Southwest of Homs, Syria
EMERGENCE magazine is a monthly e-magazine by the Metta Center dedicated to sharing stories about nonviolent movements worldwide.

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Our Mission
Our mission is to promote the transition to a nonviolent future by making the logic, history, and yet-unexplored potential of nonviolence more accessible to activists and agents of cultural change (which ultimately includes all of us). We focus on root causes (sometimes called “upstream” causes) to help people in any walk of life discover their innate capacity for nonviolence and use it more strategically for long-term transformation of themselves and the world. We work to challenge and replace the prevailing worldview with a much higher image of humanity informed by nonviolence and its implications for the meaning of life and value of the person.

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In Afra Jalabi’s heartbreaking article for this issue of Emergence you will read the story of a mother who, in her courage and willingness to die, deflected the violence of heavily armed men bent on hatred. Such stories reveal the core power of nonviolence. Gandhi had such confidence in this power that in 1942 when he called off mass civil disobedience because of his principle of “non-embarrassment” when the British had their hands full (to put it mildly) with the war in Europe, but he wanted to signal to them that Satyagraha was not going away, he sent one person, Vinoba Bhave, to commit civil disobedience and court arrest.

Most of the time, however, in this world where so few have the opportunity to learn about, not to mention get training in nonviolence, numbers often count. And in the case of insurrectionary movements against an entrenched regime, as Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher showed in connection with the nonviolent uprising in Pakistan in 1972,[1] outside support can make the difference between success and failure (Gandhi himself had called for “world-wide sympathy” in his struggle of right against wrong in India). That support was not forthcoming in Pakistan in 1972, and that movement failed. We are now seeing the same tragedy, only with even worse results for human suffering, in Syria.

The first book to appear in Arabic offering a nonviolent interpretation of the Quran was written by a Syrian, Jawdat Said, whom we interviewed at Metta in 2011. A respected Quranic scholar, Said pointed out that in the Quranic story of Cain and Abel the latter tells his brother, (Quran 5:28): “If thou dost stretch thy hand against me, to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand against thee to slay thee, for I do fear God, the cherisher of the worlds.” In other words, the first murder is accompanied by the first act of nonviolence – a refusal to kill, even in self-defense. While Said’s book had little obvious impact outside the sphere of a few scholars, it is beyond question that when the first stirrings of the discontent called “Arab Spring” reached Syria it was entirely nonviolent in character. As early as 2000, a group of young men from the ages 17 to 25 (the shebab, usually the first to throw stones and worse) were studying mostly at night in a mosque in Dariyah, for example, under an open-minded teacher who got them interested in Said’s writings.

[1] Nonviolent Social Movements
The Ethical Alternative began in November 2012 to revive the original values of the uprising, and proactively to mobilize against human rights abuses committed by some of the armed revolutionists, what we don’t seem to know is what could have happened if the world had recognized the potential of that struggle sooner. May we learn that lesson before it’s too late.
In place of my monthly column, as an early childhood educator, with deep concern for the children of our world in coping with the adult world’s reliance of violence, I would like to draw your attention for this issue to a recent UNICEF claim that “Syria is among the most dangerous places on Earth for children.”

Our task in nonviolence is to take this seriously—and ask ourselves how we can make it better. There are no easy answers.


When we speak of education, we are proclaiming a revolution, one in which everything we know today will be transformed. I think of this as the final revolution; not a revolution of violence, still less of bloodshed, but one from which violence is wholly excluded—for the little child’s psychic productivity is stricken to death by the barest shadow of violence.

