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The case of a jailed journalist: Freedom for Jihad Asa'ad Muhammad and Syria's Wretched of the Earth

Wednesday 2 November 2016, by [HASSAN Budour](#) (Date first published: 3 October 2016).

On 10 August, 2013, Syrian security forces arrested Syrian journalist and Marxist dissident Jihad Asa'ad Muhammad near Athawra Street in central Damascus. News of his arrest was confirmed by his sister Lina, a fellow Marxist and anti-regime activist forced into hiding. Jihad had been among the few revolutionary activists who remained in the Syrian capital, a deceptively quiet bubble under the strangling iron fist of the regime, despite the ominous threat of arrest hovering over his head. Soon after his arrest, a Facebook page was created that both demanded Jihad's immediate release and re-published articles he had written during and before the uprising.

There exist, according to conservative estimates, tens of thousands of Syrian civilians similarly languishing in the myriad detention centres across Syria. The vast majority of them are not well-known tech-savvy activists or writers; they do not speak a foreign language or possess social media accounts; and no-one, except for their families, will care to call for their release and will shed a tear if they die in jail. But it is precisely those - the unsung and unknown heroes and heroines of the revolution, the forgotten women and men of impoverished neighbourhoods and the marginalised countryside, and Syria's wretched of the earth - were the protagonists of Jihad Muhammad's pieces.

His pieces tell us about Massoud, the "Lionel Messi of the Syrian revolution," a 17-year-old schoolboy from one of the poorest Damascene cantons. Massoud, a top-scorer of his neighbourhood's football club, participated in demonstrations wearing Messi's shirt for FC Barcelona. Taking advantage of his Messi-like speed and diminutive size, he raised the revolutionary flag and freedom signs on rooftops, scrawled anti-regime graffiti, and constantly dodged the security forces. Massoud was arrested from his classroom and, for two months, tortured while in custody. After his release, he joined the Free Syrian Army.

Jihad also tells us about Umm Haytham, as one of thousands of Syrian women tirelessly going to jails and security branches to look for the whereabouts of their detained and forcibly disappeared sons, brothers, husbands and loved ones. They travel every day under shelling and despite checkpoints, in scorching sun and heavy rain, and put up with insulting remarks of police officers and soldiers. And they remain steadfast, buoyed with hope.

He tells us about revolutionary women from socially-conservative and patriarchal communities. Despite their frontline role in the uprising, those women are viewed with repugnance by the self-styled "feminists" and bourgeois "leftists" who claim to promote women's rights while not being able to see beyond a woman's veil and looks.

He tells us about Adnan, an Alawite soldier from the Latakia Mountains who served in Assad's army but vehemently supported the uprising. Unable to defect, he was ultimately killed in battle, prompting his bereaved mother to murmur helplessly: "Their sons are in mansions while our sons go to graves."

In addition, Jihad explores the social, economic and political roots of the Syrian uprising and its evolution into an asymmetrical militarised civil conflict, elegantly discussing the sectarian demographics and the gluttonous neo-liberalism that characterises Assad's ostensibly secular and socialist Syria.

Issues concerning social justice, class struggle, and critique of the urban bourgeoisie were focal points of Jihad's articles, coupled with themes of civil and political liberties and the struggle against tyranny.

Born in 1968 to a left-wing family in Damascus countryside, Jihad is the eldest male among nine siblings. Between 2003 and 2004, the Damascus-based Radio Sawt Asha'ab aired folktales he wrote and edited. The first major turning point in Jihad's journalistic career came in 2006 when he became Editor-in-Chief of the *Qassioun* newspaper, founded that year by the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists, an off-shot of the Syrian Communist Party. But Jihad was more than just an editor. He encouraged young Syrian writers to contribute and kept the newspaper going through the thick and thin for five years. Jihad himself wrote columns about a plethora of subjects ranging from arts and culture to state corruption, capitalism and imperialism. His vocal criticism of the government made him a target of persecution by the police state long before March 2011.

