

24 February - 03 March 2012 : an observation trip to Syria

By Kris Janssen - Belgium

part 1

Damascus, 25-02-2012

Friday 24th of February, the same day the so called joke of a "Friends of Syria" conference was held in Tunis, I arrived late at night in Damascus. Maybe the organizers of the "Friends of Syria" conference should realize that Syria can choose its friends for themselves. Thank you very much but the Syrians are wise enough to decide for themselves who is a friend of Syria. They don't need to be told by a bunch of opportunist thieves with blood on their hands, supported and financed by neo-colonialist powers and their regional poodles, who is a friend of Syria. As a matter of fact, not a single friend of Syria was present in Tunis as a real friend would come to Damascus to talk with the legitimate Syrian government and President to find an honest solution for the crises as Russia and China did. That said, I arrived in Damascus in the middle of the night and passed immigration and border control at Damascus International Airport swiftly without complications. If I had to believe the images I saw on local media outlets in Europe or the media companions of the so called "Friends of Syria" as al Jazeera or al Arabiya channels, I would have expected to arrive in a war zone. But nothing of that. No tanks and no guns on the road from the airport to the city. Just a normal peaceful city asleep. Ouch... you "Friends of Syria" in Tunis... that must hurt.

Next day, Saturday morning, I went out for a stroll in the beautiful historical city visiting the vibrant souks and the area around the Umayyad mosque. And yes, there he is... a policeman. Not shooting at people and butchering innocent people but a traffic cop trying to bring some order in Damascus' traffic jams during rush hour. It looks as everyone is doing their normal day task. Going to work and buying daily necessities in the shops as in every other city in the world. The only gun shot holes in the roof of the souk al Hamidiya are the ones there since May 9, 1926, when the French decided to bomb Damascus because these naughty Syrians wanted independence and build a future for themselves without foreign imperialist and colonial interference. Very naughty then and very naughty now. This is why studying history can be helpful to understand the present.

After having a delicious ice cream with pistachios I meet a good Syrian friend and we go to a cafe to drink coffee and talk. I am interested to hear what he has to say. Because, contrary to what people believe in the West, Syrians love to talk about their beloved country for the good and the bad and are not afraid about some secret service guys listening through hidden microphones or other James Bond toys. Some people in Europe do really watch too much American television shows. My friend explained that there are some incidents in some parts of the country but this is not about police and army killing people but foreign terrorists and mercenaries, smuggled in into the country, and helped by some opportunists and extremists, murdering innocent people to create chaos and anarchy. On the contrary, the army and police is doing what it can to provide safety and stability, as they should, and by doing so becomes a target themselves for these terrorists. Thousand of army and security personnel lost their life during the past year to protect the civilian population and the homeland. And behind every killed soldier or policeman there is a family losing a father and a husband.

In this same context one can seriously question the motive of using a certain terminology by the Western media when they talk about the Syrian army invading the city of Homs. Can someone explain me please how a national army can invade its own country?!? Yes, the Americans invaded Iraq. NATO invaded Libya. Saudi Arabia sent its troops into Bahrain. But how can the Syrian army invade Syria??? Or do we call neutralizing terrorists who are firing rockets with RPG's an invasion these days?

Imagine the Syrian army and police doing nothing against these gangs. Do the so called "Friends of Syria" want to create a new Afghanistan or Somalia? Or replace the Syrian parliamentary Republic with a taste of Saudi or Qatari democracy whereby Saudi Arabia don't even has a constitution because the county is the private property of the Royal family? Do they want to forward the new Libya as a role model where girls are not welcome anymore in its universities or other institutions of higher or are too afraid to go out? Are they really so naive to think that a liberal and highly developed society as Syria will ever accept such a return to the Middle ages?

What the Syrian population really want and need is a modern democratic system with corresponding institutions covering all layers of society and adapted to the needs of this and future generations. And the Syrian government has frantically been working on that. During the last twelve months the government has opened and conducted an intense dialogue with the population questioning their grievances and asking how they see and want their future society take shape and based on the outcome of this dialogue the government has ordered all state institutions to work out a model which serves these aspirations. One of the main accomplishes of this process is the creation of a draft for a new constitution. A constitution which will form the base on which a new modern democratic Syria will be build. A home for all Syrians with a multi party political system, democratic institutions, a pluralist media landscape, free elections and stressing human rights, gender equality and protection of ethnic and religious minorities . A role model for the Arab world and beyond. Could it be that certain countries in the region are not too happy with this role model and therefore want to destroy Syria to prevent that their own population will start to ask questions and hold their non-elected leaders responsible?