............................. Maria Montessori
( The Absorbent Mind)
Here is the official summary of the report—


The ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has an alarming impact on children. The present report highlights that the use of weaponry and military tactics that are disproportionate and indiscriminate by Government forces and associated militias has resulted in countless killings and the maiming of children, and has obstructed children's access to education and health services. Government forces have also been responsible for the arrest, arbitrary detention, ill treatment and torture of children. Armed opposition groups have been responsible for the recruitment and use of children both in combat and support roles, as well as for conducting military operations, including using terror tactics, in civilian-populated areas, leading to civilian casualties, including children. The report also stresses the disappearance of many children. All parties to the conflict have seriously hampered the delivery of humanitarian assistance in areas most affected by the conflict, in particular across conflict lines, including besieged areas. The report also highlights that children in Syria have experienced a high level of distress as a result of witnessing the killing and injuring of members of their families and peers, or of being separated from their family and/or displaced.

The present report notes that the country task force remains constrained by serious security and access limitations that present a challenge to the effective monitoring, verification and reporting of grave violations against children inside the Syrian Arab Republic. The report also contains a series of recommendations to halt violations and increase the protection of children affected by the armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.”

Please take the time to read this report (available in various languages) at this link: http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=s/2014/31

May the lives of these children transform us—and awaken us from passivity and silence to their suffering—and propel us into creative, nonviolent action—in its various expressions and forms—on their behalf.
Young women with a placard reading “NO” stuck on their forehead attend a demonstration against violence in Syria in Madrid, 2012.

Image @Freedom House/Creative Commons
http://www.flickr.com/photos/syriafreedom/681346016/in/photostream/
Wars are crowded with male faces, weapons and gruesome images, and although we know there are other things happening, we are struck anew when we are there on the ground to see for ourselves. In late January I had the chance to go inside Syria when a group of friends decided to visit liberated areas and deliver baby milk, winter clothes and some aid for local initiatives. More than 60 percent of Syria is no longer under regime control, and these islands of vulnerable freedoms are now called the liberated areas. What struck me first was the huge number of families, children and elderly people we encountered everywhere in different towns and villages. Their faces are usually absent from war reporting. But they are the reality of any conflict.

The first Syrians we came across at the edge of a small town north of Aleppo were two small children. The expression on their faces immediately felt like a bullet. Young faces but with ancient, sorrowful eyes. There, as the sun was setting, they were cycling around rubble and shelled buildings on their bikes. What we didn’t realize then was that we were going to see that vacant, distant expression on the face of every child.

I was always relieved when some kid during our journey would break into tears at the mention of a killed parent, sibling or relative. The tears would soften the faces of these children who already aged.
We were able to go further south into the country all the way into the famous Kafranble, south of Aleppo and north of Hamah, known for its civic activism, creative signs and large posters. We met many of the local artists and activists. But the faces of the children haunted me everywhere. Their eyes followed me even after we’d leave a place. In one small town, we were able to attend an art exhibition for the children that was held inside a cave, to avoid the danger of a sudden air raid. But it wasn’t necessarily safe from an explosive barrel that could penetrate the earth into the belly of the underground cave. One of the drawings depicted a little bear with its heart cut up, the wool filling showing, and an eye falling out. There were drawings of body parts strewn around houses. More sadly, one six-year-old girl had drawn rifles, Scud missiles, MiG26 fighter jets and other weapons; revealing a child whose innocence had been stolen by detailed military expertise. It seemed people were walking normally everywhere in all the towns we passed, or sitting in front of their front porches, but mostly in somber silence. The houses we visited were so orderly, with spotless kitchens—perhaps the women’s attempt to maintain sanity and order in a world that had gone chaotic and insane. I had missed all this, and had sometimes to stand still and be aware of the pine-scented air and the scene of the surrounding hills.

I had not been to Syria for the previous six years.

Full story will be published in Critical Muslim, a quarterly magazine.

In conversation with Afra Jalabi

1. Do you think women experience war differently? Can you talk about the women you met during your trips? Any stories you can share?

