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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

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Editors' note: Syrian blogger Hussein Ghrer wrote the first draft of this article on 14 February 2013, shortly after he was released from his first arrest for 37 days in December 2011. In it the writer sheds light on the role that social media have so far played in the Syrian revolution. Two days later, on 16 February 2012, Ghrer and 15 of his colleagues at the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) were arrested during a raid on their office by the Syrian security forces. Over a year has now passed without trial, indictment or court referral. Maurice Aaek, a friend and Syrian online journalist, added his comments as an afterword in February 2013, a year later.

HUSSEIN GHRER: Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression

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Social media played a substantial role in the Arab spring, with some going so far as to call the events across the Arab world the Facebook revolutions, in reference to the crucial part social media played in them. In an attempt to put things in perspective and give the factors involved their proper weight, I would like to pose a question: would there have been revolutions if there were no social media? The answer to this question is a step towards giving the factors that were part of starting the revolution their proper significance.

History has documented a number of revolutions where dictators were toppled without the aid of social media. The Arab revolutions have been no different. The natural progression of things led to the day when people raised their voice against dictatorial regimes and corruption, and gave great sacrifices in the name of freedom, dignity and social justice. When Bouazizi burnt himself he wasn't planning on getting his footage on YouTube nor to start the Tunisian revolution, and when Wael Ghonim started his page 'We are all Khaled Saeed', his specific goal was to shed light on the inhumane practices of the police apparatus in Egypt and to pinpoint responsibility for Khaled Saeed's death.

Since the oppressor and the oppressed are the main elements in these revolutions, the media played the key role of portraying the sense of injustice and mobilizing the people against the oppressor or tyrant to become the defenders of the oppressed. Previous revolutions used flyers and held secret meetings to ask people to protest and to disseminate the news of the protests. Are the social media a propaganda tool or are they used simply to convey the news?

Tunisian Revolution Model

As the story goes, a policewoman slapped Mohammad Bouazizi, so he burnt himself, which was in turn filmed by someone on his phone and uploaded on YouTube. Consequently, some of the residents of Sidi Bouzid, the remote city where Bouazizi lived, protested over what had happened to that young man; likewise someone shot a video of the protest and uploaded it on the internet. Activists circulated these videos among themselves while the protests started to build momentum in the forgotten southern area of Tunisia. This is the story of a revolution.

As activists we followed the news out of our own interest in what is published on social media networks but none of us knew that this would be the beginning of the first Arab revolution in modern history.

The Tunisians were able to attract media attention through uploading and circulating videos of the protests, and commenting on them through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Since traditional media, and particularly audiovisual media, are more widespread than social media, every home was watching these events unfold, which resulted in the protests spreading to more cities and fuelling a revolution against Bin Ali's regime.

The Egyptian Revolution Model

In mid 2010 activist Wael Ghonim started a page on Facebook called 'We are all Khaled Saeed' to shed light on the routine torture and violent practices of the Egyptian security apparatus, using Khaled Saeed's case to highlight this violence. After the fall of Bin Ali's regime in Tunisia, Egyptian activists felt that the time was ripe to call for mass protests against the Ministry of Interior and the practices of the Egyptian security apparatus. The location and time were chosen and the invitation to protest spread exponentially, with hundreds of thousands of Egyptians interacting within social media networks, especially Facebook. And since there is more freedom in Egypt compared with Tunisia and Syria, activists were also able to distribute flyers, and even use certain interested traditional media outlets that discussed and/or promoted the idea.

The protests started and videos flooded the internet. Soon, activists started to report the news live from the streets, mainly using Facebook and Twitter, with even the media using activists' live accounts, since they were considered reliable sources with backgrounds as former activists and bloggers using their actual names. This escalated throughout 18 months until Mubarak finally stepped down.

In reviewing the evolution of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and the use of social media we must differentiate between (a) using these media to promote an idea before turning that idea into action and (b) using them as a tool to convey these actions. In the Egyptian case, social media were used to spread the idea of protesting against the inhumane practices of the Egyptian security forces and encouraging activists to come down to the streets in addition to broadcasting news of the protests. As for the Tunisian revolution, social media were used mainly as a tool to convey details of the protests and in helping the people to interact as a response to suppression of protests by the Tunisian regime.