For him, the Syrian uprising lay bare several truths. The biggest of them, as Jihad puts it, is that "long gone are the times when the omnipotent, corrupt and pretentious political and corporate elite dominated their subjects. Now that people have virtually lost what gave them the little that was left for them, people no longer have anything to lose except for the chains that used to shackle them and hinder their liberation." Moreover, "He who kills his people and burns his country, its cities, patrimonies and historical citadels is not entitled to claim that he supports other peoples' struggles for freedom."

Another truth that was exposed by the Syrian revolution is that while people began to liberate themselves, the mainstream leftist elite in Syria tightened its own fetters. The communist *Qassioun* newspaper took a hostile stance towards the revolution – Jihad's column existed as the paper's sole space that truly sided with the people's demands until he left the paper and began to write independently only a few months after the revolution's outbreak. Jihad's writings got more radical and revolutionary as the uprising went on. Though his articles could fall into populism and excessive optimism occasionally, he always maintained a room for rational and critical analysis while never pontificating or pretending to know more than the revolting masses.

Jihad's ex-comrade Qadri Jamil, co-founder of *Qassioun* paper and the national Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists, would go on to become the Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs. Many of Jamil's fellow veteran Syrian communists, who for decades lectured the Syrian proletariat about revolution and liberation, now looked down with degradation and repulsion at the "rabble" causing chaos and riots. In one of his most eloquent and scathing symbolic texts, published on the first anniversary of the beginning of the uprising in Dara'a, Jihad used the shoe metaphor to describe those old "revolutionaries": A privileged bourgeois man suddenly discovered a newfound empathy with the poor so he called himself a revolutionary and started seeking a way to help the oppressed and subjugated attain their rights. He started preaching to the villagers, peasants and farmers who understood nothing from his big slogans, complex language and empty rhetorics. People visited him out of pity only when he was attacked by the police, landlords and village leaders. Ostracised, hungry, naked, and disappointed that his passionate speeches failed to "inspire the masses," the self-proclaimed "revolutionary" man sold himself out to the new affluent leaders of the village who sought to keep him in their pocket. The revolutionary man quickly began attending their bountiful feasts wearing the shoes he was gifted. With the passing of some years, he was reduced to a mere pair of shoes whose only mission is to attend meals and be worn by those who lavished him with

their charity. The metaphor used by Jihad in this article articulates the situation of many self-appointed revolutionaries not only in Syria but in the Middle East and worldwide.

In another sharp piece, Jihad Muhammad addressed the artists and intellectuals who thought they are entitled to celebrity treatment within the revolutionary movement. In April of 2011 when mass protests spread to the working-class suburb of Douma in Damascus' Eastern Ghouta, some artists, intellectuals and actors hoped to climb on the bandwagon and hire themselves as its custodians and spokespersons. Engaging the revolution as an opportunity to nurture their egos, they considered the people of Douma a worthless, ignorant mob that must be educated. To their disbelief, people in Douma did not look at them with awe. Unwilling to allow another power dictate or lecture them, the people treated them as demonstrators rather than VIP guests. Those artists would abandon the revolution when it stopped being "cool and "sexy," and when it no longer lived up to the lofty standards of their ivory towers. Jihad's letter to them succinctly and rigorously sums up the Syrian revolution:

"This uprising does not need the intellectual elite as masters and theoreticians. Rather, it is the elite who need the uprising to liberate them from their ignorance. And in order to deserve to be a part of the uprising, the elite must be ready to take classes in the Syrian streets about the art of giving, living and freedom."

Having taken inventory of Jihad's writing and of his participation on the ground, it is not surprising at all that he was eventually arrested. Perhaps some might be shocked that two and a half years into what has become a grinding military stalemate, the Syrian regime is still arresting seemingly harmless unarmed activists and writers. Certainly not all of the regime's actions are rational, but the systematic bid to arrest or kill people with free pens and loud voices is a deliberate, concerted tactic that the regime will deploy until the end.

Budour Hassan

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<https://budourhassan.wordpress.com/2013/09/27/freedom-for-jihad-and-syrias-wretched-of-the-earth/>

Telling the stories of Syria's masses

Palestinian activist Budour Hassan explains the case of a jailed Syrian journalist.

