



*“They tried to bury us,
but they didn’t know we were SEEDS”*

- a report on the 15th Garden,
a cross-border movement for food sovereignty in Syria

Report on presentation “15th Garden” by Ansar Jasim. Reclaim the Seeds workshop, March 2017. Summary by: Elske Hageraats.

Ansar Jasim shared with us her story about the the 15th Garden, a beautiful, inspiring project for food sovereignty in Syria, where people show their strength via self-organization in a country in war. *“In order to understand this project, we have to understand what is happening in Syria”.*

Ansar showed a map of Syria – not one with occupied areas, which we always see in the news – but with colours, and agricultural produce. Syria is in war, but the life goes on. We were the first to watch the latest movie *المعركة أرض* - *Field of Battle* by ([abou naddara](#)) where we see farmers continuing their everyday work on the field, with the sounds of war – bombs and gunshots – close by. *“They have to, because they are the ones who feed the people. If they stop farming, their community has no food.”* Ansar explains how food is used as a weapon. But, as always, there is resistance from the people. She shows a picture from the south of Damascus which states: *“One day we will blast the soil open with flowers. The Revolution continues.”*

In 2011, the uprising started in the countryside. On the 15th of march there was a demonstration in Damascus in solidarity with the people in Egypt. On the 18th of March, there were also demonstrations in the south. People were angry at the police. Children had sprayed graffiti on the walls of their schools with sentences they’d seen in Egypt. These children were taken away, tortured. Their parents protested and screamed hopelessly, but the governor told them: *“Go home, and make new children.”* The children were never seen again..

Since the 1990s, Syria had become more and more liberal. There was a dictatorship with neo-liberal policies that aligned with the bourgeoisie elites of the country. People had free house insurance, free school etc. but no political rights whatsoever. Yet, Syria was food sovereign. Up until 2011, agriculture was the most important pillar of the economy with 27% of the

GDP (in comparison with the industry, only 7% of the GDP). Before 2011, roughly 37% of the country was used for agriculture.

But after the uprising in the countryside in 2011, everything changed. Food is then used as weapon to control the people. The army of Assad wrote on the walls “*Starve or go down on your knees*”. They started to undertake all kinds of methods to starve people and make them surrender. Food is used as weapon in various ways:

- * bakeries are bombed
- * people in prison are starved
- * fields are burned, right before harvest time
- * seed banks are bombed, which makes many varieties, adapted to that specific climate over thousands of years, lost for ever.
- * agricultural fields around Kobani are mined
- * fruit trees are cut and burned
- * urban and rural communities are sieged
- * ‘policy of scorched earth’: the army goes to an area, burns the soil and forbids access to the area.

In this way, farmers have been pushed to the cities more and more. They are unable to leave the city, and so they have no other option than to start urban city farms, often on a roof. “*If you’re lucky, you have a taller building next to you, so you are protected by gunfire.*” Syrians are proud people. “*They don’t want to be objects of development aid – they want to be in charge of their own lives: that is food sovereignty.*” People exchange their car for a kilo of rice. They do anything to obtain seeds, which they can sow in their (urban) gardens. These seeds have to be open pollinated seeds, so that the people can save more seeds for the next planting period.

That is how the 15th Garden started. While the news is extensively covering the international refugee crisis, there is less attention to the people who remain in Syria, many of whom are living under siege. With their cities under attack, it can be extremely difficult to get basic necessities, like food and fresh produce. That’s why an activist named [Abdallah Al Shaar](#) started an extensive urban farming project across besieged cities throughout Syria.

His project, called the 15th Garden, named after the day the revolution against Assad began, the 15th of March, 2011, is bringing life and vivacity back to these war-torn cities across Syria. The 15th Garden helps locals start gardens in empty lots, teaching them skills, and provides assistance to existing urban farms. Two main goals of 15th Garden is to get food to those trapped in cities while raising awareness about food sovereignty.



One major obstacle has been the acquisition of seeds to get this all started. A network of German farms provided heritage seeds and money to Syrian farmers, sending the seeds through Lebanon and crossing the border. Because of blockades, activists risk their lives to get these seeds to the country. Ansar: “*It’s beautiful to see the creativity of people, their passion, their will to make it work, and they manage!*” Currently, the 15th Garden is also thinking on setting up ways to teach farmers to make and repair their own technologies.

Boerengroep will connect them to Atelier Paysan in France, and to several farmers movements who are building up a similar project in post-war Colombia.

If you want to **support The 15th Garden** by ...

- ... donating seeds
 - ... initiating a garden together with refugees
 - ... inviting refugees to your agricultural activity
 - ... sharing your agricultural knowledge with Syrian farmers and learning from them as well
- or if you want to be kept updated – please send an email to 15thgarden@riseup.net

You can also **donate** to:

Bassateen e.V.

IBAN: DE27 4306 0967 1182 7353 00 / BIC: GENODEM1GLS / GLS Bank

(It is a German bank account. So it could be the case that there will be charges for international charges. Please check this with your bank!)

