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# PERSPECTIVES

Political analysis and commentary from the Middle East



## SYRIA'S REVOLUTION SOCIETY, POWER, IDEOLOGY

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The graffiti on the cover makes reference to an old Arab poem. It reads: 2011 - People Wanted Life. 2012 - Destiny will respond. Free Syria

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# Contents

<b>Editorial</b>	<b>5</b>
■ Syria: The Current Situation and Possible Solutions <i>Hassân Abbas</i>	<b>7</b>
■ From the Kingdom of Assad to the Third Republic <i>Yassin al-Haj Saleh</i>	<b>12</b>
■ The Syrian Revolution is an Experiment in the Creation of a People <i>Interview with Yassin al-Haj Saleh</i>	<b>20</b>
■ No End in Sight to Syria's Economic Woes <i>Jihad Yazigi</i>	<b>24</b>
■ The Syrian Revolution and the Role of Turkey <i>Bakr Sidki</i>	<b>28</b>
■ The Crisis of the Politics of Mumana'ah <i>Fawwaz Traboulsi</i>	<b>33</b>
■ Dictatorship, Military Intervention, and False Binaries in Syria <i>Bassam Haddad</i>	<b>36</b>
■ The Syrian Revolution and the New Constitutional Values <i>Abdulhay Sayed</i>	<b>42</b>
■ Is it Winter or Spring for Christians in Syria? <i>Doreen Khoury</i>	<b>48</b>
■ The Assad Regime Controlling Information and the Contradictory Image <i>Mustafa Haid</i>	<b>53</b>
■ The Revolution as Model and the Image of Tahrir Square... Syrians are Paying a Double Price <i>Mohammad Al Attar</i>	<b>58</b>
■ Militarization, Violence and the Revolution <i>Yassin al-Haj Saleh</i>	<b>66</b>



# Editorial


It is almost a year ago that Syrian citizens, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, courageously took to the streets in protest against the decades-long denial of their basic rights by the Assad regime. The revolution signaled the return of politics to Syria, and the re-emergence of the famed Syrian criticism, satire and wit. The public sphere, long out of bounds to ordinary citizens, has been reclaimed with a vengeance, as Syrians impose their presence on streets and squares, and regain control of their lives.

But they are paying a heavy price for freedom. Thousands have lost their lives, remain in detention, or have been forced into exile. Daily crackdowns on protesters did not stop during the six month presence of Arab observers, who finally withdrew on January 28, 2012.

Most observers agree that the regime's days are numbered. But it remains resilient, and the question is how long it will be allowed to prolong the conflict and inflict further damage on citizens, the national economy, and the country's social structures. While the regime's power appears to be gradually disintegrating, there is not enough information on the scale of internal divisions to forecast the tipping point. For the first time, it is abandoning its narrative that "everything is under control" and admits that it has lost its grip on parts of the countryside and provincial towns. However it seems to be willing to absorb some losses so as to focus its military actions on securing strategic locations elsewhere. Until now, there are no defections of entire military regiments of the army, and security agencies remain cohesive. The army still has the ability to retake 'liberated' areas and, probably due to international media attention, has not resorted to other military means at its disposal, such as the air-force.

'Syria is not only Syria' is a mantra that has surfaced repeatedly in debates in the Arab media, reflecting the sharp ideological divide on whether with the Syrian regime the last supposed Arab 'bulwark against imperialism' will crumble. While the regime's demise is expected to reverberate widely, regional and international players enjoy only limited leverage. Most Western governments have abandoned calls for reform and now favor regime change, hoping that this will also weaken Hizbullah and Iran. In the meantime, the regime wagers on the support of Russia and China to help ease international pressure amidst political isolation and an increasingly dismal economic situation. Neither the Syrian opposition groupings, the Arab League, nor regional powers such as Turkey seem to be able to chart an effective roadmap that meets international agreement.

As time passes, despair is growing and peaceful solutions are becoming less likely. A collapse of the regime is not imminent and much will depend on a negotiated transition that could prevent the country from descending into a protracted war. After the UN Security Council failed to pass even a watered-down resolution for a political transition that excludes military intervention and punitive measures, Syrians are now convinced that they are left to their own devices. Heightened confrontations during the past weeks indicate that the stalemate is gradually pushing the essentially civil uprising over the brink into an armed struggle. The main locations of the uprising are the provinces and urban suburbs, where militarization could contribute to the growth of local factionalism. The protest movement is trying its best to fend off communal tensions but sectarian conflict is likely if the regime decides that this is its only option to hang on to power.



For the first time, Syria has made it into the daily headlines, with plenty of analysis. Yet, few understand its diverse and complex social makeup, or its seemingly contradictory relations with regional states and sub-state actors. Syria as a topic for research has long been marginalized in cultural, social, and political studies.

The Syrian authors who contributed to this issue of Perspectives Middle East, despite facing obstacles at home, expressed a concern for “helping foreigners understand the Syrian

people”. Syrians, whether they are in the country or in exile, are living moments that are marked by both high hopes and deep agony. We wish to cordially thank the authors for their effort and time.

**Layla Al-Zubaidi**

**Director**

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# Syria: The Current Situation and Possible Solutions

Ten months ago the peaceful uprising began; three hundred and fifty days, more or less, during which 6,000 people have been killed at a rate of twenty per day and over 100,000 citizens have been arrested or detained. Ten months, while the regime continues to kill citizens its repressive tactics have reached a pitch of savagery unparalleled in the recent history of the Arab world and have led the country down a dark narrow tunnel, destined for the abyss.

The situation in Syria today has a number of characteristics that need to be taken into consideration when studying the dynamics of the uprising, both now and in the future. These include:

## 1. The Grassroots Nature of the Popular Movement

With every day that passes the uprising establishes itself more deeply and extends itself more widely in Syria. In hotspots such as Homs, Hama, Deraa and the Damascus hinterland it has won over the majority of inhabitants. In places where a few months ago only a handful of demonstrators assembled in short-lived protests, tens of thousands are now participating in rallies and sit-ins which last many hours. What is certain is that fear of repression – which on many occasions has reached the point of outright murder – is the only factor that has prevented million-strong rallies being held in major cities.

Not only does the uprising have strong roots in traditional centers of resistance, but we have also witnessed the spread of its geographical footprint. In the first months of the movement, there were no more than a handful of demonstrations in Deraa, Homs and Latakia,

whereas by the last Friday of 2011—the second Friday of the uprising's tenth month—a total of 425 demonstrations took place, throughout the length and breadth of the country.

Not only does the uprising have strong roots in traditional centers of resistance, but we have also witnessed the spread of its geographical footprint.

It is worth mentioning that the established nature of the popular movement is not a claim based purely on the physical size and frequency of the demonstrations, but has a spiritual and ethical dimension manifested in the heroic courage displayed by ordinary citizens, who continue to take to the streets despite the very real threat to their safety. It can also be seen in the revolutionary spirit that has crept into many intangible aspects of daily life: songs, music, movies, dance and satirical jokes. The Syrian revolution has imbued the arts with a genuine revolutionary legacy never before seen in Arab societies, with the exception of that created by the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

## 2. The Regime's Cohesion

Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian army has not stood on the sidelines. Almost without exception, the armed forces have remained obedient to the regime, as have the security forces and the secret police, and any attempt to split from the regime and state authorities has been met with a heavy-handed response. As a result we are yet to see anything comparable with the

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situation in Libya, where several important regime elements declared that they had broken with the regime, hinting at the fragility behind the outward show of solidity that it promoted in the media.

Due to its careful management of the country's ethnic and sectarian make-up, the regime has created a despotic administration based not on the principle of all citizens being equal before the law, but rather, on grading Syrians according to their loyalty.

We should point out that for socio-historical reasons the army's loyalty was never in doubt. This loyalty can only be understood in the context of the regime's security policy, as practiced against both society and the state apparatus itself. Witness statements by army deserters confirm that the overwhelming majority of those killed from army ranks were soldiers and officers executed in the field either for refusing to open fire on civilians or for attempting to flee clashes with demonstrators. It is also pertinent to mention the official decrees issued in late 2011 that banned all senior government employees, including all former and present ambassadors, ministers and members of parliament, from leaving Syria without first obtaining special permission from the security services.

Due to its careful management of the country's ethnic and sectarian make-up, the regime has created a despotic administration based not on the principle of all citizens being equal before the law, but rather, on grading Syrians according to their loyalty. One effect of this has been the development of communities with virulently pro-regime loyalties. These communities in no way belong to the socio-economic class from which the regime draws its cadres (since the regime perpetuates itself from within the state agencies), but are instead social formations deliberately nurtured by the regime as an anti-society, a

buffer community to protect itself from attack. These communities are an organic extension of the regime and their survival is inextricably bound up with that of the state. By protecting the regime from society at large they believe they are protecting themselves.

Furthermore, these pro-regime pockets within contemporary Syrian society are of two kinds: the first is cultural, composed of religious minorities, such as Alawites, Christians and Druze, or at any rate, the leadership of these communities; the second is economic such as the nouveau riche, who depend on mutually beneficial relationships with senior regime figures.

The regime's solidity therefore, does not derive from a structural strength or from the durability of its internal and external relationships, but from the brute force with which it manages these relationships (i.e. relationships with state employees, citizens and conscripts). Its brutality transforms citizens into tragic figures, motivated by their fear to preserve and protect the very monster that so terrifies them.

### 3. The Incompetence of the Traditional Political Opposition

Since taking power the Baath party has worked hard to weaken political life in Syria. Over three decades in charge of the country, Hafez Assad succeeded in emptying public life of meaningful participation and established the following rule: politics is for Baathists and those who slavishly adhere to their prescriptions. For everyone else, there is prison, exile or the grave. Despite the creation of a narrow margin for political activity under Bashar Assad, Syrian political life still lacks the basic conditions it needs to progress beyond its moribund state.

Initial protests included a modest clutch of active political figures, but the uprising very quickly moved beyond the control of recognized political organizations, that were left striving to catch up with events. There were attempts to unite disparate opposition forces into a single front, but these efforts, most of which took place outside the country, were characterized by dissent and disagreement, which quickly



lost them credibility among Syrian citizens. These constant disagreements, and the fact that personal ambition was often prioritized over national interest, severely weakened the opposition, not to mention the almost total lack of consensus over issues connected with the future of the uprising, such as sectarianism, foreign intervention and the role of the Syrian Free Army.

There was a split between the “body” of the uprising, represented by the revolutionaries on the street, and its “head”, represented by opposition politicians who trekked from meeting to meeting and from country to country in search of an alliance.

Meanwhile, the uprising was spontaneously generating a new opposition from the ranks of the coordinating committees. These committees took responsibility for organizing protests, providing medical care for the wounded and supplying the media and international organizations with evidence of the brutality of the regime and its security services. At the same time, these committees were unable to make the transition to a united political organization capable of leading and representing the uprising.

There was a split between the “body” of the uprising, represented by the revolutionaries on the street, and its “head”, represented by opposition politicians who trekked from meeting to meeting and from country to country in search of an alliance. However, whenever a step was taken to form an alliance, a side-declaration was issued that would reverse any progress.

#### 4. The Militarization of the Uprising

The uprising began as a peaceful movement and remains so to this day, in its ten months. But despite its ideological opposition to the use of violence and although it is defending its peaceful nature, it has not been immune to facts on the ground that push it toward militarization.

The regime’s insistence that the security forces and the army use excessive force against protestors has caused many soldiers to disobey orders. They have refused to fire on civilians, preferring to defy their superiors, and though a great number of them have been killed by the security forces as a result of mutinous sentiments which are becoming more widespread than before. At the beginning of the uprising, only a few individual soldiers and officers deserted. Today, the deserters number in their thousands, if not tens of thousands. At first, these deserters confined themselves to protecting the peaceful demonstrators with light weapons they had brought with them when they deserted. Today, they are organized into a shadow force called the Syrian Free Army and have begun carrying out operations against military and security targets, sometimes in response to an assault by the regime or to forestall an impending attack.

The regime’s use of force has also prompted many citizens, either those targeted by the regime or the families of victims, to take up arms against the security forces, motivated both by a desire for revenge and the necessity of legitimate self-defense.

We should note that from the very first day the regime has worked to deflect the uprising from its non-violent principles and encourage its militarization. By drawing it into armed conflict the regime was sure of its victory as it is stronger militarily, better equipped and supplied and more organized. Furthermore, it would legitimize its use of violence, gaining international support for its actions by presenting them as part of the international war on terrorism. To achieve these goals the regime immediately began arming communities in loyalist areas and it is worth mentioning here the rumors of weapons smuggled from neighboring countries with the knowledge, if not the active consent of military and government officials.

#### 5. Security Chaos

Certain violent attacks on the fringes of the uprising, which, despite the state media’s attempts to exploit them and smear the

reputation of the popular movement, are either indicative of a general lawlessness or, as many claim, staged and planned by the security forces themselves. The latter explanation is popular due to a widespread belief in the almost mythical powers of state security without whose consent or participation, such operations would be impossible.

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These attacks are either terrorist or sectarian. Terrorist attacks include the bombings of public installations such as gas and petrol pipelines, the rail network, bridges and government buildings (e.g. the secret service headquarters in Damascus). Sectarian refers to the tit-for-tat abduction, extortion, rape and murder between different ethnic and religious communities, which has risen to truly terrifying levels, particularly in regions with many such communities living side by side such as Homs and the countryside around Hama and Latakia.

### **Possible Scenarios and Solutions**

Taking these five points into consideration we can now address the possibility of finding a solution to the crisis in Syria. A solution must derive from three 'arenas', which in order of size are the Syrian arena, the Arab arena and finally the international arena, all of which, including the regime itself, agree on the central issue: that the country cannot return to its pre-uprising state. In other words, change is inevitable.

In the Syrian arena, there are three possible, maybe only theoretical, scenarios:

- The first scenario is that the regime's security policy proves successful and it manages to quash the uprising before

implementing a package of reforms – and in some cases new laws – that enable it to regain control of the country. It has to be said that, though hypothetically possible, this seems unlikely to transpire. The regime is utterly bankrupt. It has lost every shred of its legitimacy and is only able to maintain its unity thanks to an oppressive use of its security and military forces.

- The second scenario is that the uprising manages to topple the regime. However, a rational appraisal of the current balance of power in the country does not support such a conclusion and it only seems likely in the event of outside intervention or some seismic internal change, for instance the whole-scale abandonment of the regime by the armed forces or a palace coup of some kind. Neither of these scenarios is certain at present. Alternatively, we may see an intervention by an Arab or international military force or an escalation of outside pressure that makes the regime's position untenable.
- The third scenario is a settlement reached by negotiation between representatives of the popular movement and the regime. The regime however persists with its repressive tactics and seems unwilling to seriously consider the possibility of negotiating with anybody except its own puppet 'opposition'. The revolutionaries on the ground, meanwhile, utterly reject the possibility of entering into dialogue with the regime and the official political opposition remains divided on the issue. For all these reasons, such an outcome seems unlikely.

To sum up, it is clear that the only possible solution in terms of the Syrian arena will have to involve the intervention of actors from outside, i.e.: a transferral of responsibility to the Arab and international arenas, which in practical terms means the intervention in some form of Arab and Western countries.

At first glance, it would seem that the Arab League is the only player in the Arab arena capable of providing a solution to the Syrian crisis. Yet its members have been unable to reach a consensus on Syria and the League itself is too weak to provide a way out of a situation as intractable as the current one, taking place in a country where the roots of the crisis are so entangled that it is hard to find a solution. Nevertheless, the League has taken a step, practically without precedent in its own history, of imposing economic sanctions on Syria and putting forward an initiative to end the crisis. Reluctantly, the regime allowed Arab League observers to enter the country to ensure it was abiding by the League's conditions.

Yet even in the presence of these observers, indeed under their very noses, the regime continued with its security strategy and deepened its media war against those that failed to stand by it, until almost every Arab state was listed in the universal conspiracy against Syria.

The League has done everything in its power to help Syria avoid yet another international intervention in the Arab world. However, the regime's sheer bloody-mindedness has effectively negated their best efforts and increasingly eyes are turning to the third and most potent of the three arenas to provide a solution to the problem.

In the third, the international arena, Western countries are alike when it comes to their unsure attitudes to direct intervention. Turkey is divided between its nationalist pan-Islamic ambitions on the one hand, its fear of the Kurds and the Alevis at home, and of Russia and Iran abroad. Then there is Europe mired in economic crisis and terrified of disintegration and a United States weakened by the failure of its military interventions in the region. None of them want the situation to develop without having a hand

in the matter, yet nor do they want the crisis to continue, in view of its huge potential for causing instability in the Middle East. They also do not want a return to stability, whatever form it might take, if they are to have no say in the new status quo. At the same time, they would much prefer it if this stability could be brought about without requiring any sacrifice on their part. For this reason they have been content to leave the ball in the court of those international bodies that have proved incapable of reaching a consensus on the non-military intervention being called for by the Syrian demonstrators, the Free Syrian Army, and certain sections of the formal Syrian opposition: i.e. international protection, no-fly zones, safe corridors, etc. They are even less certain about military intervention, despite the fuss made by the Syrian state media about an international plot to invade the country.

It is a whirlpool dragging the country deeper into violence. At present the country is engaged in a minor form of civil war, that we can call a confined civil war. If the whirlpool is to be calmed, the regime still has the power to solve the crisis by stopping the slaughter, withdrawing its troops, releasing prisoners and inviting the opposition (as represented by those part of the uprising) to engage in a negotiated transfer of power. Without this the current polarization of the country will continue, the confined civil war will spread and international intervention – perhaps under cover of an Arab initiative – will be the inevitable result with the consequent destruction of the country. But will the regime see fit to act? Unfortunately not, it seems. It will stay its course, pulling down the temple on its own head and on Syria itself.

**Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.**

# From the Kingdom of Assad to the Third Republic

The Syrian republic did not come into being on any fixed date; no date to which all Syrians - or even some of them - can refer to. Modern Syrian history - it hardly has any other kind of history - is a series of struggles for the republic.

## The First Republic

Republican Syria came into being under the French occupation, a response to the troublesome absence of kings, or the French mistrust of those emirs that were available, when they took the country over in 1920. The fact that France was itself a republic that tended to reproduce itself, or its surface appearance, wherever it ruled seems to have contributed to the formation of a Syrian republic. Following the expulsion of King Faisal I after the Battle of Maysalun in July 1920, it was not until 1943 that the French Mandate settled on a final political form for the country, i.e. as a separate political entity or state, in other words, not until the mandate itself was in its death throes. It appeared that utter artificiality of the Syrian entity was best suited to a non-traditional or modern form of government, unlike, for instance, Morocco, the only Arab country colonized by the French that was ruled by a royal family.

The political system in Syria was the product of conflict between the mandate authorities and local elites and was formed towards the end of the Second World War as a presidential republic dominated by anti-French patriots. As could be expected, the central demand of the patriotic struggle was independence from the colonizer rather than the establishment of a republic, though there was consensus among the struggling elites, most of whom were drawn from the traditional urban elites, that the

political system would be both a republic and a representative democracy.