Women generally are not agents of war. Women are subject to the effects of war and end up paying a horrendous price. They see much of what they have nourished and loved come under the claws of death and destruction. I was struck by the women of Syria when I had the chance to visit some liberated areas in northern Syria last year. Almost every single home we entered was a model of order and cleanliness, and yet these very homes were right under the possibility of air raids and missiles. Seeing the meticulous care, the rose gardens and house plants, all put in harmony and in accordance with local taste made me feel that this is the silent struggle of women; creating beauty, peace and order in a world that had gone insane, and committing to serenity when the men have gone to war—even when the whole world seemed dark. Women are agents of peace even when they don’t know it. This, however, doesn’t mean women automatically and consciously oppose war. Opposing war and working to end war require a certain paradigm and understanding that generally go against the grain of most world cultures. Also, many of these women have lived under the Assad regime for almost half a century and have seen many of their beloved taken to prison or disappear, even before the revolution. Many of the women I talked to, while sad about what they witness see themselves as part of a just struggle against horror and ugliness.

I was touched by everything I saw and heard while visiting the liberated areas last year in the north of Syria. We stayed at the home of the Hashoum family. When I woke up early in the morning, I heard gentle footsteps on the upper floor where we slept. I took a peek out the door and found the mother, Qadriah, holding a tray with a coffee pot and small cups. “Oh, it seems you’re still sleeping, come down and get your coffee when you’re
ready," she said as she swiftly descended the nearby stairs. My other friends were still sleeping and I stood there thinking of her and thinking of my late mother who used to do that when I would visit. These gestures of unconditional love of mothers the world over. How precious and tender! After breakfast and as we were leaving we complimented her rose garden, she then brought us to the backroom with high windows, lit with the brilliance of the day, and showed us her large plants touching the ceiling, telling us how she can’t leave her home for too long because of these friends.

My belief is that this silent struggle of creating beauty and peace in the midst of war and violence will one day find the tools and channels to express itself in an articulate manner, in discourses and ways of living and transforming injustices, and become a visible conscious movement. There is consistency and logic underlying the silent order I witnessed and when it finds its voice it will not only change Syria but our approaches to resistance and peace.

2. Syria is the most dangerous place on Earth for children. How are the children coping? What about the orphans, children who have lost their parents? Do we get to see these images, hear their stories in the media?

I had to take a photo with the granddaughter of Qadria, Haya, the three year old blonde with a mischievous smile. I wanted the photo because this little girl escaped by mere inches an attempt by a sniper. When the regime army had besieged the town they placed snipers on the tallest buildings in town, Qadria explained as she showed me the building opposite their house. Despite their care, the kids one day managed to step out and the sniper fired. “They wanted to scare us by showing us they care about nothing,” she explained. Modern war and the military have their underlying logic too; it’s terror and subjugation, and stopping short of nothing to achieve a coerced victory at any price. The recent official numbers show a figure of 11 thousand children killed in Syria in the last three years. Unfortunately this number could be higher. There are also hundreds perhaps thousands of under-age children in prison, not to mention the thousands orphaned or misplaced. The regime used the torture and killing of children as a tactic to subjugate and terrorize the population back into submission.
3. You have been following the coverage of the Syrian conflict in international and Arab media. Do you think either are biased and how?

Syria is not a complicated story. What is complicated is today’s world order which is based on the absence of the rule of law at the international level where a shrewd murderous leader, like Hafez al Assad, can hijack a helpless civilian population, impose his son before dying, who in turn keeps brutalizing Syrians, all with modern weaponry, generously supplied by supporting allies. This is the plight of many small countries in a world where international powers who have no incentive to act beyond their strategic interests and in whose matrix of power does not figure the will or the well-being of local populations.

