

Syria's revolution behind the lines - The story of the poor and rural town of Manbij

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Manbij is a poor and rural town of some 200,000 people in north eastern Syria. The city is half an hour's drive from the border with Turkey and the vital Tishrin Dam. It sits in the agricultural hinterland of Aleppo with one of the largest mills in the region, grinding some 500 tonnes of flour a day. Control over Manbij is a strategic prize for the Syrian revolution.

The town was one of the first to free itself from the control of Bashar Assad's regime. Its poverty, and economic marginalisation, became an advantage when the peaceful revolution turned into an armed uprising. Unlike other cities, the regime did not surround Manbij with military bases.

The story of the Syrian Revolution is written into the town's tumultuous events that began before the outbreak of the Arab Spring. It is a story about the struggle to drive out Assad's forces, to put in place effective popular control, and what has become a new struggle between the revolutionary forces and Al Qaeda affiliated Islamist organisations.

In Manbij I had the chance to observe this revolution, and how ordinary people are attempting to run their town under the most difficult conditions. Much has been written on the geo-political impact of the revolution, as well as the battles inside Syria, but little is known of its day to day struggles. This is the hidden story of the revolution.

Manbij is far from the front lines, so it has not witnessed the brutal fighting in other parts of the country, but it cannot escape the revenge of the regime. Warplanes regularly attack the town's civilian infrastructure as it fears as a serious threat the development of civilian institutions that can replace the Syrian state.

The revolution is not one that is waged simply on the battlefields; it is also a political battle in which revolutionaries have to prove in practice that they can govern Syria. The regime fears these institutions as much as the revolutionary brigades.

I spoke to many leaders of the revolution, as well as ordinary people who took part in the uprising. They told me that from the first days of the revolutions they were closely following the news emerging out of Tunisia and Egypt. They began to think how the Arab Spring could be brought to Syria, with the knowledge that Bashar Assad's regime is very violent.

Many of the activists I spoke to had spent time in prison before the liberation of the city and during the round-ups in early days of peaceful protests. The regime's prisons became centres of learning.

Activists from across Syria met in the overcrowded cells; they shared their experiences and knowledge, and formed networks of contacts that would become important in building the future national and regional revolutionary organisations.

Many people who were originally from Manbij took the opportunity to return to their hometown at the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Some of them returned from countries such as Yemen, or comfortable lives in the Gulf states. Others returned from Syria's main cities. They all wanted to be part of the revolution.

Uprising

The first demonstrations were very small, as state security was omnipresent in the town. The revolutionaries would often travel to nearby villages and cities to hold protests there as conditions in Manbij were hard. The first targets of these protests were the statues and pictures of Assad and his father, as well as other symbols of the regime.

As repression across Syria became harsher, Manbij was flooded with refugees. But the spirit of revolution was very strong. In some cases families moved in with relatives in order to give up their apartments to the refugees. People shared what little food they had; everyone was reaching out and helping each other.

The revolutionaries organised "flying demonstrations" on motorbikes, and would place nails on the road to disable security forces' vehicles that gave chase. This phase lasted for almost a year during which the revolution built momentum and spread its influence into the town's many popular neighbourhoods. As the revolution across Syria developed, Manbij's small protests suddenly mushroomed, with one demonstration drawing some 10,000 people.

An underground Revolutionary Council was formed to coordinate resistance across the town and its agricultural hinterland. The council allocated areas of responsibility, such as looking after refugees, connecting with different political parties and so on. This council was selected out of the local committees, known as tansiqiyat, a network of activists that developed in different neighbourhoods at the onset of the revolution.

The council worked under difficult circumstances, with leading members assuming the names of martyrs, or people who had long left the city, during interrogations. For this reason the council members often had to keep their work secret from each other. This was an effective tactic.

During this period they formed a massive network of popular committees in all the neighbourhoods, some 53 across the city, to prepare for an armed insurrection. The Revolutionary Council had only a few rifles and machine guns, so many residents ended up protecting their neighbourhoods with sticks and knives. They were convinced that they would have to fight the security forces and the feared Shabiha death squads.

But by June 2012 the security forces simply fled, and the town declared its liberation. Some in the security forces who were not part of the repression defected, as did many of the state employees and technicians - vital for restarting production at the flour mills. That summer hundreds of similar towns and villages had the same experience, and many people felt that the regime was close to collapse.

Battles inside the revolutions

The days following liberation were full of fear as well as expectation. People were unsure what would happen; they believed there would be chaos and looting. But it was calm. The local committees were effective in protecting public institutions. After liberation the Revolutionary Council came out into the open, but its members had few skills needed to run the town. They had to learn as they went along, and make do with what was at hand. The most important task was to secure the flour mills and restart the bakeries.

The revolutionaries received little help from the outside; derisory amounts of aid came from the “official” opposition outside the country. Some public officials still received their salary from the government, but this too began to dry up. The town had to try and raise the money from a population that had little income and was living on the breadline.

One of the constant problems is maintaining the infrastructure. Often these shortages lead to tensions between different areas. There is, for example, only one truck belonging to the city of Raqqa that is capable of fixing electricity power cables.