In 1946 Syria achieved independence, gaining control over its educational system, the army, political parties and a fledgling unified economy. The Syrian people came into being as an entity, individuals enjoying varying degrees of allegiance to pre-existing social groupings (tribes, the urban mercantile population and religious groups) and so it remained until the 1970s when this balance suffered a major setback, as we shall see.

Not three years passed before Syria entered an era of successive military coups, itself evidence of the declining power of the pre-independence elites. This period would climax with two events: the Syrian-Egyptian union of February 1958 and the Baathist coup of March 1963.

The two decades that followed the first military coup were of political conflicts, military coups, sharp ideological polarization and international and regional attempts to woo the young nation. In the background rapid changes were affecting the social dynamics of local and international politics, which were evolving without the institutional and intellectual frameworks capable of absorbing them. Within Syria exclusionary tendencies were growing stronger, nourished by an international political and intellectual environment.

In 1963 such tendencies were elevated to the status of a mode of governance, embedding themselves in the regime and becoming institutionalized in 1970. It was in 1970 that the country fell under the heavy hand of a regime that made its own survival a supreme patriotic priority. This agenda was imposed by naked force and it was successful: the regime secured a

## Yassin al-Haj Saleh

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survival that stifled all life in the country for more than forty years only to face today a widespread uprising that openly calls for its removal.

Because of the confused circumstances of its inception, the Syrian republic contained no republicans when it first came into being, that is to say, no intellectual or political school of thought centered around the principles of active citizenship.

If we are labeling the period from 1943 to 1970 the First Republic, then the long years between 1970 and 2011 constitute the era of the Second Republic, while the Third Republic seems an appropriate name for where Syria is being taken by the current, glorious uprising.

### **A Republic with no Republicans**

Because of the confused circumstances of its inception, the Syrian republic contained no republicans when it first came into being, that is to say, no intellectual or political school of thought centered around the principles of active citizenship, the rule of the people, freedom and equality and strong opposition to inherited titles and privileges and the arbitrary exercise of power. The republic had weak intellectual foundations; it lacked self-awareness and was unable to defend itself. There is no Syrian literature dealing with the republic, either as an idea or a historical phenomenon or in terms of its values. There were no political or ideological conflicts over the principle of republicanism. If we take the official name of the country as it has been for the past fifty years or so, The Syrian Arab Republic, we find that most importance is attached to the qualifier 'Arab', followed by 'Syrian', with 'Republic' a poor third.

Until the 1970s 'republic' was seen as the antithesis of 'monarchy', with all the positive connotations of the former and the negative connotations of the latter. The three Arab

kingdoms, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, appeared reactionary and co-opted by their very nature, while the progressive, liberated republics were assumed to be the future of their doomed feudal counterparts. These unfortunate countries were ruled by kings and royal families, while the republics were governed by the people and their representatives, leaving aside the lack of serious debate over the mechanism by which this representation was achieved (an issue that was to become central to the intellectual and political agenda of the Arab democratic movement in the late 1970s). However this distinction between the two systems of government unraveled under pressure from infighting and manoeuvring between the Arab states, and failed to establish a distinctive school of republican political thought.

Prior to this, in the 1950s and 60s, there had been republican and populist elements affiliated with communist and Baathist thought, who gave particular emphasis to the concept of the people and their rejection of inherited privilege. The concept of equal citizenship was, however, non-existent, as was the idea of the rule of law as a check to the exercise of political power.

Successive military coups from 1949 to 1970 and regional and international pressures only fed a culture of political expediency, which stemmed from the country's relative youth and its lack of stable political institutions and customs, not to mention to absence of a national consensus over its identity. The nation's consciousness was therefore as mutable and inconstant as its politics. More and more, Syria was starting to resemble an Arab country, not in terms of its historical identity, but its political present. The roots of this transformation reached back into the past, i.e. to the Arab nationalism that predated the French occupation and the independence movement that challenged Ottoman rule. There is evidence that the Kurdish leader of the revolution in Northern Syria, Ibrahim Hanunu, addressed Syrian crowds with the phrase, "O Arabs!" as did Sultan Pasha Atrash, leader of the great Syrian revolution of 1925-27. Shukri Qutli, the first president of an independent Syria, had said as he raised the national flag after

independence that after this day the only flag he would raise would be the banner of Arab unity.

### **Pan-Arabism**

During the 1950s, pan-Arabism became a creed that called for a single Arab nation “from the Mediterranean to the Gulf” and the liberation of Palestine and made much of the unique qualities of Arab culture, its past glories, its mission civilatrice and its essential enmity with the West. Once pan-Arabism had been normalized in this fashion, accepted even by the non-Arab population, it then underwent a further process of ‘Arabization’: Arabs themselves were now required to prove their allegiance to what had become an ideological creed. Pan-Arabism was politicized. It was now a party and while this meant that it could no longer enjoy a consensus among the population it still boasted a hypothetical consensus as it had become the state. After politicization came ‘ideologicalization’, which meant two things: first, it was converted from a generalized and widely held belief into an ideology; and secondly it was rendered complex - to deserve it, or attain it, the citizen was required to make extraordinary efforts and possess distinctive qualifications.

These twin processes rendered Arabism the preserve of an elite priesthood, a mystery inaccessible to the masses that elevated initiates over their peers.

But this was not the work of ideologues seeking to enhance their own status. This exclusive and exclusionary pan-Arabism was in fact the ideology deployed by a military elite from petty-bourgeois backgrounds in their confrontation with the traditional urban elite, who had themselves appropriated a more liberal and inclusive version of pan-Arabism to take on the French. The Arabizing of pan-Arabism allowed this middle-class group to inflict defeat on the urban elites, particularly because it could deploy socialist tropes against them. It was a short cut, a way of bypassing ‘backwardness’ and attaining social justice and development.

Among the first to be excluded by this Arabized Arabism were the non-Arabs, who

were regarded with nothing less than outright suspicion, but it also raised the bar for Arabs themselves who began to define themselves using terms such as ‘Islamist’, ‘Syrian nationalist’ or ‘Communist’: complex terms, in other words, founded on the principle of exclusivity and the need for special qualifications to gain access.

**Pan-Arabism was politicized. It was now a party and while this meant that it could no longer enjoy a consensus among the population it still boasted a hypothetical consensus as it had become the state.**

Since the 1950s, therefore, the Syrian republic has been diminished by comparisons with a Syrian nation or the idea of a self-aware republic, but sustained by association with pan-Arabism. After the break-up of the Egyptian-Syrian state in the autumn of 1961, this led to the country’s name being amended from the Syrian Republic to the Syrian Arab Republic. This break touched on the divided soul of the Syrian elite, which has two personalities: one that is pan-Arabist and palatable, although essentially unreal, and another that can be described as Syrian realist, though this, both unacceptable and unpalatable, is an orphan. This is a source of weakness for the republican principles that champion the people, citizens and political relations and oppose ties of identity and cultural kinship. In other words, a republic refers to the actual political presence of a mass of Syrian citizens, some of them non-Arabs, and not to cultural identities or what ‘should be’, though of course, as these identities and hypothetical realities gather strength they weaken the republic. The republic undoubtedly draws on historical symbols and memories of a primarily Arab nature but it is defined, first and foremost, by being open to the broad mass of Syrian citizens. Its material, political and cultural needs will be great and perhaps the only benefit it brings is that it represents a real, diverse population, not a hypothetical unity or ‘oneness’.

Syria's divided personality was the source of an intellectual distortion and a politico-psychological disruption that afflicted the ruling elite in its entirety and prevented the accumulation of intellectual, political and institutional experience. This was further exacerbated by the disorienting effect of the 1967 defeat against Israel and facilitated the country's slide into a vicious political dictatorship.

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The distributional socialism favored by the country's political and cultural elites between the 1950s and 1970s was the prevailing global economic model and did much to ease the demands placed on the regime, enhancing its image as both a socially leveling and progressive force. This was the same regime, incidentally, that operated by divesting its population of political and general rights while oppressing them physically. Yet it must be added that by linking pan-Arabism with socialism it had increased its support base while providing a balance to the exclusionary, complex effects of its ideology.

### **Assad's Syria**

1970 was the final nail in the coffin of the First Republic, a fate that had been foretold two decades earlier by Winston Churchill when he said, "This Syria doesn't know how to rule itself and won't let anyone else rule it."

As it happened 'This Syria' did manage to rule itself, but only by completely abolishing all political life inside the country, which of course failed to provide a solution to the problem implicit in Churchill's statement, that neither state nor

society possesses any unifying intellectual or institutional frameworks, indeed, it has frozen them. This is a problem we may encounter again when the thaw begins, an issue we will have to face very soon, in fact.

It soon became obvious that the officer who had brought the First Republic to an end, Hafez Assad, was seeking limitless political power, unfettered by principle, political compromise or terms of office. This was in complete contradiction to the idea of a republic, which is distinguished from monarchies by the legal checks it brings to the exercise of power.

No sooner had the man taken office that there were 'patriotic anthems' praising him and 'spontaneous popular marches' waving the picture of this 'devoted son of the people'. At the same time the intelligence services began to make their presence felt in public life, and with them the military and paramilitary forces responsible for the regime's security. Propaganda and security have remained cornerstones of the regime to this day. The agency responsible for propaganda is closer to being a slightly chaotic priesthood: its only religion, indeed its only skill, being the sanctification of the president and maintaining his absolute exclusivity. The security branch is made up of a number of agencies whose task is to keep control over terrorism: to build high walls of fear around, or perhaps inside, the regime's subjects.

In the three decades that followed Syria was a state centered around a single individual who ruled without any limits on his authority. It was a tyranny. Political and public life was entirely built around the person of the president who led his subjects with 'soul and blood' and whose followers evinced their willingness to kill for his sake. They made good on their word. Political competition was abolished, subsumed by the cult of worship around the president, not to mention swallowed up by the prisons and the ruling Progressive Patriotic Front led by the Baath-Party, but it did not disappear until tens of thousands had first sacrificed their lives.

From the 1980s onwards the regime achieved complete control over society, as violently and

effectively as it had taken power. The ‘people’ no longer existed except as a passive buttress of their control: chanting, singing and weeping on demand and displaying their mass submission during national and patriotic celebrations, displays that were endlessly repeated on state television.

This Second Republic had hardly any republic in it at all, still less of a ‘public’, and a good deal of the president who from the latter half of the 1980s was described as ‘Master of the Nation’. Pan-Arabism was by now totally inverted: a tool to achieve regional hegemony and insinuate internal betrayal. Syria was a separate entity no more: it was Assad’s Syria, and the president was its master.

A new system of privileges and privileged appointments began to take shape almost from the beginning of this period. Exclusive and exclusionary this network of nepotistic appointments was the preserve of the regime’s men, who had begun living in the style of the former urban elites, inhabiting their own neighborhoods (Abu Rumana, Rowda and Malki in Damascus) and appropriating what remained of the country’s commercial companies. Gradually, these appointments gave rise to an ideology of privilege and exceptionalism, justifying and entrenching the practice and turning it into a ‘natural law’ and a patriotic duty. The cornerstone of this ideology was the exceptional status of the president himself.

It was during the 1980s, too, that it first became clear that the president of the Syrian Arab Republic was intending to bequeath the country to his family. When he fell ill in 1983, his brother Rifaat saw himself as the natural candidate to succeed him. Then, during the 1990s, the president distanced himself from his unpredictable brother and seemed to be favoring his first-born son Basil. When Basil was killed in a car accident in 1994 he was immediately elevated to sainthood. The reason was plain: to sanctify the creed of the president and his family’s unique status and to get Syrians used to the idea of his children succeeding to his throne. It is known that immediately after Basil’s

death the ‘Father Leader’ summoned his son, Bashar, then studying medicine in London, and proceeded to groom him into the perfect image of a worthy successor. When the father did die he was referred to as ‘The Immortal Leader’ and his son as ‘The Guide of the Party and the People’. In 2005, Bashar became ‘Master of the Nation’ like his father before him.

The existence of a ‘Master of the Nation’ in the form of the president abolishes the republic and with it, all equality between its inhabitants. It institutionalizes ties of personal allegiance and a culture of political appointments and privilege and divides society along sectarian lines.

It hardly needs to be said, but this succession strikes at the heart of republicanism. The essence of a republic is the equality of all its citizens, a principle utterly at odds with the ‘blue blood’ of kings and nobles. Everyone bleeds the same in a republic, as science tells us. The implanting of this principle of essential equality is what led to the disappearance of rule by royal succession in Europe, or at least to stripping kings of any effective executive powers. Power exercised by the people should not be inherited. When power and inheritance are combined the result is despotism and this is why there is no significant difference between the Arab republics and monarchies.

A republic’s only master is the people and it is the people’s sovereignty that institutionalizes equal rights and political opportunity for all members of this population. It makes them citizens, required to participate in the life of the state. The existence of a ‘Master of the Nation’ in the form of the president abolishes the republic in one fell swoop, and with it, all equality between its inhabitants. It institutionalizes ties of personal allegiance and a culture of political appointments



and privilege and divides society along sectarian lines.

Legally speaking, Syria was ruled under emergency law, which put the country and its resources at the disposal of the regime and permitted it to apportion them according to a superficial logic based on identity and ethnic origin. The regime started to regard Syrian society as a patchwork of isolated social groups—tribes, religions, denominations and neighborhoods—and not a single people. This policy was most evident in appointments for government jobs, which were made without reference to any standing laws along entirely ethnic and sectarian lines. Baathists received preferential treatment in education, employment and deployment abroad, while those related or affiliated to party members also obtained privileges, most notably appointments on diplomatic missions. In its internal policy, just as with its regional policy, the regime and its planners focused their attention on religion, ethnicity and sectarian affiliations, with scant regard for republican categories such as nationality, citizenship and community.

### Privatization and its Ideology

President Bashar Assad's reign has witnessed several new developments such as the restructuring of the economy and the privatization of national resources, which has led to an increased value being put on private ownership and wealth. In its wake come the new feudalists, all allied with the regime, who enjoy huge privileges and absolute legal and political immunity. It is the marriage of political and economic exclusivity.

A concomitant development and equally important is the emergence of what is termed a 'modernist' ideology, heavily slanted towards the highest classes in society and absolutely inimical to the general public, democracy, socio-cultural manifestations of Islam (termed 'antique') and political Islam ('fundamentalist').

Those who partake of this ideology, a complex political-security creed, are those at the heart of the regime and the intellectuals who float in their orbit or share their tendencies. In Syria, such

ideological tendencies take overtly social and political forms, overwhelmingly classist rather than sectarian, although both sectarianism and modernism play a role in the ideological buttressing of these new economic privileges, or rather lend them a 'modernist' legitimacy. The ideologues of modernism have an essentializing view of Arab societies in which Islam is the main, if not the only, determinant of people's behavior. It is the wellspring of all backwardness, stagnation and despotism. Homo islamicus is a different breed to other men; whatever he might claim about himself, he is fanatical, violent, backward and irrational, all qualities that stem in turn from his religious beliefs. The reality is that neither 'Islam' nor 'Islamic man' exist; instead we have attempts to define Islamism carried out by both Islamist ideologues and their secularist foes, whose relationship with secularism mirrors that of Islamists to Islam: one of blind faith and fetishization.

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'Modernism' is merely an ideology that legitimizes the new feudal regime. The class-based and political privileges bequeathed by the regime to a narrow segment of the population are now concealed behind a religious and sectarian heterodoxy that makes them defensible.

One important effect of this ideological evolution is that it undermines the epistemological credibility of concepts like 'the people', 'the citizen' and 'equality' and institutionalizes narrow, mutually antagonistic identities. In doing so, it further entrenches networks of privilege and effectively shelters them from criticism.

### The Third Republic

This is how the Second Republic reached its end, turning upon itself in the same way a marriage turns when the love is gone.

**The First Republic was unstable and schizophrenic. The Second Republic was not even a republic, but a monarchy. Today, we are on the threshold of the Third Republic.**

The First Republic was unstable and schizophrenic. The Second Republic was not even a republic, but a monarchy.

Today, we are on the threshold of the Third Republic.

What Syrians oppose today is what Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans objected to before them: dynastic succession. They oppose the absolute arbitrariness that characterizes not only their regime, but all such dynasties, embodied in its terrorist security tentacles that treat them with such barbarity. They oppose the illegitimate, unjust and irrational privileges bestowed on select individuals and families. They oppose the privatization of their country by its rulers.

All these objections are easily accommodated by a republican worldview. It only requires a little more effort on the part of democratic and republican intellectuals to establish a clear link between the uprising and the concept of a republic: to characterize it as a republican uprising or an uprising for the sake of the republic.

From a historical perspective the Third Republic will have to respond to the need for political stability and self-rule. The First Republic lacked both. It will also have to supply what was missing from the Second Republic, Assad's Kingdom, namely public freedoms, the rule of law, equality for all citizens and the sovereignty of the people.

At the same time it will be required to restructure national identity to ensure that the country's Syrian identity eclipses its pan-Arabist

and Islamic components. The term Syria is the true foundation of citizenship, freedoms and rights. Pan-Arabism can function as a cultural and strategic support while Islam provides an over-arching cultural and value system. Syria must not stand in tension with pan-Arabism and Islam; in our view the proper relationship will be one of inclusive dominance: Syria outranks them, and assimilates them.

While Islam as a political force is currently in open rebellion against the despotic regime, there can be no doubt that after the tyrant has fallen differences will emerge between republican thought and Islam, in both its social and political manifestations, especially in those circles where religion enjoys certain irrational privileges, such as the personal status laws, gender relations, issues of loyalty and the social contract and the relationship between the various religious groups. The republic must have no official religion and no support in law for the idea that its president must belong to a certain religious group.

Given the pluralistic socio-cultural make-up of Syrian society, serious consideration must be given to the idea of a parliamentary system where the people's representatives have genuine legislative power. However, the sensitivity of Syria's geo-strategic location makes a presidential system the more likely option. How to combine the benefits of both systems?

Other than opposing dynastic succession and the inevitable differences between Islamic and republic thought, the whole basis of the republican project will be meaningless unless it can remain accessible to the public: those who have the greatest interest in changing the status quo. By this we mean the great majority who occupy positions at the bottom of the social pyramid, those who are most vulnerable to marginalization and poverty, not to mention religious and sectarian manipulation. The survival of the republic, indeed any democracy, depends on it creating a broad social front. It will not be able to face down any potential sectarian problems unless it manages to politicize class conflict and the conflicts between various religious and sectarian groupings.

The future of the republic in Syria depends on such a transformation and we must begin working towards it immediately.

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A quick overview of Syria's political history is enough to convince one of the importance of geo-political and geo-strategic considerations. Syria lies at the heart of the world's most 'nationalized' region: the Middle East. The official account of Syria's history is full of grave errors, mainly because it completely overlooks the dynamics of

the Syrian interior. This 'interior' - which is, after all the engine behind the uprising and its source of strength - will never reclaim its place in history unless the country can extricate itself from the Middle-Eastern system, which translates as a series of prisons for its populations.

As we hope to address this point in a separate article, we will limit ourselves to pointing out a fourth aspect of the Syrian republic to sit alongside dynastic rule, Islamic rule in all its varieties and the rule of the oligarchs for the 'new feudalists', and that is: the Middle-Eastern regime, ruled by the interests of the US-Israel axis.

