

The Syrian Uprising
The Problem and the Solution
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Translation of Friday sermon 6th May 2011 *

Dear brothers,

The Muslim *ummah* is experiencing a lot of difficulties and is suffering from many tribulations; the Syrian case is one example. Everyone is aware of what our country is going through, and what our people are facing in terms of oppression, killing, siege and gangs. We hear the news every morning and evening, we meet our fellow citizens, our family members and friends and we hear from them what is happening; several towns are under siege and many people are arrested, not to speak of the blasphemy against Allah ﷻ and the hatred against the people. These are images which we never wished to see and no one who loves Syria ever wished to watch. We hear of the untold stories of brutal killing and torture and arrest by suspicion.

If we are silent then the news speaks; if all people are excused for their silence, the ulema, imams and public speakers are not excused. For sure, in silence there is safety, but it is incumbent upon us to speak the truth. If the ulema and Friday speakers do not defend people's rights, who is going to do so? They are indeed the tongue of the people. Allah ﷻ says [in the Noble Qur'an]:

And remember when Allah took a covenant from the people who were given the Book to make it clear to people and not hide it. [3:187]

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

If one is asked and does not answer while he has knowledge, Allah will put in his mouth a rein of fire.

We have reached to this state because of the silence of the ulema and public speakers, and there is a reason for that silence; anyone who says a single word against the government will be called for interrogation. A few weeks ago, I had to sign a pledge for the political branch of the secret service not to tackle any political subject during Friday sermons; I say, this is part of our religious duty and is not politics.

The government is now seeking help from the ulema, and the Minister of Endowments is asking the ulema to calm people down; how can we calm people down after they have been oppressed and prevented from speaking freely for several decades? I started delivering Friday sermons in 1977 and since then and for 35 years, I have seen most speakers not being able to utter a word of criticism against the government or allowed to pinpoint corruption. People come to mosques expecting the speaker to handle the major challenges they are facing; when they, after decades, saw that Friday speakers neither met their needs nor expressed their concerns, they had to go out to the streets in demonstrations to make their demands. We should have been left to freely speak the truth as Allah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ commanded us. If we truly conveyed people's concerns and demands to the government, even if it meant changing the government or prosecuting a minister, people would not have needed to go out to the streets. This is why we are going through a crisis that has already started and is expanding; we wish for a swift end to it.

In order not to twist our words let me start by making it clear that we denounce killing innocent people whether they are soldiers, policemen, demonstrators or ordinary people. We denounce using arms while asking for freedom: our jihad is by words; jihad by arms is done only under the command of the ruler. We also condemn the killing of hundreds of demonstrators and the killing of soldiers and army officers and the mutilation of bodies; we denounce torture and all insults and humiliation of our people. However, the people are always the weakest part in this equation, and we certainly have a duty to defend them, since they did not go out but to enjoy the freedom, that their neighbours started to enjoy. They saw people in Egypt, Tunisia and even Jordan demonstrating in the streets so they wanted to do the same to claim their rights, those rights that journalists and public speakers did not voice. There is no conspiracy behind the people; the people are you and I; and if there is any conspiracy abroad, the people definitely cannot be accused of it and I will present my explanation.

Dear brothers,

Our country has been suffering with many problems in the past 40 years; I'm not going to speak of the thirty years before this new reign. I want to speak about the past ten years in which many promises of reform were issued. People see their wealth stolen, they see how some people are favoured for high posts; they see the maldistribution of wealth and how the country is falling backwards. These are internal problems; are these problems the result of a foreign conspiracy? People are suffering oppression, and their freedom is suppressed. These are internal problems; are these problems caused by a conspiracy from abroad?

What made the people's revolution erupt is a large pile-up of domestic problems. It is true that a foreign entity might try to provoke people at a certain time; someone trying to take advantage of these problems; someone who will try to seize the opportunity, but the people of this country are aware and we know as you do the people of conspiracy outside this country. I am sure that the people of this country, when asking for freedom, do not mean the freedom of the USA; when demanding democracy, they do not want the democracy of the USA; and when demanding their political rights, they certainly do not want to move from the side of resistance to the side of imperialism. Our people are at high level of political awareness and they know the barriers; therefore they cannot be accused of conspiracy. Yes, there may be some individuals here or there who try to sneak in demonstrations to distort the image of our people's revolution and change it from a peaceful revolution to a militant revolution, in order to wreak havoc on the country and incur more oppression upon people.

