

A Tragedy and a Revolt for Freedom and Dignity

Sam Dagher on the Arab Spring in Syria and Iraq Ten Years after the Uprisings

Interview and Editing David Labude

In 2011 the author and journalist Sam Dagher covered the initial uprisings that became known as the “Arab Spring” first in Egypt, Bahrain and Libya. Then he moved to Syria and became the only reporter for a major Western media outlet based fulltime in Damascus from 2012 to 2014 before he was detained and expelled from the country by the Assad regime. In Syria the demand for freedom and justice was brutally oppressed by the government and the country sunk into conflict and bloodshed with no solution in sight until today. In Iraq the anti-government protests calmed down quickly. However, the root causes for public anger remain unresolved and new waves of protest shook the country, in particular since October 2019.

In this interview Sam Dagher speaks about his experience in Damascus and Baghdad, discusses what is left of the demands a decade after the uprisings, and explains why there is still hope despite of the ongoing conflicts and violence.

“The Arab Spring brought up a new generation that freed itself from the physical and psychological shackles of tyranny and oppression. A generation that found its own voice and identity. That was at the very heart of the Arab uprisings, and there is no turning back for many of these people.”

I was based in Damascus and I got the chance to report from other parts of Syria as well, for instance, from Homs and the coastal region in the west and Aleppo in the north. Being in Syria was an opportunity to witness firsthand the measures taken by the regime and its allies to crush the rebellion. I saw with my own eyes how the regime was besieging opposition areas, bombing them nonstop and starving the population into submission. It was a surreal world: the difference between the areas that were controlled by the regime and the areas that were outside its control was stark. While the regime made life hell for people living outside its sphere of control, life in regime areas was more or less normal – on the surface at least. This was a way for the regime to say, you can submit to the rule of Bashar al-Assad and you will be safe and you will live normally or you can defy the regime and live the hell that the people who have dared to come out and oppose the regime are living through right now. Thus, you could be in the center of Damascus and everything would seem normal, the restaurants were open, shops as well, people were in the parks and going to work, and at the same time, on the mountain that is overlooking Damascus, Mount Qasioun, the regime had its artillery and was shelling the suburbs just beyond the capital. You could hear the outgoing artillery and rockets and even see the impact, the smoke plumes in the horizon and you could see the planes overhead that are on their way to bomb the opposition areas. It was quite a surreal experience. You knew something horrible was happening just a few miles

from where you were, but where you were everybody was pretending that everything was more or less normal.

I was also able to observe how the regime coopted the UN humanitarian agencies, particularly the World Food Program, and to use these programs in its strategy to starve opposition areas into submission. All these agencies were based in Damascus and they had to operate according to rules set by the regime. Thus, the regime was deciding which area gets UN food baskets or UN aid or UN medical supplies, and, I think, unfortunately the UN agencies went along for the most part with the regime's dictates.

Despite this and many more war crimes the Assad regime is in power for over half a century now. It was able to maintain its influence in three main ways: First of all, the family and the regime is ruthless, they operate under the principle of no mercy, that has been demonstrated by the father of Bashar al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad, in the Hama massacre in 1982. In addition, the regime established a network of secret police apparatuses that monitor citizens. These intelligence services oversee every aspect of life in Syria, they oversee and control the organs of power, the government, the army, the Ba'ath party and the economy. In a way, the Assad family has designed a "coup-proof" system. Thus, the real power in Syria lies in the family and the intelligence services.

Secondly, the family and the regime have consistently exploited regional fissures and they were fueling regional problems and then presented themselves as the ones who are able to resolve these problems. Hafez al-Assad has done that, for instance, in Lebanon during the civil war (1975-1989); the regime became part of the war, but still it projected itself as a fair arbiter. They did the same with Palestinian guerillas and vis-a-vis Israel. The regime always exploited these situations and offered its help, but demanded a price for resolving the crisis. The regime possesses a deal-maker mentality. It presents itself as the solution and offers its help in return for certain concessions. Like his father, Bashar al-Assad did the same in Lebanon before the Syrian troops were forced out 2005 and in Iraq after 2003. The regime was supporting the insurgency in all its forms, even Al-Qaeda, because it had an interest in seeing the Americans sink in the mud of Iraq and to make them think twice about maybe challenging the regime in Syria. Having said this, the regime would then present itself as the solution, as a mediator in Iraq. We see the same even today with the way many European intelligence agencies and countries are dealing with the regime, maybe secretly, but they are saying the regime can help us fight ISIS or control the refugee crisis. Ironically, the regime is actually the entity that fueled much of these problems.

Thirdly, the regime always plays the long game, democratically elected governments come and go, but the Assad family and its cronies are in power for the long-term. They lay low and wait for a crisis to wash over. This is how they have outlasted nine US presidents since Richard Nixon, and they have outlasted five German chancellors and might outlast the current one – Angela Merkel – as well.

