

## Syria: The Weeping Child of Our Conscience

Written by Atef Alshaer

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ATEF ALSHAER, SEP 9 2013

We live in times in which the value of human life seems so cheap as to not raise abiding legal, let alone ethical, stakes of a concrete and consequential nature. The world watches the violence in Syria, in particular, with pathetic recklessness. With increasing bombast and arrogance the current moment gives power to stupidity, encapsulated within extreme tendencies for indefinite possessive authority, to silence the incessant cries of the weak and poor, and indeed decent people, for justice and freedom. History is littered with examples in which humanity, and its leaders — amongst the powerful nations in particular — failed its utmost basic principle to protect the sanctity of human life. While there seems to be an inbuilt violence in the very reproduction of humanity; this violence is and has always been a stain on the conscience of those who treat it with cold passivity or try to normalise its recurrence. Violence, while amenable to interpretations of various kinds, entails a spirit of negation and narrow indulgence — all at the expense of the human potential for peaceful resistance and liberationist steadfastness to which more expansive human conditions can aspire. It has never been easy to theorize violence or accept its premises, even though some strands of it are inevitable, and indeed legitimate, even if overall, lamentable. Yet, there are certain facets to violence which seize the heart with infinite sorrow and gloom, and afflict the mind with helpless wondering. This is particularly true, when deathly violence is directed towards the innocent symbols of the present and the promising seeds of the future, namely the children.

Violence tends to be intrinsic to the human pursuit of power; and it is also the brainchild of tendencies of resistance. Since the last decade in particular, violence has struck various parts of the world, spanning almost all continents, with costly and alarming examples that should awaken international and national institutions and organisations to the fact that power, as a signal concept in international relations and human inter-relations, needs to be rethought, diffused, and tamed in a way that lessens its widespread misuses and deadly consequences. In this sense, the world, as embodied within international organisations, constantly needs to remind itself of the great perils of indiscriminate violence. This should take place through diplomatic activities as well as educational, communal and practical forums and channels that limit violence and create more efficient and fair processes of accountability, in addition to more concretely making and translating ideas about peace, human coexistence and democracy. The gruesome example of Syria as well as other countries in which violence is rife are a stark reminder that violence and power need to be better conceptualised, and essentially contained theoretically and practically — and this should be part of constant intellectual, educational and diplomatic efforts worldwide. Understanding authority-invested power in its various dimensions would not fundamentally obliterate its potential violent effects; but it might (and indeed should) lessen its far greater evils, as manifest in the Syria of today. The alternatives are grim — from leaders divested of democratic values to a megalomaniac extent to destructive forces that have no regard for the life of others whatsoever.

### The Darkness of Violence

Syria has been spilling horrors and exhibiting savagery in epic proportions and at a seemingly endless pace for over two years. The use of chemical weapons is hardly surprising given the extreme violent character of the Syrian situation, which has become a hotbed for visceral hatred and ugly revenge. Syria has broken itself into bloody pieces. Even the seasoned expert, let alone the ordinary person, cannot make sense of the violence's "victims" and "victimizers". A violent state run with evidently violent creatures, now infiltrated with violent ideologies, all with violent methods that border on violent madness, are tearing each other apart to an unimaginable violent extent. The world,

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near and far to Syria, are abetting one party or another or watching the cruel spectacle or practicing the blind eye scenario — the pacification or the death of conscience. In other words, Syria is undergoing a state of nihilism on the watch of an oblivious world. Meanwhile, it is staggering to see that the powerful nations, namely the U.S, Russia, China and the European Union, and the local appendages, Saudi Arabia, Iran and others, have neither managed nor seem to be anywhere near ending the violence, establishing peace, or even creating spaces for the construction of a viable polity that at least maintains and respects the sanctity of human life and could lay the seeds for a future democracy.

