

“They want to start a religious war; we want to extinguish it” – Mufti of Syria

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Leading figures in Syria such as the Mufti of Syria who lost his own son to a terrorist attack, want to extinguish the fires of hatred. The overwhelming majority of Syrians agree, isolating the foreign-backed mercenaries inside and outside Syria.

Most news accounts of Syria paint a desolate, sectarian picture of the country where people in areas secured by the Syrian army are miserable and where people, above all, want to see President Bashar al-Asad gone. During my visit, I found the exact opposite. In particular, I found widespread, and usually ardent, support for the president.

I entered Syria as part of an international Peace Delegation, comprising more than 40 people who believe in a political, Syrian-led solution for Syria. In the course of one week, we visited Latakia, Homs, and areas of Damascus, sat with the top religious leaders and numerous grassroots leaders. We heard testimonies from survivors of massacres — Haram, Kasab, Maaloula — and met with various internally-displaced from Yarmouk.

After the week had passed, I stayed on independently, moving freely on my own throughout Damascus, engaging with various strata of Damascene life.

The streets of the three cities I saw were far busier and more alive than I had expected possible and, aside from the mortars fired daily by armed insurgents on Damascus and environs, I felt safe and welcomed. All over, I saw groups of mixed faiths comfortably chatting, sharing meals and shisha, and proudly answering “I am Syrian” to my taboo question, “Are you Muslim, Druze, Christian...?”

Damascus, unsurprisingly, has upscale shops and historic markets, but also newsstands with papers found in any North American city, including those which have propagandized so heavily against Syria’s government and for the need for Western intervention.

Yarmouk has now, strangely, all but disappeared from mainstream reporting. Is it because the story is old, or because the actions of these armed insurgents controlling vast areas of Yarmouk have been so documented that it is difficult to any longer purvey the standard line: that the government is assaulting its own people? Still suffering under the presence of largely foreign militants, with a heavy presence of Jabhat al-Nusrah, Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), and other al-Qaeda affiliated groups there since December 2012, numerous attempts at cease-fire have been foiled. The Palestinians and Syrians (yes, there are Syrians in Yarmouk) continue to need food, medicine, hospitals, and the exit of the armed groups.

At the edge of the camp, where Yarmouk and Palestine streets converge, I could see some of the massive damage: shells of cars, houses and a hospital with walls studded with machine gun bullets and mortars. But venturing beyond the concrete barriers would have been inviting sniper bullets to the head. “For two kilometres in that direction, it’s completely open. If you walk another five meters, you’ll be in the snipers’ scope,” security told me, himself not going any farther.

Abu Kifah Ghazzi, a PFLP spokesman, outlined events of the past two years relating to Yarmouk, noting that there are Palestinians from Yarmouk alongside the Syrian army fighting against the

militias and for Yarmouk. I ask about food aid and starving residents. “The civilians are suffering terribly, but the armed gangs have ample food,” he said, adding, “Food aid has entered Yarmouk, but the militias often took it.”

In the most recent attack on aid distribution, on May 13, one person was killed and another injured when a centre for humanitarian aid distribution was targeted, the Daily Star reported. We also visited two different schools now housing displaced Palestinians and Syrians from Yarmouk. Their words were the same. “The terrorists took over the camp, took over our houses, and stole our food. We want the camp back. Tell your governments to tell those terrorists to leave Yarmouk.”

The growing trend of Syrian fighters laying down their arms in exchange for amnesty from the government was most notable in Homs, now secured by the Syrian army. This “Musalahah” (Reconciliation) movement, dubbed the “third way,” looks toward a political solution for Syria.

Amnesty and the laying down of arms doesn’t apply to the over 5,000 foreign fighters, nor have they shown any intention to stop shelling, kidnappings, beheadings and the countless other atrocities largely void from many Western reports on Syria.

As of April 2014, “1416 fighters have laid down their weapons. At first, the fighters were afraid that they would go to jail, but now, every day people are asking for reconciliation. Yesterday 10, the day before 29, I feel that peace is close,” said a priest in Homs. The highest numbers of those laying down weapons are from Homs, a city which was often dubbed in the media as the “heart of the revolution.” It seems these “rebels” realize that the ideology they thought they were fighting for is not shared by their armed takfiri brothers.

The mortars being fired at Damascus by militants in the Jobar district east of Damascus (and until recently the Mliha, now secured by the Syrian army) are not guided, yet they are designed to create maximum damage. One day I got a lesson on mortars from two men in the National Defense Forces (NDF). Most mortars the armed groups are using are homemade. Some have just enough explosives to make them fly, with as many pieces of metal, nails, sharp bits stuffed inside, to cause wider injury when exploded.

Online videos document the insurgents making these crude but deadly shells, and the firing of them toward Damascus. While the Old City has been particularly hard-hit, the mortars also reach central and western areas of Damascus. On April 15, insurgents in Jobar shelled the Manar elementary school, killing one child and injuring at least 60 more. They shelled a kindergarten the same day, injuring three more children. On April 29, four mortars hit Shaghour district, killing 12 students and wounding at least 50.

Deputy-Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad had said earlier this year (January 2014), “In the past 4 months, terrorists fired 12000 shells,” not including the mortars in other areas of Syria. A friend, a member of Syria’s rugby team, was one day at a match in Beirut, another day in the hospital, injured by shrapnel from these mortar attacks. At the time of his injury, he had been assisting civilians injured in a prior attack in the area.

