

MORE HOPEFUL FIRAS FAYYAD

# Writing on the Wall

**In the midst of civil war, a Syrian blogger looks beyond the bloodshed.**

**O**n November 30, 2011, Firas Fayyad was at Damascus International Airport checking his luggage when Syrian intelligence agents put a bag over his head and whisked him away to prison, where he was tortured with cables, whips, sticks, batons, razors, and pipes—an array of objects he now euphemistically refers to as “tools.” He remembers the sound of suffering detainees, the smell of mold and death, the sight of blood smeared on walls and of bodies suspended in the air from swollen wrists, and of bodies on the ground, covered with lesions and sores, and starved, “absent from life.” Yet, even in this place, there were traces of hope. Messages were scribbled on the walls: “Mercy—We are brothers—We want life.” “Freedom remains.” “Love.” Fayyad says those words in and of themselves are revolutionary acts, especially in a land where, for some 40 years under former President Hafez Assad and over a decade now under his son Bashar, writing on the walls was strictly forbidden by the Syrian government. “When people started writing on walls, including in prison,” the 30-year-old Fayyad says, “it was one of the best ways to push people to think. The feeling of freedom started.”

Fayyad is behind his desk at the Istanbul, Turkey, offices of the radio station Sout Raya (Sound of the Flag). He is dressed casually in an unbuttoned, blue-and-brown flannel shirt and loose pants. With his hair pulled back in a bun, he looks like a samurai. The radio station is on the top floor of an office building in a choked but fashionable business district. Each morning, Fayyad meets with a team of Syrian journalists-turned-exiles and listens to the news from their secret network of reporters working inside war-torn Syria. The reports on this frigid January morning: Dozens killed by explosive barrels in Darayya; revolutionaries aim to breach the Yarmouk refugee camp blockade; mass starvation; an autistic boy leads his family to a new life; activists from Kafranbel use wit and art to peacefully protest violence as conflict erupts around them. In a country where extremist groups and regime forces level media centers with bombs and target journalists, there’s a vacuum of accurate information. News that is available is often stained by bias, propaganda, and outright lies. So Fayyad splices the audio clips, and—through satellite, internet, and FM frequency—broadcasts stories to Syrians desperate to know what’s happening inside their country.

Fayyad is a filmmaker, journalist, and refugee raconteur. He’s also a man born to a country that’s tearing itself apart, a bleak part of the world that calls to mind phrases like “industrial-scale torture and killings” and where 130,000 plus have perished in Syria since March 2011. Before he became one of the hundreds of thousands of refugees living in Turkey, he crossed the Syrian border under the cover of darkness, alternately sprinting and

hiding in the shadows while at risk of machine gun fire from Bashar al-Assad’s security forces. This was after he’d been tortured for producing films critical of the Assad regime. Not so long ago, Fayyad was just a kid growing up in a small village called Dadek, which drapes the hills off the highway connecting Damascus and Aleppo. In one of his earliest memories, he says, he’s looking at his village in the middle of the night, a dark mass slowly illuminated by what look like tiny fires floating in the air—villagers carrying lanterns. Fayyad’s house was the only one in the village with a TV and VCR. He absorbed his father’s love for Alfred Hitchcock and Federico Fellini movies; he borrowed the family camera, studied cinema, and became a filmmaker. Life changed when his country imploded. Fayyad remembers when Dadek was first bombed in 2012, much of it reduced to twisted metal and broken concrete. Some 500 people died. Another 500 fled, making it only half the size it once was. The tragic circumstances of war inspired him to become a journalist. Today, he is the editor-in-chief of Sout Raya, the most trusted provider of impartial news on the ongoing Syrian crisis.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Syria is the world’s most dangerous place for journalists. According to the Doha Centre for Media Freedom, at least 139 have been killed since 2011, with CPJ citing 30 more that had disappeared as of the end of 2013. Sout Raya’s reporters inside Syria file their stories using only first names, or none at all, for fear of reprisal. Almost every one of Sout Raya’s employees in Turkey and Syria has been subjected to torture, imprisonment, death threats, or arrests. Fayyad says his target audience is those who remain inside Syria, but the radio station’s programs are heard throughout the Middle East, from Jordan to the United Arab Emirates to Iraq and Lebanon.

As extremist groups and regime forces continue to tear Syria apart, Sout Raya aims to foster unity. That’s why, in addition to transmitting much-needed news about ethnic and sectarian strife, it also devotes much of its attention to culture, history, and entertainment programming. And so, even now, even as the conflict worsens, Fayyad and Sout Raya vigilantly report on the simple and beautiful aspects about Syrian society and culture: the traditional “Dabke” dance or the café that, since the revolution, has changed its name to “We Are Old Now.” “People need more than just news of death,” Fayyad says. “We dream that all of what we are doing for freedom will be achieved,” he says. “It is not an easy dream, but it is not impossible.” ●

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ACCORDING TO FOLK TRADITION, the Dabke dance originated in the Levant at a time when dirt roofs had to be compacted by stomping.

