Between a peaceful revolution and a militarized one
Mutually exclusive paths or unfair distinctions?

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Is it correct to describe the Syrian revolution as “armed” and nothing more? Has the revolution been militarized? What has happened to the revolution’s non-violence? Where is the revolution headed on its military and peaceful tracks? Is it a total militarization? Is there a fundamental contradiction between the revolution’s peaceful nature and its militarization? These are questions both urgent and deserving of a response, and we shall attempt to answer them in the course of an analysis of both the concept of revolution on the one hand, and an examination of the current state of the revolution on the other.
To start with, the concept of revolution is not absolute, nor is it one thing. There is no one template that fits all revolutions. As for the issue of militarization and non-violence, history provides us with instances of armed revolutions and peaceful, despite the difficulty of categorizing them so cleanly. That a revolution is peaceful or armed doesn’t determine whether it is a revolution or not, or that it is unable to realise its goals: every revolution has it own context. In this sense, revolution is in a state of perpetual motion. It may succeed and it may fail, but there is no previously designated path along which all revolutions proceed (such as “peaceful” or “militarized”) regardless of their circumstances; no recipe that can be imposed on reality, which lays out how it must proceed and how it can become victorious. There is no single exclusionary, universal definition that we can apply to every revolution. A revolution has goals, and these are to change reality. In turn, the reality of any specific context is both the motor that drives revolution and the goal that revolution seeks to change.

Tahrir Square has become the model of peaceful revolution in the Arab Spring (a story whose chapters are still being written) but at the same time it is not the only model. Comparisons with Tahrir should be made cautiously and carefully, since attempts to emulate the model in Douma, Deraa, Hama, Homs and elsewhere were unsuccessful and the violence used in confronting protestors was terrible to behold. Syrians were forced to abandon the strategy of occupying public spaces and staging sit-ins until the regime fell, knowing they had spared no effort in their attempt to achieve that goal. The demonstrations and celebratory gathering they convened—and still do whenever they get the chance—were in essence a response to an uncontrollable need, coupled with an instinctive awareness of the importance of permanently seizing ownership of public spaces from the authorities. However, unbridled savagery has prevented this goal from being realised, so far, at least.

So what model best applies to the Syrian revolution? This is the question that repeats itself and the answer is moot, because the nature of the revolution is moot, dependent on different possibilities.

What has become of the revolution’s non-violence?

To mourn the passing of the Syrian revolution’s peaceful nature seems unjust, or at least hasty. Demonstrations (the chief expression of the peaceful component of the popular movement) are still being held, even in those places where fighting or artillery bombardment is at its most severe (for instance, the local coordination committee documented on Friday 21/9/2012 540 demonstrations around the country ). It is also clear that those areas outside the control of regime forces (with the possible exception of aerial bombardment)—in other words the areas under the control of the armed resistance—continue to witness demonstrations and other forms of civil expression against the regime.

There are numerous examples, from Saraqeb, Benish and Kafra Nabel in the countryside around Idlib to areas around Aleppo and Deir Izzour and the besieged city of Homs. Even in places where fighting rages, or which are under the control of the regime, there is still a strong insistence on holding demonstrations, distributing pamphlets and spraying graffiti. The sheer size of the demonstrations in Arbin in Rural Damascus on 21/9/2012 are a notable instance of this spirit, which were held to protest on-going military crimes in eastern Al Ghouta. Damascus, which is sealed off by numerous roadblocks, has witnessed demonstrations on an almost daily basis in districts like Rukn ed-Din and Barzeh and flash-mob gatherings at sensitive sites in the city centre, the last of which was staged only metres away from the Syrian Parliament’s building.

All this shows that the majority of Syrians who belong to the revolutionary movement (and those in areas where the armed resistance enjoys greater control) continue to believe that using avenues of peaceful expression to make their demands is a fundamental part of their revolution and one that does not conflict with other forms of resistance, which they might choose to engage in voluntarily or, at times, be forced to pursue. First and foremost, this stems from a faith in the legitimacy and justice of their demands.

It is also true to say that the revolution today is made up of both peaceful and military components and that circumstances compel these two aspects to work in harmony, each benefitting from the space for free movement created by the other. Certainly, the increased tendency towards armed resistance is the product of very clear circumstances and is a later addition to the peaceful, civil nature of the revolution. It follows that responsible supervision of the military element would seek to ensure that it dissolves as soon as the need for it disappears. It should not be based on complete rejection of it with no regard for circumstances on the ground, nor seek to equate the military capabilities of the armed popular resistance (in the form of the Syrian Free Army, with due caution about using a term that has become meaningless if not actively harmful)* with those of the regime forces, that possess supplies, support and dedicated allies.
Peaceful or armed? A false dichotomy

The either/or approach taken by some towards the revolution—either an armed revolution or a peaceful one—seems excessively binary. In reality, most revolutions are a blend of the two. The only difference is in the composition of the mix.

