



Despite crackdowns by Syrian secret police, demonstrations like this one in Daraa are being aired throughout the Internet

SYRIA Eyes for THE WORLD

Citizen journalists break regime's stranglehold on the message

If it weren't for people like Malath Aumran, the video showing Syrians mourning over the bloody corpses of demonstrators killed by state security forces in Sanamein would never have reached the outside world. Nor would detailed documentation of demonstrations, arrests, injuries and deaths end up on the breakfast table in morning newspapers around the globe. If the Internet is the information highway, Aumran and his ilk are the on-ramps.

Anti-regime demonstrators are up against a litany of barriers, within and without: a brutal and pervasive secret police force, a stunted political culture and the international community's near-universal dread of an unstable Syria were it freed from the iron grip of Bashar al-Assad's regime. And for the most part the press, too, have abandoned those on Syria's streets; most notably Al Jazeera, the 'voice of the people' during the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan revolutions, has — when it gives Syria coverage at all — increasingly settled for interviews with pro-government

officials and police, and reports disproportionately from pro-Assad rallies.

In their stead, citizen journalists like Aumran are putting their lives in danger to present a different reality of Syria to the world.

The birth of activism

Aumran is a fitting representation of what can happen when a social and political consciousness converges with the power of the Internet. Today, he is a cyber activist working under a pseudonym, but not long ago he was, in his own words, "like any other Syrian."

"I thought that we had the best country, the best regime, and all of that," he said. It was in 2006 that his worldview changed, with the honor killing of a friend who had been caught having sexual relations with a man her family disapproved of. The killer, her brother, was sentenced to just six months in prison, in accordance with Syria's permissive laws surrounding honor crimes. It would be a moment that wed the future activist's sense of social justice with alternative information sources, and which would lead him on a beeline toward the "Arab Spring."

"My friend told me about this thing, the Internet," he said. "I searched for information about honor killing and it was all there." He became involved with Syrian women's rights groups, while at the same time developing his awareness of the other issues that plagued his country. "I started to be aware that we had a

The online smear campaign

Malath Aumran's story provides an interesting glimpse into efforts to counter opposition activism, sometimes by using the same digital mediums as the activists themselves. On three occasions, his online identity was hijacked, Aumran presumes by secret police, although this cannot be confirmed, to undermine his integrity. In one instance, a Facebook group entitled "Together to reveal the Mossad agent in Syria" (translated from Arabic) was created, which featured a picture of Aumran with an opaque, superimposed Israeli flag in front of his face. In one alleged screen shot of Aumran's email, he is caught writing in Hebrew to a 'mossad.gov.il' address. On March 17, two blog posts written in his name attempt to discredit reports that prominent human rights activist Suheir Atassi was arrested in Damascus; in one, Aumran's impersonator writes that she was seen that night out on the town in Beirut.

bigger problem — not just women's rights: human rights and political rights."

Some friends accompanied Aumran on his ideological awakening and others were picked up along the way. Eventually, they had developed a small activist community. At this time he was still working under his real name, and in order to protect his identity EXECUTIVE cannot reveal his specific activities. "The problem is that our people are not political at all, especially our youth," he explained. "Four decades of regime have taken them out of public life." So Aumran and his friends set out on a campaign to "poison their milk for them." One of the primary, and most successful, initiatives was called "Proxy to your inbox." In 2009, 10 people, including Aumran, sent an email out to their contacts with a link to a program called UltraSurf that facilitated users' connections to a "proxy server," an intermediary online gateway that allows users to bypass censorship restrictions. Thanks to the viral nature of the Internet, it quickly spread, and with it the Syrian Facebook community grew. Aumran isn't sure of the exact number but, he said, the fact that the email has ended up back in his inbox nearly 100 times is an indication of its mileage.

The Arab Spring

Though cyber activism in Syria was making some headway by 2010, it wasn't until the Tunisian uprising that the youth population awoke. "After Tunisia, hundreds of young people began to get Facebook accounts under nicknames and call for change," Aumran said.

But the Syrian "day of rage" planned on Facebook for February 5, by whom Aumran doesn't know, failed to gain popular support and was a step back for those who hoped Syria would follow Tunisia and Egypt's example. The streets were even quieter than on a normal day, apart from the secret police milling about.

Again, on March 15, another Facebook-led "day of rage" passed without results. Aumran and other activists watched as the expectations of most were seemingly confirmed: President Bashar al-Assad's state apparatus was untouchable. But the next day something changed. Small groups, usually linked together by the Internet but under no central organization, began to stage small but much more successful acts of civil disobedience than the prior attempts of pulling off an instant mass protest.

In Damascus, 27 families of political prisoners marched to the Ministry of Interior to demand the release of their relatives. Within minutes they were set upon by secret police. Some were beaten. The organizer of the protest, a human rights activist who asked to remain anonymous, told EXECUTIVE that she saw "mothers beaten and pulled on the ground." According to her, there were 45 confirmed arrests and 32 will face trial on criminal charges of "weakening national feelings," which carries a one to three-year sentence in prison. One of those arrested was Tayeb Tezeni, a prominent Syrian philosopher and intellectual, though he was quickly released. "His arrest was a clear message that nobody is safe in this country," the organizer said.

