

Douma Breaks Its Silence

Author: [IWPR contributor](#)

Activist provides firsthand account of regime's crackdown on mass protests in Syrian city.

After years of repression, deteriorating socio-economic conditions and the absence of freedom, the Syrian regime's painful system of violence and arrest led the city of Douma to finally speak out. Last week was the "Friday of Pride" when the people demonstrated for freedom and in support of their fellow citizens and protesters in the town of Der'aa, where dozens have been killed by the security forces.

Douma is the heart of the Damascus governorate - its cultural, historical and administrative capital. Its residents responded to calls for demonstrations that reached them through online social networks, as well as more traditional ways of communication, particularly important here because of the strong family ties that link many residents.

We were surprised that so many people turned up, and we were surprised by the initial reaction of the regime too. Thousands of us walked through Douma after Friday prayers on March 25. We were chanting slogans in support of Syria, Der'aa and freedom. Some supporters of the regime tried to block our way, but they soon ran off, abandoning their placards featuring pictures of their president. We stepped on the placards as we continued on our march. And that's how we made our way to the municipal square which we decided to rename Freedom Square.

Once we were there, our chants started to broaden to include demands for the end of the emergency law, constitutional amendments, the release of political detainees, political freedom and for corruption to be fought. We almost lost our voices in the cheers of support. We also made a special demand, in the name of the local citizens, for the immediate release of detainees from Douma.

As the days' events escalated, we made sure to get ourselves organised. We quickly assigned committees, including one for the leadership of the demonstrations. That was especially important because many people in Douma joined us, as well as many others from neighbouring towns and cities. Protesters also joined us from Damascus, where they had been dispersed and hit with sticks.

In the meantime, the security forces made their move. Some of them came to talk to us to try and convince us to break up the sit-in, while others mingled with the protesters and took pictures. At the same time, religious leaders were sent to placate the people in the square.

But they all failed to have any effect on us. A member of parliament was then sent in to give a speech but he was soon expelled from the square to the sound of chants making it clear we had lost all confidence in any public figure.

It was then that I felt the sit-in acquiring its strength.

The security forces retreated from the square, where everything was under the protesters' control, to gather in their hundreds in a nearby plaza. In our square, people were sharing food, dancing the dabke and holding discussion sessions.

Then the leaders of the security forces returned to negotiate with us over our demands, especially the release of detainees, including four students who had been arrested on charges of writing anti-government slogans on the walls. And they were indeed released.

But, despite threats from the security forces, we insisted on not breaking up our peaceful sit-in on Freedom Square. So the regime decided to evacuate us using force. First, the street lights went out so that no one could take pictures or shoot any videos. Then they attacked after midnight, in the dark, with heavy sticks. They even chased us down the side streets and alleys.

Some of us took refuge in a nearby cafe, which was attacked and everyone in it was arrested, even the employees. Some others were hiding behind an iron door, so the police locked it and kept the demonstrators inside until the next day, when locals opened it and released the captives.

The police pursuit and arrests carried on until the early hours. Traces of blood and shattered glass were all over the streets, although the municipality cleaned everything up the next morning in an attempt to wipe away all evidence of this brutality.

Yet this day will be remembered as the time when the wall of silence was finally pulled down.

Now the city is back to a situation of precarious calm, but many have indicated that they have the desire and will to participate in any coming demonstration or sit-in. They say that they appreciated the fact that our protests were peaceful, without any attempt to destroy public or private property or to ransack the city. They also appreciated the high level of organisation and inclusivity - women were a significant presence in the demonstrations.

It's finally been proven that we cannot put our faith in any one organisation or political party or religious sect. Our belief has to lie with the people as a whole, the people who chanted "God, Syria, Freedom".

The identity of this Syrian activist has been concealed for security reasons.

Location: Syria

Topic: Protests

Focus: The Arab
Spring

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/douma-breaks-its-silence>