While today, the great Syrian uprising is fighting the regime and its oligarch hangs on, it must not be too late to face the other issues that await it in the years to come.

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# The Syrian Revolution is an Experiment in the Creation of a People

Interview with Yassin al-Haj Saleh

**Perspectives: What is your interpretation of the current state of affairs in Syria, nine months into the revolution?**

SALEH: Currently, we are looking at what might be called the rise of a new political actor - the people - best defined as the actor that “wants to bring down the regime”. In our country as in all Arab states, politics has been a question of elites, of struggles between elites, civil or military, secular or religious, in which victory generally goes to the best-armed side. Things are different today. Now there is a new player that has been formed by the revolution. It is isolated and by-and-large unarmed. It is much weaker militarily than the regime it seeks to depose is - and is on average, younger than the country’s political elites. Nevertheless, it has turned out to be far more determined, stubborn and inventive than anyone anticipated.

I view the Syrian revolution as an experiment in the creation of a people, of a new evolutionary stage in politics and governance, though one that may have to pass through many trials and horrors and we should not expect a new political dispensation to emerge fully formed after the revolution. In historical terms the revolution is the process by which and through which the “people” takes shape, though this will face the daunting challenge of placating the fears of minorities and guaranteeing the unity of Syrians and Syria itself.

**Perspectives: How do you explain the silence of large sections of the Syrian population in the face of events currently taking place in the country?**

SALEH: For decades now it has been official policy to drive the majority of the population

away from politics, to dissuade them from taking an active, independent interest in public affairs, and to foster widespread political apathy. Simultaneously, any independent political or civil organizations that might attract the support of Syrians have been stamped on. All initiatives by the political and civil opposition were crushed, bequeathing a ubiquitous and profound sense of fear and inadequacy to those that came after them. My generation of political activists lost its ability to be enterprising and its self-confidence. Furthermore, the regime worked for many years to instill sectarian divisions in the population and a crisis of national identity, to the extent that Syrians became more afraid of each other than of the sinister apparatus of state.

There are sections of the Syrian middle class - in industry, trade and the professions - who enjoy a reasonable income and who privilege stability and security over anything else so long as their agreeable lifestyle continues. In my estimation it is these factors, exacerbated by a lack of confidence in the self and “the other” and a fear and mistrust of what the future will bring, that explains why people keep silent.

**Perspectives: Why do these groups remain neutral about current events?**

SALEH: Their neutrality springs from the causes I have just mentioned. They want something guaranteed and it’s simply not there. In today’s Syria there are no guarantees. These people are worried that the regime will regain control and revenge itself on them, plus they have concerns about their interests. If the revolution is victorious they have nothing to fear but at the same time, they have nothing to win. The fact that, nine months into the revolution, the outcome remains

unclear, means they prefer to sit on the fence. I'm sure they fear the threat of civil war, as well.

Nevertheless, their neutrality is not stable. They are tense and uncertain and some of them may side with the revolution if it becomes obvious that the regime will fall.

**Perspectives: Do you fear the possibility of sectarian conflict breaking out in the event of the regime's fall?**

SALEH: I'm worried about the former employees of the regime. The current heads of the security services may very well reform themselves into a mafia-type organization after the collapse of the regime and continue to practice the violence, theft and discrimination at which they are so adept.

The longer the revolution goes on, the lower the economy sinks, the further the state unravels and the greater the possibility of outside intervention, the more likely it is that the regime will dissolve into many and diverse sectarian conflicts.

I'm also concerned about sectarian revenge attacks, but it seems highly unlikely. For three quarters of a year of revolution, Syrian society has maintained a blameless image and, despite attempts by the regime's security agencies to incite sectarian tension, it has been very limited, remarkably so. In fact the revolution has demonstrated a deep awareness of the issue and has made great efforts both to avoid it and warn against it.

At the same time, Syria is created from the same divisive clay as Lebanon and it is not immune from the threat of sectarian strife. Everything depends on how things develop from here and the manner in which the regime falls. The longer the revolution goes on, the lower the economy sinks, the further the state unravels and

the greater the possibility of outside intervention, the more likely it is that the regime will dissolve into many and diverse sectarian conflicts.

**Perspectives: For some weeks now the numbers of deserting army conscripts and security troops has risen and military operations against security and secret service installations have taken place. Is this an indicator that the revolution is transforming from a peaceful movement and militarizing?**

SALEH: The deserters are part of the revolution. They have refused to open fire on their fellow citizens, knowing that they will be shot themselves for disobeying orders. If the regime gets hold of them their fate will be imprisonment and an ignominious death. In my opinion, therefore, it's incorrect to talk about a supposed contradiction between their military capabilities and the undeniably peaceful nature of the popular protests. In most cases they have limited their activities to protecting the demonstrations, to providing a deterrent of sorts against the regime's repressive troops. Some of the demonstrations you see on television would not have been possible if they hadn't received a degree of protection from the Syrian Free Army.

The intention is that the Syrian Free Army's capabilities be put at the disposal of the peaceful protests as a safeguard, not that they work against them or at their expense. The revolution has clearly demonstrated its profoundly peaceful nature through the call for a general strike on December 11. The initial response was encouraging, even if it went unheeded in some quarters. The Syrian people are experimenting with a variety of resistance strategies: there's no reason to limit themselves. In my view, calling on members of the Syrian Free Army not to resist when they are attacked makes no sense. For a start, that's not humanly possible, and furthermore, it's their duty to give the demonstrations and the civilian population as much protection as they can. As for demands that they should join the peaceful demonstrations, that's either ignorance or stupidity: it was never the point.

**Perspectives: To date the regime has made no significant concessions despite internal, regional and international pressure being brought to bear on it. How do you interpret this?**

SALEH: Pride and arrogance. I've already mentioned that the regime managed to crush all manifestations of civil and political independence in Syria. It is accustomed to having total control of executive power, total control of the media and the dissemination of information, total control of national resources and a monopoly over contacts with the outside world. Its infrastructure has calcified over the decades and it will not allow partners or political opponents, nor will it countenance negotiation. It defends its privileged position by force, which has led to a sharp decline in the political, intellectual and moral standards of governance. If it loses its monopoly over violence, information and wealth, it loses its weight. It would be irrelevant in an open public forum, in a competitive political market. Its calcified structure means that it fears any genuine concession to those it governs might bring the whole edifice crashing down.

The revolution is aimed squarely at the political regime itself, not at any specific policy or practice. This leaves the regime with no room to manoeuvre. It cannot seriously countenance effective Arab monitors or withdraw its army from the cities. If it stops the slaughter it will fall in a matter of days or weeks.

**Perspectives: If regional and international pressure proves ineffective what is the likelihood that the opposition, in the form of the Syrian National Council, will enter into dialogue with the regime? What would its demands be in that event? What alternatives are open to the opposition?**

SALEH: I believe that the Syrian National Council as a body, and a large number of those who have participated in the revolution, have burnt their bridges. Either the regime falls or it's prison, the grave or exile. We're engaged in a revolution and when you're in a revolution you can't hold onto your hope of a way back.

Then there's the question of who you would have a dialogue with. With murderers? With individuals whose humanity, politics and patriotism is of the very lowest order? People whose hands are stained with the blood of Syrians and stolen money and who never stop lying?

The revolution is aimed squarely at the political regime itself, not at any specific policy or practice. This leaves the regime with no room to manoeuvre.

The declared position of the opposition is that they will never negotiate with the regime over a transition to a democratic Syria, nor enter into any form of dialogue. Yet it seems to me that even that position is pretty redundant, because the reasons that make dialogue impossible, also rule out negotiation over a transition.

The alternative is revolution: ensuring its survival and expansion, diversifying strategies of resistance, isolating the regime and cutting off its sources of material and media support. I think the opposition and the Syrian National Council are closer than ever before to carrying out direct acts of revolution.

The longer it takes and the greater the interest of international forces in the situation, the harder the choices. The situation in Syria is difficult and complex and the opposition has to work resolutely and tirelessly in a regional and international arena that more than ever before resembles a jungle.

**Perspectives: What is your evaluation of the Arab League's role in the Syrian crisis? Have its pressures and sanctions against the regime succeeded in weakening it or hastening its end? Do you anticipate the League escalating matters and imposing a demilitarized zone?**

SALEH: The Arab League is a useful tool for isolating the regime and one of the political battlefields on which it can be fought. We

shouldn't rely on the League, in my view, but at the same time we mustn't cut our links with it or actively oppose it. The same goes for the United Nations. We want to be constantly trying to influence these bodies for the benefit of the revolution and use them to isolate and weaken the regime.

I cannot predict what might happen, but I believe the Arab League is in a state of confusion, as are the major international players, even if they don't seem to be. The Arab states have no desire to see the Syrian crisis become an international issue because of the political, humanitarian and strategic consequences they will have to shoulder as a result. The wider international community, though much more effective, has no desire to intervene in what is a highly complex situation, both internally and regionally, and one which holds out few obvious benefits. For these reasons, and contrary to the prevailing mood in some revolutionary circles, I favor working on the revolution from within, avoiding issues of international protection, demilitarized zones, no-fly zones and safe passages. The revolution as a whole is continuing and moving forward even though there is acute suffering here and there and impatience in those places that are most exposed to the savagery of the regime. Instead of worrying about international protection and the like, we need to focus our efforts on providing aid to these areas, developing strategies of resistance and ensuring the continuity of our struggle. At the end of the day, no Arab or international organization would care about Syria if the Syrians themselves hadn't kept the torch of revolution burning for nine long months in the face of one of the world's most brutal political regimes.

**Perspectives: And what of the roles played by Syria's neighbors, Iran and Turkey in particular?**

SALEH: Iran is an ally of the regime. Its regime is structured similarly to the Syrian one. Its links with our country are designed to strengthen its regional and international influence and entrench its power internally, but in doing so it has won the enmity of the Syrian people. Syrians have an extremely negative view of Iran these days

I favor working on the revolution from within, avoiding issues of international protection, demilitarized zones, no-fly zones and safe passages.

whereas before the revolution they were either positive about it or indifferent.

Turkey was once a friend to Syria and is now an opponent of the regime. I suspect it has realized that a black-and-white attitude towards your neighbors is the wrong approach in political environment as treacherous as the Middle East. The Turkish regime is more open and democratic but it appears to be far from certain of its course. It fears the material, political and strategic cost of getting embroiled in the issue yet it cannot ignore what is taking place in a country with which it shares extensive borders and many interests. Faced with this dilemma it favors a coordinated Arab response. Besides this, it opposes the Syrian regime with nothing more than words.

**The interview was conducted by Hussein Yaakoub on December 20, 2011.**

**Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.**

# No End in Sight to Syria's Economic Woes

The Syrian economy did not collapse in 2011, as many, including the Syrian president himself, had predicted, but it has suffered tremendously from the flight of investors, the reluctance of households to spend, a dismal economic policy and international sanctions.

When the protests began in mid-March in Daraa, a city at the center of a neglected agricultural plateau, and then spread to the suburbs of Damascus and to other areas that have experienced economic and social difficulties during the last three decades, the government thought it had understood the motives of the revolt and that it had a ready solution.

## The Government's Dismal Economic Management

Within days of the protests the government announced an increase in salaries and in state subsidies on heating oil as well as the removal of several key figures associated with the liberal economic policy of the past few years. The extent of these "concessions" was substantial: the salaries of civil servants were increased by 20 to 30 percent – in a country where about a quarter of the working force is employed by the state – and the price of heating oil was decreased by 25 percent, although, only a few weeks earlier, the government had deemed its policy of subsidizing energy products "unsustainable."

These announcements had very little impact on the dynamics of the protests, which continued unabated. Protesters in fact reacted angrily; while they had taken to the streets to demand an end to the impunity and corruption of state officials, the government was effectively trying to bribe them! On March 25, a day after the president's political and media advisor Bouthaina Shaaban

announced these decisions, protesters in Daraa chanted: "Oh Bouthaina Shaaban, the people are not hungry (in Arabic the word for hungry – *jou'an* – rhymes with Shaaban), the people want freedom."

During the next few months a string of other measures was adopted to appease the regime's various constituencies. Farmers benefitted from an increase in the procurement prices of those agricultural products they sell to the government, a rescheduling of their debt repayments and the establishment of a fund to help them cope with drought affected areas. University students were given loans and new faculties were opened in remote areas. A fund was established to finance the development of informal housing areas in Damascus and Aleppo, and import tariffs and a consumption tax on key food items were reduced. An increase in the price of fuel oil used by manufacturers was also postponed.

The government's unfortunate economic measures created a deep distrust towards it within the business community.

While these measures helped reduce the daily hardship of large segments of the population, the disadvantage was that they increased the fiscal deficit and contradicted the long-term economic policies of previous years. As the year drew to a close, the government seemed to realize that it had gone too far and decided to reduce all overhead public expenses, except salaries, by 25 percent. However, any further measures like, for example, a complete reversal, would now be tantamount to political suicide.

## Jihad Yazigi

Jihad Yazigi is editor-in-chief of The Syria Report, an online economic and business digest. He has written extensively on Syria's economic and business affairs and has published several sector reports on Syrian industries. He also works as a consultant for businesses and international organizations operating in Syria.



By deciding to rapidly and extensively increase its financial expenditures, the government also demonstrated that its economic decisions were based on a political agenda and the result of panicked reaction, instead of a rational analysis of the economic situation.

After decades during which the Syrian economy was centrally planned, the government adopted in 2005 a “social market” development model in which the state was asked to focus its efforts on social services and infrastructure, while the private sector was to be given more leeway to operate. The debate over the role and size of the state in the economy seemed to have been finally settled, and the government appeared to have a clear road map in spite of its many shortcomings and justified criticism levelled against it.

But now things are much less clear and the government’s unfortunate economic measures created a deep distrust towards it within the business community, which realized very early on that the authorities had no clear plan to fix the dire economic situation.

Thus it is not surprising that from the very beginning of the protests, investors, already afraid of the consequences of the unrest, withdrew from the market. At the end of June for instance, the Syrian Investment Agency reported a 43 percent annual decline in the number of projects it had licensed. The other few indicators available showed a similar trend, although the overall decline can be attributed more to the general economic downturn and lack of confidence in the economy than to government policies. For example, the assets of Syria’s private banks fell by 15 percent on average in the first nine months of 2011, traffic at the country’s two maritime ports fell by some 10 percent during the same period, while traders and retailers reported double digit declines in their turnovers.

### International sanctions

Although sanctions adopted by a part of the international community (most importantly the Arab League, Turkey, the EU, and the USA, as well as Canada, Switzerland, Japan, and Australia)

only added to Syria’s woes, their overall impact on the economy and on the government’s margin of manoeuvre remained limited by the end of 2011.

The import ban imposed on the oil sector by the European Union is probably the most significant of these measures. Syria’s oil sector is a major contributor to the national Gross Domestic Product, to fiscal revenues and to foreign currency earnings. Thus, the closure of a market that represents 90 percent of all crude export is of serious concern to the Syrian authorities. The additional ban imposed on the transport, financing and insurance of oil exports also makes finding new markets extremely difficult.

The idea of imposing sanctions has been a controversial one for many Syrian analysts, including members of the opposition.

The ministry of oil announced in December that the country’s oil output had declined from 387,000 barrels a day (b/d) of crude oil before the sanctions to 270,000 barrels. This decline by a third corresponds to most of the country’s oil exports, which were estimated at some 150,000 b/d before the sanctions, which means that the country’s oil exports are now down to around 30,000 b/d with no clear prospect of returning to previous levels anytime soon.

The lack of revenues from oil exports poses a serious threat to foreign currency earnings, which have already been very affected by the absence of tourists and the withdrawal of foreign investors.

In contrast to the oil sector, which the government controls entirely, the severe restrictions on US dollar transactions imposed by the United States government have had an impact on broad segments of society. The Syrian government, businessmen and individuals alike have been affected. The fact that the Euro can still be used enables many transactions to

continue to take place, but there is no doubt that financial relations with the outside world have been seriously disrupted.

The impact of the asset freeze on a long list of Syrian entities and individuals – on whom travel bans were also imposed – is more difficult to assess. While initially many had doubts over their efficacy as most of the listed individuals are believed to have foreign accounts held under the names of middlemen, the combined impact of these measures by most Western countries and the Arab League has created a sense of encroachment. It is not entirely a coincidence that the Arab League plan to send monitors to the country was accepted by the government after the imposition of sanctions by Arab countries and that the lifting of these sanctions was initially among the main demands of the government for it to accept the monitors.

However, the idea of imposing sanctions has been a controversial one for many Syrian analysts, including members of the opposition. While proponents of the sanctions have encouraged the export ban on crude oil “because oil export revenues directly enter the pockets of the government” as they say, one can argue that many expenses also “come out directly from the pockets of the government!” Civil servants salaries, subsidies, health care centers and schools catering to the overwhelming part of the population are covered by the government. If it were to make cuts in public sector expenses, would it prioritize the security services or social services?

If a quick end to the crisis engulfing the country was clearer, the impact of these sanctions would be limited; if not, the consequences could be dire for the people.

The plight of the Iraqi people is still in the minds of many Syrians. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled to Syria in the last decade not only because of the violence in Iraq, but also because twelve years of international sanctions destroyed the Iraqi economy, physical infrastructure and social fabric.

## Prospects for 2012

While violence and general unrest affected large parts of the country since the beginning of the protests, people began to feel the pain of the economic downturn on a large scale only towards the end of the year.

There are now daily power cuts across Syria, with up to 3 hours a day in central districts of Damascus and much longer ones in the rest of the country. Cooking gas is extremely difficult to find, while heating oil is being sold on the black market at twice the government-set price. These difficulties are caused by many factors, including lower government revenues, the disruption of supply lines following attacks on pipelines, corruption, smuggling, and international sanctions.

The lack of large protests in central Aleppo and Damascus, the country's two largest cities and economic powerhouses, has been widely attributed to the support of the business communities for the authorities. However, the picture is much more nuanced and in reality many members of the business community deserted the authorities very early on.

How these difficulties will affect the political scene and the popular revolt gripping the country is difficult to assess. Although the growing number of unemployed people may be tempted to take to the streets and join protesters, the reactions of the population remain largely shaped by the evolving political events rather than by the daily economic difficulties.

The attitude of investors is also being closely watched. The lack of large protests in the central parts of Aleppo and Damascus, the country's two largest cities and economic powerhouses, has been widely attributed to the continued support of the business community for the authorities.

However, the picture is much more nuanced and in reality many members of the business community deserted the authorities very early on. In July, for instance, the Deir-ez-Zor Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in Syria's eastern region, issued a formal statement harshly condemning the conduct of the security services in the city. Across much of the country, where the strongest protests have taken place, businessmen have generally followed calls for strikes and other forms of civil disobedience and many are also believed to be actively financing the uprising.

The coming weeks will probably be decisive with regards to the ability of the economy to sustain increasing pressures, although the total absence of official data – itself an indication that things are not going as well as the government would like us to believe – makes it extremely difficult to provide a clear forecast.