Within days, protests were popping up in Daraa, Homs, Baniyas, Damascus and Deir al-Zor. For devoted activists like Aumran, long at the forefront of anti-regime activity but suddenly observing a movement without any centralized control, the playbook had to be revisited. "Before recently, our role was to organize protests," Aumran said. "But the role now is to cover them, to develop media attention and to articulate demands."

As events unfold in Syria, the lack of a traditional journalistic presence in the country has made activists and amateur videographers crucial; despite having no coverage on the ground, satellite television news outlets like BBC and Al Jazeera were able to show, for example, an attack by security forces on the Omari Mosque in Daraa on the night of March 22. The video was posted on a social media site and quickly did the rounds on the Internet. The original videographer is not known.

The contribution of blogs, social media and YouTube in the movements that have swept the Arab world has in many ways been overblown. To dub Hosni Mubarak's ouster the "Facebook Revolution" discredits the blood and sweat of those who camped for weeks in Tahrir Square far from the glow of a computer screen. But the In-

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Leashing online media

In February, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued Decree 26, a measure regulating electronic media. The decree will group electronic media, such as blogs and online newspapers and magazines, with traditional outlets, thus putting them under the umbrella of the existing Decree 50. In effect since 2001, Decree 50 obliges private press to be licensed and authorizes the government to revoke this license and impose fines of \$10,000 to \$20,000, and/or up to three years imprisonment, if an outlet is found to report on military affairs, contact foreign nations, accept money from foreign sources or in any way threaten the “national interest.” Moreover, journalists are required to divulge their sources if asked to do so. Decree 26 differs little but is more restrictive in scope. Each website must obtain a license and register the names of the website owner, manager, editor-in-chief and all contributors (reporters and editors). Website owners are required to keep a copy of their website content and of the activity logs, including names of contributors, for a specific period of time. Failure to do so could lead to imprisonment or fines. On top of this, all electronic media editors and journalists must be a part of the Syrian Journalists Union, which collects fees from its members and rejects journalists from the private sector. All websites’ advertisements must go through the Arab Advertising Organization, Syria’s advertising regulator. The new electronic media law means that more than 2,000 websites have to be licensed, an expensive process, especially given that many outlets choose to be online platforms precisely to avoid the capital costs of traditional media. Prime Minister Muhammad al-Otri, at a 2008 meeting with editors-in-chief from Syria’s newspapers and several ministers, said: “Electronic media are depressing the nation’s citizens by spreading false news. There is a growing threat from sources outside the country who operate under the banner of freedom of expression but whose real aim is to change public opinion in Syria.”

Additionally, he accused the Internet community of being “nouveaux riches” in the media game only for financial gains, while also accusing journalism training programs of “luring journalists away into the private sector.”

Internet does provide activists the unique ability to synthesize and disseminate information in the midst of an otherwise disparate campaign.

For example, last year at this time, for the Kurdish holiday of Nowruz, there were major confrontations in Syria’s northeast between demonstrators and security forces. This year, expecting a repeat on March 20, Aumran enlisted the help of a Kurdish friend living abroad to mobilize people he knew on the ground to develop a system by which information could reach the outside world. This involved two people shooting video and taking pictures on the ground and two others transporting the memory cards to safe houses where they would be uploaded to the Internet.

Activists in the crowd had Turkish SIM cards — common in this area of Syria — to avoid monitoring by Syrian state security, as colleagues outside the country periodically called in for updates, which they then typed into emails and tweets, spreading them across the Internet and to their contacts with the press. In the end, however, demonstrators this year did not face the

same resistance from the authorities and the holiday passed without major incident.

On March 22, as Aumran spoke with EXECUTIVE, he tweeted information as it came to him from all over Syria. He found out the daughter of Sultan al-Attrash, a legendary figure in Syria’s struggle for independence, had been arrested. “This will backfire for them,” he said emphatically. From Daraa however, where on March 19 soldiers fired on protesters from helicopters and killed at least six, there was only silence; the two activists sent to the city from Damascus hadn’t been heard from since. In a way, the group is unorganized; it is an unofficial network of friends (and friends of friends) each doing their own part. “Everyone works individually, but we cooperate as a team,” one activist, who focuses on documenting human rights abuses and informing the press and non-governmental organizations, said. “Usually all of us do everything, but some are more able to do certain things than others so we try to refer that kind of work to him or her... for example when we need something related to Internet expertise we ask [Aumran].”

As the demonstrations have gained traction, the online community has continued to expand and to splinter. In one case, on the Facebook page of “The Syrian Revolution March 15,” a wall post (a publicly viewable message) suggested using alternative protest tactics, such as, for example, demonstrating at a soccer game.

One day later, March 18, in the town of Deir al-Zor a small group of fans-turned-flash-mob stormed the field at halftime calling for their rights. The Syrian National Television broadcast of the game suddenly went black, due to “technical difficulties.” It is unclear who organized them but the original inspiration for the idea is likely that seemingly innocuous wall post. According to the human rights activist, “Every day there is a new group calling for a new movement on Facebook.”

For activists calling for regime change, there is a long and dangerous road ahead. As EXECUTIVE went to press, 61 had been confirmed killed in Daraa, dozens in Latakia and Sanamein and, since March 1, hundreds injured and arrested throughout the country. Even if it were possible it is yet unknown whether the majority of Syrians would support the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Nonetheless, the “Sturdy House That Assad Built,” as a Foreign Affairs article dubbed it in March, is clearly showing cracks. In large part due to Aumran and his fellow artisans of information, its flaws are the world’s to see. ■