

الجزيرة

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The One Fact

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When someone knows that Hitler may have had only one testicle, but she or he doesn't know about Hitler's hatred of Jews, then there ought to be something wrong.

Several people I met recently knew only one fact about Syria, which is that Bashar al-Assad belongs to a religious minority. They sure didn't know whether Syria is a monarchy or republic, or for how many decades the Assad dynasty has been ruling Syria; one of them even thought that Tripoli is the capital of Syria, but -bizarrely- they all

knew that Assad is Alawite.

Of course, they are not expected to fully comprehend the Syrian «crisis», but only knowing that al-Assad belongs to the minority Alawite sect is clearly problematic, because in the minds of those people, what's happening in Syria boils down to the following: Assad is Alawite, Syrian majority doesn't like him, hence the civil war.

We are certainly not conducting scientific research here, but if we were to investigate the reasons behind this «phenomenon», we would start by asking: how did several Western citizens, with occasional interest in international affairs, come to know only that fact about Syria? There are two possible answers to this question, one is plausible and the other is not. First, when several people happen to have the same information about a given topic, even though they are somewhat incurious about it, we can conclude that their commonly known piece of information has been repeated enough so that all of them became aware of it. In concrete terms, the few times our «samples» read or heard news about Syria, the fact that Assad is Alawite was always highlighted. The second explanation would be that all of our «samples», coincidentally, have the same queer interest in learning the religions of all presidents, or something the like.

Who is responsible?

Stating a problem is not enough to solve it. We have to pinpoint who is responsible and discuss how we can mitigate it. There are three main stakeholders in our dilemma: the journalist (or the writer), the reader and the

Syrian – particularly the Syrian expatriate living in a democratic country. Apropos the journalist's responsibility, there is little benefit in retelling the fundamental principles of journalism, among other things, truth, disclosure and allegiance to citizens. Therefore, we will only discuss the role of the reader and the Syrian.

Readers cannot be passive actors and ignore whatever seems irrational or oversimplified. For journalism to function, the public has to be involved. Disinterest and negativity cannot make the public better informed. In fact, the reader should be offended by knowing that a journalist, for whatever reason, is trying to narrow down complex topics to superficial explanations, which are somehow misleading. Moreover, this is not only a matter of self-respect, the reader bears social responsibility; a newspaper that has thousands of daily circulation, for example, is most likely read by thousands of people, thus criticizing a story written in that newspaper might influence thousands of people.

Today, more than ever, journalists are technologically approachable; therefore, writing letters to journalists and editors is an example of (potentially) influential form of online activism, in contrast to the so-called «clicktivism» such as Facebook Likes, (re)Tweets and Avaaz-like online campaigns.

As for the Syrian, the responsibility is twofold. First and foremost, the Syrian is also a reader, but unlike other readers, the Syrian is knowledgeable when it comes to stories about Syria. However, Syrians have yet to master how to address their suffering to Western people. This point is very important so we shall revisit it with some remarks

later on.

Second, Syrians living in democratic countries have an unprecedented opportunity to «practice» democracy in their countries of residence. Surely, journalism, as a democracy tool, has existed long before the Syrian revolution, but it wasn't until the eruption of the revolution that Syrians had a higher chance of being heard as they are now the center of the scene. Therefore, again, writing letters and even contributing to analyses about Syria seem just the right thing to do. **As Yassin al-Haj Saleh puts it:** «the Syrian revolution paved the way for a new genre of writing based on personal experience, rather than ready-made ideologies or doctrines». Many Syrian activists have been actively contributing their first-hand accounts to the collective memory of the Syrian revolution, and such material should be more accessible to a wider Western public, but how?

What's next?

We, Syrians, have to bear in mind that the details of the Syrian tragedy fall in the unimaginable land for European youth. We need to translate our devastating reality into terms and images that people who grew up in democracies can understand and relate to. Of course, some might argue that this invitation to alter the representation of the Syrian tragedy comprises a moral question, as one cannot come to a formula where enough said about the Syrian ordeal without including all of its horrific and unthinkable aspects. However, it seems like after 38 months of constant suffering we are allowed to put that moral question on hold and move towards a more pragmatic attitude that may help

boost the Western solidarity with us.

The famous video produced by **SOS Children's Villages Norway** is a near-perfect example of how we can address the Western public, but still it is not exactly what we should be aiming for.

Most of, if not all, the popular Western campaigns focus on fund-raising for humanitarian aid, which is severely needed, but we also severely lack solidarity from political and social movements in Western countries; the kind of solidarity that pressures Western governments for real engagement to achieve a political solution in Syria. Such human solidarity is not a fairytale, **it did happen before**, but maybe we should adapt our rhetoric to speak to a Western generation who has never lived under a dictatorship, a generation that takes freedom of speech for granted.

Finally, our struggle for freedom shall continue by creating new tactics to establish a lasting and effective human solidarity. By being critical to what is conveyed in the media, the reader and the Syrian together can set proper standards for media coverage of the Syrian revolution from which future generations can learn, hopefully.