Two indicators to watch in the coming weeks and months will be the movements of the foreign value of the Syrian pound and the rate of inflation. Contrary to the expectations of many, the government had managed until the end of last year to maintain a grip over them. Retail prices for most basic commodities remained largely under control, while the Central Bank of Syria had managed to limit the loss in value of the Syrian national currency. In black market

transactions the Syrian pound was trading at the end of the year at a value depreciated by 25 percent from its pre-March level compared to the US dollar – the decline was not insignificant but nowhere close to a crisis.

The reasons for the strength of these two indicators for most of last year are difficult to discern. Low inflation was probably caused by a strong reduction in spending by Syrian households who prefer to hoard their savings, good crops that have kept the price of food items low and the reduction in customs tariffs and consumption tax rates on a wide range of products.

The relative strength of the Syrian pound is more difficult to explain as there is no data from the Central Bank on the extent of its involvement in the currency market or on the size of its foreign assets. Some have argued that Iraq and Iran are funding the Syrian government and pouring billions into the Central Bank's account but there is little hard evidence so far to back these claims.

In the first month of 2012 things began to change. The pound lost another 15 percent by the end of January, leading to a spike in retail prices.

The coming weeks will probably be decisive with regards to the ability of the economy to sustain increasing pressures, although the total absence of official data – itself an indication that things are not going as well as the government would like us to believe – makes it extremely difficult to provide a clear forecast.

The major factor weighing on the country's future prospects is the lack of any serious political initiative by the Syrian authorities to solve the economic and political crisis. Until then it will be difficult to foresee an end to economic distress and the chance of a recovery.

# The Syrian Revolution and the Role of Turkey

Turkey is one of the states that is most affected by the Arab revolutions of 2011. Thrown into confusion by the Libyan revolution, the Turkish government then found itself confronted by a popular uprising in Syria. First adopting the role of advisor to its neighbor, its failure to make the Syrian regime enact political reforms conducive to gradual democratic change, soon saw Turkey declare its open support for the Syrian people and their demands.

Effective Turkish support for the popular revolution was confined to hosting a number of conferences for the opposition and sheltering activists and deserters fleeing Syrian territory, as well as tens of thousands of civilian refugees currently housed in tents on the Turkish side of the border.

Events in August, which happened to coincide with Ramadan in 2011, were a watershed moment for the Assad regime. Early that month Western powers raced to declare the regime illegitimate and openly demand that it step down. At the same time, the start of the holy month witnessed an escalation in the frequency and intensity of the popular demonstrations, which were now being held daily instead of once a week. Finally, the regime itself had decided to enter the army and its tanks into the conflict, a move that saw horrendous massacres committed in Hama, Homs, Rastan, Talbeesa, Jisr al-

Shughour and Boukamal. A key consequence of the army's involvement was a rise in the number of desertions and the creation of what came to be known as the Free Syrian Army, which became a key player in the conflict.

Taken together these developments brought an end to friendly relations between Ankara and Damascus. Multi-dimensional ties, nurtured at great cost by both sides over many years, were now broken. Following the intervention of the Syrian army, the sharp criticisms voiced by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, in the early months of the uprising turned into outright condemnation and calls for Bashar Assad to step down.

Syrian protestors in many areas of the country, faced with the brutality of Assad's forces and the paramilitary gangs of the *shabiha*, rested their hopes on Turkey's ability to find a solution. At one point, Turkish officials spoke of the possibility of creating a demilitarized zone on the border to protect civilians and army deserters. Nothing came of it, and demonstrators vented their frustration in posters and chants. Effective Turkish support for the popular revolution was confined to hosting a number of conferences for the opposition and sheltering activists and deserters fleeing Syrian territory, as well as tens of thousands of civilian refugees currently housed in tents on the Turkish side of the border.

So what changed in the months that followed? In this article we will examine the interrelated internal and external factors behind Turkey's hesitancy over the crisis in Syria.

## The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

According to leaked reports - mostly by the Turkish government itself - a number of direct

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meetings between leaders of the PKK and Turkish officials were held in Oslo in the first half of 2010 to explore the possibility of a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey. Following the last meeting in May 2010, the secret talks between the two parties came to an abrupt end and the Kurds aligned themselves with the rejectionist stance of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who is held in an isolated island prison off the coast of Istanbul. The months that followed saw an escalation of military operations by the PKK against the Turkish army and an equal upswing in Turkish reprisals against Kurdish fighters, not to mention a huge wave of arrests directed against civil society organizations associated with the PKK. Lawyers and intellectuals were among those arrested and charged with abetting terrorist activities.

The military operations mounted by the PKK took a more serious turn following the start of the revolution in Syria. Kurdish fighters managed to kill a number of Turkish soldiers in a wave of well-planned assaults that whipped up ultra-nationalist sentiments in Turkey. The far right started to bang the drums of war.

At the same time, the Iranian branch of the PKK (or the PJAK) announced that it was suspending all military operations against Iran's armed forces.

The head of the PKK in Syria, Saleh Muslim, returned to Damascus. Long pursued by the Syrian security agencies, he had lived for years in the Qandil Mountains in the far north of Iraq. It was said that a deal had been struck between the Kurdish party and the Syrian regime, marking a resumption of relations that had been suspended for thirteen years, since Ocalan's expulsion from Damascus in the autumn of 1998, following threats of reprisal against Syria from the Turkish army. In this new deal, the Syrians would allow the Democratic Union Party (the PKK's Syrian organization) to operate freely in the Kurdish regions (Jazira, Ain al-Arab and Afrin as well as the large urban communities of Aleppo and Damascus) and to recruit new fighters for their training camps in the Qandil Mountains. In return, the PKK would dissuade Syrian Kurds

from participating in the revolutionary movement that sought to bring down the regime.

The concessions granted to the PKK limited to the recruitment of new fighters. The promise of 'self rule' meant that the PKK was permitted to elect popular representative bodies in the major Kurdish cities and regions, transforming the party into a parallel regional government that took on some of the state's responsibilities in the provinces. They even opened cultural centers to teach the Kurdish language. For a Baathist regime that has always denied the existence of non-Arab citizens in Syria, refused citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Kurds and other minorities, parceled off and isolated regions with a Kurdish majority, persecuted their political parties and outlawed their language, this was certainly an astonishing precedent. The regime was being pragmatic, though. Its priority was to keep the revolution within the Sunni-Arab areas where it would be easier to contain and suppress without fear of opposition by foreign powers preoccupied with the issue of religious and sectarian minorities in Syria.

From the Turkish point of view, specifically the escalation in PKK attacks on the Turkish army, this Syria-PKK deal only further ramped up the tension. Prior to this Turkey had enjoyed two years of peace, enough to relieve military and judicial pressure on the politicians and leave Erdogan free to pursue his dream of disarming the PKK and incorporating them into political life, which was at the heart of the secret talks in Oslo. Following his economic and diplomatic achievements Erdogan was hoping to institute a new, civil constitution that would change the nature of Turkish politics. It was what he had promised voters, but now the Syrian crisis was threatening to consign such ambitions to the distant future.

From these observations we may conclude that the Syria-PKK deal works as follows: the PKK will escalate military operations against Turkish forces while ceasing hostilities against the Assad regime's most important ally, the Iranians, a clear implementation of the threatening statement made some months ago by Assad that "an

earthquake will strike the region” in the event of his regime coming under attack. In return for services rendered, the PKK is allowed to resume its activities in Syria’s Kurdish areas—recruiting new fighters for its campaign against Turkey and undertaking a pseudo-governmental role in these areas, which includes suppressing revolutionary tendencies among young Kurds drawn to participate in the uprising against the regime.

### **The Alevis and the Left in Turkey**

Turkey’s internal problems were not confined to its issue with the Kurds and the long-running armed conflict with the PKK. There was also the matter of some twenty million Alevis, a community divided between Turks and Kurds.

The city of Dersim in South-East Anatolia represents a convergence of these two problems, as the majority of the population is Kurdish Alevi. The massacre perpetrated by Turkish forces in this small city back in 1925 remains a dark stain on the conscience of the Turkish state, and Erdogan’s public apology in December 2011 for this horrible crime was a remarkable achievement. The apology provoked widespread debate in the country, chiefly on the grounds that it was a precedent that would force Turkey into accepting historical responsibility for other atrocities committed by the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, who ruled with an iron fist until his death in 1939.

In my view, it is the impact of the Syrian crisis on Turkish society that drove Erdogan to this surprising admission, which in one respect constituted a moral bribe to Turkish Alevis unhappy with their government’s support of the revolution against the ‘Alawite’ Bashar Assad, as he is perceived in Turkey. I would venture to say - if I might be forgiven a little overgeneralization - that the Alevi population in Turkey was broadly sympathetic to the Syrian regime in its struggle with the Syrian people, while the Sunni population sided with the revolutionaries. In this light, the Syrian revolution is interpreted as a clash between an ‘Alawite regime’ and a popular ‘Sunni revolution’.

Historically, Turkish Alevis have favored leftist regimes, including the Republican People’s Party founded by Kemal Ataturk. Marxists and those of similar ideological may not regard the Republican Party as Leftist, but that is nevertheless how it sees itself and it belongs to the international socialist movement. During the Syrian crisis, Kurdish Alevi party leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who is from Dersim himself, criticized Erdogan’s pro-revolutionary stance describing it as interference in the internal affairs of a neighboring state that could cost Turkey dearly.

The Marxist Left, meanwhile was even closer to the position of the Syrian regime and some other Arab states, portraying the revolution as an ‘imperial conspiracy’ against a regime that supported the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance. The conspiracy, it claimed, sought to ‘divide Syria into sectarian and ethnic statelets’ and its impact could reach into Turkey itself.

To give the complete picture, there is also a small Islamist faction that shares the Leftists’ obsessions with Western conspiracies, using a rationale best described as deranged. This faction, which finds adherents in the ranks of the Islamist Happiness and Voice of the People parties is fixated on the idea that the Ottoman Empire was broken up at the start of the twentieth century by a Western conspiracy that is still bent on dividing modern Turkey. The ultra-nationalist right enjoy a comparable conspiracy complex, bolstered by their traditional enmity with the Islamists.

Having thus reviewed the contemporary political scene in Turkey, we find that support for active Turkish intervention in Syria is fairly limited, and furthermore, is faced by a broad opposition front made up of both the genuinely principled and opportunist alike. So what about external factors?

### **Turkey and Iran**

Tension between the two countries peaked over their opposing attitudes to events in Syria, a tension embodied in the recent warnings issued to Turkey by one of Iran’s leading military figures, despite the fact that in the spring of 2011,

Turkey voted against a Security Council resolution designed to further isolate the regime in Tehran.

Let us look at the nature of relations between the two sides over the last ten years.

While Iran has been a potent force in the regional politics of the Arab East since the revolution of 1979, Turkey's own influence in the region only started to surge after the Justice and Development Party rose to power as part of an Islamist coalition in 2002. The Baathist regime in Damascus is both one of Iran's most important allies and Turkey's gateway to the Arab world, so it is hardly surprising that the Syrian revolution should be so decisive when it comes to relations between the two states.

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There is a common perception, based on an essentially Orientalist worldview, that relations between Iran and Turkey are determined by a sectarian Shia-Sunni power struggle with roots in the sixteenth century conflict between the Ottoman and Safavid empires. But I believe, giving due weight to the sectarian dimension, that the roots of their relationship lie elsewhere.

On the one hand, it seems clear that its Shiism is as much a burden to Iran as a help when it comes to forging ties with its Arab neighbors. The Iranian revolution, which unleashed a strident rhetoric against the 'arrogance' of Western imperialism, sought to take up the mantle of leader in an Arab world which had lost Gamal Abdel Nasser and seen Anwar Sadat make peace with Israel.

The sectarian issue may have lain in abeyance during the Cold War, but it shot back to prominence in the 1990s, dividing Arab communities in Lebanon, Iraq and throughout the Arab Gulf. This divisive sectarianism reached its peak in the wake of al-Qaeda's operations in New York and Washington in 2001. The strategy adopted by the US in its 'War on Terror' further fed Arab fears about Shiite Iran, with the Gulf states in particular opting to engage the Persian enemy in an arms race. The occupation of Iraq in 2003 increased Iran's involvement in the region through Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine and led to the formation of a 'moderate Arab front' to hold back the threat of greater inroads.

Turkey, meanwhile, reentered the region by means of vigorous economic, cultural and diplomatic policies, reasserting its presence for the first time since the First World War. The extremist secular nationalism with which Kemal Ataturk built modern Turkey on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire had caused Turkey to turn to the West and cut its historical ties with the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Indeed, Turkey had to wait until the dawn of the new millennium to find a way back in, after its Cold War role had become redundant. The country's Islamists, long persecuted and oppressed by the Kemalist regime, undertook a root and branch revision of their ideological position in the same decade and were swept to power in 2002 on the back of overwhelming public support. Thus began the Justice and Development Party's long and arduous journey to consign the Kemalist regime to history and begin a new chapter in the history of modern Turkey. Their project involved revisiting the country's Ottoman past via a reappraisal of Islam and international politics and instituting a plural democratic regime based on free market economics.

Davutoglu's strategy towards Turkey's neighbors, based on a "zero problems" foreign policy, was in essence a political response to economic necessity. The liberalizing policies instituted by former prime minister and president Turgut Ozal at the beginning of the 1980s had begun to take effect by the end of the millennium, but strained relations with its

neighbors stood in the way of Turkey's ambitions for economic expansion. Turkish diplomats worked tirelessly on all fronts, making good progress in Syria, Iraq, Iran, various formerly Soviet states and the Balkans, but coming up short in Armenia and Greece.

It was a policy aimed at stability: at maintaining the status quo. When the Arab revolutions broke out, Turkey was faced a choice: either to side with the revolutionaries, or maintain its relations with the various despotic regimes fighting to stay in power. Just weeks after the Syrian uprising began, the old policy fell by the wayside. The Turkish government failed to persuade the Syrians to adopt a moderate solution based on concessions that would usher in profound democratic change in Syria and alter the face of Bashar Assad's regime. Relations between the sides grew strained, then snapped.

The differences between the respective roles played by Turkey and Iran in the Arab East stem from the vastly different nature of the two regimes. Since its revolution more than thirty years ago and the high price of its war with Iraq and Western economic sanctions, Iran has never once enjoyed stability. It is motivated by a desire for international recognition of its status as a regional power, befitting its glorious past and manifest potential. The war that Saddam Hussein launched against Iran for the first eight years of the Islamic republic's existence acts as a primal trauma, an experience that has colored all its subsequent actions with a profound fear of conflict and isolation. It is this very fear that pushes Iran to strengthen itself, both by extending its influence in a number of Arab countries and seeking out a deterrent nuclear capability. The Iranian model has lost its initial glamour. Iran's role in the region is now a source of tension and crisis in the Middle East.

By contrast, the new 'Turkish model' promises stability, peace and trade, not to mention the vision of secularism and democracy in harmony with Islam. In the last few years Erdogan has won himself a large public following on the Arab street, for his escalated demagogical anti-Israeli rhetoric and his advocacy for the Palestinian

cause. By showing clear support for the Arab peoples against their dictatorial regimes, Turkey has made itself a player in the conflict and brought the curtain firmly down on its policy of preserving the status quo. Iran, meanwhile, has gone the other way, supporting Assad's brutal repression of his people and supplying him with funds, weapons and - it is claimed - expertise, as well.

### Conclusion

It is impossible for 'reformist Turkey' to play an openly revolutionary role in the struggle for power currently playing out in Syria. Turkey has achieved its democratic transition in its own particular fashion: a measured progression over more than two decades of conflict and uncertainty. It is for this reason that the new, reformist Turkey is not interventionist. Unlike revolutionary Iran, which has worked hard to disseminate its 'revolutionary principles' throughout the Arab world, Turkey does not seek to export its reform. It is equally impossible for Turkey, as a member of NATO, to militarily intervene in Syria without its Western allies. All it can do is what it has done: offer a home to the Syrian opposition and issue statements condemning Assad's regime. In addition to all the internal and external factors mentioned above, we might add the fear of failure that haunts the Turkish army. This complex stems both from its failed assault on Cyprus in 1974 and its fruitless military operations against PKK bases in northern Iraq. Whenever it has mounted operations, the modern Turkish army has experienced failure and committed fatal errors, reflected in the diminishing respect it is accorded by public opinion in the country. This has enabled Erdogan to remove it from political life and, more recently, to bring a number of senior retired military leaders to trial, such as Ilker Basbug and Kenan Evren.

The Syrian people are on their own to continue their revolution without support, seeking to topple the regime and build a new, democratic and civil republic.

**Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.**



# The Crisis of the Politics of Mumana'ah

There are ever multiplying attempts to draw a distinction between the policies of 'mumana'ah' (a middle ground between 'steadfastness and 'forbiddance') followed by the Syrian regime, and the country's internal crisis that led to the current popular uprising. Perhaps the time has now come to look more closely at the role played by these policies in the crisis facing the regime, given that the regime uses its international role and regional clout as one of the principle tools to impose its control within Syria. Such a task requires us to define 'mumana'ah' to analyze its policies and to ask what they have succeeded in changing or achieving, and to what extent events have overtaken them, leading to their failure or adjustment.

Bashar Assad inherited the concept of 'mumana'ah' from his father, Hafez Assad who adopted it as a response to the unilateral policies of Anwar Sadat that led to the Camp David Agreement.

Bashar Assad inherited the concept of 'mumana'ah' from his father, Hafez Assad who adopted it as a response to the unilateral policies of Anwar Sadat that led to the Camp David Agreement. Assad formulated a strategy suitable for both outright opposition to the peace process and for negotiation, a strategy that required him to gain control over two countries - or rather, two countries and three populations: Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians (having lost

Jordan after a brief honeymoon in 1975-76). It was with this aim in mind that Syria intervened in the Lebanese conflict from 1976 onwards. When the Palestinians, or rather the official Palestinian faction led by Yasser Arafat managed to resist Syrian control and the attempts to replace him at the head of the PLO, the Syrian regime resorted to forming the 'rejectionist front' of some ten Palestinian organizations. Similarly, when Lebanon fell under Israeli control in 1982, Syria reasserted its influence by counter-attacking. This counter-attack began with the so-called War of the Mountain of 1983, waged by Walid Jumblatt's troops with Syrian support against the control of the Lebanese Forces over the Shuf region. It was followed by the support for the leftist Lebanese resistance against Israeli occupation, before finally adopting the Islamic Front led by Hizbullah, and reached its apogee when Syrian forces were invited to enter Beirut in 1987 to separate the warring factions. The Syrian mandate over Lebanon was renewed with US and international approval—plus, limited Saudi support—then formally ratified by the Taif Agreement, which tasked the Syrian armed forces with disarming the militias and preserving "civil peace".

But these are the roots of the 'resistance' policy. It was first overtly practiced at the time of the US occupation of Iraq as a response to Secretary of State Colin Powell's demands that,

1. Syria end its alliance with Iran.
2. It stop sending jihadist fighters to Iraq and sheltering Iraq's Baathist leadership on Syrian soil.
3. It sever ties with both Hamas in Palestine and Hizbullah in Lebanon.

