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Syrian Youth Against Tyranny

In the uprisings that started in Tunisia, spread through the Middle East and North Africa and reached Western countries such as the US and Spain, young citizens have played a key role by questioning the systems inherited from the previous generations and demanding new forms of representation.

By Leila Nachawati for ISN

In the Arab world, Syrians are facing the most dramatic situation, with [tens of thousands](#) killed, injured and arrested. Within this context, young Syrians are at the forefront of the global struggle for freedom and dignity - and its main victims.

Speaking up after decades of silence

After more than forty years, most Syrians had grown used to viewing the Baath regime as an oppressive, yet unquestionable, power. There was an attempt to overthrow Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president Bashar al-Assad, in the city of Hama in 1982. It was so violently repressed -- it led to the [slaughter of 20,000 people](#) and became one of the [single deadliest attacks](#) of an Arab leader against his own people -- that a whole generation was traumatized and subdued into political paralysis. Since then, no attempts to ignite an organized reaction against one of the most repressive regimes in the world have succeeded.

It took another generation and the revolutionary trend sweeping the region for Syrians to take to the streets to demand freedom, justice and dignity. Young people in Syria led the mobilizations for change, just as they did in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. They envisioned a future in which their voices would be heard, and they used new tools and channels to share and spread their hopes of transforming their country into a place respectful of everyone's rights.

New spaces in the land of state-controlled media

Despite minor improvements in the last decade, the majority of Syrian mainstream media are still [owned and controlled](#) by the government; foreign journalists are virtually banned from entry. Tools provided by the internet have allowed citizens to create their own narrative however and share real-life events with the world, in real time. Internet media and platforms are flooded with images and videos taken by protesters (mainly through mobile phones), then shared by citizens and media worldwide.

Facebook pages such as "[The Syrian people know their way](#)" showcase a collection of creative examples of graphic design, posters, photos and videos produced by young activists that aim to

reflect the spirit of the revolution and provide further inspiration for the on-going struggle. Aware of the importance of icons and visual representation, they combine their designs for blogs, websites, posters, banners, with the promotion of effective methods of peaceful civil resistance against the regime's brutality -- without engaging in militarization.

YouTube popularized what has now become the [anthem](#) of the Syrian revolution, "*Irhal ya Bashar*" ["Bashar, get out"]. The song by Ibrahim Kashoush encourages the Syrian president to leave office, replete with provocative lyrics and a catchy *dabke* beat. The government first tried to stop it by silencing the singer: In a symbolic and macabre response to Kashoush's chanting, the singer was found dead on 5 July 2011, his throat cut and his vocal cords ripped out -- a clear message to anyone willing to speak up.

Although Kashoush may have been killed, his voice was not silenced. The song became even more popular, with demonstrators singing it in Syria and abroad. It ignited a strong reaction to the on-going repression and drew even more international media attention to the Assad regime.

To counter online opposition, the government used the internet for its own purposes by lending support to pro-regime hackers. [Syria's Electronic Army](#), a group of hackers acknowledged as a [positive force](#) by Assad in a June 2011 speech, took over certain Facebook pages -- such as those belonging to presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Barack Obama -- and flooded them with comments like, "We love Bashar al-Assad". In order to try establish that nothing terrible is happening in Syria, the government has also [accused international media](#) of fabricating content and claimed YouTube was the epitome of "the West's moral bankruptcy and cooperation with terrorism".

Despite attempts by the government to delegitimize and criminalize them, Syrian activists have nevertheless managed to attract global attention to their struggle -- and it seems that they are winning the media battle, after decades of silence.

Mobilizing "the silent majority"

Social media platforms, particularly YouTube, are being used by young Syrians to try mobilize what is known as "the silent majority": other Syrians who are still afraid of speaking up. A widely-shared video called "[What are you afraid of?](#)" shows a teenager talking to a young man sitting in the dark. The first one lists the reasons why the other one might be afraid, and encourages him to take a stand:

Are you afraid of the Security agents? Believe me, they're afraid of you. If Hamza and Hayar who were kids are not afraid, will you be?

Are you afraid of sectarianism? We are the country of love and coexistence and peace... We have rights, and we will take them!

What are you afraid of? Your country is calling you, your country is calling you!

If we, the youth, do not fight for change, who will?

Do you like living like this? Do you?

Now we have a chance to change our future.

Bloggers and online activists such as [Hussein Ghreer](#) have also called on Syrians to take a stand against repression: "Silence doesn't serve us after today. We don't want a country where we get imprisoned for uttering a word. We want a country that embraces and welcomes words."

Ghrer, like many other bloggers and human rights activists, has been arrested twice by a regime that considers freedom of expression a threat. His detention sparked outrage among fellow bloggers and activists, who issued a [joint statement](#) that summarizes what Syrian activists stand for and the threats they face:

Hussein was detained because this regime fears freedom. Words are Hussein's weapons, and ours too. We want these weapons to break the silence. We urge you to raise your voice for Hussein's freedom and all prisoners of conscience in Syria.

Competing narratives

Although Syrians have been paying a very high price for their agitation, citizens have continued to create their own narrative with tools provided by the internet. The gap between the state-controlled narrative and that of the population is growing wider and wider because of the hard work and sacrifices of Syrian activists.

Syrians opposing the regime are aware of the state narrative and have counteracted it through powerful online means. Another song, "[We want to fill the dungeons](#)", created by a group of activists who call themselves "The Strong Heroes of Moscow", addresses the propaganda that floods Syrian media with pointed lyrics:

We will fill the dungeons and pack the prisons for the Assad nation. No freedom, it's all nonsense, it's all a conspiracy that comes from the West.

Who said "God, freedom and nothing else"? We will shred them like lettuce.

They're just a million infiltrators, they are not the majority.

Your media performed its magic and exposed the Salafi terrorists.

Your name raises us on high, even if your people die of hunger, we'll elect you for life.

The state narrative mocked in this song contrasts with the revolutionary narrative that Syrian youth have broadcast, focusing on demands for freedom, anti-sectarianism and non-violence.

Non-violent resistance inspired the Syrian uprising from the beginning, but it has been met with arrests, torture and bloodshed. 26-year-old activist [Ghiath Matar](#) from the Damascus suburb of Daraya -- dubbed "the Syrian Ghandi" -- was known for leading the initiative of facing security forces with bottles of water and flowers. He was hunted down and tortured to death on September 10. The Syrian Local Coordination Committees issued a [joint statement](#) that mentioned the dream Ghiath had died for:

Ghiath and his friends in Daraya were advocates of non-violent struggle. He believed that a free and civilized Syria can't be realized except by Syrian men and women in their peaceful struggle against the violence of the regime, with all the love they have facing the speech of hatred, by refusing to be like the butcher or use his tools.

How much more can Syrians endure?

Young Syrians once believed in peaceful resistance, but the brutality of the regime against unarmed demonstrators has clashed with their dream of seeing the country transformed into one where fundamental rights are respected. Youth unemployment was already among [the highest in the world](#) before the revolution, and six times higher than the rate among older adults; the lack of opportunity

had forced thousands into emigrating. Now, after a year of crackdowns -- and with the country on the verge of economic collapse -- young Syrians find themselves trapped between unemployment and death.

Thanks to content uploaded by activists being widely shared, their struggle can be followed by citizens all over the world – and, for the first time in decades, there is near-worldwide solidarity with the cause of the Syrian people. However, without unified international pressure, young Syrians will be alone in facing a regime that has driven its own people to despair. The world needs to do more than watch the bloodshed in real time.

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