The story of Syria is NOT being told. It’s simply the Syrians’ struggle for dignity and freedom—exactly the first words the Syrians uttered when they first took to the streets. What is happening in Syria captures the malaise of our world today, and copies the failure to help in pervious disasters. We live in a world order designed by those who triumphed in World War II. The Syrians tried to break the 44-years reign of tyranny and dictatorship and tried doing so mostly peacefully and non-violently for the first 6 months and believed the world would come to their support. But none of their expectations came true; the regime became emboldened with the world’s silence, increasing in brutality and detaining tens of thousands of Syrians, mostly civil rights activists, students, doctors and lawyers and began to besiege cities and towns. As a result of the peaceful struggle of the people some soldiers started defecting from the army and bring light weapons. The people were desperate to protect themselves and believed that these new units forming, composed of those who defected as well as some civilians joining them, would bring them some measure of safety, but this created a whirlpool of further consequences and devastation. Syrians were in a difficult place. Considering the common dominators among Syrians—and which is not so different from other parts of the world—and their lack of any nonviolent training, I’m even surprised the peaceful phase lasted six months and against incredibly tremendous odds, facing one of the most brutal entities in recent history. People always do the best they can under any circumstances. Arms seemed to offer something substantial to Syrians who didn’t understand the strategic power of nonviolent struggle.

What are a people caught up under a brutal tyranny to do in today’s world, when the world order is designed to sustain and support local dictatorships? Many societies are between a rock and a hard place; and most people in Western democracies are living almost in numbness and denial of the conditions of billions of fellow human beings. This is why the role of reliable media should be about communicating the general and contextual narrative of a country and then situating the detailed events into that context within that context. But when lay people suddenly start hearing about violence, conflict, and fighting between this or that group they have no clue that these things are part of a longer history and are ultimately about freedom, social justice and basic human rights. People don’t go to war just because they want to die or because they’re insane. They go to war because all other alternatives seem closed to them. One of the crimes of modern media in my view is that it does this; it portrays many conflicts as suddenly erupting and also as being motivated by insane people that happen to wear strange clothing; and hence rendering the underlying causes and reasons irrelevant. Most media in the world today are rather agencies that are specialized in obfuscating simple stories and confusing the public about basic struggles in the world. Some media and journalists with ideological agendas are even more dangerous and actively maintain the numbness. In Syria for example they are deft in zooming in into
some violations by rebels and zooming out of the large scale industrial killing and torture by the regime or sometimes completely omitting the regime from their writing, where you get only the story of crazed rebels fighting for mere dominance. The reader is then left with an understanding that all parties are guilty of crimes—which is factual—on a more or less equal measure, when what’s really happening in the Syrian context, for example, is that a regime is killing its own population. Not only killing but also doing so with the aid and intervention of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah fighters. Moreover, due to the lack of any structures and institutions that could stop such interventions and meddling in Syria, as well by those giving some arms or support some rebel areas, there is a real power vacuum, which allows all different sorts of entities to enter the scene. In Syria, the lack of any substantial international law and the lack of serious means to enforce anything fair to the Syrian people have created a horrific context—it’s a country that has been left to all kinds of thug to play their agendas.

It is truly sad how the perception of “otherness” clouds our solidarity with the oppressed. We don’t want to see that the ideas and even fanaticism of some people are part of the software that can be changed without these people having to die. This denial of the humanity of the “other” is not just at level of power and politics. It’s unfortunately, as I explained, what I see underlying the many intellectual arguments dealing with Syria. After all, power and politics are the reflection of an idea, as Edward Said so eloquently argued in his book, Culture and Imperialism. The way Syria has been handled, covered and understood underscores this sickly relating to the other. The lens of Islamophobia is a thick one these days, obscuring many basic facts, injustices and serious human rights violations that could be stopped.
The colonial legacy is pervasive and profound. When journalists like Fisk go to Syria, they do not care about the “natives” or the pain of their daily lives or the basic issues of human rights. These journalists become instruments of maintaining tyranny, even if they claim anti-imperialist sentiments, because ultimately the “other,” the “native” and his or her humanity has still not figured in the discourse of even those on the left or claim humanist values. The other is stripped of agency and her pain is irrelevant equally to those who support the empire or who hate the empire. This organized numbness and sustained denial cannot be functional without a great deal of effort and huge amounts of deliberate lying and “willed ignorance” to use Said’s own phrase.