The peaceful Egyptian revolution witnessed violent confrontations with the security forces and regime thugs and it is impossible to guess how the demonstrators would have reacted had the regime used methods more violent than dispatching mercenaries on camel-back.

In the Yemeni revolution we have seen military clashes between defected soldiers and regime soldiers and between supporters of Sadeq Al Ahmar and the republican guards even as large swathes of society have refused to take up arms, or rather have not been compelled to do so by the delicate interplay of circumstances (everyone knows nobody lacks guns in Yemen). The struggle is played out in public spaces: revolutionaries occupy one square and Saleh’s supporters gather in another. Circumstances in Libya dictated that the greater part of the revolution was militarized.

Ultimately, revolution is the creation of human beings. What makes it a revolution is people’s desire to change reality, utilizing every method possible, with the one condition that events do not lead to a similar reality. But even this catastrophic possibility is accepted as one potential outcome: to accept an atrocious reality for fear of ending up in another is to take a stand against revolution and the inevitability of change. The Syrian revolution, like every other revolution, is a blend of different forms of resistance, armed and non-violent, and the desire for change. There is much common ground between those who call for peaceful revolution and those who call for militarization: there is the revolution itself and its ultimate goals. Revolution excludes nobody. A reading that states “either a military revolution or a peaceful one” offers a false dichotomy. It is false because it is based on a logical position adopted without regard to the objective circumstances and this applies not only to the Syrian revolution but all other revolutions, even to the concept of revolution itself, which ultimately can only be derived from the situation on the ground. Furthermore, this reading denies the ability of people to find alternative means to interact with reality; peaceful means, violent means or a combination of the two in confronting oppression.

The revolution belongs to all who take part in it: supervising the revolution and the need to integrate methods of resistance

But our analysis of the military component should not be biased towards it. Appreciating the situation on the ground and a pragmatic approach leading to an acceptance of diverse forms of resistance against a recalcitrant tyranny should never permit us to ignore the dangers inherent in the presence of a militarized faction within the revolution. Nor must it allow the call to arms to drown out other voices. The form of supervision most capable to rectifying this imbalance is one that is close to the reality of events, if not actually on the field, side-by-side with the fighters.

Supervision is not directive but rather engaged and participatory. We do not want a realistic appraisal of the Syrian revolution to become an exercise in apologetics for any error or undesirable course the revolution might take. Rather, we seek here to communicate with people and the reality that they live. Here, too, there is no remedy available, no glib and easy answers to the questions posed by a revolution which is perpetually redefining and redirecting itself.

Some still cling to a fixed ideological position on the militarization of the revolution. This ideological position is itself a part of the revolution and its rich diversity and we must always maintain an open dialogue with those who believe that the military option that some have been forced to adopt is a mistake. The doors of the revolution remain open to those who hold this view; that they may participate in the revolution and alter its course, if they are able. But it is equally true that these very people must be prepared to make sacrifices and expose themselves to danger (as some of them incontrovertibly do), without making excuses that the space available for peaceful resistance has been crowded out by the strong arm of the militarized faction. The truth is that the margin for peaceful resistance in Syria has never been that big. From the outset the cost and consequences of demonstrating have been impossible to keep in check.

While it is true that instances of abuse and arrest are higher than they have ever been, this does not alter the basic fact that forms of peaceful resistance are undertaken as a result of necessity and experience, not because the authorities approve of it or consent to turn a blind eye. This, of course, neither means a call for a cheap sacrifice, nor is it an invitation to add a poetic tone to a conflict that is highly unequal. It is just a further confirmation that the policies of the regime and its insistence on pursuing a military/security approach in dealing with justified and just demands has left the majority of Syrians facing complex choices, for which in many instances there is a high price to pay.
There is only one side in Syria that crushes peaceful demonstrations and arrests civilian activists and opposition intellectuals, and that is the regime. There is only one power that constricts peaceful freedom of expression and seeks to monopolise opinion and means to express it as a means to monopolise the use of force, and that is the regime. Syria’s revolutionaries, whatever the path they have chosen, have a single common enemy. When they gather to openly demand that this enemy be removed and work to achieve this end, no violence can ever sever this fundamental bond. The revolutionaries tread paths imposed on them by reality and the revolution has a single goal, defined by history and the great sacrifices made in its cause: a free, democratic Syria for all.

* See Hazem Al Amin’s article in Al Hayat: The Free Army: An army of victims weighed down by its name – http://alhayat.com/Details/429075