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A Theory of Freedom

by Ghena Almostafa

(English 1102)

What freedoms or privileges do you have in college? Have your rights sometimes been taken away at college? How could you try to change something that you think is unfair? What can you do yourself to make a difference? The flames of war burned Syria; they took my house, family, friends, and happiness away from me. My house and my school was destroyed; I lost family members, and I haven't heard anything about my close friends since then. Terrorism, racism, segregation, fascism, civil wars, violence and all forms of disputes were some of the major debated topics people have been through for a long time ago and had to deal with the outcomes. Yet, we are in the 21st century and people still suffer from these issues. Let us consider what happened over 50 years ago in this country, when African-Americans faced a long path full of racism and racial segregation as they pursued equal rights across the United States. Racial segregation in the United States was simply defined as law-enforced separation of African Americans from white Americans. Separation of colored people was by law in some states in different sectors, such as health clinics, employment, schools, bussed, and many others. Then, the civil rights movement raised with many influential leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. King was the influential civil rights leader in America who stood out for his own people. After a battle of nonviolence, negotiation, self purification, and direct action (negotiation and protesting). On the other hand, in Syria (the land of the sun), the story is not quite the same, but shares the same values. As of January 2011, the uprising began as a minor protest, in response to the revolutions seen by a number of Arab countries (known as Arab Spring). The revolutions were caused by government corruption and human rights violations. The uprisings were marked by massive demonstrations against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, clashes with police and security forces, violence, mass arrests and brutal repression, resulting in hundreds of casualties and thousands of wounded people. This revolution left behind a deteriorating economic situation of the country, destruction, a hundred thousand people were killed, and others became displaced and stripped of their identity, their birth certificates, their passports, and their possessions, and their homes. These events lead us to think what if King Jr. was still alive until today? What if he didn't write the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and wrote it from Damascus jail instead? King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" refutes the idea that oppressed people should patiently wait for freedom and for the citizens of Syria to desire freedom just as King did. People need to realize that the strength in numbers allows for nonviolent resolution to a major conflict. The approach of Martin Luther King, Jr., in his nonviolent campaign included four steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustice existed, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action; these steps will not solve the Syrian scenario.

The first step of King's nonviolent campaign is to determine whether injustice existed or not which sound like an easy step to follow, but not in Syria. In "Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau said: "All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable" (Thoreau 726) This shows that revolutions and disobedience raise when corruption and injustice exist. Even Though that the Syrian government and The Court of Cassation (the highest court of appeals) are full of corruption and injustice, the Al-Assad regime refuses to confess that. You may argue that what if the Syrian government is right and justice does exist in Syria? Well, Thoreau said: we are "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison" (Thoreau

732). The Syrian government do not just hide the truth, but also label protesters as terrorists, and they should be eliminated. How do expect them to confess their crimes, especially with the international silence? We can also see the international silence on the crimes committed in Syria is very similar to the silence of whites on the segregation and racism towards African-Americans.

Second, why is the time now? And why shouldn't Syrians wait? The war entered its 9th year, yet Syrians are still waiting. The Al-Assad regime continues the suppression of Syrians' direct action. Based on King's theory, direct action refers to demonstrations, boycotts, sit-ins, and marches. Also, "the Birmingham police force witnessed its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes ... their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail" (King 267). The reaction to peaceful demonstrations is the same in the 1960s Birmingham and today's Syria. In both cases, the police did not protect the nonviolent protesters. In the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King, Jr., said: "I have heard the word 'wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has almost always meant 'Never'" (King 258). This evidence shows that without direct actions, the word "wait!" will not yield a tangible solution to the crisis. People may argue that if civil rights were won in the self-purification workshops, it also applies to Syria. Self-purification defines as the ability to deal with extreme violence without using force in return. For instance, if the police perform physical attacks or verbal assaults, you will remain nonviolent. In addition, this important step guarantees that action will occur, that the action will remain nonviolent, and thus that it will succeed. Unfortunately, in Syria, this idea is not just about police enforcement pushing children and women, or torturing them, or even shooting randomly at innocent people. It is more of who gets the power wins. Al-Assad still uses heavy troops, and even internationally banned chemical weapons (manufactured in Syria) on innocent people, and do you expect them to wait and follow self-purification? Syrians are still waiting. Even though Syrians follow self-purification methods, the outcome is still not quite the same as the American Civil Rights Movement, nor has it succeeded in keeping the Syrian revolution nonviolent.

Lastly, the world needs to negotiate, one of King's steps, with Al-Assad for justice in Syria. In the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King, Jr., said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King Jr. 255). This shows that Syria is now a real threat for the neighboring countries, such as Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. In Birmingham, African-Americans experienced discrimination based on race. Syrians face discrimination simply if they are disloyal to Al-Assad. You and many other people may think that, "If I live in the United States, which is geographically not a neighboring country to Syria, and it is even in a different continent way far away, then why should I care or feel threatened?" Well, King also said "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (King Jr. 255). This indicates that Syria can create conflicts between the countries who do support the crimes they had committed towards they own people and the countries who do not. For example, since the Syrian civil war has started, the United States is in disagreement with Russia because of Russia's support to Syria. People may also argue that negotiation is the most nonviolent effective element in ending crisis. In fact, this would apply to the cases when both sides accept to make concessions.

In conclusion, King's and Syrian citizens' ambition was in the matter of pursuing their rights. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Jefferson 119). This evidence shows that all humans are created equal, born with their natural rights that cannot be given or taken away from them for whatever reason. I believe that we are all in this together. Nothing should threaten our freedom, deprive us from our rights. Also our right of freedom must never harm any other human being, directly or indirectly. We must respect freedom of every person in anywhere. We should all stand for justice in any part of the world. This way we ensure that our world is free of evil and injustice.

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