4. Is there something called “Syrian nonviolence” or it is an oxymoron given the picture you describe?

In Syria the people genuinely attempted a nonviolent revolution, inspired by the rest of the region and motivated by the consequences they witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and even Yemen. However, we need to understand that nonviolent movements are not always undertaken by people who believe in nonviolence. Rather people end up using nonviolence when it works. And although it always works better than armed resistance, we need to realize that when people undertake it they usually view it as the lesser tactic and that if nonviolence doesn’t work they’d resort to violence—the ultimate tactic. In Syria, you had both. A huge number, even millions who were willing to commit to nonviolence as a tactic, and a smaller number of people who had both theoretical and practical understanding of nonviolence as the ultimate powerful tool in effecting change. So, when the Syrians saw that nonviolence was becoming too costly, there was a general belief and tendency that resorting to violence would escalate the fall of the regime and reduce the costs. Only those who understood the dynamics of nonviolence knew it would be the opposite. This is why the town of Daraya, considering its 15-year nonviolent movement prior to the revolution resisted arming for a full year. Although it eventually armed with popular pressure, the delay and the existence of a strong civic component helped create a stronger civilian leadership, a strong media office and hence creating better adherence for example, compared to other areas, to human rights norms.

However, we do need to seriously understand what’s happened in Syria, I mean for those of us who are interested in nonviolent theory and its applications and organized action on the ground. When you have an excessively brutal dictatorship which for decades has created strategic alliances regionally and internationally and which can get away with crimes against humanity and has lesser incentives to uphold any human rights standards—and this combined with a population that has been completely crushed, fragmented and deeply traumatised—how do you create a context for change? What are the practical options in such a context? How do you maximise the results and minimize costs? Considering everything, the Syrian revolution is one of the greatest examples of the human spirit. The fact that it happened against all the odds is quite astonishing. What is truly sad is that we still do not have the means to reach out to people and create nonviolent literacy and ways of empowering people with tools that would enable them to start a shift in their societies before reaching a point of eruption. People will fall into the momentum of arms when left without other alternatives. Dr. Muhammad al Ammar, a community doctor from a town near Da’araa and a nonviolent activist, once remarked that people, if left alone, would remain illiterate and yet after many years of education learn to read and become writers and scientists; and similarly, he argued, if people were left without proper understanding of the power of nonviolence and its methods they would resort to the conditioning of thousands of years and lean to dominant methods of armed resistance.
The central question for me, therefore, and which also goes beyond any ideological or ethical considerations, is a practical one: how can we achieve social and political transformation with the least cost? Tyranny is a cheap entity and I find it difficult to see Syrians pay their most precious resources and the best of their youth and so much blood to get rid of something so utterly grotesque and in substance truly cheap and ultimately an illusion.

Motaz Morad from the Daraya Media office, and a long time member in the nonviolence movement there, recently told me that the very existence of nonviolent ideas and perspectives in Syria and the attempt in the first six month to commit to nonviolence created a context for serious rethinking among many Syrians, including among fighters in the Free Syrian Army (FSA). It’s been tremendously grounding and helpful to keep in touch with people like him and others who stayed the course and remained with the people --in his case, right there in the battle areas, and a great personal cost. Several members were killed and many are in prison. He recently told me some interesting stories where FSA fighters came to him and admitted to him that the nonviolent phase had been the better option. Morad said that one time he listened to an FSA fighter, who had been extremely enthusiastic about forming the FSA in Daraya and making the logic and calculations on his own. He told Morad that they used to have 1 or 2 maximum per week (in Daraya) killed by either a sniper or a tortured body being delivered from prison, and then said to Morad that at worst between 50 and 100 would be killed a year in Daraya if they kept their earlier strategies, and also explained the huge gains politically both locally and internationally --the attendance for example of more than a dozen ambassadors in Ghayath Mattar’s wake, (one of the local activists who was tortured to death in prison) and all the other benefits of those first six month including defections from the army. He then said to Morad that now the death toll was not only several timesfold, but even beyond that, while the whole Syrian cause had been pushed back.