Sunday, 26th of February 2012 will be a historical day for Syria as this is the day the referendum will be held for this new constitution being adopted. A massive turnout can be expected with a convincing majority of voters voting in favor of the new constitution. Another finger in the eye of the "Friends of Syria" abroad who may not be that friendly at all towards this proud country and people.

part 2

Damascus, 27-02-2012

Sunday, 26th of February. A historical day for Syria and the Syrian people as today the national referendum is held in which the Syrian people can speak out in favor or against the new constitution. This new constitution is the result of a year of intense dialogue with and consultation of the Syrian population to question their grievances and needs and have a clear view of how the Syrian people see their future and which shape Syrian society should take not only for this generation but also for many generations to come. The children and grandchildren of today.

If the weather is an indication of how this historic day will present itself, the sign is positive. Leaving the hotel in the morning the sun was shining and the sky was bright and blue. On my way to the central Saba' Bahrat square I met lots of people going to and coming from the polling stations to cast their votes. Groups of young people, students, older people, families ... the whole spectrum of Syrian society. Many of them wearing T-shirts, scarfs or caps with the Syrian national flag and pictures of the President and waving flags. The joyful atmosphere is in stark contrast with the many stories brought by the powerful international media chains.

On the long and wide avenue leading to Saba' Bahrat square as well as on the square itself I see no armored vehicles, no snipers on the roofs and no armed soldiers. When I talk to some people and ask if they are aware about these silly stories circulating in the West, they laugh and make jokes. "Oh yeah, we just cleaned up the rivers of blood". "Didn't you see the police beating thousands of people?" "We would love to be paid to come here".

The square itself is packed with huge masses of people. If I was an ignorant tourist, not knowing what this day is about, I would rather think that a festival is taking place instead of a political referendum. Families and students are picnicking on the square while loud music is played through the loudspeakers. Small groups of young people are dancing and making fun. Lots of them waiving flags and singing songs. I can easily understand why a foreign tourist would think that he arrived in the middle of a festival instead of a political happening.

The famous hospitality of the Syrian people manifests itself when they notice me strolling through the crowds. Everywhere I am invited to sit down and have a chat. It strikes me how politically aware these people are. Despite the festive mood, they do realize very well that this is a historical day for Syria and the beginning of a new era for the Nation. I doubt that people in my country have the same political awareness as the Syrian people demonstrate here.

At around 2 o'clock in the afternoon a friend invites me to join him to one of the polling stations where he is to cast his vote. Upon arrival I witness a large number of people from all layers of society doing what they consider as their civic duty by exercising their democratic voting rights, something a lot of people in other countries of the region - countries who are at the forefront when criticizing Syria as crying wolfs and who are launching appeals to provide weapons to rebel groups to continue their terror campaign - can only dream of. The Saudi situation is a clear example as they don't have a constitution

because the Saudi royal family is running the country as a family business. So there is no need for a referendum according to this ruling family.

Western accusations that the only people going to the voting stations are state employees paid and forced to go there are just laughable if one sees the reality of facts.

Also at the polling station I talked to some people. And they all had one common thing to say. A message they asked me to deliver to outside world. "Please leave us alone". "Stop interfering and telling us what we have to do". "Get of our back". "We Syrians do not need the Americans, British or French to tell us how to organize our lives. We can do that ourselves".

Suddenly someone took me apart because he wanted to tell me something. And his words were wise. This is not about the government against the opposition he explained. Some people here are for the government and some people are for the opposition. And that is just fine and the way it should be. The new constitution and political landscape provides for a pluralistic political scene and sincere opposition leaders are welcome to bring their message in the Syrian media ; radio and television as well as printed media. Everyone is convinced that this is the future of Syrian politics. And that's why a large majority of the electorate is in favor of the new constitution. People who are close to the government and people who feel more for the political program of the opposition.

