



Myriam Youssef

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Syria; Let there be mayhem

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As the media turned away from covering government-controlled areas after the violence subsided, our local researcher in Damascus, Myriam Youssef, reflects on how Syrians there are living a different type of silent violence. She warns that the silence may not prevail and that the consequences could be sever and unruly.



A man walking his grandson in Eastern Aleppo where many families had to live in partially destroyed houses. Credit: Myriam Youssef.

Suffering defies fear

“I would not have cared if it was just about me, but be confident that I am ready to kill...yes to kill, if my children starve. Nothing is crueller than a father finding himself unable to feed his children and keep them warm.” These words of a taxi driver in Damascus left me shocked and out of words. I muttered *“May God dispel this misery”*, which is what we say here when we run out of words. In fact, no words that I know could portray and express the state of this man and other Syrians nowadays, as they face unprecedented economic, social, and psychological pressures.

Syrians thought that last winter was their most difficult time since the uprising and the subsequent war that followed, as they faced severe fuel and electricity shortages. But their hope for a better time vanished with the beginning of this winter season. Nearly everyone here agrees that the country is currently experiencing its worst times ever.

The restlessness, that was locked away inside the chest by fear, started to come out as murmurs in conversations behind closed doors. Fear does not seem to be able to restrain the expression of frustration any

longer, as the murmurs are gradually echoed throughout the country and became the talks of the street, taxis, shops, cafes and households.

Consecutive crises

The peak points of difficult times in 2019 included the gas crisis, the heating fuel crisis, and the auto fuel crisis which started in April 2019 and completely crippled movement in the streets in most of the country. During the last two months of 2019, a new sharp peak of hardship came with the outbreak of the uprising in neighbouring Lebanon. This continuous peak has affected every aspect of daily life.

In recent years, Lebanon has been an important economic haven for Syrians, as it is the only neighbouring country that is easy and safe to reach and was not influenced by the turmoil that has swept the region since 2011. Thus, Syrians have relied heavily on Lebanon in many aspects of their lives.

In addition, around one million Syrians have been displaced to various Lebanese regions to escape the scourge of war and oppression. Thousands of Syrians have deposited their money in Lebanese banks, which they considered more stable than their Syrian counterparts. Lebanon has also constituted as a gateway for Syrians to transfer funds and deal with the US dollar, which is difficult in Syria due to sanctions and regulations. Syrian regulations constrict them to only receive their payments and remittances sent in hard currency from abroad in Syrian pounds which lead to significant losses as the official exchange rate is half of that on the black market.

Moreover, the openness of the Lebanese market has allowed Syrians to obtain various types of goods, foods, and medicines that are scarce in the Syrian markets which provide mainly local and low-quality goods. In fact, the fuel coming from Lebanon, a non-oil producing country, has become one of the solutions for many Syrians facing the fuel crisis.

The last crisis is the worst

The situation has deteriorated rapidly over the past few months, as most Syrians have started to feel the effects of the economic crisis in Lebanon that affected bank deposits and money transfers, as well as making it difficult or even impossible to source goods. All the actions of the government failed to stop the value of the Syrian currency from dropping from 600 Syrian pounds against one US Dollar in September to over 1000 pounds during the second week of 2020, a limit which the Syrian pound never crossed before, even during the worst periods of the war. With this came the unbearable rising prices of most basic commodities and an economic deterioration that the government can no longer gloss over as it used to do in the last years.

For the first time since 2011, vendors in most markets close their day without one single item being sold.

Even the popular most affordable markets have been quiet, and customers are only buying the absolute essentials since prices are rising out of control. The price of the same item may vary from one place to another, and from one merchant to another under the pretext that the Syrian pound is falling, and the dollar is rising.

During the last week of 2019, prices increased by 50 percent or more for many basic food products forcing citizens to contemplate what to exclude from their food shopping lists, which is already constricted to absolute essentials. Non-essentials are of course luxuries that have been forgotten a long time ago.

The price hikes of course are not limited to foods. Everything was affected including transport and property rents. If a struggling tenant dares to object, the answer would be ready *"All prices have gone up, how can I live if I do not increase the rent?"*. It feels like an endless cycle, with life becoming harder with every cycle.