Mary King, in her book, The Quiet Revolution, talks about the success of nonviolence even when it fails, because of what it does on the ground, the consequences on many levels, and all that it adds to the understanding of nonviolent strategies. Syria now is unfortunately a big example of how armed resistance is fast becoming a failed option for liberation in today’s world, where arms are controlled by the very powers that broker their interests upon the blood of the oppressed. Morad said that hearing recently these conversations and calculations made him realize that even if nonviolence failed in Syria it had planted some deep questions in the minds of many people and is making them think. I’d call that a successful failure. Morad is finishing writing his book about the history of the Daraya movement, right there under the barrels. “If only the rest of Syria followed suit as Daraya which didn’t arm for the full first year,” he explained recently, “things would have been quite different.” The delay in arming helped create a civilian leadership and good media work,” he explained, even after arming, and it was due to the strong nonviolent organization of the previous phases.

So, recently I wrote to him point blank that some people in the West, including some academics, believe that Assad has been deterred by the armament of the revolution. His initial reaction was “A'oudhu Billah.” (Arabic expression for, Oh, God help!) Then he wrote, “only in the last year alone one hundred thousand Syrians were killed from the whole one hundred fifty thousand --and that's only the official number.” He also wrote, “arming is a curse, and is never a mercy upon a people especially when there is chaos and lack of organization. The only good thing is that people are now willing to really examine what happened and to rethink many things. However there are also those who are willing to sell anything to the devil to serve their own interests.” He then explained how frustrated and disappointed he was over having recently seen a field sible. I personally can’t believe that we’re
writing on computers and have all these technological tools and yet are stuck when it comes to social and political change to the tools of the French Revolution and even Spartacus, yet with far more dangerous equipment than swords and guillotines!

5. Is there any one image or story that continues to haunt you even now?

There are several things that keep coming back to me. But one of them doesn’t leave me. When I went to Syria last year, we stopped in a small town after passing Aleppo in the north. In the melancholic air before sunset and the scenes of destruction that kept increasing as we went further into the country, there were two kids on bikes. Initially I was happy to see two kids playing but when we came close and I looked into their faces I saw two elderly people looking back at me. Even when I told them about my own sons and I took photos and asked them to smile their faces couldn’t respond. There was so much destruction in the town, due to the shelling and air-raids. And their faces reflected what that town had gone through. What I didn’t realize then that these two faces were actually what I will encounter throughout our trip, especially when we attended some community events and met hundreds of children. I was happy when one kid or two wiped out their tears at the mention of their killed fathers. It assured me that something was being expressed, but these were rather the exception. Most kids had a sober stunted expression on their faces beyond their years. This haunts me. How could we live our lives in other parts of the world when millions of kids in Syria alone—not to mention many other places—are living fear and terror moment to moment, and this aside from the issue of deliberate starvation and manufactured hunger by the regime in many besieged areas. I don’t think we can afford to pretend border separations when in reality, due to the digital age and means of communication and

@Afra Jalabi
transportation, we live in a global village. In the Muslim tradition, it is reported that Muhammad said that we can’t be truly faithful if we went to bed while our neighbour was hurting or hungry. We go to be every night on this planet while many are hurting and hungry. What values do we really hold? What are our priorities? How can step out of hell into this gorgeous blue planet we inhabit? These are the questions that always haunt me.

Afra Jalabi is a Montreal-based Syrian writer. She serves on the Executive Committee of The Day After project, an international working group of Syrians representing a large spectrum of the country’s opposition engaged in an independent transition planning process, and she was a signatory to the Damascus Declaration, an umbrella group that aimed to improve human rights and create gradual change in Syria. She is a contributor to the new book The Syria Dilemma, edited by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (MIT Press).
From my bedroom in the city

I hear the sea rise toward me

and inside the sea

the far ocean singing,

sweeping its churning tides

ceaselessly ashore.