He explained me that the real matter is blunt terrorism. Rebels, terrorists and foreign mercenaries who are killing innocent civilians and destroying the country's infrastructure. They want to create chaos and fear and by doing so affecting the people's life in the most possible negative way. They want to Afghanise Syria not realizing that the Syrian people are well educated and proud of their country with its rich historical culture and pluralistic society where all religions and ethnicities have been living together in a peaceful way since thousands of years. This is the message he wanted me to forward. The bloodshed has no connection with being part of the political opposition or not or about democratic rights and civil liberties. The bloodshed is part of a campaign of terror and sabotage against the Syrian Nation and its people.

Impressed by the sincere popular support for the political zenith the referendum is and the wisdom showed and expressed by the Syrian people I return to my hotel realizing that whatever foreign pressure being applied on Syria, the Syrian people will overcome this difficult times by sticking to its principles and conviction that their future can only be decided by the Syrian people themselves and not by interference and imposing the will of some foreign neo-imperialist states.

part 3 : on a trip to Dar'a

Damascus, 01-03-2012

Leaving from the Samaria terminal on the outskirts of Damascus it's a two hour drive by public bus to reach the Southern city of Dar'a, near to the Jordanian border. I wanted to visit Dar'a as this was the place where the upheaval started about one year ago and some very harsh reports were published in the international press accusing the Syrian army of carrying out atrocities. As a critical writer, analyst and observer I wanted to witness the situation in Dar'a with my own eyes.

The road from Damascus to Dar'a was quite and calm. Some people had warned me that possibly I was going to see some army units and tanks stationed along this strategic road but just till the entrance of the city I couldn't see any of these. While entering the city there was a military checkpoint where the commanding officer took a quick look on the copy of my passport and less than a minute later I was back on the road. No heavy weaponry or armored vehicles in sight. The city itself was functioning normal. All shops open, lots of people on the street and the usual traffic jams.

I even visited a crowded market and had the opportunity to talk with some local ordinary people. They assured me that the city was safe now thanks to the intervention of the Syrian national army who managed to bring again peace and safety to this city whose population was the victim of terror and fear caused by terrorist gangs. Isolated incidents in the vicinity of the city do still sometimes occur but the army and police is fully capable to deal with these situations.

After walking around I visited the governor of Dar'a and had an interesting conversation with him during which he gave me a chronological narrative of events since last year. The governor was appointed in April 2011, one month after the outbreak of the problems to replace the former governor.

When the demonstrations started in Dar'a in March 2011, this was about legitimate and honest demands by ordinary people asking for reforms as we can see everywhere else in the world, including Europe and the USA. At that moment there were no terrorist attacks and the only police present in Dar'a was traffic police. The government took immediate action by meeting the demands of the demonstrators. One month after expressing their demands the governor as well as the head of police were replaced and a dialogue was opened between the government and representatives of all layers of society to resolve the problems and build a new framework of trust and cooperation. It looked as everything would be solved in a peaceful and democratic way.

But, unfortunately, soon after the start of this process of reform and dialogue, the events were hijacked by gangs, rebels and terrorist groups as they took advantage of the situation to launch their violent and vicious attacks and terrorize and threaten the civilian population. These gangs destroyed public and private property and launched a violent campaign against the civilian population and the police in which a lot of lives were lost.

These gangs consisted mainly of 3 groups ; Salafist jihadists including elements of al Qaeda, extremist branches of the Muslim Brotherhood and blunt criminal opportunist troublemakers. As Syria has never been confronted by Salafism or al Qaeda and because of the proximity of Dar'a to the Jordanian border, it became very fast crystal clear that a large scale infiltration was going on of foreign jihadists and mercenaries entering Syria through its long porous borders. The same as would happen later at other border areas of the country.

Proof of the vicious goal the armed gangs wanted to achieve was the terrorist attack on the palace of justice and the local offices of the radio & television establishment. As the Dar'a offices of Syrian radio & television are located on a hill overlooking the city, the journalists could record the violent attacks carried out by these criminals and foreign elements. When the terrorists realized this , they burned down the building, destroyed all the files and

materials and looted the place stealing the technical equipment. The employees of the local radio & television department were threatened, abused and had to run for their lives.