Dear brothers,

The problems of the past ten years could have been solved in a dialogue between the people and the government: the problem of poverty can be solved by increasing salaries, which already started; the problem of unemployment can be solved by creating job opportunities; the problem of lack of freedom can be solved by giving freedom to speakers' tongues and writers' pens; but today's problems with the government have reached a point where there is no possible solution - it has reached a point where blood is shed: how can these innocent souls be brought back to life? You can satisfy a poor person by increasing his salary; and you can make an oppressed person happy by releasing him or his relative from prison; but how can you please a person whose son was killed by a sniper; and how can we please a demonstrator who went out, unarmed, without even a T-shirt, and all of sudden a bullet hits him in his chest, turning him dead. How can we please an injured person who was taken to hospital for treatment but was instead killed on a hospital bed? How can these wounds be healed? The solution here is impossible. We feared the situation escalating to this level; and we said before, "If blood is shed, the whole scene will be different." The relationship between the people and the government in the past ten years was based on hopes while waiting for reform; but when I walk the streets and move from one house to another offering condolences, and meet people from cities like Jabla, Dera, Douma, etc. one having his neighbour killed and another having his cousin killed, and a third having his brother killed and a fourth saying his son-in-law was killed and so on: what answer can I offer? There is no doubt that the gap between the government and the people has become too large and reform now needs a miracle and needs brave decisions to be issued by the President himself; he should come out and speak to the people to compensate for what is gone and correct what is to come.

Dear brothers,

We are suffering; and the people cannot be blamed for having feudal feelings against the government; because our media is following a policy of ambiguity and distortion. The President himself said, "we want transparency" yet we have never seen this transparency at all. For instance, yesterday there was some news that "300 people in Saqba were arrested" in the news channels of the so-called "biased satellite news channels" or "the provocative channels"! Anyone listening or reading this news will be furious. No denial of this news was issued by the government's media: this news is either true or false; if it was a lie, why has government's media not issued a statement stating that it is a lie such as "according to a source in the government: no one was arrested in Saqba etc". But if some people were arrested, even if only 10 or 20, make it clear in public what their crime was and on what basis they were arrested. A government official should come out to say, "10 people were arrested in the city of Saqba under the charges of so and so". That is the transparency that may erase doubt and mistrust from the hearts of people.

If what is happening in Dera indeed is a hunt for a gang of terrorists: we heard the confessions of some of them, which, if they are true would be disgusting, as every free man should be angry at killing innocent soldiers and policemen at checkpoints. If what is happening in Dera indeed is a hunt after gangs of terrorists and "*mundaseen*", why then were the media and correspondents not allowed in to watch, film and report? The presence of cameras would help in preventing both parties from crossing the limits: it prevents the

demonstrators from crossing their limits because they now know that the world is watching, and would prevent some security people from transgression. Why were international organisations of humanitarian aid not allowed to enter Dera?

These are questions that raise doubts in the minds of people; therefore, they have every reason to get angry for the sake of Allah and for the sake of their fellow citizens: we are humans and people are humans, and we are all one family; the speaker cannot separate himself from people and even if you claim that all people are wrong, I would say, "I am with the people" as a poet put it, "I am part of the tribe Ghaziyya: I will stick to them whether they are right or wrong."

Whenever the equation is between the people and the government, the people will always be victorious; and whenever the will of the government goes against the will of the people, the will of the people will be triumphant.

Yes, some may claim that the majority of people do not care; my answer to those people who are not concerned about the blood that is shed: what are you waiting for? Are you waiting for blood to be shed in your home or in your neighbours'; if you are not bothered about the blood that is shed in Dera and Douma and the cities around us, when will you be bothered? Until now, blood has not been shed in Damascus but around it, yet, to be honest, not because of the courage of the people of Damascus, rather because of the wisdom of the people of Damascus; as we do not want chaos and we do not want bloodshed. This is why I do not wish for people to go out in demonstrations in chaos. They should be well organised. Unfortunately, to get a license for a demonstration is next to impossible as the conditions are designed so that no license is issued. However, let me tell you and the body of the government that we are under pressure to go out on a demonstration. I walk in this city and whenever I meet people, in the mornings and evenings and visit people in prosperity and people in adversity and whenever I speak to them, they say we want to go out on demonstrations; some are demanding that people in this mosque, al-Hasan, want to go on demonstrations and we should not stop them; I say that I am trying my best to make it possible and I wish that people would apply for a license at the Interior Ministry, and I will go out with you to demonstrate the following Friday or the next under the protection of the law; because we do not want chaos or anarchy, but we facing a dilemma.

I want my voice to reach the President as it seems he has good intention for reform and we thank him for this and we pray that he does it, as we want the process of reform to start soon; yet, it is clear that there are obstacles and it was a mistake to delay this process which made people frustrated and which made people go out to the streets. People could never be prevented from demonstrating no matter how many laws are enforced. I say this while I hope that police and security men respect people and treat them in the most perfect manner even if they go on demonstrations without a license; because every man possesses freedom and dignity. Having people going on demonstrations without a license is not an excuse to shed their blood, or to slap them or slander them or beat them with sticks and wound them, and does not give legitimacy to arrest them.

Why don't we have data for all prisoners? We are now in the 'information age'. Life started with the 'ice age' and moved on from one age to another; before, we were in the 'space age' and prior to that, the 'nuclear age'; now we are in the 'information age'. President Bashar al-Assad himself used to encourage this, and he was chairman for the Information Society. So why not produce data with the names of all people arrested and publish it on the internet or in newspapers - as done with the results of school exams - so everyone knows where their relative is being held and on what charges he was imprisoned?