Across the Mediterranean Sea

night has fallen in Syria

where a century ago

Grandfather walked with his family

on journeys across eastern borders,

visiting from Ehden in the mountains of Lebanon.
Syria devastated
prepares for devastation,
night has fallen,

Oh bury tomorrow, and all the days after

The sea rocks the boats in the port of Marseille
and the far ocean sweeps light-struck tunnels of water
ceaselessly ashore, through the night and the day,
gulls cry from their home in the air
circling the foaming line where salt meets sand

while the bombs fall on Damascus
and all the stories ever told there
lie smoldering in the undone earth.

Tomorrow, in a thousand years, children in school will read
inaccurate chronicles of this day
and the light of heaven will shine on the silvery sea
and the inconsolable earth
As I see it now, a revolution is a result of failure, years of failure to learn and change, decades of failure that everyone is responsible for.

After years of injustice and corruption, of tyranny and persecution, the sociopolitical structure arrives at the edge, it can no longer sustain itself, the explosion takes place to dismantle the established balance of power and interests. Although the destruction may take sometime, the new balance of power and interests starts to form on the same foundations.

The core of real social change comes from changing the attitude towards problems, believing that they can be fixed, to change our understanding of the world and deal with it as something reasonable. The change that “unjust” societies have to accomplish before reforming itself is a change that cannot be achieved in a year, a decade or even a century of solid intellectual efforts, let alone a revolution to topple down a dictator.

As long as we refuse to hold ourselves responsible for the the tyranny, atrocities, and the violations of the past, we will certainly utter the same claim towards the responsibilities of the future, subsequently we will fail in taking control, will keep blaming others, and will not be able to form the chain of change, which will keep us part of the problem not the solution.

Even before the protests began in the streets of the towns and cities of Syria; I sensed a belief among Syrians that the “Assad regime cannot be overthrown without arms”. I am suggesting that this belief was one of the reasons why many people were reluctant to join the movement or support it, or joining it only after it turned violent. This belief seems very important for the stability of any dictatorship. It gives people the excuse to submit and surrender, it feeds hopelessness and enriches hypocrisy.

When the revolution started, we failed, as nonviolent activists, to convince the people to take off their masks, to stop cursing the regime indoors and cheer for its leader outdoors. We did not succeed in creating a message that people can stand up for. A message they can raise during a protest, declare during interrogation, a message that does not force them to lie. On the contrary the bars were raised too high, and the price of taking the mask off was unbearable.

Many activists, let alone ordinary people, kept their masks on, and later on the majority of them had either to run and hide or leave the country, those who stayed in the country, in regime areas, and kept their bars low were considered closer to the regime!
The widespread belief that change cannot be accomplished peacefully paved the way to invent and discover all possible tactics and tricks that facilitated the shift towards armed struggle. Even the well-known “peaceful” tactics were suitably modified in order to support the strategy of the armed resistance. The “failure” of the “peaceful” tactics was utilized to justify the urge for the armed struggle, while the failure and the disasters resulting from the armed struggle, even though it lasted for a much longer period, only paved the way for inventing surprisingly new means to keep the insurgency alive. Some of these means buried the original goals of the revolution itself, “democracy” for example. Intellectually, I consider myself to be solely responsible for the bloodbath taking place in Syria. This conviction comes from the fact that I knew beforehand how bad things could get if violence was adopted, yet I couldn’t do much about it. Nonetheless, I will not allow this to prevent me from expressing my belief that nothing can be significantly changed as long as the ideas we hold are still the same. What we seed is what we get. There are no shortcuts. No one ever woke up speaking a foreign language without studying and hard work. A “Sociopolitical Structure” that has been giving birth to and sustaining despotic regimes for centuries cannot all of a sudden speak the language of justice, freedom and democracy.

A political regime is only the top of the iceberg of a “sociopolitical structure”, neither people are from heaven nor the regime is from hell, they all are of the same planet. Nothing significant can be achieved if we succeed in flipping that iceberg over.

