

# A man with balls

Syrian activist Ahmed Zaino fights for the future of his country with ping pong balls and red paint. His creative, non-violent protests drive government forces mad and bring hope to his fellow Syrians.

BY ELLEKE BAL

**O**N A SULTRY NIGHT IN OCTOBER of 2011, two young men sit on the edge of a fountain in the city center of Damascus. It's near midnight and a threatening silence hangs over the old Arab city with its narrow, mysterious streets and numerous bazaars and coffeehouses. The men speak softly with each other.

President Bashar al-Assad's security forces are present on the streets. Russia and China have just vetoed the UN Security Council resolution intended to force the Syrian government to cease violence against

DURING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR, AHMED ZAINO WROTE INSPIRING SLOGANS ON ORANGE PING PONG BALLS AND THREW THEM DOWN THE STREETS OF DAMASCUS.



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AHMED ZAINO



its citizens. State media is broadcasting nature films.

One of the men lights a cigarette. The other slowly puts his hand into his pocket and pulls out a paper packet full of colored powder. Unnoticed by anyone, he lowers it into the water of the fountain. The men stand up and walk away.

That night, the fountains in Damascus slowly turn red. When the sun rises and the citizens wake, they see water the color of blood flowing in their fountains. Heated discussions erupt on the streets. Drivers secretly film the fountains as they pass. These films show up on YouTube.

That morning, Ahmed Zaino, a 27-year-old architect, sleeps late after his nighttime adventure. But the moment he steps out his door, people in the street rush to tell him: “Did you hear what they did? The fountains are red! Everyone’s talking about it!” Later that day, he hears how the soldiers of Assad’s security forces hustled to shut the fountains down. It takes them a week to replace the colored water.

Two years later, Zaino still smiles when

he talks about it. He speaks with great excitement about the time he and a friend tossed orange ping pong balls with *Hurriyah!* (“freedom”) written on them down the streets of Damascus, and how the men in uniform, carrying rifles, ran after the bouncing balls to collect them. “If you don’t want to speak with weapons, you must speak a different language,” he says.

With a small group of friends, Zaino formed a brave and ingenious non-violent resistance movement in Syria in 2011 and 2012. More than once they managed to mislead the army with humor and to offer the Syrians strength and a sense of hope that change might come. For months, they kept up the campaign. They demonstrated daily, hid speakers in trees from which anti-regime speeches sounded, filmed demonstrations which they then played back in public spaces, released balloons with notes carrying messages of encouragement and met up on the rooftops of Damascus at night, shouting “Freedom for Syria!” hour after hour.

For the first time, Zaino tells his extraordinary story to *The Intelligent Optimist*.

It’s an important tale of courageous choices made by young people like himself, a story that deserves to be part of the history of the tragic civil war in Syria.

Ahmed Zaino is a shy young man with big, dark eyes. During our conversation, he occasionally shares his passionate dreams for Syria, but he also often stares sadly off into the distance. When he talks about the friends he lost in the war, his sadness is palpable. Zaino, who trained to be an architect at the Al-Baath University in Homs, now lives in a tiny apartment in Paris. He fled Syria in the summer of 2012 after the head of the security forces told him directly, “Don’t ever return to Syria or I’ll kill you.”

How had it come to that?

Zaino can still recall the first time he went out onto the streets of Damascus. It was March of 2011, and the Arab Spring was spreading. A portion of the Syrian people rose up to protest against Bashar al-Assad’s government and almost five decades of family and Ba’ath party rule. “Nobody could call out slogans because everyone was crying with joy. I was very emotional too

because I thought: *Finally, we can build a new Syria,*” Zaino says.

Already during those early demonstrations, the police would forcibly disperse the crowds. Hundreds of protesters were killed. Police became more and more aggressive the longer the protests continued; they started torturing and killing people.

Zaino could see that many of his friends wanted to fight too. “I told them, *Guys, whatever happens, we must try to use a different language. We know the regime will keep shooting and bombing us. People will die, but if we start shooting back, more people will get killed.*”

His words proved prophetic. In the fall, the demonstrators formed the Free Syrian Army. The conflict grew grim as they carried out armed attacks against military posts and gas pipelines. It was the beginning of a long, drawn-out civil war. At least 120,000 people have been killed, mostly citizens, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. More than 2.5 million people have fled the country. According to the Netherlands Refugee Foundation, approximately a third—7 million people—are dependent on humanitarian aid.

**NON-VIOLENT PROTEST MOVEMENTS** often play a bigger role in conflicts than we realize, such as in Syria. This is clearly shown in the work of political scientist Erica Chenoweth, a professor who studies international relations and civil resistance at both the University of Denver and the University of Oslo. She studied 323 non-violent and violent protest movements that occurred between 1900 and 2006 and concluded that non-violent protest is twice as effective as violent protest. She wrote a book about it called *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*.

“I can’t say the war wouldn’t have happened if resistance had remained non-violent,” Chenoweth says, “but based on our data, the nonviolent resistance had a much better chance of succeeding than armed resistance.”

To gain a better understanding of why Ahmed Zaino’s actions were so important, try to imagine the situation in Damascus in the fall of 2011, Chenoweth continues. “People were scared and confused. They heard

all sorts of rhetoric from the regime and didn’t know who they could believe. Then you suddenly see the fountains running red, you start to ask yourself what’s going on. You see other signs of resistance and suddenly you are prepared to take the risky step of supporting the opposition because you know you’re not alone.”

