One Aspect of the History of Political Rumour in Syria

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This article deals exclusively with political rumour in Assad’s Syria. It is an attempt to examine the subject based on the author’s personal experiences.

Rumours to soothe

Only a few weeks into our detention we began hearing rumours about our imminent release. It was the 1980s and we were political detainees. Our visitors — or the visitors of some of us — told us, ‘they say there will be a pardon for detainees to mark Eid;’ the anniversary of the ‘Corrective Movement’ (Hafez al-Assad’s coup on November 16, 1970), or ‘The Renewing of the Pledge’ (the term given to the seven yearly referendum on Hafez al-Assad’s presidency). They attributed the information to an officer in some branch of the security services, to a prominent member of one religious group or another, to a major financier — the ‘news’ is even traced back all the way to some anonymous source in the palace.

We were in Aleppo’s Central Prison situated in the district of Muslimiya, about a hundred of us most of the time, representing a range of the political movements opposed to the regime. We had no officially recognized rights, everything was on the basis of long-established custom. Visits were allowed, but were suddenly, and four months after I’d been locked up. The trade in alive-or-dead information was the origin of huge fortunes in the 1980s. It is possible that officials on the lower rungs of the regime ladder were attempting to soothe families by distracting them with stories about the imminent release of their relatives and loved ones, and the wretched families would believe what they heard or choose to believe it, to strengthen their resolve and the resolve of the family member in detention. Alternatively, maybe the regime deliberately spread stories about the release of detainees through its unofficial channels. It is possible that the objective here was to siphon off some of the pressure exerted by society during a period in which detainees in prisons and branches of the security services numbered in the tens of thousands, as well as to test how various parts of society reacted to the leaked information. Here is another genesis of rumour, aside from lack of information; deliberate misdirection; the regime’s agencies deliberately spreading false information.

In our case, the political detainees of a former era, it is possible that there was a third genesis of the rumours of our imminent release, aside from the lack of information and deliberate misdirection, and this was the hopelessness of our relatives and of us prisoners ourselves. People convert their desires into facts, or rather, they talk about them as though discussing facts. They are the drivers of the rumour, not in the sense that they start it, but because they use it as a means to soothe themselves.

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to carry their emotions and dreams. It enables them to bear the burden of living in harsh times. It becomes their property. During one prison visit, after I’d spent years behind bars, my father said, ‘The years in prison are numbered!’ It’s a proverb and means that however long these years last, they will end. I told my companions what he had said and it started to seem like a piece of information, so I began wondering what the source had been? The need for hope generates convenient information and a less frustrating world.

The truth behind the rumours about our release was something about which we political detainees: the desperately lacked information. When would we be freed? What was to become of us? From the perspective of the detainees and their relatives, rumour was the alternative to unavailable information. From the regime’s perspective, rumour was the final element of a strategy of denying and fabricating information, or a means of deflecting pressure from the detainees’ relatives.

Rumours to distort

At an early stage in the Syrian revolution it was rumoured that myself and another opposition figure like Razan Zaitouneh and Riad Al Turk, were staying at the American Embassy in Damascus. The site that published this ‘report’ first appeared after the start of the revolution, and was linked to one of the regime’s covert and notoriously secretive, and mysterious, intelligence agencies. Hence, even what, on the surface, is a known source, but which in practice is anonymous, and completely impervious to any checking procedure. Most of the reports on the site fall into the category of dark psychology. Most involve dealing with the personal relationships of opposition figures, their incomes and their purported connections to entirely fabricated stories. While it is generally the case that rumours aim to be believed, to be treated as truths, there is a certain species of rumour, whose objective is to distort, to erode the standards by which credibility is assessed and to destroy the public’s ability to distinguish between a ‘governance’ that refers to ‘governance’: governing people and their fate. Razan, a lawyer, writer, and founder of the ‘Violations Documentation Centre’, had been threatened by Jaish al-Islam (the Salafist paramilitary group that controlled Douma) just a few weeks before the abduction. I have no conclusive evidence, but from my knowledge of the situation on the ground, and from some other pieces of information, I am convinced that the aforementioned group is responsible.