I emphasise that not one single person should be forced to spend a night in other than his home unless a court order has been issued: the state of emergency has already been lifted; so if anyone is to be arrested it should be done only with a subpoena issued by the Public Attorney and later released in the newspapers so that it is made public such as "under a court order police arrested three people in such and such quarter under such and such charges, and they will be put on trial in two or three days; their names are so and so." People go out of their homes, especially in the outskirts, not knowing whether they will be able to return or not because of military checkpoints. People are even arrested and taken as hostages instead of others. Look at what Allah ﷻ tells us in His Holy Book, in the story of Yusuf the Prophet ﷺ, when his brothers addressed him not knowing that he was their brother:

"They said, 'O king! He has a very old father so take one of us instead of him; we find you to be a man of generosity.' He said, 'We seek refuge with Allah, we do not charge but the one with whom we found our goods, if not we would be amongst the oppressors.'"

Look at this justice. It means only the criminal is charged not anyone else instead. Only the one who committed a wrong act according to the established criminal law should be taken; not according to a made up crime such as "weakening the stature of the state"; does going out on a demonstration weaken the stature of the state? Brothers! People used to slander rulers in the past and modern days and anecdotes are related about that and there should not be and there is not in any of this, any weakening of the stature of the state.

What wrong does a person do when he is stopped at a military checkpoint and shot with live bullets and left to bleed to death while his father is being beaten and prevented from saving him, then the father is taken to prison. This is the story of Mu'tazz al-Sha'ar which is has become known to everyone. People are narrating this story everywhere. It is a story of one, yet in reality the story of tens and maybe hundreds of people: the meek and the helpless who went out on demonstrations here or there. A person goes out on a demonstration, does not commit any crime; does not kill, does not steal and does not vandalise. Why should he be arrested? Is it because he utters one word [freedom] or only walk in a demonstration? The story of Mu'tazz al-Sha'ar, his father and two brothers is story that is calling on the living conscience of every human being not only in Syria but in the whole world. I want the President to listen to these words hoping that we can call upon his compassion to release all prisoners immediately after this Friday prayer.

The first step on the way of reform is the release of all prisoners. I have not slept the past night thinking of these people in prisons, thinking of what I have to say in courtesy to these people who cannot spend the night on comfortable beds but in the basements of prisons. How can we gladly have a meal or comfortably take a nap while being indifferent to the suffering of these people?

I am calling upon the President, as we would like a solution out of this dilemma. The solution starts first and foremost by pulling the military, all tanks, armed vehicles and security forces out of the streets and inhabitants' quarters so that people can feel security and safety. People do not feel secure while tanks are surrounding them. It is true that we move freely but brothers who attend this speech and come from far areas like Daria, Saqba and Zamalka, are telling me they are stopped by military checkpoints and some cannot get out of their homes. I am not sure; maybe the President has no knowledge of this, and is not informed of this news.

If we want to put an end to this crisis and bring things somehow close to how they were - I do not claim that things will return to normal, as after blood was shed there is no way things can resume as they were with friendship and purity - first of all, the military, all tanks, armed vehicles and security forces must be pulled out of the streets to let people feel safe, with the siege being lifted. Secondly, to release all prisoners from the 1980s until our time. Thirdly, people living in exile must be allowed to return to their home country. Some people have been deprived from returning to their homes for 30 or 40 years lest being arrested. These people should be able to return as the people are one nation regardless of their doctrine or belief; whether they are salafis or sufis, or ikhwan or of any other doctrine; the government should have room to tolerate all groups as long as they do not use weapons against the government. We do not want to use force against the government but we want everyone to practice jihad by his tongue, by good words. It is the good word that can make thrones collapse; it is the good word that can make kings and rulers fall. The good word, which Allah ﷻ revealed in His Wise Book and the Messenger of Allah ﷺ brought and commanded the true ulema amongst his heirs to pronounce.

I pray that Allah ﷻ facilitate the people of Syria an easy way to get rid of this oppression so that the practice of the *deen* is allowed, and relief is given to our brothers. I pray that Allah ﷻ grant relief to every mother whose son is absent from her so that he returns to her safely. I beseech Allah ﷻ to send His Mercy upon all innocent people who died in the streets on Damascus and the cities around it whether they are policemen, soldiers or ordinary people. Last but not least, immediately after the Friday prayer, we will hold a special funeral prayer in absentia for the souls of those who died this week in Syria and in the Muslim world. May Allah ﷻ accept from us and from you all our good deeds; as He ﷻ is the All-Hearing and the One who is Close and the One who Answers. I say this while seeking the forgiveness of Allah ﷻ for me and you, and for all Muslims, so seek His forgiveness.

* Friday sermon can be viewed here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pG_tRhaP5g