SYRIAN SECURITY forces arrested Syrian journalist and Marxist dissident Jihad Asa'ad Muhammad near Athawra Street in central Damascus on August 20. News of his arrest was confirmed by his sister Lina, a fellow Marxist and anti-regime activist forced into hiding.

Jihad had been among the few revolutionary activists who remained in the Syrian capital, a deceptively quiet bubble under the strangling iron fist of the regime, despite the ominous threat of arrest hovering over his head. Soon after his arrest, a Facebook page was created that both demanded Jihad's immediate release and republished articles he had written during and before the uprising.

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languishing in the myriad detention centers across Syria. The vast majority of them are not well known tech-savvy activists or writers; they do not speak a foreign language or possess social media accounts; and no one, except for their families, will care to call for their release or will shed a tear if they die in jail.

But it is precisely those—the unsung and unknown heroes and heroines of the revolution, the forgotten women and men of impoverished neighborhoods and the marginalized countryside, and Syria’s wretched of the earth—who were the protagonists of Jihad Muhammad’s articles.

HIS STORIES tell us about Massoud, the “Lionel Messi of the Syrian Revolution,” a 17-year-old schoolboy from one of the poorest Damascene cantons. Massoud, a top scorer on his neighborhood’s soccer team, participated in demonstrations wearing Messi’s shirt for FC Barcelona.

Taking advantage of his Messi-like speed and diminutive size, he raised the revolutionary flag and freedom signs on rooftops, scrawled anti-regime graffiti and constantly dodged the security forces. Massoud was arrested from his classroom and tortured for two months while in custody. After his release, he joined the Free Syrian Army.

Jihad also tells us about Umm Haytham, one of thousands of Syrian women tirelessly going to jails and security branches to look for the whereabouts of detained and forcibly disappeared sons, brothers, husbands and loved ones. They travel every day in defiance of shelling and checkpoints, in scorching sun and heavy rain, and put up with insulting remarks by police officers and soldiers.

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He tells us about revolutionary women from socially conservative and patriarchal communities. Despite their front-line role in the uprising, these women are viewed with repugnance by self-styled “feminists” and bourgeois “leftists” who claim to promote women’s rights while not being able to see beyond a woman’s veil and looks.

He tells us about Adnan, an Alawite soldier from the Latakia Mountains who served in Assad’s army, but vehemently supported the uprising. Unable to defect, he was ultimately killed in battle, prompting his bereaved mother to murmur helplessly: “Their sons are in mansions while our sons go to graves.”

Jihad also explores the social, economic and political roots of the Syrian uprising and its evolution into an asymmetrical militarized civil conflict. He elegantly discusses the sectarian demographics and the gluttonous neoliberalism that characterizes Assad’s ostensibly secular and socialist Syria.

Issues of social justice, class struggle and critiques of the urban bourgeoisie are focal points of Jihad’s articles, coupled with themes of civil and political liberties and the struggle against tyranny.

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But Jihad was more than just an editor. He encouraged young Syrian writers to contribute and kept the newspaper going through thick and thin for five years. Jihad himself wrote columns about a wide range of subjects, from arts and culture to state corruption, capitalism and imperialism. His vocal criticism of the government made him a target of persecution by Assad’s police state long before March 2011.

For him, the Syrian uprising laid bare several truths. The biggest of them, as Jihad put it, was:

"[L]ong gone are the times when the omnipotent, corrupt and pretentious political and corporate elite dominated their subjects. Now that people have virtually lost what gave them the little that was left for them, people no longer have anything to lose except for the chains that used to shackle them and hinder their liberation....[Moreover, he] who kills his people and burns his country, its cities, patrimonies and historical citadels is not entitled to claim that he supports other peoples' struggles for freedom."

Another truth exposed by the Syrian revolution was the stumbling of the mainstream left when people began to liberate themselves. The "communist" Qassioun newspaper took a hostile stance towards the revolution. Jihad's column served as the paper's sole voice that consistently sided with the people's demands—until he left the paper and began to write independently only a few months after the revolution's outbreak.