No falling bombs ... But we are not okay!

"Thank God the bombs stopped falling over Damascus and you are finally fine." said a friend who was visiting Syria for the first time in seven years. I am trying hard to explain to her that we are actually not fine, and that what we are experiencing today is much harder than what we experienced during the harshest days of the war. But to no avail. She is convinced that 'some' economic difficulties and price hikes cannot be more difficult than bombs and explosions. She does not realise that bombs carry the certainty of death while the despair we experience now carries the *uncertainty* of death. A deferred death, and we do not know when it will strike.

People started looking identical, as misery made home in their eyes and faces. Foods are rationed, homes are cold, faces are pale and loaded with the signs of worries and illnesses.

Should I tell my friend about the taxi driver who is willing to kill if his children starve? Or about that woman who was forcibly displaced from Ghouta and now lives with her two sons in the suburbs of Damascus in a house without windows or doors, and has to get her children to survive on one meal a day? Or about the children and young people who are forced to leave their education to work and yet struggle to support their families? Or about the kids walking to their schools without shoes or bags? Perhaps it is better not to tell her about all of this. Let her keep her rosy image of a country that has issues only because 'some' problems. Myself, I shall only silently await the next inevitable explosion!

Is there an explosion on the horizon?

"The explosion is near, the situation is unsustainable." a sentence that has been repeated daily without anyone knowing where, when, and how this predicted explosion is going to happen. But what everyone knows is that it is an inevitable explosion, and it will not be a wonderful idealistic public movement and nothing like the beginning of the 2011 uprising.

It is more likely to be a violent eruption, with the same scale of the violence that people have bottled up over the past years. What awaits us, if it happens, is likely to have very unfortunate consequences; an explosion that no one will be able to contain or handle properly. It will be a ball of fire that burns everything around it and will continue to roll to burn the largest possible space, and we will reach with it the inevitable point of no return.

The signs of this explosion are very clear everywhere. In Damascus, extreme poverty and homelessness live side by side with outrageous wealth. Hundreds of children, women, and men with shrivelled eyes and pale faces selling biscuits and chewing gum in the streets or begging for money, walking alongside those driving around with luxury cars, fancy clothes and shiny shoes and who go to luxurious restaurants and hotels where a price of one dinner is equivalent to what a family earns in few months.

In the countryside of Damascus, which has been destroyed by the war over many years, particularly the eastern and western Ghouta, the life for hundreds of thousands of people has become a big prison. The war in those areas ended with the departure of thousands of fighters and civilians toward the northern Syria. Some chose to stay hoping for a better life but later realised it was a mere illusion. Dozens have been arbitrarily detained with the aim of blackmailing their families for money. Job opportunities are scarce and young people are prevented from leaving Ghouta to search for jobs elsewhere. Children are forced to be the breadwinners for their families.

A lady from eastern Ghouta tells me: "Everything here is boiling, and the explosion is near, but it will be very violent, and we do not rule out that it could resort to arm or theft, looting and vandalism, as people no longer have anything to lose. We lost everything and thought we would at least get some gains, but we were delusional. Our homes and livelihoods were destroyed, we were displaced, and we lost our family and friends. Is there a greater tragedy? Let there be mayhem."

As for other Syrian cities, such as Homs, Aleppo, Deraa and Deir al-Zour, people are trying to heal from the fresh wounds of the war. The destruction is everywhere with no signs of reconstruction projects which the government keeps talking about. People are full of despair and see no light at the end of the tunnel. They feel deserted and abandoned by the rest of the world.

"No, it is not despair, but distress" says a woman responsible for supporting her family after her husband was left completely immobile after being hit by a shrapnel a few years ago. "By now we are used to despair but today we feel an unprecedented distress of not being able to survive anymore. Will we manage our livelihoods next month, and the month that follows? Will a day come when we feel hungry or cold without having anything to quench our thirst or warm our bodies with? If the situation continues with this rapid deterioration, there is no doubt that that day will inevitably come."

Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.

About the author



Myriam Youssef