

Syria waits for Ramadan

by Alain Gresh

Le Monde Diplomatique- English Edition, August 2011

In August it is Ramadan and every day is like Friday — demonstration day for the population of Syria's cities, not least those of Hama who have already endured one major army attack since the year's protests began, and are expecting more

Hama is not all of Syria. This town of 500,000 people has made trouble since Syria gained independence in 1946. It was bombed flat in 1982 after an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood, and became a focus of attention once again when the uprisings began this March. Turkey's prime minister, Recep Erdogan, has warned the Syrian government against repeating the killings of 1982. The international media have been spreading wild rumours about this symbolic town — without verifying them.

Getting to [Hama](#), 200km north of Damascus, was easier than I expected, by a well-maintained motorway. The approach to the city was guarded by a single army checkpoint. On the outskirts of town there were half a dozen tanks concealed at the side of the road. Hama was deserted; I saw a few families leaving in taxis. My driver had to weave between obstacles erected at the mouth of every street — piles of cobbles, tree branches, breezeblocks and dustbins. There were burned-out buses and cars. These flimsy barricades were intended to slow any surprise attack by the army on this “liberated” town. Crudely written slogans on sheets proclaimed: “The people say the regime must go” and “No repeat of 1982”.

I arrived at a checkpoint manned by youths and had to explain who I was. One came to guide me through the maze of streets and alleyways and get the barriers moved. At my first stop, I was invited to sit down and dozens of people crowded around, joining in the conversation and answering my questions. They showed me photos of martyrs (brothers, cousins, friends) or pictures taken on their mobile phones. Some were unbearable — an exploded brain or a crushed head. One picture was of two bodies crushed by a tank, according to the man who showed it; another said: “No, no, it was a big car — look at the tyre tracks.”

Why were the streets empty? Except on Fridays, when there's a demonstration, people stay at home. The men take turns to keep watch, around the clock. Some of the women have been evacuated; many fear a repeat of 1982. What had happened to that burned-out bus? “The government forces set it alight and they are trying to blame us. They say we want to create an Islamic emirate. They are trying to plant weapons in the mosques to incriminate us.”

“Our revolution is peaceful (*silmiyya*),” they told me. From Egypt to Yemen to Bahrain, it’s the most powerful weapon in the demonstrator’s arsenal: nobody I met was armed with more than a stick. In other areas, armed groups, their numbers swelled by “Arab fighters” from Lebanon or Iraq, have run amok, and there have been vendettas against army officers and soldiers, but these are rare. A pamphlet published in Hama on 1 June gave the demonstrators precise instructions: they should avoid causing disorder, respect public buildings and avoid insulting or provoking government forces. The demonstrators say they are protesting against oppression, and don’t want to oppress anyone.

‘They can take everything but our dignity’

Among those gathered around me, one had a degree in philosophy, another was a doctor, another an engineer. All wanted to see a “civilised” regime, an end to arbitrary and humiliating treatment, and respect for their dignity (*karama*).

“They can take everything from us, but not our dignity,” said one man. Arrest, ill treatment and torture had traumatised them. “We decided we would never go back to prison. Our only choice now is between death and freedom.” Several hundred people from Hama are political prisoners; nationwide, there are 10-15,000. As we talked, young volunteers collected dustbins in the street.

One of the leaders put the flood of eyewitness accounts into some kind of order by reviewing the sequence of events in Hama since the beginning of the troubles in Syria. Still paralysed by 1982, Hama took its time about joining the movement. The first demonstrations, and the first deaths, came at the end of April; but Hama was still willing to talk. “A delegation met President [Bashar al-Assad](#) on 11 May. He promised that those responsible for the killing would be brought to trial and that the army would not come into the town. And then the third of June happened.”

I listened to stories that occasionally differed in their details, but agreed on the key points: on Friday 3 June, “Children of Freedom Day”, thousands of peaceful demonstrators gathered in the streets, armed with flowers to present to the soldiers. The flowers were answered with bullets, leaving between 150 and 230 dead. “And yet,” said the leader, “three days later, we agreed to meet the president. Again, he promised to punish those responsible, and the head of the government forces, Mohammed Muflih, was recalled to Damascus for an inquiry.”

The government forces withdrew and calm followed — until the massive demonstration of Friday 1 July, which according to some of the media attracted 800,000 people (one and a half times the population of Hama) but which was probably more like 200,000. A journalist close to the authorities said 70,000. The regime panicked, dismissed the governor Ahmed Abdelaziz, who was in favour of a peaceful solution, and reinstated Muflih, who was also promoted. Everyone was expecting an all-out attack on the city when, on 4 and 5 July,

government forces tried to enter Hama, arresting several dozen people and killing four. “We pushed them back. The American and French ambassadors arriving on 7 July helped us to foil their plans.” Hama’s trust was broken. “The president said twice, in speeches, that the army would not open fire on the people. The only governor who applied [Assad’s] orders was dismissed. From now on, we are insisting that the regime goes.”