Jihad's writings become more radical and revolutionary as the uprising went on. Though his articles could tend towards populism and excessive optimism at times, he always maintained a commitment to rational and critical analysis without condescending or pretending to know more than the rebellious masses.

Jihad's ex-comrade Qadri Jamil, a co-founder of Qassioun and the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists, would go on to become the Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs. Many of Jamil's veteran fellow communists, who for decades lectured the Syrian proletariat about revolution and liberation, now seethed with contempt for the "rabble" causing "chaos" and "riots."

IN ONE of his most eloquent and scathing texts published on the first anniversary of the uprising's beginning in Dara'a, Jihad used the metaphor of a shoe to describe these old "revolutionaries":

"A privileged bourgeois man suddenly discovered a newfound empathy with the poor. He started calling himself a revolutionary and seeking ways to help the oppressed and subjugated to attain their rights. He started preaching to the villagers, peasants and farmers who understood nothing of his grand slogans, complex language and empty rhetoric."

People visited him out of pity only when he was attacked by police, landlords and village leaders. Ostracized, hungry, naked and disappointed that his passionate speeches failed to "inspire the masses," the self-proclaimed "revolutionary" man sold himself to the village's newly affluent leaders, who sought to keep him in their pocket.

Practically overnight, the revolutionary man began attending their bountiful feasts, wearing shoes they had given him. With the passing of some years, he was reduced to a mere pair of shoes whose only mission was to attend meals and be celebrated by those who lavished him with their charity."

Jihad used this parable to illustrate the role played by many self-appointed revolutionaries—not only in Syria, but in the Middle East and around the world.

In another incisive article, Jihad addressed the artists and intellectuals who thought they were entitled to celebrity treatment by the revolutionary movement. In April 2011, when mass protests spread to Douma, a working class suburb in eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, some artists, intellectuals and actors hoped to climb on the bandwagon and appoint themselves as its custodians and spokespersons.

Engaging the revolution as an opportunity to stroke their egos, they considered the people of Douma a worthless, ignorant mob that had to be educated. In fact, people in Douma did not regard them

with awe—to the great surprise of these artists. Instead, the people treated them as fellow demonstrators rather than VIP guests entitled to lecture them. These artists would soon abandon the revolution when it stopped being “cool” and “sexy,” and when it no longer lived up to the lofty standards of their ivory towers.

Jihad’s letter to them succinctly and rigorously summed up the Syrian revolution:

“This uprising does not need the intellectual elite as masters and theoreticians. Rather, it is the elite who need the uprising to liberate them from their ignorance. And in order to deserve to be a part of the uprising, the elite must be ready to take classes in the Syrian streets about the art of giving, living and freedom.”

Having taken inventory of Jihad’s writing and of his participation on the ground, it is not at all surprising that he was eventually arrested. Perhaps some might be shocked that two-and-a-half years into what has become a grinding military stalemate, the Syrian regime is still arresting seemingly harmless unarmed activists and writers.

Certainly not all of the regime’s actions are rational, but the systematic bid to arrest or kill people with free pens and loud voices is a deliberate, concerted tactic that the regime will deploy until the end.

Budour Hassan

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Jihad Muhammad’s supporters are asking those who back the campaign for his freedom to sign this petition at a Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/165958810268601>

We the signatories demand the immediate release of Syrian journalist and writer Jihad Asa’ad Muhammad, detained by Syrian security forces since 10 August, 2013.

Over the past two decades, Jihad has dedicated his writings to defending the rights and interests of the most disadvantaged segments in the Syrian society out of his commitment to the causes of all marginalised people. In addition, he defended the rights and interests of all Syrians in general in the face of despotism. Jihad has also championed and advocated tirelessly for all human rights, the liberation of the occupied Golan, as well as the just cause of the Palestinian people, both in his journalistic career and his personal life.

Freedom for Jihad! Freedom for all prisoners; and freedom to Syria.

* <https://socialistworker.org/2013/10/03/telling-stories-syrias-masses>