Staying in Bab Sharqi, the East Gate area of the Old City, I got a more personal lesson on mortars, some as close as 50 metres from where I stayed, a residential area. On another occasion, outside the walls of the Old City, from the direction of insurgent-held Jobar, sniper bullets flew within a few feet of me. So while the city has a secure and strangely normal feel to it, the attacks of these militants are constant.

Driving to Homs, the roads were secured by military checkpoints, cars were searched for explosives

and weapons. Evidence of the past three years of fighting is everywhere. In Homs City, I saw the site of a double car bombing just the week prior, which killed 25 civilians. Houses and businesses torn apart, families of martyrs told of the bombings, mid-afternoon, timed one after another, to ensure hitting any rescuers. These people were some of the most ardent supporters of President al-Asad and the Syrian army, again saying al-Asad is the only means of unifying Syria, and the army is protecting them. Having endured years of car-bombings and mercenary snipings, they would know best.

In Latakia, northwest of Damascus and closer to the Turkish border, to some of the current hot spots like Aleppo, I was surprised by the sense of normalcy: people picnicking, busy seaside streets as the Sun set. Lilly Martin, an American 22 years in Syria, mentioned that yes, Latakia is in general safe, but that they are assaulted from afar, from the Turkish border, by long-range missiles.

As Latakia is largely unscathed, it is host to refugees from areas being assaulted by militant groups, including the displaced from the village of Kasab, attacked March 21 by mercenaries originating from, and with the support of Turkey. The mercenaries continue to hold Kasab, and reports cite the desecration of churches there.

In Latakia, Homs, Damascus, and on the roadside, posters of President al-Asad are everywhere... the President in a suit, to the President in army fatigues and sunglasses. The support voiced by the various civilians I met in all three cities is not exclusive to minorities or 'Alawites or Ba'th party members. In fact, within Syria, there are a number of registered opposition parties who, while seeking change in the country, support President al-Asad.

At a joint meeting with the peace delegation, I met members of six different leftist opposition parties who do not support foreign intervention, but instead support the reconciliation movement. They resoundingly agreed that this "conflict" was a Syrian issue, to be dealt with by Syrians in Syria, that the foreign mercenaries had to go, and that elections were imperative. Despite their differing sentiments three years ago, they said they would now vote for Bashar al-Asad this June.

"In Syria we have real opposition parties, demanding reforms for the Syrian people. We are the real opposition, rooted in the streets of Syria," said Shaykh Nawaf 'Abd al-'Aziz Trad al-Milhim, head of the People's Party. Berwin Ibrahim, chair of the National Youth Party for Justice and Development said, "We don't agree with the regime on many things, but we insist that our homeland comes first. We have corruption in the government. But that is like any government. The conspiracy, terrorism, and interference from Western countries have united supporters of the government and the opposition," she said.

One of the opposition who had formally called for al-Asad to step down, Mohammad Abu Qasem, Secretary General of the Solidarity Party, said, "What's happening in Syria is international terrorism, with many countries interfering in Syria. Since the elections were announced, the insurgents started working harder in Kasab and in Aleppo."

Feminist activist, Suheir Sarmini, Deputy Secretary General of the Syrian National Youth Party, said, "President Obama and Congress have armed these gangs to kill our children, our people. Tell Obama and Congress to stop killing the Syrian people and not to interfere in Syrian sovereignty."

In contrast to accusations that no "real" opposition could exist within Syria, Mazen al-Akhrass, a member of Syria's NDF and a political analyst, pointed out that two very vocal (and far more critical than those I met) opposition members remain in Syria, unscathed. "Louay Hussein and Hassan 'Abd al-'Azeem are very well known and extremely against the regime, and they ask for more than 'reforms.' Yet they have been living in Damascus — the 'stronghold of the regime' —

during the events, and their lives weren't threatened. They are not in jail, and at this point they seem to have settled for partial reforms as a step toward full regime change."

We met with Syria's Grand Mufti, Dr. Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun. He spoke of the need for reconciliation and forgiveness amongst Syrians. He is notable for walking the talk: Shaykh Hassoun's 21-year-old son Sarya was assassinated in October 2011, on the same day that it was announced he'd be engaged. During the funeral, while sobbing, the Mufti called for forgiveness and reconciliation, even for those who murdered his son. "All of the churches and masjids that have been destroyed, we can rebuild. But who will bring back our children? Who will bring back my son Sarya? When we have violation against any child, it is a violation against God."

He mentioned that in March he had been granted a prestigious Italian peace prize, by The Ducci Foundation, for his non-sectarian preaching of interfaith peace. But the Mufti never got to Rome. "I was granted a visa for only ten days. They were afraid I'd stay longer. But Europeans are among those killing our people. If all the Syrian people die, it is okay, no problem, just to keep their oil. I reject this [kind of] 'democracy.' We in Syria are not Sunni or Shi'i or 'Alawi nor Muslim nor Christian. We are human beings and must be respected. They want to start a religious war. We are going to extinguish this fire."

On a personal note, I would echo the Mufti's call, and those of so many others I met in Syria. Come to Syria, see for yourselves. Very quickly you can get a taste of the senseless mortars, and the horrific testimonies of those assaulted by foreign mercenaries and takfiri ideologists. But also of the strength and resistance that is the Syrian people, who don't intend any time soon to fall to occupation, and who will vote for President al-Asad in June.

<http://www.crescent-online.net/2014/06/they-want-to-start-a-religious-war-we-want-to-extinguish-it-mufti-of-syria-eva-bartlett-4489-articles.html>