

Syrian Cleric at the Heart of the Uprising

Why have Damascus and Aleppo not revolted against the Assad regime? Most analysts share one theory: the influence of Muslim scholars in these two cities. In the last few Fridays, we have witnessed a huge increase in the size and number of demonstrations. Those interviewed on the streets say it is the religious leaders who have encouraged them, and specifically, Shaykh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi. So who is this man?

To start with, Shaykh al-Yaqoubi has openly spoken out against the regime from within Syria, and from outside since he left the country two months ago. He appeared on Al-Jazeera's "Harvest of the Day", clearly stating that taking part in demonstrations is permitted under Islamic law, and incumbent, quoting the words of Prophet Muhammad (God bless him and grant him peace), "If people do not stop oppressors, God will punish them all."

The Syrian people are religious by nature and attached to their religious figures. In this regard, there is a void in the media, as only human rights activists and opposition leaders from various colours of the political spectrum have appeared. Yet the Syrian people have been waiting for a stronger voice. After all, the demonstrations are starting from mosques, particularly al-Hassan mosque in al-Maydan, a conservative quarter of Damascus, where another scholar, Shaykh Kurraym Rajeh has subtly been motivating people to demonstrate.

Al-Yaqoubi is from the heart of Damascus, from a religious family with a rich history in the service of Islam. Three of his ancestors were Imams in the Grand Omayyad Mosque, including his late father who was a highly respected scholar in the Middle East. Al-Yaqoubi has been criticising the regime since his appointment as Friday Imam and speaker in the heart of the city, a few hundred metres away from the presidential palace. His Friday sermons were popular and his audience would congregate from all around the city. His sermons attracted foreign reporters too: two articles were published about him, one in "Syria Today" and another in a Dutch newspaper.

Al-Yaqoubi became popular in Syria when he, in January 2009, refuted the country's official Mufti, Dr. Hassoun, and called for his resignation, because he had made some disrespectful comments about the Prophet of Islam (God bless him and grant him peace). Instead, al-Yaqoubi himself was dismissed from his job. Yet the Syrian people stood by him and the Government eventually reinstated him.

When the revolution started in Tunisia, and then in Egypt, he didn't remain silent. He commented, "We were preparing the Syrian people for these moments." One of his sermons was about "The Collapse of Tyrants." And when the uprising started in Damascus, he was sharp against the regime, yet wise at the same time. He asked

people to have patience until after the first speech President Assad was to deliver in Parliament, in anticipation of reform. When al-Yaqoubi saw how Assad failed to meet people's demands, and instead opted for using force against them, he began speaking out, initially delivering a sermon entitled, "Murder and Oppression in Islam;" and later on 6th of May, a powerful speech denouncing murder and torture, and defending the people's right to demonstrate.

After he left Syria, Shaykh al-Yaqoubi toured Egypt, Turkey and the UK where he continued to speak openly against the regime. He spoke to Barada TV, a Syrian opposition channel, and also to Al-Jazeera International. His interviews and sermons are now available on YouTube, and are receiving thousands of hits. Back in Syria, people are taking his words seriously.

It is a well-known fact that the Syrian regime has a history of oppression against religious institutions, placing many restrictions upon the ulema and threatening them, which is why many choose to remain silent. The Syrians have long been waiting for a religious leader that meets their aspirations.

What is different about this man is that he comes from a Sufi background with solid knowledge of theology and Islamic law, alongside a deep knowledge of the west. He doesn't belong to any political Islamic movement, rather he adheres to mainstream Sunni Islam, considered to be the 'middle path'. Therefore, he offers a unique voice, representing the concerns of the people at the grassroots, saying in his Al-Jazeera international interview, "the final word is for the people in the streets who are making the revolution."

He explains his vision, "while political movements try to struggle in the political arena, Sufis try to build harmony between the religious and the worldly which is the elixir of Islamic civilisation." He is absolutely against violence and terrorism, yet he has levelled criticism at the West and its policies in the Muslim world. So, does he want to establish an Islamic state? In a comment in one of his speeches on the internet, he says, "my goal is building a civil state where all religions are freely practiced."

Shaykh al-Yaqoubi has an ardent following around the globe, with students – many of whom are teachers and imams – spread from Tokyo to Toronto, and from Stockholm to Cape Town. He has travelled widely and speaks English fluently and was recently added to the list of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world.

When asked about his goal in this struggle, he replies in one simple but evocative statement, "to remove, by peaceful demonstrations, the oppressive, corrupt regime and build a new democratic Syria."

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