Nonviolent tactics can flip any tyranny, however this does not change the mechanisms that produce tyranny. Nonviolence should address ordinary people and allow them to discover their capabilities and potentials, should provide them with a small truth that they can believe in without covering it with a mask, this would convert them to responsible individuals, thereby change the mechanisms that build the sociopolitical structure.

The current bloodbath in Syria also has its structure and balances, reason is still very much immature, and has no significant influence, however the conflict will stop once its no longer sustainable, locally and internationally. Nonviolent activists are trying to stay around, the need to keep talking, working and supporting reason and democracy. We must reject violence and persecution, raise awareness and cooperation, believe that Humans are always human, they are not beasts no matter how beast-like they seem to behave.

The shame of the Syrians shames the rest of the world. The failure of the UN to take a decisive action regarding such brutal conflicts, indicates that our world is still ruled by the law of the jungle, no matter how civilized are the names we give it.

No matter how many times “humans” succeed in delaying the inevitable and hold the sociopolitical structure of the current “unjust” world together; it will eventually explode and destroy the established balance of power and interests, where we keep borrowing only to pay the interest of our debts, where 85 persons have as much money as 3.5 billion human beings. Our world is heading towards a similar Syrian edge and no one also seems to be capable of doing anything about it.

Bsher Said is an activist in the Syrian Nonviolence Movement.
Here we will explore different strategies for bringing Syria into the high school or college classroom.

**Warm-up**

As a warm-up activity, ask students to share what they already know (or think they know) about Syria. Write their responses on the board or on flip-chart paper.

**Initially simply ask the question**

“What do you know about the Syrian conflict?” and see what emerges. Follow-up questions may include:

- When did this conflict start? Why did it start?
- Who is in conflict?
- What are the goals and demands of the opposition groups?
- Why do you think the government has responded with force?
- How has the international community responded to the conflict?

**Reading**

Have students read Syria: The lost child in oversized shoes by Afra Jalabi from this issue of Emergence.

Discuss the use of nonviolence depicted in the article (the mother who protected her son, the activists like Yahya Shurbaji and Ghayath Matar). What stands out about these stories of nonviolence? Why do you think stories of nonviolence are not told in the media?

**Using images**

Afra Jalabi writes of the media coverage of Syria, “The very way Syria has been covered is worth many studies: the deliberate omissions, the obsessive focus on irrelevant details and the specific recurrent trends; all which indicate a deeply flawed relationship with the Arab world and the missing of the real and serious challenges faced by ordinary people in the region and their basic human rights and dignity as citizens of this world.” With your students, explore the way the media is covering the crisis, in particular asking questions about what is being omitted and what details are being over-emphasized.
One way to explore these omissions is through the use of images. Numerous photos from the Syria crisis have gone viral, and you can explore with your students how the crisis is being visually depicted in the news and what stories are being told.

1. (Requires computers): Have students search different news sources for the most recent images of Syria. Take an image inventory. What is being depicted? (High-level talks? Refugees? Buildings on fire in the distance? Etc.)

2. Show students the viral image from the Associated Press that depicts the situation for refugees in Syria:  
   Ask students for their initial reaction to the photo. Is it surprising? What aspect of the story does this tell? How do students feel when they look at this photo? Another way to use the photo is to simply show it (without a caption) and ask students to write a caption for it, then share their captions. Finally, share the original caption, and compare this to what the students came up with.

3. This series of images shows how images can be taken out of context and, especially in the age of social media, how art can be misinterpreted as fact. [http://www.policymic.com/articles/79359/this-photo-is-going-viral-but-you-probably-don-t-know-the-full-story-behind-it](http://www.policymic.com/articles/79359/this-photo-is-going-viral-but-you-probably-don-t-know-the-full-story-behind-it)

**Follow-up:** Have students choose one of the initial images from their search and try to imagine the larger context of the picture (what is not being depicted). As an extension, you could print the photos and have students draw what they imagine might be beyond the borders of the image’s frame.

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