The same scenario happened to several police stations and public buildings. Also the palace of justice was attacked and destroyed. While burning down the building, the first sections targeted were the archives where the criminal records were held. Not by coincidence but by a well prepared operation with the purpose to destroy all files and evidence.

Concerning the role of the army. A lot of stories have been circulated in the Western media about atrocities committed by the Syrian army against the civilian population in the context of a propaganda war and psychological warfare waged against the Syrian Nation. Multiple conversations held with common people as well as officials paint another picture in total contradiction with this negative and biased reports.

When the legitimate and peaceful civil demands were expressed, there were no army units at all present in the city. And even the normal police did not carry weapons in order not to provoke or derail the situation.

It was only after the terrorists hijacked the situation and started their violent campaign that the army, at the request of the population, entered the city to restore order and provide security.

Under extreme political pressure applied upon the Syrian government by the Arab League and the international community, the government retreated the army from the city centre and the rebel gangs immediately took advantage of this vacuum to re-enter the neighborhoods and relaunch their campaign of destruction and terror.

Confronted by this critical new situation, the Syrian government had the duty and obligation to act in order to protect the civilian population which was under great suffering. The Syrian army once again intervened in a very prudent almost surgically manner to take out the terrorists while at the same time going to great length not to hurt civilians.

As a result of this operation, security has returned to Dar'a and life is back to normal now. The army has now again fully retreated from the city centre and has only taken up some stand-by positions on the access roads.

part 4 : The Hypocrisy of the War against Syria

Damascus, 03-03-2012

The Syrian Nation and people have during the last year been under a continues and ferocious attack by a coalition of arrogant imperialist centers of power helped by their Western and Arab allies who are or too corrupted by the color of money or too weak to have a voice of their own or too blinded by their overambitious and nostalgic memories of a long passed era of glory and grandeur.

Not hindered by the slightest sense of scruples or shame these aggressors attempt to sell their imposed war as a humanitarian intervention to “save” the Syrian people. How cynical can one be as their deceit is flimsy as a piece of paper. Why don't they just admit that the real goal of their assault is to destroy Syria because of its historical strategic alliance with Iran and its brotherly ties with the Hezbollah resistance in Lebanon? Doesn't the reality of Syria as a strong frontline state against the Zionist and racist State of Israel has anything to do with it? Hasn't Syria's unconditional and ceaseless support for the Arab and Palestinian cause and its position as the heart of Pan-Arabism not always been a finger in the eye of the enemies of these causes?

Let us now have a closer look into their so called noble “*humanitarian*” actions. Because of the unshakable unity and strength of the Syrian people the enemies of Syria had to resort to gangs of criminals and foreign mercenaries to spread fear and terror under the population and indiscriminately commit murder against woman, children, the elderly and other innocent civilians.

These gangs, supplied with and trained to use the most sophisticated weapons and communication equipment, attacked cowardly the Syrian national army - the defenders of the national homeland.

They destroy the infrastructure and by doing so cut or restrict access of the civilian population to basic services and utilities as electricity or fuel.

Strangling economic sanctions target the welfare of the people. Combined with psychological warfare and Machiavellian disinformation campaigns they cause the collapse of specific parts of the economy as, for example, the tourist industry affecting directly or indirectly tens of thousand of families making their living in this important economic sector.

In a brazen show of arrogance the imperialist colonizers give their regional mouthpieces a platform to shamelessly pose as defenders of democracy. How more cynical can they get than by forwarding Qatar as a representative of democracy? Or Saudi Arabia with its medieval gender conceptions who doesn't even has a constitution because this holy land is regarded as the private property of a royal family which draws its legitimacy on birthright irrespective of and untouched by any democratic reality.

While stabbing their Syrian Arab brothers and sisters in the back, obeying their Western masters at the slightest snap, where were these agents for more than half a century to defend the land of Palestine and the Palestinian people during their continues suffering under the iron fist of the Zionist occupiers?

Does a highly educated and developed society as the Syrian one needs an American flavor of democracy as we could witness after their "*humanitarian*" interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya or other parts of the world?

Shouldn't the Syrian people decide their future for themselves, independently from every form of foreign interference, by continuing their chosen path of profound political reforms constituting an example for the whole region and beyond?

Kris Janssen

Damascus

February - March 2012