Zaino becomes emotional when he considers the effects of his actions. “My friends told me I was being naive, and I understood that.” He also knew of the handful of civilian deaths in the cities of Al-Rastan and Houla, reason enough for his friends to take up arms and take to the streets in anger. But then he adds firmly, “I can’t speak with a weapon.”

Still, Zaino wanted to do more. First he mounted simple demonstrations, but that became more and more dangerous as the army grew stronger and started to use tear gas. Zaino explains that he saw a YouTube video of how to make a gas mask out of cola cans filled with charcoal. Together with a group of friends, he decided they could make 300 of these masks to give to demonstrators so they could wear them and stay out longer.

Months passed, and the war kept getting worse. Zaino wanted to reach more people, “to let them know that there were ordinary Syrians who didn’t want to fight,” he says. A girlfriend gave him a copy of a book by American psychologist Gene Sharp called *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, which lists 198 methods of nonviolent protest. Zaino and his friends started to explore new actions.

In a deserted office, they collected 80 megaphones, to which they taped an amplifier, a speaker, an alarm clock and a radio. Then they hid them all over Damascus. One dark night in December, the city was startled awake by loud music in the streets: an old song about mother Syria, forbidden during Assad’s reign. After the song, there was a speech by Zaino, in which he said, “We are the people! It’s not necessary that people die! We must stop killing each other!”

The reaction was overwhelming. People came outside with tears in their eyes. Laughing, Zaino tells how a number of soldiers had to cut down trees in an effort to disable the megaphones quickly.

Zaino himself didn’t experience this action; he’d been arrested the previous day. Much to his amazement, he was let go. He

PHOTOGRAPH: MANU BRABO/AP IMAGES

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ERICA CHENOWETH,  
POLITICAL SCIENTIST

would have to be more careful, he decided, but along with four friends, he continued to work with other non-violent activists in Damascus, including a group of young people who glued shut all the doors to a government building so no one could go in or out.

There were also larger demonstrations. Hundreds of youth helped release balloons with cards attached carrying messages of hope for the Syrian people. And there was an encore to the ping pong ball stunt: Zaino bought a whole shipment of ping pong balls and wrote messages on them such as “Freedom!” or “You and I, still brothers,” aimed at persuading soldiers of the government army to switch sides. Zaino and fellow activists threw these balls down the roads around Assad’s palace and ran to safe hiding places.

But the non-violent resistance remained too small, according to Erica Chenoweth. Successful resistance movements involved

more people. The threshold for participation in non-violent action is often lower than the threshold for taking up arms, which is how she explains the success of non-violent resistance. But in Syria, that proved difficult due to a rapidly escalating level of violence over a mere nine months. “According to data,” says Chenoweth, “for an average non-violent campaign to be successful, it must run for a least two and a half years.”

After Zaino was arrested for a second time, tortured and threatened with death, he fled to France by way of Jordan. He’s deeply unhappy there, he says. He has applied for asylum and can’t travel outside of the European Union until he has a visa. He would much rather help in the refugee camps along the Syrian borders, which he currently does from afar. He also works as an advisor for the charity Besmet Amal, for which he raises funds in France. Using crowd-funding, he managed to get a satellite tower and a bakery built in the Syrian village of Ma’arra al-Numan.

Chenoweth says that non-violent civilian movements still have a large role to play in Syria. “They can make the situation safer and create a better life for Syrians by offering food, objective information dissemination and medical aid. Those too are important non-violent contributions.”

Even though Zaino and his friends didn’t win their non-violent battle, they did provide a crucial element to the story of the war that’s raging in Syria, says Chenoweth. She calls it “cognitive freedom”—the freedom that takes place when people suddenly realize that they’re not victims of a political situation but have a choice to think differently about the current regime and can take action to safeguard their freedom.

The most powerful engagement leveraged by Zaino and his friends revolved around humor, says Chenoweth. “Through their actions, people realized that their perceptions of the regime might just be based on lies. This gave people a sense of confidence in the role they could play in the resistance movement.” She adds, “I think many people had their opinions changed by the non-violent resistance, and that may well be the most important form of freedom.” ■

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ELLEKE BAL *wonders what she might do in a time of war.*

## Framework

**AHMED ZAINO IS ONE OF THE ACTIVISTS FEATURED IN THE DOCUMENTARY *Everyday Rebellion*.** This film, recently shown at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, deals with the worldwide rise in non-violent protests. The filmmakers followed, among others, the now famous Yes Men, the activists of the Arab Spring and the topless provocateurs known as FEMEN who are protesting the patriarchal society in the Ukraine.

*Everyday Rebellion* was made by Arman and Arash Riahi, Iranian brothers who grew up in Austria. They started filming during the wave of protests in the country of their birth around the time of the elections in 2009. They were inspired by the activists who opposed economic and social inequality and practiced non-violent resistance during wars. While filming, the brothers heard about the underground movement in Syria, where the situation had already turned grim.

The brothers were immediately excited about Ahmed Zaino. “We didn’t think non-violent resistance had had enough time to develop in Syria,” says Arash, “until we met Ahmed and his friends.” Arman adds: “Remember, there will always be people who don’t just see a hopeless situation. People like Ahmed have an infallible sense of injustice. They try to do something about it, even while the bullets fly around them. You have to be really strong to do that—and above all, creative. If there wasn’t a war on, these people would probably be artists.”

The Riahis are hard at work on a website, [everydayrebellion.com](http://everydayrebellion.com), where they want to create an online meeting place for non-violent activists. On the site, they list methods and guidelines for non-violent resistance and post interviews with activists and experts as well as scientific articles by political scientist Erica Chenoweth about non-violent resistance. | E.B.