It makes sense to talk of a triangle of rumour, its three points representing: the party spreading the rumour, which also possesses political power and information, the consumer within society who is to be ‘soothed’ or misled, and finally, the subject of the rumour, which was us, the group of political detainees at the time. It’s a proverb and means that however long these years last, they will end. I told my companions what he had said and it started to seem like a piece of information, so I began wondering what the source had been? The need for hope generates convenient information and a less frustrating world.

Rumours to deceive

Ever since my wife, Samira Khalil was abducted along with Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hammoda and Nazem Hamadi in the city of Douma in East Ghouta on December 9, 2013, there has been a never-ending stream of rumours about their fate. Razan, a lawyer, writer, and founder of the ‘Violations Documentation Centre’, had been threatened by Jaish al-Islam (the Salafist paramilitary group that controlled Douma) just a few weeks before the abduction. I have no conclusive evidence, but from my knowledge of the situation on the ground, and from some other pieces of information, I am convinced that the aforementioned group is responsible.

The rumours said everything, that secret regime cells abducted them, that they are with Jabhat al-Nusra (another viable candidate after Jaish al-Islam), that someone saw Razan in some prison, that one or other of the four is in some other prison. Giving the impression that he was actually conducting a serious investigation into the matter, the leader of Jaish al-Islam himself spread the rumour about the four to show that a special committee was looking into it and that they had found a lead. He hinted that ‘foreign elements’ were involved in the crime, before complaining that there was too much focus on Razan and her friends while other detainees of the same regime — he mentioned female Muslim detainees — were being ignored.

Here, too, the genesis of the rumour is a deart of information, and the absence of trustworthy sources, independent of political actors. Nor is it unlikely that some rumours gain currency as misleading information as part of a deliberate strategy. I am aware of at least one instance of this, when it was alleged that a group that no one had heard of was responsible for the abduction.

In the case of the four abductees from Douma, the source of the rumour is not the regime and its agencies but other, new authorities, and new ‘rulers’ who control people and their ability to assess correctly. This is a new reality in Syria, where rumour always rode on the train of state power or followed it like a shadow. But just as the monopoly over weapons was broken by the revolution, so were the monopolies over truth and deception.
The well-publicized fact that ISIS has committed numerous criminal acts only lends veracity to these feelings of fear.

This example shows that a rumour’s power is proportionate to the power of the party that disseminates it (or that forms its subject) on the one hand, and on the other, to the enigmatic nature of that party.

As I mentioned at the outset, the three cases outlined above come from my personal experience. I was a prisoner in the first case, when my companions and I received rumours about our fate, then in hiding for the second case in which I was the subject of the rumours. Then for the third case, I was one of the family members of the abductees, the husband of an abducted wife, and received a number of rumours about her fate. The three cases fall into the sphere of politics, the politics of a closed regime which acts as a secret organization or an interested party, and not as a publicly accountable authority. This also applies to Salafist military formations, which act, in turn, like security agencies. In all these cases the distance between politics and the crime is not great, and for all the parties involved, much of what concerns them is to remain undetected. Rumour is the other face of secret power.

Do people fight rumour?

If truth is always the first victim of war, then Syria has been living through warlike conditions for half a century. These conditions have further weakened the public’s already weak desire for actual facts. It is well-known that a state of emergency was declared on the first day of Baath rule on the pretext of its war with Israel, a move that imported the logic of war into the examination of facts and comparing competing narratives.

In the current circumstances people doubt certain narratives, but not from a position of verifiable facts or based on a logic of what can-be-expected—what is possible and what cannot be. Such approaches are rarely viable amidst the circumstances of double war (the ‘hot conflict’ in Syria playing out against the backdrop of a longer, cold conflict — the ongoing state of war with Israel). We lack independent vantage points from which to scrutinize and inspect what is taking place, especially those weathervanes that indicate the fluctuations in the cross-currents and disturbances that characterize revolution and war.

