

One Aspect of the History of Political Rumour in Syria

Yassin Al Haj Saleh

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 quite unexpectedly stopped in February 1982 (around the time of the Hama massacre), and were also banned for twenty straight months during 1987 and 1988. For all those years we didn't receive any human-rights assistance or access to lawyers. We weren't even officially accused of anything or tried until the spring of 1992, which in my case was some eleven years and four months after I'd been locked up. The most important thing in all this was that we

had no idea how long we would be in prison; Months? Years? More, perhaps? A life sentence? Maybe we'll die here! We didn't know, and nor did our families.

This, then, was the first genesis of the rumour of our imminent release; the complete absence of information, and further, the absence of any trustworthy source of information about our cases. Rumours with no clear origin are the only available alternative to information with a known and named source. Faith in information equals faith in its source.

This dearth of information was a source of great distress to our families. My mother passed the whole of one long summer's day on the doorstep of the military intelligence building in Aleppo trying to find out anything she could about the detention of her third son in the summer of 1986, and she learnt nothing. In the winter of 1995 my siblings spent days outside the headquarters of Political Security in Damascus trying to learn anything they could about my fate, and got nowhere. I had just finished fifteen years behind bars at that point, and instead of being released all word of me had ceased.

Information came at a steep price; the wives, mothers and sisters of Islamists sold their gold jewellery to the mother of the Tadmor Prison's director in the 1980s (Major Faisal Ghanim) so that she would act as an intermediary, to find out from her son whether their husband, father or brother who was missing was still alive, and if so, to let them visit him in jail. The trade in alive-or-dead information was the origin of huge fortunes in the 1980s.

The issue of political detention in Syria was an open secret, but one which everyone was supposed to pretend they knew nothing about. Taking an open interest in the subject was exceptionally dangerous and Syrian

officials would never mention it, and deny any knowledge if asked. Western journalists internalized the Syrian regime's taboos, rarely questioning Hafez al-Assad or his men about the matter.

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.

Only in this second instance is it appropriate to talk about rumour mongering. The phrase rumour mongering indicates the presence of a party actively spreading or propagating false information. If this party is anonymous, making the rumour appear self-generating, then the false information is likely to spread all that much more effectively. In reality, of course, there is very rarely such a thing as a self-generating rumour, and there are very few rumours that someone somewhere is not working to spread for some purpose. As such, most rumours are ultimately the product of rumour mongering. At the same time no rumour can play out its natural life-cycle — i.e. spread in a given social

circle or its target environment — without first severing links with its creators and making identification with its original source impossible.

This gives rise to a question about what drives rumour; is it the anonymous figure who creates the rumour or is it the environment in which the rumour is passed around and in whose circles it spreads? I tend to think that after the rumour has taken wing and has begun to lead its own independent existence, this 'driver' shifts from being the person who starts the rumour to the environment that first hosts it, then alters and edits it until the content and function of the rumour is almost entirely changed from its first iteration.

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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



Yassin al-Haj Saleh is a Syrian writer and dissenter based in Damascus. He was a political prisoner between 1980 and 1996. He writes for several Arab newspapers and journals outside of Syria and regularly contributes to Al-Hayat newspaper. Among his Arabic publications are: *Syria in the Shadow: Looks inside the Black Box* (2009), *The Myth of the Others: A Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of the Critique* (2012), and *Deliverance or Destruction: Syria at a Crossroads* (2014). He has been granted the Prince Claus Award in 2012 as 'a tribute to the Syrian people and the Syrian revolution.'

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 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.

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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 (i.e. the security-political establishment), the consumer within society who is to be 'soothed' or misled (i.e. the families of detainees), and finally, the subject of the rumour, which was us, the group of political detainees at the time. Specific rumours in specific circles deal with specific content. For instance, rumours of the release of detainees had currency among the families of detainees and not, say, for university students or those in artistic circles. And by the same token, no rumours about artists were passed around by the mothers of detainees, they were not fertile ground.

It is significant that when we were transferred to the State Security Court in the spring of 1992, the rumours slackened off. Two of the three anchors of the triangle of rumour had been cut loose; the party that set the rumours in motion no longer needed to

deliberately — or randomly — pump them out, and the consumer was now receiving information about the course of the trial, and the changes in the condition and fate of the detainees directly from the detainees themselves. We were charged with a range of crimes, including 'disseminating false reports' with the aim of weakening the nation's resolve. The regime, which had kept its subjects in the dark concerning the fate of tens of thousands of their fellow citizens, was now trying some of them for spreading false rumours!

Rumours to distort

At an early stage in the Syrian revolution it was rumoured that myself and other opposition figures 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. Here you have 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 propaganda,' 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 truths from lies. This is another instance of deliberate misdirection, something the Syrian security services are well versed in. Knowing that they have no chance of winning the battle over truth, they prefer instead to erode the entire concept of truth itself.

Around the time that the rumour about the American embassy was circulating, I was being told that armed gangs were assassinating senior figures and killing soldiers. At this point I was, in fact, hiding out in Damascus, and every week an article or two of mine on Syrian affairs was being published.

It was in the nature of Syrian Baathist ideology that its 'objective analyses' would be converted into facts on the ground. If you were 'hostile to the homeland' and complicit in 'foreign conspiracies' against the homeland, it was all the same whether you ran 'armed gangs' or didn't, or whether or not you actually lived in the American Embassy, or didn't. What mattered was your 'objective partnership' -

serving the same goal. If we were really 'partners' why shouldn't those 'armed gangs' really be mine? Why wouldn't I be living in the American Embassy? Why do the actual details matter if the overall strategy is understood, the 'deep objective' that manifests itself in events? Insisting on actual facts distorts the clarity of the strategy (the conspiracy), which is the 'true reality'. Here, rumour becomes more 'real' than checkable facts.

The point is that there is an epistemological grounding for rumour; verifiable reality evanesces before the desire for a comprehensive knowledge of reality and the power of judgment. The word for judgment in Arabic is *hukm*, which means both 'passing judgment' (i.e. ruling between right and wrong) and also refers to 'governance': governing people and managing their affairs. Hafez Al Assad's state agencies described the ruler as an historic, 'wise' leader. The word for wise, *hakim*, is from the same root.

Two years later, I was in East Ghouta. During an online press interview I was asked about my residence at the American Embassy by a regime-affiliated journalist. I replied that it had been comfortable and safe and that I'd enjoyed the company of other opposition figures. My intention was to destroy the rumour by adopting it, and that is what happened, but not before another farcical episode had taken place. Regime loyalists, and those hostile to the Syrian regime took my mock-serious response as absolute proof of what they had been saying all along, that the revolution was an American creation. They included a Lebanese University professor who taught in the American University in Beirut and a fairly well-known Syrian poet, who said they'd known about my stay in the American Embassy for a good while before my 'confession', because they'd been told about it by a 'patriotic opposition figure' while they drank coffee in a Damascus cafe.

This is an exercise in how something massive gets made out of nothing when the desire for passing judgment grips people. If it weren't for this impulse, there is no way a poet in his sixties and a fifty-something-year-old professor would believe that the Americans would hand over the keys to their locked and bolted embassies to a group of Leftist Syrian opposition figures who also happened to be the bitterest enemies of the Syrian regime. Further, how is it that Syrian intelligence, as 'aware' of this information as they were, failed to make good use of it? Aside from self-interest and personal malice, it goes back to the process of discarding solid facts in favour of an abstract 'strategy' or map that purports to be a facsimile

of reality. The poet and professor made fools of themselves because they sought to make fools of others and monopolize judgment for themselves.

In any case, rumour here is a tool of political conflict whose purpose is to discredit and destroy the opponent's cause.

Rumours to deceive

Ever since my wife, Samira Khalil was abducted along with Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hammada 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 a while ago 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 regime — he mentioned female Muslim detainees — were being ignored.

Here, too, the genesis of the rumour is a dearth 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.

When the official monopoly over information ended, so did the monopoly over rumour. It could be said that rumour was one of the authorities' weapons that they did not have to answer for and with which they distorted society and weakened its ability to call them to account, terrifying it with dangers and disasters that were never any threat at all.

Rumours of fear have been exploited by ISIS in particular. In order to clear areas of their inhabitants or reduce their numbers, the group would send them warnings or inquire about them in surrounding areas. This would be enough to make many people flee before them. 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 like 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 domestic arena and obliterated the conditions for the birth of truth, i.e. independent scrutiny, 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 if the mistake one of us makes is 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 the wrong group. I am right because I am one of us, and we are in the 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 special 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 misdirection.

Contrary to many hopes, the communications revolution did nothing to check the onslaught of rumour. The same tool that aids research and provides trustworthy information also acts as a conduit for the spread of lies and fabrications. As far as I can make out, in the case of Syria those who work in agencies that spread false narratives are more committed to their cause

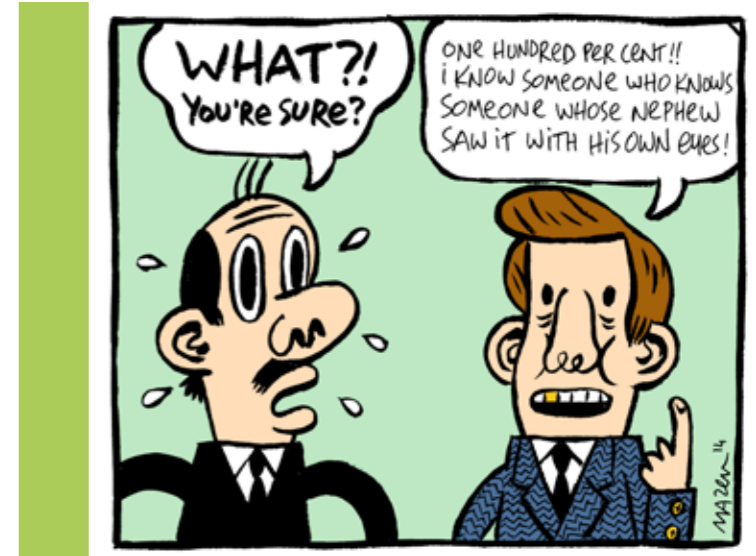
than those who conduct independent research and investigation in pursuit of the truth.

The heroes of countering rumour: scepticism and observation of the authority

For all 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 Syrian 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 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