With regard to a settlement in Syria, I think first of all, we need to differentiate between a political settlement which looks at the situation as simply a political dispute, which the Syrian conflict is not, and a long lasting solution which is what is needed in Syria. So if you are looking for a long lasting solution, first of all you have to put justice and accountability front and center, the regime and everybody else who has been involved in war crimes, needs to be held accountable for their atrocities. That should be the focus of any effort to resolve the current situation. Secondly, you have to treat the regime and the family as entities that have hijacked the country and its people and its resources for five decades and have done everything to remain in power. They have destroyed the country and displaced millions. This fact cannot be overlooked in any resolution. Thirdly, we have to look at all the regional and international powers who have armed and supported different factions both pro- and anti-regime, for instance, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and others, they need to end

their destructive involvement in this war. Lastly, besides this active support, there are many Western and European states that provide tacit support to the Assad regime. For, in their mind it is either ISIS or Assad, or refugees, forgetting that Assad actually creates these crises. This tacit support that the regime gets from many Western states and Europe also has to be taken into account.

Summing up the Arab Spring in Syria, I would choose the word "tragedy". In a sentence, and that would be a better reflection of the situation, it is a revolt or a revolution for freedom and dignity crushed by the regime and its enablers, highjacked by regional powers on all sides, and betrayed by those countries that proclaim to be defenders of democracy and liberal values.

This will not end soon, even under the new US president Joe Biden. Syria and much of the Middle East will be the least of his priorities. Biden has too much to deal with domestically, I mean in the US. The death toll from the Covid-19 pandemic has surpassed the number of people that the US lost in World War II, 400 000 people, and the economy and society has been devastated by the pandemic. These issues are going to be the focus of the Biden administration.

Talking about the Middle East, the new US administration wants to re-enter the nuclear agreement with Iran, this indicates that Biden actually wants to dial down tensions. Thus, any confrontation with Iran over Syria would not be in that direction.

The Arab Spring and Iraq's October Revolution

The protests we have seen in Iraq since October 2019 have been absolutely incredible and unprecedented in the country's history. We saw a collective expression of a new generation of Iraqis in their late teens and twenties and thirties who have transcended all the divisions, primarily the sectarian divisions that have plagued the country for so long, to come out, men and women and that's very important, we saw women on the frontline of these protests together with men, defying bullets to demand a better life. Another aspect we must not lose sight of is that these protests almost immediately started after the country had defeated ISIS and they were driven by predominantly Shiite areas in Baghdad and the south that have suffered more than any other community from the terrorism of ISIS. This tells us that actually the problem is not ISIS, the "Islamic State" is rather a very ugly and extreme manifestation, a symptom, of a deeper problem, that is bad governance, corruption, poverty and the marginalization that a lot of people feel. The fact that people feel that they have no say in their future and lives, that is the core of the issue. The protests, their timing and context and who was behind them are proof that insecurity and terrorism are fueled by these deeper problems. And this is absolutely connected to the Arab Spring, because the protests in February 2011 in Tahrir Square – at the time – against the government of Nuri al-Maliki, the protesters were dealt with the same way, they were hunted down and killed, as today, and the demands of today are also more or less the same as in 2011. Thus, I absolutely see the current protests in Iraq as an extension of the Arab Spring.

The demands of the protesters are indeed ambitious. However, I think they could be realized if Iraqis are left to decide for themselves what kind of country they want to live in. This means an end of the proxy power struggles, outside powers ending their intervention in Iraq and in Iraqi politics, and giving Iraqis a real chance to decide for themselves what kind of future they aspire to. Furthermore, you have to see a change in the way certain Western states, among them European countries, deal with Iraq. Their priority at the moment is terrorism and ISIS. Consequently, their partner is always the government that is in place now, and that is what they care about and where their interests lie. They do not want to think of

the alternative, because the alternative in their minds, is chaos and may be a return of ISIS, which is completely false, because exactly the policies of these governments are the main drivers of the kind of extremism that we see manifesting itself in ISIS and other radical groups. The real solution therefore would be to support the forces of change, for instance the protest movement, and to make sure they come to the forefront and are represented in the Iraqi government and the Iraqi state.

In terms of the Arab Spring and whether it had any positive effects on Iraq and Syria, I think yes. It is certainly very bleak and hopeless across the board, if we look at Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and other parts of North Africa, but I think that's not the reality. There is a new generation in the region that looks at the world differently and that interacts with the world differently. These young people have been freed from the physical, mental, emotional and psychological shackles of tyranny and oppression. This generation found its own voice and identity, and that is at the very heart of the Arab Spring – though it has often been overlooked, since attention usually focuses on the war and the tragedy, extremism and ISIS. For many of these people there is no turning back. Obviously this has come at a huge cost for everyone, but at the same time for many the struggle is not over yet. It could take another ten years to fully realize their goals and aspirations, but I think eventually they will get there. Furthermore, you have to look at the millions of people who are living now outside the region mainly in Europe, some in the US and other parts of the world. They are acquiring new skills and experiences and I think at least some of them will want to go back and help rebuild their countries, so I think it's hopeful in the long term.

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