This is only enhanced by another element, one that is far from rare in the Syrian socio-psychological make-up, and which manifests itself in phrases like, ‘No smoke without fire’ and ‘If so-and-so hadn’t done such-and-such he would never have been arrested’. The truth is there is much smoke in the world today, and that it is possible to spread smoke in one place to conceal the fire in another, and that the arrest or abduction of a man or woman says something about the perpetrators of the crime, not the victim. Nor is it unusual, given current circumstances in Syria, that someone will come in for special mistreatment for being who they are and not for what they’ve done. We are all guilty of it, if not like one of us makes being who he is (not what he does), thus violating some general principle. This is sectarianism. You are wrong because you are one of them. They are right because I am right because I am right because I am right because I am right. I am talking here about individuals being valued according to their identities and origins and not their actions. Killing on the basis of identity is based on affiliation not deed.

We are talking about sectarianism because the sects are perfect target environments for rumour. Rumours spread there which are rarely encountered elsewhere. Sects are the social frameworks for special rumours, whose source is inter-sect conflict, and which constitute one aspect of their narratives about themselves and others. The spread of sectarian rumours through wider society is inversely proportionate to how ‘forbidden’ or taboo the topic is in public discourse. Once again, we encounter the issue of lack of information and deliberate misinformation.

Contrary to many hopes, the communications revolution did nothing to check the onslaught of rumour. The same tool that aids research and the heroes of countering rumour: scepticism and observation of the authority

All for that we are not totally powerless in the face of rumour. We can compare stories and identify their points of weakness or ‘holes’. When chemical weapons were used to perpetrate a massacre in Ghouta in August reports soon spread in Syria and international circles, and everyone (starting with the regime) seemed to accept a rumour which said that opposition forces were the ones who had used the chemical weapons. The American journalist Seymour Hersh spent nine months working on the chemical weapons. The American journalist Seymour Hersh spent nine months working hard to come to exactly this conclusion. What all sides had in common was that none of them had tried calling the residents of Ghouta (there are approximately four million people currently living there), and asking them if there had been any whispers about chemical weapons in the neighbourhood or about the possibility that opposition fighters had used them. And then there was a precedent; the Assad regime had used such weapons before, perhaps as many as thirty times prior to the assault in August 2011. These things help distinguish between rumour and fact, between a report you can trust and a rumour that seeks to deceive. The report says something about an incident, while the rumour says something about the person who started it.

But while individuals are able to trust some information in circulation, the ability to catch rumour in the political arena requires the existence of independent — and agenda-less — scrutiny and investigation. On the social level, effective resistance to political rumour requires the authorities to be placed under observation, and greater transparency in the creation of policy.

There is a somewhat hypocritical proverb in Arabic which says, ‘The speech of kings is the king of speech’. In other words, that our rulers are also the wisest among us. Right now, we need to develop a counter-proverb that says that kings (i.e. those with political power) are liars, that their speech is false until proved otherwise, and that the more power the speaker possesses the more his words and deeds must be subjected to wider social scrutiny. Rulers are careless and irresponsible, this proverb must say, and more often than not, criminals.

In societies everywhere information is one of the basic tools of governance and a basic tool of resistance. In our country, the rulers have monopolized information to control people and control the concepts of right and wrong. They have stripped people of their ability to assess and judge reality and placed them in the position of the accused, the guilty. The separation of political power and information of governance and judgment, is essential if we wish to develop a liberated and democratic politics.

In the examples above, rumour rides on power, it does not subject it to scrutiny. The object of scrutinizing political power — the kings and rulers — is to negate its ability to spread rumour that misleads its subjects, who are denied both information and power, and to prevent the powerful monopolizing governance and ‘wisdom’.

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger