

Revolution Reborn

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Yesterday, 25 August, the revolution flag flew high in villages, towns and cities across Syria. In Sweida, Dera'a, Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa, Hasakeh and Deir Al Zour, thousands were on the streets reviving the chants of the revolution.

Protests erupted in the south of the country a few days ago, in regime-held Sweida and Dera'a. They were triggered by the cost-of-living crisis, especially the recent increase in fuel prices as subsidies were cut. People are struggling to meet their basic needs – one of the reasons many are still fleeing the country. More than 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and half of the population are food insecure. A Syrian state employee currently earns around \$10 per month, nowhere near enough to provide for a family as basic food items spiral in price. It is the regime which has brought the country to ruin. Protests triggered by socio-economic demands soon escalated to renewed calls for Assad's downfall.

In Druze-majority Sweida the clerical establishment has voiced support for the protests, signaling a shift in a region which has previously maintained a position of neutrality through the revolution. Druze protesters sang revolutionary songs "Syria is ours, not Assad's", they chanted. They also chanted the anti-sectarian slogan "one, one, one, the Syrian people are one" and Bedouin Sunni tribesmen joined them sending a clear message of unity in spite of the regime's ongoing attempt to ferment sectarian division. One symbolic demonstration raised a revolution flag at the tomb of Sultan Prasha Al Atrash, a Druze hero of the anti-colonial struggle against the French. Syrians are once again struggling for national liberation – from a criminal regime which has no popular legitimacy.

Since 16 August more than 52 locations in the south have witnessed protests and other acts of civil disobedience. On 20 August a general strike led by public transport drivers, which also saw shops and businesses close, was widely observed. A number of regime buildings have been attacked. On Wednesday, angry protestors ransacked the local offices of the Baath Party in Sweida. In addition to deteriorating living conditions protesters also voiced their rage against rampant corruption and called for a crackdown on the drugs trade. Warlords and regime cronies have been amassing wealth and power through smuggling the amphetamine-like Captagon, which has led to a deteriorating security situation in the south.

On Friday, protests spread around the country with people taking to the streets under the banner "Friday of Accountability for Assad". In scenes reminiscent of the early days of the revolution, women and men from all different social backgrounds were calling for the fall of the regime. Many

chants and banners also demanded Assad's imperial backers – Russia and Iran – leave. Protestors in the north chanted in solidarity with their compatriots in the south. In Idlib, and Atarib in the Aleppo countryside, the flags of the Druze and Kurdish communities were raised alongside the revolution flag. And there were numerous displays of solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance. In the camp of Mashhad Ruhin in Idlib where people displaced by Assad's terror now live, the crowds gathered and chanted "the people want the fall of the regime". Children, who were not even born when Syria's revolution began, knew the words to every revolutionary song. Even members of the Alawite community, Assad's loyalist base, have been taking to social media in recent days voicing their anger at the regime which has destroyed the country.

In Sweida women led protests calling for the release of political prisoners – a key demand of all Free Syrians. More than 130,000 individuals have been detained or forcibly disappeared by the regime since 2011. Posters demanded the release of Ayman Fares, a son of Lattakia, who released a video which went viral a few days ago criticizing the regime and was arrested whilst trying to flee to Sweida. The regime deals with dissent in the only way it knows – with severe repression. In both Aleppo and Dera'a there have been reports of security forces firing on protestors with two civilians reported killed in Al-Fardous neighborhood of Aleppo city. The Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that 57 civilians have been arrested in connection with the protests over the last few days. And the bombing has not stopped. Just this morning regime and Russian warplanes targeted two schools in Idlib province – continuing their relentless campaign against civilians safe in the knowledge that the international community will fail to meaningfully respond to ongoing war crimes.

In recent days coordinated campaigns have appeared on social media with a list of demands and calls to protest. One is the 10 August Movement which, amongst other things, calls for the establishment of a transitional government in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015), an end to sectarian division, an end to foreign occupation and external intervention, the release of all detainees and the prosecution of war criminals.

These courageous women and men across the country have shown that the regime cannot bomb, starve, torture, gas and rape the Syrian people into submission. Despite everything they have been through, and in the absence of meaningful solidarity with their struggle, the dream of a free Syria is alive. The world may choose to normalize with Assad, but Free Syrians have time and again made clear they will never accept his rule.

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