The most horrendous reality in the Syrian disaster is the repeated scene of children, lying dead in their hundreds. Some are with shrouds or clothes. Others without. All are exposed to the glare of onlookers whether on the ground or through global and local televisions — while we, the silent, world, “see” but do not penetrate into the depth of what it means for children to be murdered with such impunity. These children weep salt and bitter light in our conscience as they lie dead, because of the unfettered pursuit of delusional, valueless power by adults who have lost the elemental pulse of understanding regarding the virtuous world of innocence and beauty captured in children. Children, the eternal gift of the world to itself, are not only our responsibility and obligation to protect; they are an integral part of our deepest desires to be at peace and to live in happiness with ourselves and others. Killing an adult is a severe crime, but killing and targeting children is more than a crime: it is savage barbarity that reduces the humanity of the perpetrators and renders their humanity meaningless. It is an attack on the future, on the very principle that there will be a better tomorrow, entrusted and laboured at by all for the sake of those who are now children.

The United Nations and other international agencies have confirmed that more than one million children are now refugees in the neighbouring countries to Syria, another two million are displaced inside Syria, and many others are unaccounted for. Besides those killed, there are the traumatised, the wretchedly poor and those desperately in need of help. The world seen through the eyes of the Syrian victims must be one afflicted with a selfish mentality guarded by powerful elites, who talk and talk, caution and caution, but never rise to the level of acting urgently to put an end to the suffering of all. Recently, UNICEF executive director Anthony Lake eloquently described the untenable status quo of the Syrian children, “We must all share the shame, because while we work to alleviate the suffering of those affected by this crisis, the global community has failed in its responsibility to this child... We should stop and ask ourselves how, in all conscience, we can continue to fail the children of Syria.”[1]

The failure to respond or at least to think of the children of Syria is a crime of conscience that is desperately calling out for some remedy. Humanitarian organisations can be helped by wealthy individuals, communities, universities, schools, religious places, art forums and other organisations. These actors can organise awareness campaigns, fundraising, and other activities to at least offer some inroads into alleviating the suffering of these children, and create hope, no matter how faint, for the children — and even for their suffering mothers, fathers, and siblings, whose children have been lost — that they know that they are never forgotten, nor left alone in this world, to remind them again that they are the gifts of the present and the pillars of the future. The situation in Syria, as described by United Nations officials and other organisations, requires a sustained and concerted effort that spans the extent of the globe to prioritise the needs of the children. While one can lose hope in adult warriors in pursuit of mindless power, devoid of human values and aesthetic integrity, children are an inexhaustible source of hope that must be cherished and cultivated. In these dark moments, one can only wish that the international powers and the neighbouring countries to Syria cooperate as a matter of utmost urgency to end the tragedy, stop the fighting, find ways and means to at least create a lull in the violence — no more costly and hideously mismanaged interventions such as that which has left Iraq in disarray and bleeding for more than ten years now. This happened in Europe during the First and Second World War, which witnessed tragedies of unimaginable proportion: why cannot this happen in Syria? Such a lull might create a space for productive thinking and diplomacy that at least establishes the idea that there are always better ways than the ongoing violence and destruction in Syria. The worst of human tragedies can be transcended if there is the will and the foresight on the part of those involved and others concerned to see an end to their own tragedy, from which no one stands to win. Even victory is defeat when it is so immorally cultivated and aesthetically deformed.

At the end of Sebastian Faulks’s extraordinary novel, *Birdsong*, which describes the horrors of the First World War and Britain in times of peace in the 1970s, there is an affecting scene of birth. Elizabeth, the granddaughter of the

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main character, Stephen, gives birth to John. Her partner, Robert, is draped in an authentic happiness, a sign of affirmation and continuity:

He threw up the conkers into the air in his great happiness. In the tree above him they disturbed a roosting crow, which erupted from the branches with an explosive bang of its wings, then rose up above him towards the sky, its harsh, ambiguous call coming back in long, grating waves towards the earth, to be heard by those still living.[2]

We, who are still living, must do everything possible to see (Syrian) children delivered safely to the future and living in peace and happiness. Then, our conscience can rest and feel the blessings of the world in its most innocent and beautiful symbols, the children.

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[1] See , last accessed on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

[2] Faulks, Sebastian, *Birdsong*, London: Random House/Vintage, 1993, p. 407.

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**Atef Alshaer** is a Lecturer in Arabic Language and Culture at the University of Westminster. He has several publications on the Arab world in the field of literature, language and Politics. He was educated at Birzeit University in Palestine and SOAS, University of London, where he obtained his PhD and taught for a number of years.