Social Media and the Syrian Revolution

Many say that Syrian activists did not use social media in their revolution against the regime, but the opposite is true. I believe that whoever said this considered the Egyptian revolution a standard model for using social media, and their beliefs were substantiated by the protests in Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States that were successfully organized via social media. However, the Syrian revolution is considered to be unique in that it was innovative in its use of social media, and this in itself should be examined. I am not implying that the Syrians are unique or different, but simply stating that necessity is the mother of invention, and that due to the cruelty and oppression of the Syrian regime in addition to media blackouts, the Syrians invented new ways to use social media to their benefit and to serve their revolution.

The Syrian Reality before the Revolution

The Syrian regime, from the days of Hafez Al Assad, was intolerant of any opposition with regard to political, security or even economic viewpoints, and did not allow media freedom or freedom of speech. Even when private media institutions were founded they belonged, directly or indirectly, to prominent figures in the country and were controlled by the security apparatus and, by default, by the security forces of the presidential palace.

When social media surfaced all efforts were made to block them. Bloggers who criticized the regime directly or indirectly, myself being one of them, had to write using aliases to avoid being arrested and tortured.

Intolerance was the main characteristic of the regime. Any window to freedom of speech, however small, was shut down lest it become a threat. Diligent efforts were made not to support the developments of the internet's infrastructure or disseminate it among the citizens, citing exorbitant costs as the reason for this, in addition to blocking sites that seemed threatening to the government, including YouTube, Facebook, blogs and many other social media sites. This enabled the regime to minimize activists' effects on the people, shutting them away from each other and from society at large.

In the Beginning

In line with the Egyptian model, a Facebook page called for people to protest throughout Syria on 5 February 2011. The attempt failed for various reasons, but mainly because the page's owner was anonymous. Also, he did not live in Syria. However, a small group of activists pursued the concept by suggesting the most suitable methods to spark the protests and attract the widest audience base. To this end, a Facebook page was launched calling on people to protest against Bashar Al Assad's regime, and Tuesday 15 March was announced as the revolution's start date, while the following Friday was named 'Wrath Friday'.

Indeed about 150 men and women came out in front of the Umayyad mosque in downtown Damascus on the day, not as a direct response to the invitation to protest but in the hope of gathering as many as they could. As expected, the number of people was small, and the reaction of the security forces was harsh as they started beating and arresting protesters.

The protest on 15 March was the spark of the revolution, but the actual birth of the revolution took place in Daraa, on 18 March, when parents demanded the release of their children who had been arrested by intelligence forces after they had written several statements against Bashar Al Assad's regime on their school's walls, in response to the Syrian Revolution Page.

It is worth noting that the attempt to imitate the Egyptians by calling people to protest against the Syrian regime through Facebook failed because the situation was different.

Here we elaborate on this failure.

The Social Media 'Weapon' Against a Tank

On 15 March I went to the Umayyad mosque half an hour prior to the protests starting. I prepared my mobile phone and my fake Twitter account, and told my friends who live outside Syria to follow the news that I would be posting from that account.

The police were everywhere; there were around 150 people confronted by more than 500 policemen. They were staring at our faces, trying to distinguish and memorize the faces of the protesters. A young man shouted: 'Syrians will not be humiliated.' This was the key statement that started the protest, which was able to get through two streets before the police forces, disguised as civilians, started beating the protesters and arresting them.

I raised my mobile to start filming the protest, as did a number of others, but the policemen started insulting us, clearly following strict orders that taking photos or videos was prohibited. The policemen were looking for anyone using mobile phones. I remember one of them shouting at a woman who was trying to shoot the protest from her office window above.

The Syrian regime benefited from previous revolutions and knew not to have any authentic footage published. Bashar Al Assad admitted this to a delegation from Jubbar: 'The thing that annoys me in the protests is those people who take photos and videos to send them to hostile TV stations!'

The Syrian regime was keen to isolate Syria from the media. When I was arrested on 24 October 2011, I noticed that those prisoners who had taken photos and videos and sent them to the TV stations were treated harshly and tortured more than others.

They accused me of conspiring with the BBC to train the activists to photograph or take videos of the protests, and of forging them, as well as using satellite mobile phones prior to the revolution breaking out. This was because I was a supervisor at 'Araa Academy', a project funded by BBC Media Action in Syria to train journalists on how to use social media tools effectively.

The Syrian regime targeted people who photographed the protests and killed them; we saw so many videos in which the cameraman was killed or injured while shooting. One of them was the martyr Ahmad, who was shooting the tanks shelling the houses in Rastan, Homs, and who we saw dying while covering with his final words the crimes of the Syrian regime against the Syrian population. He was shot by soldiers from within a tank.

Every Citizen Is a Journalist

From the very beginning of the revolution, the Syrian regime enforced a full media blackout across Syria by restricting journalists and reporters, and arresting some of

them, such as the former Reuters reporter and the Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar* reporter. They also broke into *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* offices in order to prevent their staff working. Having seen this, the Syrians realized early on that they were on their own facing the regime's cruelty. Therefore they decided to fight the media battle themselves. That is how we came to see a number of people taping the protests and others uploading these videos on YouTube, and then sending them to the 'coordination committees'¹ and news stations, often within 15 to 30 minutes.

Some of my acquaintances in the region considered me an internet guru and asked for my assistance at times, but within two months many had mastered taping, uploading and sending videos themselves. I was happy they became independent, and happier with the fact that the citizens' media culture had started to spread.

Through their persistence and perseverance, the Syrians managed to break the media blockade which was forced upon them by the regime to black out what was happening in Syria, especially after Saudi Arabia and Qatar ordered *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* to cover the revolution in Syria. Yet the activists faced suspicions regarding the photos they posted of protests, and the eyewitness testimonies of the events, because there was no way to validate those photos by a special independent media body, since the regime deliberately broadcast fabricated videos, uploaded them and sent them to news stations, then revealed their falsehood in order to accuse the activists of lies and fraud. But this did not deter activists who continued uploading a huge amount of videos, which helped convey a much clearer picture of the reality in Syria.

The constant doubt regarding photos of protests forced Syrians to develop their own tools to prove the credibility of what they broadcast by holding signs that specified the date and place, in addition to taking photos of obvious locations to conclusively show the sites of protest. They also used local newspapers for the first time in Baniyas in late April, when one of the activists started the video with a shot of a local newspaper to show the protest's date, so that the regime's media couldn't claim that the activists repeated broadcasts of the same protests on different days.

On the other hand, the communications blackout and the targeting of photographers made the activists constantly look for alternatives in order to continue working, so they used the communications networks of neighbouring countries in the border regions, such as Daraa and Idlib, in addition to using internet devices and satellite phones to overcome the blockade. Most importantly, the activists came to utilize small cameras hidden in shirt buttons, pens, ties and glasses for instance, and installed them in cars, shop doors and activists' clothes so as to be able to tape the policemen's violations close up; some of them walked among the security forces while taping their actions. In the absence of traditional media tools, the citizen with a mobile or camera has indeed become a journalist or official speaker.

CLOSING PARAGRAPHS TO HUSSEIN'S ARTICLE

written by Maurice Aaek

Where are the Bloggers and the Old Activists?

A follower of the Syrian blogosphere would have noticed a clear gap or lack of bloggers' interaction regarding the Syrian revolution, especially during its earliest months, although a lot of these bloggers are known for their outspokenness in several fields, such as women's rights, treatment of disabled people, etc. That is why a lot of those who knew them wondered about their absence and assumed that they had shut themselves down and were not playing any part in the Syrian revolution.

While some bloggers sided with the Syrian regime in confronting its people under many pretexts, the majority of bloggers supported the revolution fully from day one. Bloggers living in Syria could not openly announce their support of the people's demands through their blogs, through fear of arrest or maltreatment by the security forces, and the same went for some bloggers abroad, who feared for their families in Syria. The bloggers were not able to play a major role in the revolution as bloggers because even those who participated in the protests and were arrested could not post the news of these protests using their real names or write their own personal accounts.

I recalled how, when the Egyptian regime blocked Twitter and Facebook and cut off the internet from some areas in Cairo, I stepped up, along with a group of Syrian bloggers, to help them reach out to the rest of the Egyptian population and the world by creating a special blog that posted the news of what happened in Cairo around the clock. The blog received tens of thousands of hits daily. It pained us not to be able to play the same role in Syria, as conditions there were completely different from those in Egypt.