People were reluctant to pay for water and electricity, as they had little money, while the revolutionary leaders had to try and find the cash to subsidise the price of bread - this has now begun to change, with a campaign to ask people to make a symbolic contribution.

It is true that the Revolutionary Council was underfunded, and it had little experience at first; people were blaming it for being ineffective. But in reality it was extremely challenging for the council. As these difficulties began to mount, a rival council emerged.

This council was formed by a number of committees, among them professional syndicates such as doctors, lawyers and journalists. The council also included those who felt they were not being represented by the Revolutionary Council.

The problem was that many people who worked with the rival council were not part of the revolution and they were even scared to call their body “revolutionary” because they feared the return of the regime. The rival council was playing a game, hoping to capitalise on local difficulties to snatch power from the Revolutionary Council. The revolutionaries reached for a compromise, but they refused.

The revolutionaries still had support from the FSA brigades, as well as control over the flour mill and bakeries, water treatment work and other key utilities, and when a regional gathering of councils was formed, the other liberated cities insisted that Manbij be represented by the Revolutionary Council. So their rival's power bid failed.

After several months of standoff the city formed the Trustee Council, composed of some 600 representatives -these included representatives from the tribes, the Kurdish community and others.

This wider representation gave it a legitimacy, as well as authority, to police the city as well as raise taxes. Unfortunately it is an all male organisation; this reflects the traditionalism of rural Syria, despite the active role played by women inside the revolution. Some women activists are campaigning to get representation, but they have not as yet been successful.

Corruption and the Islamists

As the uprising developed into a full-blown armed conflict, thousands of the revolutionaries rushed to join the front lines in Aleppo, Damascus and elsewhere. These Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades, known as *kataebs*, became effective in the battles against the regime. But as they left for the front other *kataebs* emerged in the town, which were usually associated with certain tribes and big families and were outside the control of the Revolutionary Council.

These became known as the “bread FSA” as they always pushed their way to the front of the bread queues. In reality they were either corrupt or outright criminal gangs, and became a severe problem. They set up checkpoints and began to extort money from locals, taxed merchants, and sometimes resorted to kidnapping.

The council had no money to pay for a local police force, or repair infrastructure damaged by regime air raids. It could not rely on the Free Army brigades as they were away at the front. Locals became frustrated at the degeneration in security, the antics of the bread FSA and the growing uncertainty.

This created deep unease, with many young people abandoning the local brigades for more Islamist organisations such as the mainstream Islamist Ahrar al-Sham, to the more hard-line Jabhat al-Nusra, and in some case the Al Qaeda affiliated organisations such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Both Islamist organisations entered Manbij to clear out the corrupt brigades, and built a reputation as incorruptible. But then they fell foul of the locals when they attempted to impose their agenda on the population.

Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra established themselves in the town. When Ahrar fighters attempted to take control of the flour mill people rose against them.

A petition was raised and signed by thousands of people, and the Trustee Council demanded they hand it back, which they did. Another point of tension emerged over the control of schools. Teachers have been attempting to get the education system back up - less than 20 percent of children have restarted school - only to find themselves having to face down these militias.

When the Al Qaeda affiliated ISIS appeared, they demanded control over the mosques, but the town and the religious establishment refused. In the end they allowed them two mosques. At one point ISIS (also known as “dawla”, Arabic for “state”) sent armed men to Friday prayers at the main mosque demanding the Imam leave and allow them to deliver the sermon.

When the imam refused they kidnapped him. This created a huge upset among the locals, and eventually ISIS had to release him. A few weeks later he was assassinated, sparking angry demonstrations and demands that ISIS be expelled from the city.

ISIS were forced to dismantle their checkpoints, and withdrew from public view, but they remain a menace, especially to journalists, activists and revolutionaries. This attempt by Islamist militias to seize control has become a severe test for the revolution, and one that is being played out across the liberated areas. These battles inside Manbij have galvanised the Revolutionary Council, and it has been able to rebuild its standing among the local population.

Realism

Despite the seeming stalemate in the war, people in Manbij remain optimistic, as well as very realistic. The revolutionary committees have been very good on a local level, but have not been able

to transform this effectively onto a regional or national level.

This is a serious weakness. I was invited to witness a regional meeting in Aleppo, where all the local councils were trying to develop effective structures, a court system and prisons, and share resources and whatever funding is available.

Although the regime has so far managed to weather the uprising, rally its base of support and raise its own militias, the people I met remained hopeful about the outcome of the revolution. This may sound surprising, as the image you get from outside Syria is not promising. On the ground people feel they are winning on many of the fronts, with the only setbacks around the city of Homs.

For many of the revolutionaries in Manbij and other areas, the pressing issue is how to effectively oppose Al Qaeda organisations. At the moment Manbij's FSA brigades are engaged in battling the regime and are reluctant to open new fronts.

But a confrontation is coming, as the local populations are becoming increasingly frustrated with attempts by these organisations to steal the revolution. Despite the destruction and hardship many people feel confident that the regime will never return to the liberated areas.

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P.S.

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