## Fawwaz Traboulsi

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Syria's response to these demands was predicated on the fact that the entire regime was blacklisted. The fact that it counterattacked across all fronts, especially its support of armed operations in Iraq and the security regime in Lebanon, was only to be expected.

But where does the policy of 'mumana'ah stand now?

First and foremost, the withdrawal of American military forces from Iraq has brought an end to Syria's armed presence in that country, to be replaced with political, economic and diplomatic strategies. The Syrian regime has stood by and let the US pull out and the Iraqi parliamentary and presidential elections run their course, in the hope that Damascus will be able to achieve a rapprochement between the various Iraqi factions and control a large slice of the Sunni bloc in the post-withdrawal political dispensation. To this end, it worked with Turkey and Saudi Arabia to support Iyad Alawi's bid to become president of the new Iraqi government. Iran, however, favored the Shia and Kurdish parties under the control of Nuri al-Maliki, and entered into a closed deal with the Americans to achieve this end. It could be claimed, therefore, that Syria exercised a policy of 'resistance' in Iraq that successfully saw off US threats of hostile action and kept the regime safe, while failing to secure its influence over the country's politics. But the reverberations of the Iraqi adventure have led to internal problems for Syria, not least the returning jihadists who are fighting against the security forces in the current uprising.

Secondly, Syria responded to American pressures to break their strategic alliance with Iran by forming close ties with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The Syrian-Saudi relationship enjoyed a honeymoon period, during which the two countries found a solution for the Lebanese crisis, following the events of April 2008 the Doha Conference and the Lebanese parliamentary and presidential elections, but the cooperation soon collapsed following the fall of the Hariri government and the growth of an unspoken, largely mysterious, but palpable enmity between Damascus and Riyadh.

The multi-faceted political and business ties between Syria and Turkey, that saw Ankara facilitate indirect talks between Israel and the Syrian regime, were dealt a serious blow by the Israeli assault on the Freedom Flotilla. Furthermore, relations between Turkey and Syria themselves received a setback following harsh Turkish criticism of the Syrian regime for breaking its promises. This seems to be connected with Syria's use of Turkey as a middleman in talks with the Euro-American axis to resolve the current crisis.

Following the fall of Hosni Mubarak, an internal Palestinian truce, and on the eve of UN recognition of Palestinian statehood, Syria has lost its 'resistance' role on the Palestinian front and its influence over Hamas.

Thirdly, the Syrian response to demands to sever links with Hamas and Hizbullah was to invite the two resistance organizations to engage in peace talks. But following the fall of Hosni Mubarak, an internal Palestinian truce, and on the eve of UN recognition of Palestinian statehood, Syria has lost its 'resistance' role on the Palestinian front and its influence over Hamas. Khaled Meshal, head of the movement's political council and a noted hawk, has turned into one of the "give peace with Israel a chance" brigade. This transformation in attitudes can be clearly seen in last July's declaration by Syria that it now officially recognizes a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Fourth, another slice of Syrian 'resistance' policy was consigned to history when Israel pulled out of South Lebanon in 2000 (with the exception of the Shebaa Farms and the Kafr Shuba Hills). Ironically the liberation of occupied South Lebanon deprived Syria of its sole means to apply military pressure on Israel to withdraw

from the Golan Heights. There can be no denying the importance of Syria's support to the Lebanese resistance, which would never have survived without the intelligence and logistical support provided by Damascus, not to mention the regional and international links it put at the disposal of the resistance, such as access to Iranian weaponry and supplies. For its part, this arrangement benefitted Syria by dispensing with the need to mobilize the Golan front and the heavy military, human and economic price consequent on such action. Thus, the policy otherwise known as "the unity of Syrian and Lebanese interests" made Syria ultimately responsible for the stability and security of the northern front of occupied Palestine. Having recognized the Shebaa Farms as Lebanese, Syria took on the additional responsibility of leading Beirut to the negotiating table with the Israelis when the proper time arrived.

Henry Kissinger coined the slogan, "No peace without Syria", bestowing a unique regional and international importance on the country, not to mention legitimizing the regime itself.

The victory of the Lebanese resistance over the Israeli aggression in 2006 was also a triumph for Syrian policy and a frustration both of American policy to uproot Hizbullah and the Israeli attempt to carry this policy out. Furthermore, this victory was a vindication of a regional strategy of missile-based defense, whereby Israeli air superiority was negated by striking at civilian and military targets in the heart of occupied Palestine. Indeed, Hizbullah's success in this regard was a unique achievement in the military and strategic history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In turn this strategic advance

transformed the military wing of Hizbullah from a resistance militia formed to liberate occupied Lebanese territory into a fully fledged national defense force, bolstered by the Syrian-Iranian regional 'resistance' strategy.

On the anniversary of the 1973 October War, Henry Kissinger coined the slogan, "No peace without Syria", bestowing a unique regional and international importance on the country, not to mention legitimizing the regime itself. But that assumed the existence of a genuine process for peace in the region. Now that the battle for international recognition of the Palestinian state has been won, and Israel under Netanyahu and Lieberman is not only seeking to wreck Israeli-Palestinian talks, but the very foundations of the Oslo Accords while Tel Aviv is dominated by those who reject any concessions over the Golan Heights. If Syria - and Lebanon - was able to extract itself from the Israeli-Arab conflict through a peace agreement, what would then remain of its policy of 'resistance', which requires it to pursue bilateral solutions within the bounds set by King Malik Abdallah's Arab peace initiative, based on the principle: "All the territory in exchange for total peace"?

All possibilities remain open. The truly appalling thing in all this is that a regime so contemptuous of its people resists admitting to the crisis in its policy of 'resistance', just as it resists admitting that its great people (and they are great) supported it against the pressures it faced from abroad during the crises in Iraq and Lebanon and only started demanding its most basic rights once these storms had passed.

It is this resistance, in truth an obstinacy, that weakens Syria as a state and a society and renders it vulnerable to foreign interventions and conspiracies at the expense of its national interests and the desires of its people.

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**Translation from the Arabic by Robin Moger.**

# Dictatorship, Military Intervention, and False Binaries in Syria

**A**fter almost five decades, when the time came to publicly oppose authoritarian rule in Syria, one would have thought that it was the rational and decent thing to do. And it is. More than that, it is incumbent on anyone who cares about Syrians (let us leave “Syria” alone for a moment) to struggle for the establishment of a political system that is free(r) of all forms of oppression. So, what is the problem?

## Why Fighting Dictatorship is Intuitive

It is easy, rational and just to adopt unequivocal opposition to the Syrian regime’s authoritarian rule. It is equally easy, rational and just to condemn the regime’s crushing of protests. Regime supporters and some in the anti-imperialist camp retort that some of these protesters are agents of external forces or armed gangs.

While there may be a grain of truth in this argument, it is empty. It is, in fact an insult to the intelligence of any Syria observer. It overlooks the regime’s brutality in the last ten months of uprising. It erases the decades of oppression, detention, silencing, and torture that the regime has dealt to the mere hint of opposition. That regime which turns fifty next year.

Indeed, it is only Saddam Hussein’s relentless authoritarianism in Iraq that has surpassed the legacy of the Syrian regime’s repression. It is true despite Syria’s relative stability until March 2011. Its institutions were poor but sufficiently functional. Its cities were relatively safe. And after the late 1980s, its urban centers boasted an increasingly bustling life. The regime peddled these characteristics as a model of “social peace.” The threat of heavy reprisal along with the formation and state

cooptation of an exceptionally corrupt business class were among the painful threads that held this brittle “social peace” together. Important too in this regard was the fact that the Syrian welfare state was able to provide the minimum needs for most Syrian citizens until the 1990s, though it largely neglected the countryside. It is precisely the relationship between the state and top business echelons after the mid-1980s that gradually exacerbated Syria’s social and regional polarization. After the 2000 succession of Bashar Assad and his team of “liberalizers,” the Syrian Baath (out of all places) introduced what they called the ‘social market economy’ in 2005. Within the still constitutionally socialist republic, the new announcement was intended as a near-formal blow to the remaining vestiges of a state-centered economy.

Prisoners came in all shades and indeed comported with the Syrian regime’s official rhetoric. They included those who dedicated their lives to defend the Palestinian cause and to oppose the United States’ duplicitous policies in the region.

A resulting series of camouflaged neoliberal policies and bad fortune exacerbated existing structural disparities and social discontent among the less privileged. The increasing withdrawal of state subsidies and welfare, the gradual introduction of weak market institutions to replace the corrupt but functioning

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institutions of the state, combined with notorious mismanagement of the economy, became a recipe for social unrest. The scant rainfall during the past decade caused massive migration and loss of jobs in the country side, adding fuel, as well as location, to the fire of social protest potential after 2010. All it took was a spark. Bouazizi provided it. Syria's social peace was exposed and decimated.

But it didn't all start in March 2011. Beneath the serene streets of Damascus and Aleppo lie thousands of political prisoners. Stuffing Syria's jails and solitary confinement units, even prior to the uprising, were Islamists and atheists, liberals and communists, and everything in between. Prisoners came in all shades and indeed comported with the Syrian regime's official rhetoric. They included those who dedicated their lives to defend the Palestinian cause and to oppose the United States' duplicitous policies in the region, its support of dictatorship, and its launching of wars on false counts. The prisoners' fault was not that they were conspirators. It was that they opposed the regime. Their detention highlighted the fact that anti-imperialism has never been nor will it ever be the regime's priority. Clearly, the Syrian National Council (SNC) will not be any better when it comes to related matters of autonomy from external actors.

The tragedy is that the rise of such a problematic body, the SNC is testament to the regime's deep bankruptcy. Some may argue that the regime's holstering of various legitimate regional causes, or the "cause," as a subterfuge for its horrendous domestic repression created resentment even among the "causes'" proponents. Many Syrians are fed up with this duplicity that has come at their expense. They may even appear uninterested in regional issues. Many in the pro-"resistance" camp read this deprioritization of anti-imperialism, or even the domestic call for external intervention, only as a betrayal. They fail to see the exasperation, desperation, vulnerability, and ultimately the motive force of self-preservation. It is none other than the regime that has given birth to this imperative of self-preservation.

### **Imperialism is not the Issue for the Syrian Regime or the Protesters at all Times**

It is one thing for analysts living outside Syria to oppose and condemn foreign intervention (which this author does unequivocally). It is another to assume that all those calling for it in Syria under the current conditions are part of a conspiracy.

Again, it is the Syrian regime's brutality since March 2011 and before that has created the conditions for the street's increasing support for foreign intervention to stop the killing. Certainly, some may have had ulterior motives and supported intervention all along. But the majority of those calling for intervention have been brutalized into doing so. They are not thinking in terms of supporting or opposing imperialism at this time.

**Any type of anti-imperialism must necessarily include a rejection of authoritarianism. Supporting resistance to imperialism at the expense of an entire community's most inalienable rights can only spell defeat.**

The "resistance" camp seems to want or expect hunted and gunned down individuals and families on Syrian streets to prioritize the regime's anti-imperialist rhetoric over the instinct of self-preservation and their fight for freedom from authoritarianism. Again, the fact that some inside Syria are abusing this dynamic to call for the kind of external intervention that the regime's regional and international enemies have long dreamed of does not negate that fight. If die-hards among the pro-resistance camp feel indignant or distraught by these calls, they should recount the modern history of Syria. Indeed, it is the anti-imperialist, pro-resistance camp that has some accounting to do at this stage. Any type of anti-imperialism must necessarily include a rejection of authoritarianism. Supporting resistance to imperialism at the expense of an

entire community's most inalienable rights can only spell defeat.

Finally, the regime's priority above all else has been and continues to be its own preservation. If it engages in or enables resistance to imperialism, that's all the better. If not, well, staying alive is good enough, even if it required siding with the United States or reactionary Arab regimes at times. This is similar to the self-image that the United States maintains of supporting democracy: If it can engage in promoting democracy, that's all the better. If not, promoting dictatorship to serve its interests (as is the case in the Arab world) will do just fine. This is because the objective was never to create democratic regimes, but compliant ones.

### Why Foreign Intervention is Loathed

Protecting and defending authoritarianism on the political grounds that it serves resistance has become desperately short sighted. By the same token, to not understand the implications and consequences of foreign intervention in Syria at this moment is patently short sighted. This moment of regional turmoil and unsavory political alignments linking the worst in the foreign policies of "east" and "west," dating several decades now (longer than the Syrian regime's record of oppressing its own citizens), is cause for caution. In other words, Syria is being used by various powers, including the United States and Saudi Arabia and their chorus, as an occasion to accomplish their own objectives in the region - reactionary ones, to be sure, in terms of the interests of most people in the region as the decades behind us attest, and as the current uprisings against the "fruits" of such objectives make even clearer. That does not mean that we should withdraw our opposition and halt the struggle against dictatorship in Syria. It only serves to remind us how not to do it.

One must start with the simple assertion that the Syrian situation is more than just the Syrian situation. This should not come, however, at the expense of Syrian lives. Since the mid-twentieth century, when mainly European designs for dominating and influencing the countries or politics of the region through schemas such

as the Baghdad Pact, Syria was an important regional prize, but mostly in a passive manner. After Hafez Assad took power in what is called the "Corrective Movement" in 1970-1971, Syria became a more fortified regional actor that not only determined its own internal politics, but also those of other countries at times.

One must start with the simple assertion that the Syrian situation is more than just the Syrian situation. This should not come, however, at the expense of Syrian lives.

Syria became a leading member in what was called the rejectionist front. That front sought to confront Israel without succumbing to bi-lateral peace plans that did not aim at a comprehensive and just settlement of the Palestine-Israel conflict. Save for a brief stint of confrontation between Syria and Israel in 1982 - when Israel downed several Syrian jet-fighters - the story goes that the Syrian-Israeli border was the safest place on earth, despite the occupation of the Golan Heights. However, by proxy, and mostly via non-state actors such as Hizbullah and Hamas, Syria remained the last and only state in confrontation with Israel. Regionally, the Syrian regime acquired a reputation of bravado. This was not because it actively fought Israel. It was because all the other Arab states became non-confrontational.

In 1993, Syria's stance as lone confronter state was further fortified. This was due on the one hand to Iraq's military irrelevance and defeat. On the other hand "peace" with Israel proliferated on multiple fronts: The Oslo accords the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, and deeper flirtations between various Arab countries and Israel, notably Qatar and Morocco. It was also the time when Qaddafi paid off the UK and the US for being a bad boy and promptly joined the community of lawful nations.

The Syrian regime continued to support Hezbollah as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad (both of which had offices in Damascus). It opposed the invasion of Iraq in a manner that no Arab country did. It continued to be the only well-endowed secular and explicitly, if only rhetorically, anti-imperialist state in the region.

But for the United States, Israel, some European countries, Saudi Arabia and its mignons in Lebanon and the Gulf, it is the Syria-Hezbollah-Iran axis that constitutes the most formidable challenge. Taking out Syria as it stands would weaken Hezbollah and isolate Iran. With Syria out of the way, Hezbollah would be starved of its safe arms transport corridor and less able to meet a strike against Iran with reprisal.

One can be moved by the urgency of saving Syrian lives today, but if this is the ultimate purpose, and if Syrians' self-determination is the desired outcome, one can easily see the perils of military intervention.

An Iran-strike would also confront Turkey with a dilemma. Quite aside, from its two-faced posturing on the Syrian authoritarianism at the same time that it oppresses Kurdish resistance, Turkey would have to balance two conflicting desires. On the one hand, the Turkish government hopes to nourish its vision of regional hegemony through the consent and admiration of the Arab street. But it is that very street that rejects the United States-Saudi Arabia alliance that Turkey is implicitly supporting in its drive to isolate the Syrian regime.

In any case, precluding Turkey, the actors that are amassed to benefit from the fall of the Syrian regime are in the final analysis no less problematic than the Syrian regime. In sum, these actors are certainly more violent, discriminatory, and anti-democratic, in reality

and in terms of their collective or individual long-term vision for the region. Whether one supports the Syrian regime or not, the fall of the Syrian regime is more than the fall of the Syrian regime. That does not mean that it should not be opposed or overthrown by domestic means. Syria's past or potential regional role should not be an excuse for supporting its sustenance. Conversely, supporting the demise of the Syrian regime by any means, including external military intervention, is extremely reckless if the objective is to save Syrian lives or set the stage for a post-regime path of self-determination.

Any external military intervention supported by the above array will devastate Syria, because of a host of intended and unintended consequences. It will exponentially increase the death toll of Syrians without achieving any discernable conclusive outcome. Moreover, the external factor will reignite another local and regional struggle rather than simply end domestic authoritarian rule and pave the way for democratic development.

One can be moved by the urgency of saving Syrian lives today, but if this is the ultimate purpose, and if Syrians' self-determination is the desired outcome, one can easily see the perils of military intervention. Ideological considerations aside, the magnitude of the complexity and mayhem can be discerned simply by anticipating a conflict that will involve Iran, Hezbollah, and a substantial chunk of the Syrian population. Internal and regional opposition to external military intervention in Syria will swell the more an attack is imminent. Unless the regime brutality reaches even higher proportions prior to the intervention (apologies for the coldness of the calculation here), it will be counter-productive to say the least. As for the question of no-fly-zones, as opposed to full scale military intervention, it is safe to say that a no-fly zone is a code of sorts for more active military intervention in practice, as the case of Libya makes clear.

#### **The Residual Problem with this Article**

It is crucial to point to a flaw, or lack, within this article, and to introduce an anti-climactic

caveat. First, I must admit that the tenor of the position elaborated in the lines above lacks a clear agency (e.g., institution/party/movement) that might convert it to an actionable path. The Syrian National Council is certainly not it. But that has never been the object of debate. This article is a very modest and insufficient attempt at engendering a discussion about locating or catalyzing such a collective. According to independent protesters on the ground in Syria, there is room for the growth and effectiveness of a truly democratist opposition that is not always in line with the SNC. True, both parties may be benefitting from each other for their own purposes today, but there is growing concern among many activists about where the SNC is headed and how it is run, now and in the longer term. This tension, which is also evident between the SNC and other smaller opposition groups outside Syria, has not become explicit yet. Perhaps the most bright ray of light are the reports that the larger part of the Syrian opposition inside Syria does not take its cues from anyone outside Syria, and for good reason, despite some appearances to the contrary. It may only be this indigenous force that can solve the problem of leadership.

The anti-climactic caveat is that no one outside the SNC and part of the domestic opposition is calling for external intervention in an inexorable manner. That is not for lack of want or desire. Besides the arguments suggested above from a general standpoint, the lack of readiness for external intervention is manifold and not always intuitive. Largely, it's because of

the low pay-offs, and a bit of cynicism, among the anti-Syrian (regime, geostrategic importance, and people) camp. First, Syria is not Iraq or Libya. It does not have ample natural resources to be used as mortgage for future reimbursement for the West's "noble" deed to liberate people. Second, unrest in Syria may potentially spill over to the new champions of democracy in and around the Arabian Peninsula, not to mention Lebanon and the thorny derivatives of further instability in that godforsaken country. Third, the current Syrian regime protected its borders with Israel (actually, itself, considering the occupied Golan) for decades.