We, the bloggers and the old activists, so to speak, had to lie low as bloggers so as not to expose our identities, but we participated in the revolution and purposely incorporated ourselves within different work groups to serve it. This was not the case for all bloggers, as many of them, specifically those living abroad, were capable of writing publicly and openly, but they were few and that undermined their direct effect.

It is worth mentioning 'collective blogging' when talking about the role of bloggers in the Syrian revolution; individual blogging was replaced by groups of bloggers creating several blogs, in which they could post their opinions without risking their lives; the most important of these – <http://the-syrian.com/>² – has been read widely and has links on many Facebook pages.

Work groups were also created that specialized in monitoring and analysing everything presented by the government's media. These groups managed to reveal the fabrications of the video showed to journalists by Walid Al Mu'alim at the end of November 2011, in addition to analysing all the photos of the explosions in Kafr Souseh and Al Maydan in Damascus, proving conclusively that they were created by the regime itself.

A Military Turn to Social Media Activism

In the year following the writing of this article, an increase in the number of online pages created by Syrian activists continued across different social networks. This has played an important role in advocating for the revolutionary movement. However, the expansion has for the most part been more about an increase in numbers rather than in effect and quality. Nevertheless, some varied and diverse ways of using social media have sprung up in the past year.

Whereas some pages focus on posting pictures only, others try to provide online radio shows, in addition to pages that try to publish monthly or bimonthly pdf magazines that can be printed and distributed manually to reach new readers outside the internet circle. All of these attempts also rely on team work by activists and media professionals, something that has become the prevailing trend in the Syrian social media over the last few months.

With the increase in the numbers of Syrian emigrants, the role of providing aid and relief to Syrian activists increased, and social networks were used to organize and coordinate this role and highlight the places that need assistance.

On the other hand, and with the revolutionary movement in Syria turning into a military movement during the last few months, all of the armed groups fighting the Syrian regime created pages and accounts on social networks, and invested heavily in those internet tools to cover the news of their battles with the regime. In many stages of the struggle, the news of the armed clashes and battles posted online by those groups attracted the attention of Arab and international media more than the news of the peaceful civil movement that the coordination committees had been reporting on since the beginning of the revolutionary movement.

The pages of those armed groups used multimedia to cover and document most of their military movement and field news. In the past few months, the traditional media's interest in the online sites of the Syrian coordination committees was limited to broadcasting the names and numbers of victims, and those arrested or missing as documented by these pages. Many pages related to the coordination committees simply copied news from the sites of the armed group, mainly the Free Syrian Army.

As a result of this military turn, the role of social media sharply declined in terms of raising political awareness, or even general and open national discussion about many issues relating to politics, rights and national identity which had prevailed in the first year of the public movement. It is worth mentioning here, that those named by Hussein Ghrer (bloggers and old activists) had attempted through social media to fight for the 'peacefulness' of the public movement by highlighting the risks and disadvantages of 'militarizing this movement'. Later, they continued to emphasize that this 'militarization' is only an 'incidental phenomenon' that was forced on the public movement by the regime's violence. They also played a unique media role in rectifying what they called 'the revolution's mistakes and pitfalls'. They probably meant rectifying the mistakes of the armed military movement, by criticizing some of its practices at times and

reminding people of the foundation it was based on at other times, without withdrawing 'the legitimacy' of the movement.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some of the youth groups who support the regime also used social media networks as a media tool to advocate for the regime and defend its practices. These groups have also shifted their focus in the last few months to broadcasting and commenting on the news of the battles. They 'publish the victories of the regime's army or 'expose the allegations of the Free Army'. Although the social media that have rallied to the Syrian regime have not departed from reproducing the regime's official discourse in general. However, the particularities of writing for social media networks to some extent have broken through the rigidity of the regime's traditional media and its stereotypical tone of preaching.

1.
The 'coordination committees' emerged at the start of the Syrian uprising in May 2011. They consist of a network of young volunteers who began to organize, report on and photograph protests, and to post their reports and photos online and disseminate them to pan-Arab and international media.

2.
An English version of the site is available at:
<http://english.the-syrian.com>