought under control, and his condition stabilized. On 6 June, he was transferred via the Bab al-Hawa crossing to a hospital in the Turkish town of Reyhanlı, and then to Antakya, where his condition deteriorated, which Abu Salah attributes to his repeated movement and severe blood loss.

On the morning of 8 June, Sarout passed away as a result of his injuries, bringing an end to a short but epic life full of dramatic transformations, battles, and blood. His body was returned to Syria to be buried in the town of al-Dana in Idlib Province. At his funeral, the body so often carried on the shoulders of crowds was raised one last time by mourners chanting for him, rather than with him, burying him away from the Homs he had spent his last years fighting to liberate anew and return to.

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Despite his apparent ebullience and ever-readiness to rush toward danger, the story of Sarout’s last years negates the

idea of him as a reckless seeker of death. Instead, his actions were invariably premised on a conscious decision to fight to the end. His revolution knowingly took the form of continual confrontation. As such, Sarout owned his destiny, and chose the path he did out of a combination of passion and considered thought. Hence, for example, his decision to return to the battlefield despite his multiple prior injuries.

The point is that many of Sarout's defenders point to his supposed "simpleness," arguing that circumstances beyond his control pushed him against his will to take the paths he did. This fails to give him due credit, and is belied by his own innumerable statements and actions. Sarout wasn't "simple," if what's meant by the word is that he didn't grasp the meaning and implications of what he did and said. Nor is it true that he didn't choose his path of his own volition: however crushing and cruel were his circumstances, his free will interacted with them, and selected a particular course of action from among the multiple available options. Sarout wasn't alone in living those circumstances, yet the decisions he made were not the same ones taken by all who lived them with him.

It remains true at the same time, however, that Sarout was not always fully equipped to express his ideas, or to think systematically about his situation and act accordingly. Even during his flirtation with Salafist discourse, the core of his statements remained centered around ideas of "pride," "honor," and "defending one's self and blood." The same shortfall can be seen in his repeated insistence on "rejecting politicization," or such phrases as "nobody can politicize us." To judge by Sarout's overall life story and words, what he meant by this was, first, a rejection of negotiation with the regime, and second a refusal to involve

himself in any enterprise governing civilians prior to the toppling of the regime. Yet this in itself is a patently political position, and, so far from “rejecting politicization,” it led Sarout to identify with anyone declaring war on the enemy, even such groups as ISIS and Nusra, with their flagrantly obvious political ambitions. For Sarout, everything other than the sole objective of destroying the Assad regime was a sideshow, a deviation from the straight road of the one, clear battle against the one permanent enemy, in a manner of thinking reminiscent of radical movements of many kinds; those incapable of seeing anything other than America, or Israel, or global capitalism, or “false gods” as their antagonists.

Does this imply a blanket justification of words spoken and positions taken by Sarout that many in the revolutionary community—the writers of this text included—reject, such as utterances sympathetic to ISIS and Nusra, or expressions of sectarian bigotry? Certainly not. Nor does it mean rebuking those who cannot get past these words and positions, and feel that Sarout’s post-factum explanations were insufficient. This is “our problem” with him, and would that we were free of Assad, and Sarout were still alive, so we could argue with him about it one day. We have all—we and Sarout—been deprived of that opportunity now.

Still, to do justice to history and the country, and in light of so much death, pain, and destruction, these particular periods of Sarout’s life should not be unduly singled out in isolation from their attending circumstances. Certainly they mustn’t be obsessively brought up time and again as though they told the full story of Sarout, or even the full story of the Syrian revolution, as Assad and his apologists would have it. Do the Assadists, or Al-Akhbar newspaper, or

Putin’s media, or those behind the electronic campaign to have tributes to Sarout deleted off Facebook, take issue with Sarout because he once uttered an extremist statement, or raised a black flag, or spat out a sectarian insult? No: they take issue with him because he stood up against Assad. It’s the same reason they take issue with us all—peaceful or violent; sectarian or democratic nationalist—and with the revolution as a whole, with everything it contains and everyone it comprises.

Today, Sarout’s death appears to have opened a window for us all onto our memories of 2011, and ourselves and our worldviews during that moment that changed us all; that moment in which we felt we owned the power to shape our destiny, and owned our loud, hoarse voices. For precisely this reason, and because Sarout symbolized that moment, the Assadists endeavor to deprive us of it, and of him. The campaign by the regime and its allies to erase Sarout’s story reveals their terror of the revolution’s story as a whole, and their astute understanding of the critical importance of fighting the ~~narrative war~~. Faced with this, we can only persist in our own determination to fight the same war, and to document the details of our story to the best of our abilities, in defense of our memory, of ourselves, of 2011, of the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime, and of Syria.