Finally, as the venerable Kissinger used to say in the 1980s (I'm paraphrasing), let the Iranians and Iraqis kill each other, for it facilitates things for the United States thereafter. Thus, some would like the Syrians to continue killing each other for a while longer. They would be happy to see Syria weakening even further its institutions and infrastructure while exacerbating social/political divisions and undercutting possibilities of collective action for a long time to come. Syria's long-term trajectory after the Baath had fallen is an unknown quantity regarding the question of anti-imperialism and the struggle for restoring the Golan. So, from their perspective, why not wait for Syria and Syrians to disempower themselves further instead of having a swift conclusion?

For the moment, external military intervention is not seriously on the table yet. But the discursive conflicts on this question continue unabated and merit a discursive treatment.





# The Syrian Revolution and the New Constitutional Values

The youths of the Syrian revolution rose up against the condition of wretchedness and despair that generations of Syrians have been captured in, for fifty years. By taking to the streets daily, the youths of the revolution express a profound consciousness that their wretched life is not a fate; that such condition is a product of a massive mishandling of public affairs; that their lived hardship at the local level is connected to arbitrary policy-making at the national level; that impulsive national policy-making is the result of the lack of participation, transparency, accountability, and an independent judiciary; that the lack of any possibilities to hold government to account is caused by the absence of power rotation; and that all this was legitimated by the successive Syrian constitutions in the past fifty years, which all brought the legislative, executive and judicial powers to coalesce, so that government becomes a tool to contain and silence discontent, and to produce fear, instead of guaranteeing human dignity. The youths of the revolution broke the wall of fear, and said everything in simple words. They questioned the foundation of their loathsome present and its political roots, and, with their dreams, they are now laying the grounds for a different future.

In this article, I attempt to accompany the revolution as it rises up against the prevailing political values, and as it creates and discovers the values that will be constitutive of the new Syria. I write about the values that the Syrian revolution is constituting, as it faces existential challenges. The peaceful revolution is entering the tunnel of regime frenzy and the game of nations. The whine of bullets and the stench of death penetrate to settle in the place. Yet the

youths continue to take to the streets. They devise yet more creative forms of mobilization. And they continue to peacefully call for freedom and dignity in Syria. I wish to listen carefully to the sounds and actions of the youths, to get a sense of some of the values that they imagine as constitutive for the new Syria.

The successive Syrian constitutions in the past fifty years all brought the legislative, executive and judicial powers to coalesce.

As I attempt to identify some of the values that are dreamt up by the youths of the revolution, I shall be selective, in hunting the best of what their voices utter, their pens write and their hands perform. I do so deliberately. From the reality of the revolution I wish to speak about the ideal representations of its youths, not the horror that surrounds it. I wish to talk about aspirations, not delusions; about dreams not nightmares; about moments that offer a glimmer of hope, not actions that lead to despair; about what the youths of the revolution want Syria to leave up to, not what they fear that it may sink down in. I want to walk in step with the youths of the revolution as they break up with their present lived political reality and imagine a new social contract. They are doing this every day, everywhere and in every means of expression.

I make no claim that what I write corresponds to the reality of the Syrian revolution. Indeed the reality is far richer, more complex and often less bright. I shall not put words in the mouths of the

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youths. But I shall aim to highlight the values that are most characteristic and distinctive of their movement and the most entitled to last. As I try to discern the values dreamt up and forged by the youths in their movement, I admit that this comes through my own personal impressions, which have a clear bias in favor of any movement that liberates the minds and brings hearts together, as opposed to movement that drives to seclusion, closure and division.

### Human Dignity

The spark that lit the uprising was a slap, thrashed by a policeman on the face of a young man in the Hariqa commercial district in the heart of Damascus in February 2011. Hundreds took to the streets immediately afterwards, chanting 'The Syrian people will not be humiliated!' At more or less the same time, the town of Deraa was in uproar over the continuing detention and torture of a group of students after they wrote 'The people want the fall of the regime!' on a wall at their school. The authorities humiliated their families as they demanded to know the fate of their children. The people of Deraa took to the streets, chanting, 'Death before humiliation!' The first bullet was fired, the first martyr fell and tens of demonstrators were detained and mistreated.

The revolution's Local Coordination Committees proclaimed that the "Syrian is honorable."

The demonstrations spread and death went with them. Individuals and whole cities were brutalized and abused. The sheer scale of the killing and torture exposed the authorities' contempt for human dignity. The more the regime apparatus treated people like animals that deserved to be put down, the more Syrians realized that their own dignity would have to be the starting principle for any new social contract. A consciousness of human dignity and the dignity of a human consciousness were the values hymned by the youths of the revolution in word

and deed. The revolution's Local Coordination Committees proclaimed that the "Syrian is honorable." For the Syrian revolting youths dignity is the starting principle for freedom. There is no true freedom without human dignity. Dignity is not a value posited by the constitution or the law. It is not created by positive law, but is a moral principle; a pre-constitutional Major Premise, which finds its evidence in the natural right of the human being to exist on this earth. Human dignity precedes the social contract. The constitution comes to proclaim human dignity not to create it. Then the other rights flow. In the Syrian revolution, the consciousness of human dignity is radical, decisive and non-negotiable. The more the regime violates it, the more determined the youths of the revolution become, in making it a fundamental postulate in the constitution of the new Syria. Further values are derived from human dignity: the dignity of birth, the dignity of the body, the dignity of the self, the dignity of life, the dignity of death. A number of rights flow from human dignity and must be protected in the new Syrian constitution, without any exception. These include the right to childhood; the right to the inviolability of the body and self from violence, torture, sexual assault and other inhuman treatment; the right to receive dignified medical treatment; the right to pursue an honorable leaving; the right to a dignified death, burial and funeral. Syrians have never permitted and will never permit the most basic of these rights to be tampered with. Their revolution is thus irreversible and irrevocable.

### Freedom

From the very first day of the revolution the youths were calling for freedom, raising their hands in public squares and chanting 'Freedom! Freedom!' They scrawled the word on walls and banners; they uttered it in every language, including Kurdish, they sung and sketched the word "Freedom," freely. Scarcely a demonstration went by without songs, signs and drawings calling for freedom.

Until the writing of these lines, the youths of the revolution have not yet obtained the

desired freedom. They have nevertheless created atmospheres in which they are able to assert every day their freedom of opinion, and expression in all forms. In the time of the revolution, electronic magazines, websites, blogs and pages on social networking sites flourished after a system of selective licensing and an impossibly restrictive regulation have long prevented Syrians from freely publishing any printed material. Such publications write on the revolution and for it. They debate options concerning the fate of the revolution, and open discussions over the major social and political issues. They shunt aside all the arbitrary and constantly shifting lattice of taboos and red lines laid down by the regime over decades. All who work in such publications are guilty in the eyes of the regime. Nevertheless, every week, new magazines pop up, new pens bristle, which are all printed and distributed ever more widely.

**The Syrian revolution proves that opinion in its best form is artistic expression.**

The Syrian revolution proves that opinion in its best form is artistic expression. In the squares where demonstrations are held, the chants for freedom quickly became songs for freedom. Indeed the most prevalent and longest lasting revolutionary act in Syria today is singing and satiric art. The youths of the revolution smuggle paintbrushes and ink, cardboards and colors. They stitch together sheets and cut up boxes, they bring loudspeakers and lamps, select vantage points to film from, and mount cameras. They work to secure the squares where they gather, young and old coordinating their efforts, and women even more than men. All this is collectively carried out, where singing is mingled with painting, to produce incessantly epic scenes of demonstrations. The revolution has been drawing its protests, and has blended drawing with music and theatre.

With their obstinate determination to publish and to express themselves, the youths of the revolution entrench the principle of freedom of opinion and expression, in its best form, as a constitutive value for the new Syria. They will accept nothing less than this principle becoming the bedrock of any legal system in the new Syria. Having tasted it, having extracted it with their blood, they will not accept less than the principle of freedom of opinion and expression becoming incapable of being subject to the restriction of the law. The law must simply guarantee the full exercise of such right. They will not allow that the publication of magazines and periodicals, the formation of groups and associations, and the emergence of initiatives and works of art and literature be dependent on the prior consent or permission of the authorities. They will not allow that publications and works could be subject to any censorship or subsequent control.

The constitution and the law must guarantee the freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to deride politics and politicians. This requires that the law must intervene to ensure that one citizen's exercise of his or such freedoms do not interfere in the free expression or personal rights of another. An independent, transparent, just and legitimate judiciary will play a vital role in restraining abuses of these rights and in countering infringement on the personal freedoms of others.

For the youths, the revolution started, as they asserted their freedom to access information and disseminate it without censorship. The young man or woman of the revolution was once an ordinary person, who struggled with his and her wretched life in silence. With the revolution this young man or woman became a revolutionary, longing for free and dignified citizenship, and a journalist. Revolutionary-citizen, citizen-journalist, journalist-revolutionary: these are the identities in the time of the revolution. This citizen-revolutionary-journalist has perforated despotism, and broken through the barriers of discipline and censorship to publish information and news. He or she proclaimed that no authority

shall have any power to prevent the free flow of information, no matter how brutal it becomes.

Journalism has merged with its subject until the two have become inseparable. The citizen-journalist-revolutionary suffers and reports on his suffering at the same time. His house is shelled, his family killed; awash with pain he tucks his camera under his arm and goes out to record what is happening for the rest of the world to see. The images, reports and information put out by the revolution outnumber those broadcasted by the traditional media outlets. The footage they produce does not show ordinary life taking place in ordinary cities, but momentous events in the Syrian history. In every image there is a scene, with profound symbolism. Regardless of the source or the brutality of what they contain, these images say something important. They bear witness to the reality of the revolution. They are also historical documents. Every hour, hundreds of images and reports from Syria's towns are uploaded to the Internet. Every town has its own channel on YouTube, its own archive of pictures, its own network of revolutionary correspondents. This vast stock of reportage has broken the state's monopoly on information, as well as that of the global news network. The news networks created by the revolution became sources of information with a reasonable degree of credibility.

**Revolutionary-citizen, citizen-journalist, journalist-revolutionary: these are the identities in the time of the revolution.**

In all they do the youths of the revolution are laying the ground for a Syrian society in which information and the access to it is free from censorship or state interference. They will not allow the constitution to state that access to information and its dissemination shall be free, subject to the restrictions of the law. They will not allow such formulation, because

whatever the constitution will give in its text, it will be immediately taken away by the law's procedural labyrinth. They will accept no less than a constitution that openly guarantees the unrestricted free access to information and its dissemination. The youths of the revolution will not permit less than the law guaranteeing the exercise of this freedom, without restriction. The formation of news networks and journalistic bodies will no longer be conditional on the consent of the authorities. There will be no Ministry of Information in the new Syria. Who informs who? Everyone knows his or her news; everyone has access to information, and has the right to disseminate it without censorship. There is no information-as-propaganda in the new Syria, but only journalism that is exercised freely. The law would intervene to prevent restrictions on the freedom to have access to and disseminate information, and to prevent any infringement upon the other personal rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution. The authorities do not have the right to discipline or control the exercise of such freedom.

### **Citizenship**

From the start of the revolution the consciousness of a common fate among Syrian cities was paramount. The demonstrations of Deraa could have remained confined to Hauran (which is the Darra wider region). Yet hundreds of Syrian cities, towns and neighborhoods quickly revolted in solidarity with Deraa. Scenes of demonstration reaffirming the sense of a shared destiny that bound the Syrian cities and towns in the face of the regime's killing machine, repeat themselves incessantly. Hardly a single demonstration took place without the gathered protestors singing in support of other cities towns and neighborhoods, near or far. Cities remember one another, assuage their shared grief and tirelessly pledge their solidarity.

From the start of the revolution, the youths chanted 'One, one, one! The Syrian people is one!' In response, the regime shrieked about civil discord. Not a day went by that wasn't packed with moments of pure symbolism, affirming

the unity of the Syria people in its sectarian, communitarian and ethnic diversity. Hands were raised to the sky and the people shouted: 'One hand! One hand!' Scenes have repeated of youths from different cities, towns and neighborhoods making visits to other towns to demonstrate their solidarity; and hosts sheering in welcome to show the shared feeling of the common fate among the various components of Syrian society. The youths came to the squares to affirm their diversity, and to insist that their demands for freedom and dignity are shared by all. The aesthetic worldview of the Syrian revolution is constructed by the pens, ideas and initiatives of tens of Syrian writers, artists and intellectuals who are descendants of the diverse communities of Syria. The sap of the spoken, sketched, sung, written and dreamed revolution gushes from the diverse limbs of Syrian society, to create a unique fragrance of meaning.

**Not a day went by that wasn't packed with moments of pure symbolism, affirming the unity of the Syria people in its sectarian, communitarian and ethnic diversity.**

The Syrian revolution is shaped by the assertion of diversity and the consciousness of the common that permeates such diversity. As it unfolds, the Syrian revolution draws the lineaments of a citizenship that is rich in its plurality, and unshakeable in its unity. It is a citizenship that does not conceal diversity, but does not let it become predominant in public life. It is a citizenship that seeks to know diversity, but does not allow diversity to become a source of political factionalism. It recognizes dissimilarity but does not allow proselytizing and preference. It recognizes difference but is not tired of communication. It embraces diversity and does not marginalize. It feeds on tolerance, and does not incite rancor. It encourages reconciliation, and does not provoke discord. It is a citizenship that is contemporary and creative. It is asked for

and dreamed of by the youths of the revolution, despite the many attempts to submerge them in the darkness of 'fatal identities.' It is a citizenship that is rich by a plurality that feeds legislation with the best content, without bias, imposition or dismissal. It is a citizenship that gives every citizen, regardless of his religious, sectarian or ethnic affiliation, an equal chance to be elected to public office, and even to the office of the President of the Republic. This citizenship is no fantasy. It is flaunted every day by the young men and women of the revolution and it deserves to be the central component of public life in new Syria.

### **The Public Place**

The demands of the youths for freedom, dignity and citizenship cannot be understood without the context in which all these is shaped namely, the implacable will to persevere with peaceful protests, and the costly pursuit to reclaim the public place.

The revolution began - and continues - as demonstrations and rallies. The more the regime tried to hem in and silence these demonstrations, the more deep-seated they became and the wider they spread. The youths of the revolution will not surrender their right to free and peaceful assembly and demonstration, a right for which they have paid with their lives. The most glorious gift a new Syrian constitution could give would be to honor the memories of the thousands of martyrs who have fallen in the public squares of Syria by enshrining the citizen's inalienable right to freely and peacefully assemble and demonstrate without the need of any permission from the authorities. The right to demonstrate is one of the basic rights of citizenship. It ought to be exercised as part of the citizen's right to exercise direct oversight over government.

As these lines are written, however, the youths of the revolution are yet to occupy Syria's major public squares of the big cities. Nevertheless the youths flock in their modest neighborhoods and create their squares in the backstreets. They gather in coordinate movements, and they sing their determination to reach the major public squares.

Public squares in major cities were and still are used as places to pack crowds and produce scenes of the cult of the personality. In the time of the revolution, the meaning of the public squares is felt differently. They are seen as places where the authorities must be summoned into the presence of the citizen, after the citizen has long been dragged there to display allegiance to the authorities.

The public place allows the coming together of all components of society. It gives society an opportunity to know its own plurality.

The public place allows the coming together of all components of society. It gives society an opportunity to know its own plurality. It is an opportunity for individuals to express their opinions freely, and to debate and discuss peacefully. It is the place where opinion exists and acquires a meaning. No opinion is meaningful without a sphere in which it is expressed. The public place is more than a physical site. It is for the youths of the revolution a state of mind that now structures their mobilization, and a new form of thinking that they have come to train themselves to adopt. The youths of the revolution assert that they are entitled to care about, and express their views on, public affairs. They understand this can only happen where the diversity of opinion is fully recognized. They create initiatives to call on the silent citizens

to join without fear debates, discussions and deliberations about politics and public affairs, in a manner that does away with the stagnation that marked Syrian public life for decades. The revolution has imposed on Syrians the reality of the public sphere, in the wider sense. It has challenged them to fearlessly voice their views on major issues after living for so long in the “kingdom of silence.”

With their movement, the Syrian youths of the revolution have demonstrated their attachment to the values of freedom, dignity and citizenship, which all become meaningful in the public sphere. The revolution has given young people the opportunity to discover the meaning of these rights, to shape them with their mobilization and make of them an intellectual and moral frame of reference, through which they have been able to criticize their reality and imagine a new future. With every day that passes, tens are killed or imprisoned, whole cities are assaulted, just because these young men and women gather together to call for these rights. Each day, more and more Syrians become conscious of these rights and their desire for them grows stronger. These rights are no longer distant dreams or empty words. They have been taken up by the youths of the revolution. They have drunk deep of their essential meaning and given them life in their movement. Every youth who demonstrates today is an embodiment of freedom, dignity and citizenship. He carries within him a burning desire to implant these values in the constitution and the public life of the new Syria.

**Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.**

# Is it Winter or Spring for Christians in Syria?

Since the Arab uprisings began, the Western media, in particular the conservative Christian press, has questioned whether the Arab Spring has turned into a 'Christian winter', following the tragic outcome of the Maspero demonstrations in Cairo on October 9, 2011. Lebanese Maronite Christian Patriarch Bechara Rai started to stoke fears over Syrian Christians with controversial remarks on the future of Christians in the region during an official trip to Paris in early September 2011. Rai focused on the Syrian uprising, warning that the downfall of the Assad regime would either lead to sectarian civil war, disintegration of Syria into sectarian mini-states or a fundamentalist Sunni regime.<sup>1</sup> The Maspero tragedy, as well as the apparent Islamization of the Arab Spring, with the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the strong showing by the Islamist Nahda Party in the Tunisian elections, seemed to confirm his fears.

will be imposed on them. The events leading up to the Maspero tragedy certainly embody this fear: Coptic Christians were protesting against the destruction of a church in Aswan by Salafists, and were attacked, with up to 27 protesters killed by the Egyptian army.

The Maspero incident focused attention on Christians elsewhere in the Middle East, especially the Christian sects in Syria who roughly make up about ten percent of the total population. The killings of Iraqi Christians and their forced displacement definitely haunts their co-religionists in Syria, especially because of the influx of Iraqi refugees into Syria.

## Where do Syrian Christians Stand?

But understanding where Syrian Christians stand vis-à-vis the regime and the uprising is complex. The regime's ban on foreign journalists entering the country makes it difficult to gauge to what extent Christians genuinely support the regime. Fear of persecution as a minority in a post-Assad Syria has pushed Syrian Christians, particularly some Christian religious leaders, into either actively supporting the regime (because of direct business or power links) or staying at home to wait for the outcome of the revolution. For this reason, Christian areas in Syria have not witnessed protests.