At another crossroads, I heard the same stories and appeals to international opinion — and refusal of any foreign military intervention — and was treated to the same hospitality: I was invited to sit in an armchair, and offered drinks, sandwiches and flowers. “We are not Salafists,” explained one of our hosts. “We want a ‘middle-of-the-road’ Islam.”

Like fingers of the same hand

Hama may be very conservative, but its people insist they are open, notably towards the Christian minority. One said: “We are like fingers of the same hand.” A Christian confirmed this view: “These young men you see are like sons to me; they call me their uncle.” Yet the Christian church leaders support the authorities. “The Church has authority in matters of religion but not in politics. In my family, we all have different political opinions, and the Church can’t settle our arguments.”

Yet in private there is hate talk too, especially against the [Alawites](#) (the Shia minority from which many of Syria’s leaders come), although pamphlets published by the resistance committees repudiate it.

The previous evening, in [Bab Tuma](#), the Christian quarter of Damascus, several thousand people had gathered around a stage for a concert in support of [Bashar al-Assad](#). Young people, boys and girls together, wearing T-shirts with his picture or wrapped in Syrian flags sang, danced and shouted. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christians have taken refuge in Syria, and the local Christians fear for the future. A banner denounced “the lies of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya”. The two satellite TV channels, one financed by Qatar, the other by Saudi Arabia, have been accused of partiality, spreading unverified rumours and acting as instruments of those seeking to overthrow the regime. This is not entirely false, but government restrictions on foreign journalists help the rumours to spread. The regime has banned the Lebanese dailies *Al-Akhbar* and *Al-Safir*, which have always sided with the Syrian government and Hizbullah against Israel but have condemned the killings.

Thousands of people gathered in front of Hejaz Station to protest against the US ambassador’s visit to Hama and western interference in Syrian affairs. It was a holiday, and none of the young people taking part were civil servants or schoolchildren forced into demonstrating. The regime still has its supporters,

even if their numbers have dwindled (1): some of the minorities, who are worried that Islamists will seize power, and some of the bourgeoisie (including Sunni Muslims), which has grown rich over the past decade thanks to economic opening-up. Damascus (where most demonstrations are in the suburbs) and Aleppo have yet to move; it is the poorer regions (such as Deraa), where the ruling Ba'ath Party drew its strength in the 1960s and 1970s that have mobilised, feeling that they have been abandoned over the past decade.

Damascus has changed: hundreds of traders have set up stalls along its pavements; nobody dares move itinerant salesmen on; the traffic ignores the speed limit; buildings go up without planning permission. The police are busy elsewhere and respect for the law is declining, in spite of a government advertising campaign appealing to citizens: "Great or small, we respect the law", "Optimistic or pessimistic, we respect the law".

"The bullets killed our fear," said one person I talked to. Half a dozen opponents of the government had sat down to dinner in an open-air restaurant, "in broad daylight", without fear of being overheard. They all knew they might be arrested the next day, but now they were acting openly. Should they take part in the "national dialogue" meeting that the government had called, due to begin the next day? Most were sceptical and only one intended to go, in order to "to make my opinion heard". "What is the point of discussing new laws," asked another, "if nothing changes in practice? Do we really need new laws to give political parties freedom of action right away, or to ask independent figures to run one of the 'official' daily papers?" (2). A third talked of the amnesties: "I was put in prison and, in spite of the first amnesty, I was not freed, although the only charge against me was of making a speech on foreign television. The constitution forbids torture, but it takes place on a daily basis."

Boycotted by the opposition, the national dialogue was broadcast live. For the first time on official television, the Syrian people were able to hear many voices denounce the regime's choice of the "security option" and abuses of power by the police and the *shabbiha* ("ghost") militias, which are often made up of criminals. The regime justifies itself by talking of a foreign conspiracy. It is clear that a weakening, or even the fall, of the regime is an objective for the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia and rightwing forces in Lebanon (3). But the crisis is an internal one, and demands an internal solution.

[Michel Kilo](#), a long-term opponent of the regime who has spent years in prison, believes there must be a transition, and that it can only begin if two conditions are met: "Repression at local level must stop; the 'street' — the committees that organise resistance in each neighbourhood and town — must participate. The 'street' is the true protagonist of our revolution; the opposition parties and the key figures no longer represent many people."

I met an educated young woman who, although rather nervous — she is wanted by the police — believes in a better future. She is part of a national leadership of the resistance committees that is using the internet to coordinate political positions and actions. “We don’t want to become a political party. Our role is to be present on the ground, to unite all the different watchwords and points of view, and to develop our information functions. We are learning to look beyond our prejudices, to work together. We all express our hopes and fears in different ways; some of us are Muslim Brothers, some are secular, others are Arab nationalists, but we all want the same thing: a civilian government. And we reject violence. In August, it will be Ramadan, the most sacred time for Muslims. For a whole month, there will be communal prayers every evening; every day will be a Friday.”