

## Syrian farmer hoping for his best harvest: freedom



Demonstrating in Latakia. The Assad regime allegedly paid 1,000 Syrian pounds to any thug willing to beat or shoot protesters

AFP/Getty Images

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July 4 2011 12:01AM

Four months ago, Ali Jaber Abu Hamze was a farmer in the small town of Madaya, near Damascus.

Now he is Madaya's head of the Syrian Revolution Co-ordination Union, in hiding from the Assad regime and trying to build a coherent opposition force against Damascus.

Sitting in a lemon grove near the disused farmhouse where he is in hiding, Ali Jaber told *The Times*: "We want what you have: freedom."

In his thirties, with a thick, dark beard and penetrating eyes, he expresses his deep sense of betrayal by the Local Co-ordinating Committees in Syria (LCC) who present themselves as the official opposition.

"The LCC is hijacking our cause — men like us arranged the protests around the country." Other men who face a similar predicament to Ali Jaber signalled their agreement.

His resentment towards the LCC echoes a wider concern by the West that should increasing protests trigger regime change, there is no coherent rebel movement to take over. Within Syria's broad opposition, there are many fractures and factions where groups fail to agree on basic principles. In Damascus many protesters are calling for reform, while the LCC wants regime change.

But what Ali Jaber and other opposition groups have in common is an insistence that despite the best efforts of the Syrian Government to claim otherwise, they are neither Islamists nor violent extremists.

Now a fugitive, Ali Jaber spent a year in a Syrian prison. He said: "This country runs on informants. Someone told the Government I spoke against the President."

He described how groups of 40-50 men crushes into a 5 sq m space were stripped, covered in water and given electric shocks with cattle prods. Rape, torture and beatings were common, he claimed. He said: "We are not terrorists, nor Salafiya militants, nor Islamists. We are just regular Syrian people calling for the end to this regime."

Men within Ali Jaber's group had ordinary lives before the protests began — it is made up of mechanics, teachers, engineers and students.

After the first protests in Daraa, virtually every young man was thrown into jail for questioning, Ali Jaber said. "This is what made people join the protests. When you see women and children dying at the hands of your government, you must act."

He said that the Government paid 1,000 Syrian pounds to any thug willing to beat or shoot protesters. "They are the violent ones." As we head to another town, Zabadani, it is clear the group has a well-developed network. Men jump on to motorbikes to act as scouts for the 30-minute journey between the towns.

Speeding through the night, the driver is alerted to another car following. As he waited for the car to pass, he explained that Syrian security are sophisticated, with 17 branches, but are easily recognised by the black Peugeots of the internal security, or the larger people carriers of military intelligence.

A basic farm building, on a hill overlooking the Syrian-Lebanese border region, forms the base of their Zabadani operations. Many more young men are there — all wanted by the authorities. The leader in Zabadani, showed his mangled foot, which he said guards stamped on and the fingers where his nails were pulled. Another man with diabetes said that guards ignored his pleas for insulin and let him faint before sending him to hospital, where a doctor broke a needle in his arm. "They treat us like we are nothing. But now we are going to make something of this country."

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