Syrian Catholic archbishop Elias Tabeh for example, in *Der Spiegel*, called Assad a "very cultured man" and dismissed "demonstrators as terrorists." But Patriarch Hazim of the Greek Orthodox Church (which represents the biggest Syrian Christian community), whose initial statements indicated support for the regime, has recently been more nuanced in his views on the revolution. Because of his base in Damascus,

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These concerns are certainly legitimate, especially since it is natural for minorities to feel insecure during times of upheaval when outcomes are unclear and the nature of future political systems is still unknown. There is always a sense within Christian minority groups that mainstream Muslim cultural and religious norms

## Doreen Khoury

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Hazim's political statements are usually ambiguous and open to interpretation, but two statements are noteworthy. On October 21 during a radio interview, he said that although he shared Patriarch Rai's fears of fundamentalists taking power in Syria, he also refuted the argument that minorities supported dictatorships, criticizing the notion that "Christians defend their existence at the expense of freedom and human rights."<sup>2</sup> Following the Orthodox Antioch Conclave on October 27 he said that "the Church cannot stand helplessly by amid oppression and discrimination from which the peoples and groups are suffering."<sup>3</sup>

### Syrian Christian activists have refused to link the fate of Christians to the Assad regime.

Syrian Christian activists have refused to link the fate of Christians to the Assad regime. Intellectual and dissident Michel Kilo criticized the Maronite Patriarch for his statements, calling for the use of calm language, despite legitimate fears over the current situation. On September 17 a statement by Syrian Christian activists and intellectuals condemned Rai's interference in internal Syrian affairs, and "stirring up sensitivities between citizens of all sects". Affirming that Christians are an integral part of the Syrian nation and do not need protection, they also rejected the Assad regime's ploy in branding itself as the protector of Christians, as the Syrian crisis is political and not sectarian, and the protests are a popular civil revolution.<sup>4</sup> Supporting the popular uprising or not is also a generational issue. While the older generation seems to be wary of the protests, the Local Coordination Committees (grassroots organizations of the uprising) contain many young Christian activists who are frustrated with the conservative stance of church leaders.<sup>5</sup> A Facebook page called 'Syrian Christians in Support of the Revolution'<sup>6</sup> which has over 37,000 'Likes', says in its description: "They

accuse the Syrian revolution of being Islamist, and this page proves that all sects, including Christians, are at the heart of the revolution."

### Has the Arab Spring been Islamized?

Claims that the Arab Spring has been Islamized and that democratic gains have been reversed have to be put in perspective. First of all, the Muslim Brotherhood is by no means the biggest component of the Syrian opposition, and as its leadership has been outside Syria for 30 years it is difficult to assess its popularity on the ground. There is also no information on the actual number of Salafists in Syria, other than the regime's claims, which are aimed at scaremongering.

Because demonstrations are coming out of mosques on Friday, many are automatically characterizing the uprising as Islamist. First of all, 'Muslim' and 'Islamist' are being used concurrently, as if all Muslims are Islamists. The two are separate distinct identities. Moreover, it is perfectly natural for demonstrations to come out of mosques, as they are often the only safe places where people can gather.

Secondly, the uprisings are overturning not only political systems but also old mindsets and imposed ideologies. While many Syrian Muslims may be religiously devout, it does not necessarily mean that they will accept ideological repression, especially as the Arab revolutions opened the public sphere to free expression and mobilization.

The Assad regime, like most Arab dictatorships, quashed any religious or cultural identities, primarily to establish tight control over society. So it is not surprising that when repression is lifted, these identities seek to openly express themselves, culturally and politically. These manifestations include Islamism.<sup>7</sup> Burhan Ghalyoun, leader of the Syrian National Council, has noted that Muslims are essentially Syrian citizens and have the right to be fully represented; "the new Syria cannot be 'new' if it discriminates between Muslims and non-Muslim and in any case, during elections the Syrian people will decide who rules them."<sup>8</sup>

### Has the Assad Regime Protected Christians from Sectarianism?

The pan-Arab ideology of the Baath regime was historically attractive to minorities as it allowed them to transcend sectarian identities, and advance socially and politically in a region where the Sunni Arab identity dominates. But the Assad regime, in order to entrench itself in Syrian society, has succeeded in convincing some Syrians, especially minorities, that it is the only alternative to chaos, by highlighting the risk of civil war and stressing society's fundamentalist and sectarian elements. This rhetoric has worked with three groups who fear Islamist rule: minorities, the business class and the urban middle-class.

The pan-Arab ideology of the Baath regime was historically attractive to minorities as it allowed them to transcend sectarian identities, and advance socially and politically in a region where the Sunni Arab identity dominates.

The Baath regime constructed a top-down ordering of society, creating divisions by fostering direct bilateral ties of loyalty with these groups and convincing them that their survival is dependent on it. As Damascus-based Syrian cultural researcher Hassan Abbas writes, the regime manufactured these social groups "as a support base and an intermediary through which to protect the regime."<sup>9</sup> Because of the continued support of these groups, the regime has been able to claim that it has not lost legitimacy. The regime has heavily relied on the *shabiha*<sup>10</sup> and the state media to portray the uprising as dominated by two feared entities: foreign conspiracy and Salafists. This not only intimidates people, but isolates these social groups from mainstream Syrian society. Thus when religious leaders like Elias Tabe or Bechara Rai fear the 'end of Christianity' this is a sectarian position against Muslims, mostly fed by the regime.

Nir Rosen's two-part feature on the Alawites for the Al-Jazeera English website shows how the Assad regime by aggressively promoting the interests of the Alawite sect and pushing them mostly into the state security, also entrapped them and isolated them. "Assadism" became the Alawite religion and their identity. "Assadism filled the gap left by the negation of traditional Alawite identity."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the regime's main line of defense, that it installed a secular state which protects minorities and does not distinguish between sects, is also open to scrutiny. According to Syria's 'secular' constitution, the president has to be Muslim, and the basis of jurisprudence is Islamic Shari'a Law. Syrian civil activist Maan Abdul Salam says that the regime organized annual conferences on 'brotherhood' between Muslims and Christians. By propagating the idea that the two sects should tolerate each other it deliberately enhanced sectarianism. If the regime was genuinely concerned with eliminating sectarianism, it could have instead passed a civil personal status law<sup>12</sup> which would link citizenship and belonging to the state and not to sect or religion.<sup>13</sup>

Thus even as the Assad regime presented itself as a protector of the Christians, it also succeeded in instilling a sense of their isolation from mainstream society. The argument propagated by the Assad regime, and supported by some Christian leaders, that the regime should be maintained because it guarantees social cohesion must be seen clearly for what it is: Blackmailing religious minorities into supporting the regime.

Christians are fully integrated in Syria society, and participate in all of walks of life, so why link this to the benevolence of the regime, and not to the fact that Syrian society is tolerant in general? Despite the dozens of articles that have appeared on the 'plight' of Syrian Christians, there are no credible reports since the start of the revolution of sectarian attacks against Christian villages, property or churches. Most articles contain interviews with Christians who express their fear, but do not report on any sectarian

targeting or harassment. Mount Lebanon Greek Orthodox Bishop George Khodr has said that although Christian Copts in Egypt have recently experienced sectarian violence, the same cannot be said for Christians in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. He notes that the Church is in constant contact with Christians in Syria, who have not been subject to sectarian pressure, even in cities like Homs and Hama which have witnessed mass protests.<sup>14</sup>

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The irony, notes Nasser Weddady of the American Islamic Council, is that “when the Assad regime says it is protecting Christians, this sets up a false equivalency: because at the end of the day, this is a dictatorship, and the Baath regime is an equal opportunity torturer: if you oppose them, they will attack you.”<sup>15</sup>The regime has been brutal to any form of Kurdish opposition for decades, and it has imprisoned Christian and Alawite dissidents, such as Michel Kilo, and recently Louay Hussein.

In November, the Syrian government expelled Jesuit priest Paolo dall'Oglio for criticizing the regime's violent crackdown on protestors. Dall'Oglio was a renowned promoter of dialogue between Christians and Muslims and had been engaged in efforts for internal reconciliation, particularly in the current crisis. His expulsion sent a clear message that the regime's support of Christians is not unconditional and that those who publicly addressed the oppression of the Assad regime would be deemed members of the opposition.

Here the Maspero incident can be tied in, because it showed that just as regimes can protect minorities, they can also choose to discriminate against them, as it was state authorities, namely the army, who were responsible for the attack on the Copts. There is always the danger that if the regime becomes increasingly cornered, both regionally and internationally, it could resort to instigating sectarian violence itself, and pinning the blame on Islamists or foreign conspirators. The Assad regime has long and extensive experience in inciting sectarian strife; it actively participated in the Lebanese civil war and its aftermath, meddled in Iraq, and armed factions against each other. It will be a leading instigator of civil war in Syria, if it feels that this is the only way to retain power.

### **Can Christians, on a Strategic Level, Afford to Side with a Dictator and Adopt a Negative View of the Arab Spring?**

The revolutions have been about freedom of expression, more socio-economic rights, more control for people over their lives, the end of state corruption and more access to and representation in public life. If Christians are an integral part of Syria, they cannot limit their rights or role to whether they can pray in public or not, but have to consider all the political, social and economic rights associated with citizenship. Cultural and religious rights are fundamental rights, not a privilege that Christians should feel lucky to have.

Several analysts have warned of the negative repercussions of Christians appearing to send a message to Syrian protestors that Christians back a dictator against their demands, and thus committing them to such a controversial stance. If Christians are perceived to identify too much with the regime, there is a possibility of a backlash against the community if the regime falls.<sup>16</sup> On the regional and international levels, supporting an increasingly isolated regime might also have negative consequences.

Christians cannot limit their view of the Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising in particular to a primarily narrow sectarian perspective based on Christian existential fears, whereby the only

outcomes they can conceive of are conservative Islamic states hostile to religious minorities. Although a sectarian civil war in Syria cannot at all be dismissed, it is not inevitable that the Lebanon and Iraq scenarios of sectarian strife will unfold in Syria. We should not ignore a probable scenario in which Syria could transition to a freer, democratic and just system, which is fair towards minorities. Syrian opposition leader Bourhan Ghalyoun and the Local Coordination Committees have constantly reiterated the opposition's guarantees of a civil state, a national pact between representatives of sects and religions and his belief that the success of the revolution depends on the involvement of all segments of the Syrian population so that all are represented.<sup>17</sup>

If Christians are an integral part of Syria, they cannot limit their rights or role to whether they can pray in public or not, but have to consider all the political, social and economic rights associated with citizenship.

Fear of repressive Islamists does not only apply to Christians, as moderate Muslims and secular liberals, both are by no means a minority in the Syria, also feel threatened and have an equal stake in opposing the rise of more extreme forms of Islamism. Thus, Christians as an integral part of Syrian society cannot afford not to support Syrian uprising. Ultimately they have

to look forward, because by isolating themselves from the uprising, they risk losing out on playing a leading role in a future Syria.

### Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> "Hazim stressed importance of Orthodox Antioch unity." October 28, 2011, The Daily Star <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/Oct-28/152450-hazim-stresses-importance-of-orthodox-antioch-unity.ashx#axzz1cNPbMhy9>
- <sup>4</sup> Paula Asteeh, "Rai is the head of Christian minority in the East and his words are not logical or acceptable." September 17, 2011 Asharq Al-Awsat, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11981&article=640776&search=%E3%ED%D4%C7%E1%20%DF%ED%E1%E6&state=true>
- <sup>5</sup> See "Christian activists impatient with the religious leaders defending the regime & call for organizing a meeting against the official church positions", September 9, 2011 Asharq Al-Awsat, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11973&article=639530>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/SyrianChristians>
- <sup>7</sup> See Robert Grenier, "the price of democracy in the Middle East" AlJazeera.net 17 October 2011 <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/10/20111017122127469546.html>
- <sup>8</sup> "Ghalyoun: We understand Rai's fears but the solution is in democracy and not a coalition of minorities." 10 September 2011 El Nashra <http://www.elnashra.com/news/show/393872>
- <sup>9</sup> Hassan Abbas, "The dynamics of the uprising in Syria" 19 October 2011 Jadaliyya.com <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2906/the-dynamics-of-the-uprising-in-syria>
- <sup>10</sup> State sponsored thugs, much like the Egyptian baltagiyya.
- <sup>11</sup> Nir Rosen, "Assad's Allawites: the guardians of the throne." October 10, 2011, Al.Jazeera.com, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/20111010122434671982.html>
- <sup>12</sup> i.e. family issues, like marriage, divorce and inheritance are administered by the state, and not by religious courts
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Maan Abdul Salam, Syrian civil activist on 26 October 2011.
- <sup>14</sup> "We are not afraid for the Syrian Christians and there is no pressure in them even in cities like Homs." September 27, 2011, Al Rai newspaper, <http://www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/Article.aspx?id=300045&date=27092011>
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Nasser Weddady, outreach director at the American Islamic Congress on October 25, 2011.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with Antoine Haddad on October 19, 2011. See also: Michael Young, "Patriarch Rai, you're wrong." NowLebanon.com, September 9, 2011, <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=309727>
- <sup>17</sup> "Ghalyoun: We understand Rai's fears but the solution is in democracy and not a coalition of minorities." September 10, 2011 El Nashra <http://www.elnashra.com/news/show/393872>

# The Assad Regime

## Controlling Information and the Contradictory Image

**D**uring one of his meetings with a group of Syrian students on May 5, 2011, Bashar Assad mentioned that it was not the demonstrators that bothered him so much as the people who filmed them and sent the images to the media. In my view, this is a deeply significant admission of how much the Assad regime places value on information, and how far it will go to contain the threat it poses. It also suggests that the decision to target those who capture events on film—or rather, on their mobile phones—and even to have them killed, is a presidential one.

### Father and Son

Under Hafez Assad the Syrian regime enjoyed almost total control over the flow of information, something that made it very hard to predict what would happen inside Syria when he passed away, even for Syrians themselves. The regime and its security officials monopolized the vast majority of information, including that which touched on citizens' private lives and public opinion. A notable example of this information policy in action was when Syrians, in the 1990s, learned of secret negotiations between Syria and Israel, even as the Syrian state media continued to talk of the "Israeli enemy", plots by the "Zionist entity" and promoted their favorite slogan: "no sound is heard over the sound of battle." Maybe it was at this point that Syrians finally realized that their political leadership was fundamentally unpredictable, a quality Hafez Assad himself considered as a badge of honor: evidence of his strength and artfulness.

It was a model Bashar Assad sought to emulate to maintain the freedom of manoeuvre enjoyed by his father. State affairs were dealt

with as state secrets, not permitted to be disclosed and discussed. They were a red line. It is interesting that most Syrian opposition politicians and activists were accused of "spreading false information, thus weakening the spirit of the nation." In a sense it is true, this 'spirit' that Assad is trying to impose on the nation will be weakened when information is no longer censored; herein lies the importance of spreading information, and its danger, too.

Were it not for the Arab Spring, the events of Daraa in March 2011 would have remained an isolated incident of which no one would have heard.

As a result, Syria is listed as having some of the most rigorous media and Internet monitoring in the world. The authorities shut down newspapers, censor entire issues, pull other issues off the newsstand, physically cut pages out of "brother Arab" publications that make it into the country to prevent the free circulation of 'dangerous' information to the masses.

### Information Control

Were it not for the Arab Spring, the events of Daraa in March 2011 would have remained an isolated incident of which no one would have heard. Over the years, the Syrian regime has amassed considerable skills in restricting information, but it does not, it seems, possess much expertise in dealing with information once it is out. This can be clearly seen in the official response to information that Syrian activists

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succeed in publishing. At the outset, when the president was still focused on containing events, the state media simply denied them. Regime-aligned analysts and state controlled media outlets claimed, for instance, that footage from the village of Bayda (where tens of villagers were rounded up in a public square on April 12, 2011 and humiliated, while armed security troopers jumped up and down on their backs) was in fact of Kurdish Peshmerga militants in Iraq. This prompted a man named Ahmed Bayasi, who appeared in the footage from Bayda, to appear in a YouTube video which was circulated on Facebook and satellite TV channels, showing him standing in the same square, stating his name and brandishing his identification documents. Bayasi was subsequently arrested and activists leaked news that he had been killed. Some weeks later, the Syrian media aired an interview with Bayasi in the state security headquarters denying reports of his death. Ironically, with this interview the same media defused its own claim that they were Peshmerga fighters in Iraq and not Syrian security forces.

Another example is the video that was posted on YouTube and broadcast on satellite television, purporting to show the discovery of the first mass grave in Daraa in May 2011. State television and the state-affiliated Dunia channel rushed to denounce the video as a fake, but that same night, the Syrian state news agency reported that Bashar Assad made a phone call to the victims' families—three of them were from the same family—promising to hold those responsible for the massacre to account.

At a meeting with another group of citizens from Douma, a Damascus suburb, Assad admitted his disappointment at the state television service, stating that he personally never watched it, giving the impression that he was locked in a struggle against the malign influence of his own media outlets. But his outrage was short-lived. Soon, he willingly embraced these media tactics (in essence, the tactics developed by his father) and at his second speech, delivered at Damascus University in June 2011 he praised the efforts made by the

state media in what he termed “an information war”. On the side of the regime was “the Syrian Electronic Army” that attacked public and personal social media websites, deluging them with comments and invective, and attempting to get Facebook pages and accounts shut down by reporting them to the administrators. Assad also expressed his admiration for the Syrian media's brave confrontation with a universal media “conspiracy” against the regime, joining state television in denouncing the uprising and casting doubt on all non-official accounts of events.

This attitude was particularly evident in the interview he gave to ABC News in December 2011, during which he appeared in denial and totally out of touch with reality. Instead of acting as the head of state and hence highly-informed on all matters, Assad came across as a member of the public with no conceptions outside that of the state's own narrative. In his last speech, on January 10, 2012, Assad expressed his disgust at the interview, claiming it was fabricated and edited in a misleading way.

The men and women who film the demonstrations are indeed the most potent foes of the Assad regime, for they threaten one of his most effective weapons: information.

The current Syrian information policy has been in place for nearly four decades and is simple: “We decide what other people should know, and we present an image of our strength and resilience”. Until recently, this approach had proved successful, but the official depiction of events - that the uprising is just a “passing summer shower” and “a crisis that is now over”; that “all is well with Syria” and “we'll emerge stronger than ever” - no longer convinces anybody. This is chiefly due to the extraordinary efforts of activists using the most basic technological tools and in many instances paying with their lives, despite the

regime's tireless attempts to kill, imprison and isolate them. The men and women who film the demonstrations are indeed the most potent foes of the Assad regime, for they threaten one of his most effective weapons: information.

On March 25, 2011, I joined a demonstration in Damascus with a group of friends, a day after Vice-President Buthaina Shaaban had declared that demonstrating was a right and that the state had no problem with peaceful protest. We caught up with the demonstration at the Hamidiya Bazar and walked towards Marja Square in the heart of Damascus.

We saw large groups of civilians standing about, some looking up at the surrounding buildings and pointing out people taking video footage, while others pointed to those using mobile phone cameras on the ground, shouting: "Over there! He's filming! Grab him!"

The regime plays on its supposed qualities of security and stability, comparing the status quo with a freedom that is associated with chaos and regional instability.

The people taking footage were subjected to ferocious beatings as they were dragged off towards secret police vans. When they were confident that no one was filming and there would be no 'information' available to show what had happened, the plain clothed security men pulled out black rubber and wooden truncheons, which were hidden under their clothes and attacked and beat us. In a few minutes, some demonstrators were arrested while others fled, and more people started to appear brandishing pictures of Bashar Assad, accompanied by a camera from the state television, which broadcast images of the pro-Assad rally that night, March 25, 2011, after the presenter declared: "Al-Jazeera and the other conspiratorial channels spoke today about a demonstration against the regime in Marja Square, whereas it was in fact a rally in support of His Excellency the President."

The official media persisted with this ruse until recently, then abandoned it for a new trick: filming footage of the supposed site of the demonstration showing it to be empty, or rather, a scene of daily life. This is because the "civilians" (who turned out to be security forces and republican guard soldiers) who attacked us at that demonstration, on March 25, 2011, are no longer capable of chasing down cameramen at every demonstration and setting up counter rallies.

### The Image of the Syrian Regime and its Contradictions

Despite the control of the authorities over information in Syria, the truth, in its broad outlines at least, was known to all: Syria is a country ruled by a politically corrupt security regime under authoritarian dynastic rule.

Attempts by Bashar Assad and his wife to present a more civilized and youthful image collapsed after the president's first speech to parliament following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011. Contradictory accounts and analyses offered by the Syrian regime dealt further blows. For instance, he said the failure to implement political reforms over the preceding eleven years was down to the urgent need to implement economic reforms first. When the protests in Syria first started, the regime spread rumors that the demonstrators were demanding economic rights and improvements, not political freedoms.

Similarly, the regime plays on its supposed qualities of security and stability, comparing the status quo with a freedom that is associated with chaos and regional instability. At the same time, it talks continuously about arms smuggling and armed gangs lurking everywhere, which - contrary to the regime's own boasts about stability - the combined efforts of the army and security forces have failed to defeat after ten months of intensive campaigning.

Since the beginning of the revolution, the regime has portrayed itself as reformist, taking a number of measures to bolster its credentials, such as abolishing the emergency law and the

state security court and passing a media law, a political party law and looking into amending the constitution. But Assad has retained the founding decree of the state security administration which gives special powers to the military and special courts (allowing security operatives to kill, detain and torture citizens without fear of retribution), as well as issuing a judicial control law and a demonstrations law, both of which negate the impact of the reformist measures and empty them of meaning. Evidence for this is the rise in forcible detentions, disappearances, torture and assassinations that has followed the abolition of the state of emergency.

Furthermore, Assad claimed that these reforms are part of an old scheme, whose implementation was delayed by unfavorable regional and international circumstances and cannot be seen as a response to the legitimate demands of the protestors themselves. Indeed, they have no value as a political “gain” for the protestors: they were merely designed to placate protestors before the uprising could get out of hand. When these placatory measures failed, Assad began to talk about “individual errors” committed by members of the security forces and created investigative committees who have yet to hold anyone to account for their crimes, a failure that Assad excused in his most recent speech by decrying - irony of ironies - a lack of verifiable information.

Perhaps the most contradictory story propagated by the regime, and the most damaging to its carefully constructed image, is the claim that “armed gangs” have been murdering civilians and soldiers. This ignores the following points:

1. These gangs are present at anti-regime demonstrations yet avoid pro-regime rallies that are announced in advance, which would give such gangs plenty of time to prepare operations against them. Yet this never seems to happen (with the sole exception of the incident in the regime-loyalist Homs neighborhood of Akrama, when unknown persons fired RPGs and

other firearms in which six civilians and a French journalist were killed on January 11, 2012 and yet the investigations indicate Pro-Assad involvement).

2. The regime denies the existence of civilian casualties and focuses on military casualties (most of whom are said to be members of units tasked with protecting the regime).
3. The type of operations carried out by the army and the security forces seem designed to inflict mass punishment against recalcitrant civilians rather than targeting armed gangs. These include surrounding cities and cutting off water, electricity, food, medical services and communications, thereby leaving civilians trapped and easy prey for any armed gangs wandering about. Once the city is entered it becomes impossible to identify these gang members, as all they have to do is throw away their weapons. A more appropriate tactic would surely be to surround specific neighborhoods and permit non-combatants to flee, leaving only fighters behind.
4. The majority of the “terrorists” and “armed elements” who have been arrested and shown on television, turn out to be peaceful demonstrators. Most have been arrested at least two weeks prior to the operations they are confessing to. In one case, a supposed gang member stated that his operation had been planned by a man who had been killed sixty days before the alleged crime was carried out.

In his most recent speech on January 10, 2012 (and his third since March 2011), Assad dedicated the first and last sections to a discussion of information and the media, and his profound revulsion at the conspiracy being engineered by some sixty television channels and dozens of websites against his regime and the



deliberate misrepresentation that they engaged in. He justified his refusal to allow foreign media into Syria on the grounds that such fabrications had less impact when they came from outside.

Everything we know about the regime is no more than a cover. If the regime seems unified that is only because it wants us to see that. We are not permitted to get a glimpse of any divisions that may exist.

If they were allowed in, he all but admitted, that would be equivalent to handing them control over the image and the information that the regime had worked so tirelessly to control and manipulate.

### **Conclusion**

Information about the regime, its stability and unity, remains hard to come by and predictions

are difficult. Even political and military defectors such as the Senior General Inspector, member of parliament Imad Ghalioun or Brigadier-General Mustafa Sheikh know very little about what goes on at the highest decision-making levels, or in the security forces' operation rooms. This leads me to believe that radical change in Syria, when it comes, will happen overnight. Everything we know about the regime is no more than a cover. If the regime seems unified that is only because it wants us to see that. We are not permitted to get a glimpse of any divisions that may exist, as this is what truly terrifies Assad. Today, he is more frightened of his own henchmen than he is of the peaceful protestors in the street or the thousands of conscripts and officers who have decided to take up arms against him. He fears his closest friends, because they possess the inner secrets; the 'information'. Like Assad, these men know that it is far easier to cut the top of a pyramid than turn it on its head, and this is a game at which they are very expert.

**Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.**

# The Revolution as Model and the Image of Tahrir Square...

## Syrians are Paying a Double Price

### A Necessary Introduction

This article of mine springs from very real feelings of bitterness. After ten months have passed, the Syrian regime's savage machinery of repression continues to chew up those who have risen up against it. Syrian blood lies thick upon the ground and it continues to flow. The regime's inexcusable determination to pursue a security strategy to deal with the popular movement pushes the country ever deeper into a black hole of violence and hatred. Confronted with all of this the vast majority of demonstrators continue to offer peaceful resistance, devising new strategies on a daily basis to help them fight off the tyrannical and immoral authorities.

The lack of proper interest in the non-violent struggle in Syria can be explained, at least in part, by the absence of any symbolic image comparable to Egypt's Tahrir Square, which has become the dominant reference point for those following the 'Arab Spring'.

It is a bitterness exacerbated by my awareness that this astonishing civil resistance does not receive the attention or support it deserves outside Syria.

This article shall be a record of what I experienced during my travels in Europe and Egypt, experiences that led me to the conclusion that the lack of proper interest in, and support for, the non-violent struggle in Syria can be

explained, at least in part, by the absence of any symbolic image comparable to Egypt's Tahrir Square, which has become the dominant reference point for those following the 'Arab Spring'. The image of Tahrir Square - itself an inspiration to the Syrians - has become a burden, the price that the Syrian revolutionaries must pay if they are to receive the attention enjoyed by their Egyptian comrades. This insistence on a comparison between the two countries works to the detriment of Syria, blithely ignoring the obstacles that, to date at least, have hindered the reproduction of a Syrian counterpart to Tahrir Square.

### The Magic of Tahrir Square

I reached Cairo on a work trip on November 17, an arrival that coincided with the mass rally held in Tahrir Square the following day and called the Friday of Handing Over Power. Like every visitor to post-revolutionary Egypt I was obsessed with Tahrir and the first thing I wanted to do was head down there.

At about nine o'clock that Thursday evening I reached the square in the company of a friend. The crowds filled every corner of the open space. People were busy erecting podiums for the following day. In the middle of the square was a grassy circle where the demonstrators' tents stood. These individuals had no intention of abandoning their sit-in until the revolution was complete.

Happy as a child I wandered about, from the Egyptian museum on one side to the Omar Makram mosque on the other. The place was packed with discussion circles and it was the easiest thing in the world to join in. Room would be made for you, for sure; there were no barriers

### Mohammad Al Attar

Mohammad Al Attar is a Syrian playwright and drama practitioner. He graduated in Applied Drama from Goldsmiths, University of London. His play "Withdrawal" was performed in London, New York, New Delhi, Berlin, Tunis and Beirut. His play "Online" was premiered at Royal Court Theatre in London. His most recent play "Look at the Camera" was premiered in Brussels and Berlin. Al Attar has published numerous texts for performances and critical contributions published in several Arab newspapers and magazines.

here. I would join a circle, listen for a while then go off to another. It was hugely enjoyable: an experience quite without precedent. No sooner did I open my mouth to speak than everyone turned towards me:

*"You're from Syria?"*

*"Yes."*

Then the comments poured out:

*"How's it going over there?"*

*"Never give up!"*

*"With God's help, you'll do it!"*

The people there lavished me with genuine sympathy and I withdrew, flustered, amid prayers of support. Wandering over to the vendors selling snacks, I hopped up onto the grassy circle in the middle of the square, and decided to take a closer look at the tents. Most of these long-term demonstrators were young, but I was surprised to see children accompanied by their relatives. I didn't want to leave Tahrir that night. I had been seduced.

The following day, Friday, November 18, Tahrir thronged with demonstrators. Myself and a group of non-Egyptian friends were watching the awe-inspiring scene from the bridge that overlooked the square. It wasn't an ideal spot but it was good enough to get a glimpse of the Syrian flag being waved by the demonstrators. When night came we descended to the square. Thousands were still roaming about, in addition to the sit-in crowd who still stuck to their tents in the centre. We walked about a bit. Truth be told, we were tourists. My friends were snapping pictures here and there. One of them, a woman, stopped to photograph one of the carts selling *tirmis* beans. The young man pulling it looked delighted. Another young man nearby shouted in irritation,

*"What do think you're doing photographing that? Go and take a picture over there..."*

He gestured to the heart of the square where the crowds huddled around people giving speeches. A little taken aback I asked her and the rest of my friends to leave, but they wanted to stay on.

*"It's wonderful here!" one shouted.*

### **The Dominance of the Image and the Revolution as Model**

For reasons connected with my job I have been able to make several trips to Europe since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. I have been to Stockholm, Paris, Edinburgh, London, Brussels and Berlin. I need scarcely mention that the situation in Syria constituted the greater part of any conversation I had there.

We have to admit that if the same question is repeated so often, this means that it is a valid one. The rather generic inquiry, "What's *really* going on in Syria?" seems to result from a dearth of images - of data - from Syria. It is a question about details, about the specifics of a situation, rather than wondering "Why is the revolution happening in the first place?" In the latter sense, the question acknowledges the general context: a totalitarian, dictatorial regime that has stifled the country and its inhabitants for decades. It is a question, therefore, that seeks data: instances of the systematic oppression being practiced by the regime; the proportion of demonstrators versus regime-loyalists; the extent of the revolutionary movement's non-violence and its ideology, and so on.

This need for information, acutely felt by non-expert observers of the region's political scene, has one overriding cause: the absolute media blackout imposed by the regime. It is important to reflect that in these European countries you have a population accustomed to receiving extensive and in-depth television and press coverage of world events, two things that the Syrian revolution conspicuously lacks. Of course I am referring here to the coverage of events, to the incidents that take place on the ground on a daily basis, and not just political analysis and interpretation.

But these endless questions reveal another factor behind this lopsided curiosity. While a lot of the questions were a direct result of the regime's media blackout I also noticed that many of those whom I met abroad were trying to evaluate the Syrian revolution using the Egyptian revolution as a point of comparison, or to be more precise, Tahrir itself. I could accept a certain amount of confusion and inaccuracy when it came to events on the ground in Syria - Syrians suffer from it themselves at times - but I found myself unable to accept this lack of admiration for the civil, non-violent resistance of my fellow countrymen, and the consequent absence of effective solidarity on the part of non-Syrian activists and otherwise socially aware individuals living abroad.

Friends in Paris informed me that the drawn-out nature of the revolution and the confusion of regional and international actors over who would take political responsibility for Syria had gravely damaged support in Europe. But the debates I had in Europe, the last of which were with a group of playwrights in Brussels and then some academic acquaintances of mine in London, left me with the following conviction: Syrians are being asked to reproduce another Tahrir in order to attract a greater share of media attention for the civil resistance.

Jon Rich gave precise expression to this point when he wrote: "From the outset of the crisis in Syria, political analysts waited for a demonstration of millions in Damascus so they could begin to anticipate the collapse of the bloody regime. Images of a million demonstrators is itself enough to change the logic of politics in the world, for it is irrefutable evidence that 'the people want a change of the regime.'"<sup>1</sup>

The image of Tahrir truly is a seductive one. More importantly still, it is inspiring and motivating. Nor can there be any doubt that this very image was hugely influential in encouraging Syrians to liberate themselves from the loathsome tyranny under which they lived. So it is an irony, and an unjust one, that the degree of solidarity they receive is dependent on their ability to reproduce the scenes from a Square that for eighteen days had so entranced the world.

This is not to belittle the value of the protest in Tahrir as an example to be followed. Quite the opposite. The occupation of public squares is an act of resistance with a number of motivating factors, most notably the intense desire to reclaim public space, thereby reclaiming rights both practical (the right to free movement and assembly) and symbolic (the liberation of the public arena from the images, statues and names of the 'one leader' and senior regime figures). Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh has written the following on just this issue: "Unarmed, popular revolutions facing regimes who base their power on the total appropriation of public space, cannot establish themselves without appearing in this public space and cannot win liberating and restoring it to the common weal."<sup>2</sup>

Any careful evaluation of the situation in Syria will inevitably lead to the conclusion that recreating Tahrir is not a viable option, at least at present.

It is painful to state, but the revolutionaries in Syria have tried to produce facsimiles of Tahrir on more than one occasion. Early last April, demonstrators arriving from the countryside around Damascus tried to occupy Abbasiyeen Square in the city but were met with heavy gunfire before they could reach their goal. On April 18, revolutionaries managed to take over the main square in Homs and began turning it into another Tahrir, setting up tents and large signs. Then the square was surrounded by security forces, who opened fire. The true extent of this massacre remains unknown to this day, thanks, once again, to the regime imposing a media blackout and severing all lines of communication with the city. Yassin al-Haj Saleh reports that activists from Homs insist that more than two hundred people were killed<sup>3</sup>. Despite the high price they have paid, the revolutionaries attempt to repeat the experiment whenever they

get a chance. After thousands had gathered in Hama's Aasi Square, and before the city was subjected to a military assault, the main squares in regional centers up and down the country, from Douma and Zabadani in the Damascus hinterland, to Sanmein in Deraa, were filled with rallying demonstrators. But these demonstrations did not turn into the open-ended sit-ins we saw in Tahrir because those involved knew that the price would be too great to bear.

Any careful evaluation of the situation in Syria will inevitably lead to the conclusion that recreating Tahrir is not a viable option, at least at present. Syrians have experimented and shown this to be the case. Foreign observers would do well to note the true scale of the sacrifice the Syrian people have made for the sake of their non-violent resistance and stop obsessing over mass rallies and the occupation of city centers. To do so, in my view, would lead to a greater appreciation of what they have achieved, and their inventive creation of non-violent strategies of resistance in the face of brutal and systematic state repression.

**Our demonstrators, their souls held in one palm, their chanted slogans in the other, take snatched and distorted videos that shake as they run.**

This brings us to the role played by the media. The importance of the Tahrir image is well established, but I cannot help wondering how events in Cairo's main square would have played out in the absence of such extensive coverage and the ceaseless flow of live images from Tahrir itself. It would not have diminished the glorious sacrifices made by the Egyptian demonstrators, but what effect would it have had on popular and political responses to the revolution?

In addition to all the other burdens they have to bear, I fear that Syrians are paying a heavy price for the free circulation of images from Tahrir. Frankly, Tahrir became spectacle: you could sit at home, idly flick on the TV and

there you were in the square, confronted with the demonstrators' courage and good humor as they confronted a grim and ruthless regime. In Syria there are no men and women sitting in their tents day and night and battling with thugs on camelback, no young people putting on concerts or protecting museums. In Syria it is harder to glimpse these forms of civil resistance, though I assure you that they are happening. Our demonstrators, their souls held in one palm, their chanted slogans in the other, take snatched and distorted videos that shake as they run.

We see the blood, hear the bullets and screams, but it is up to us to assemble the full picture. They are images that inaugurate a new aesthetic, according to Syrian film director Ossama Mohammed<sup>4</sup>. Jon Rich went even further when he said that these filmmaker-revolutionaries, while documenting the possibility of their own deaths every time they take to the streets, they are creating a profound change in our understanding of the image<sup>5</sup>. I believe both Ossama Mohammed and Jon Rich to be absolutely correct in their analysis, but I still regard their reading as being limited to the structure of the image and its aesthetics, as treating no more than the visual characteristics of this new form of image. I'm afraid that the image coming from Syria lacks immediacy and abundance, the very qualities it requires to inform the world of what is taking place "here and now". This rule, which theatre is all about, is disregarded.

A friend told me that people outside Syria needed to see more of the reality of daily life in Syria, more of the quotidian aspects of the non-violent resistance. This was important, she claimed, because it would generate support away from the polarizing effect of political discourse. "There are lots of people who aren't with the regime," she said, "but are yet to take a position. The complexity of the country's political future and the murky picture coming out of Syria confuses them."

A sensible point: it's again a question of information and images. But what can be done given the regime's media blackout and its

untrammled brutality? Are activists being lazy when it comes to documenting their struggle and providing images? I personally confirm that they are not. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the pictures and videos that are leaked, not only come sometime after the event and are of poor quality, but are very few in number and do not accurately reflect the true scale of the horrors to which Syrians are being subjected, nor the true extent of their resistance.

“We have no Tahrir Square,” I told my friend.

I wanted to add, “Maybe other people could make more of an effort to appreciate the extent of our resistance and find out more for themselves, instead of waiting for us to hand them another Tahrir.” But I said nothing.

Over in London another friend said: “Frankly, your regime’s media blackout has done the job. People here don’t make the effort you’d like. We always hope they will, but it never happens.”

Heroic action surely deserves solidarity, but the one that receives live, continuous and blanket coverage will always get more admiration. This is something we have to concede.

### **Egypt, Syria and the Different Pain Thresholds**

In Cairo I received an invitation from Roger Anis, a young press photographer and friend of mine, to attend a photography exhibition put on by a group of Egyptian photographers who had documented events in Tahrir during the revolution<sup>6</sup>. It was extremely affecting. Apart from the documentary value of the pictures, the aesthetics was stunning. I might have been the only person there who felt annoyed. I couldn’t forget the uncomfortable fact that none of this was available to us in Syria. I thought of a Lebanese-American friend of mine, another professional photographer who I had bumped into once in Beirut. She had told me about the trip she had made to Cairo with a group of friends just as the situation in Tahrir was beginning to escalate. They weren’t going to miss it for the world, she said. Once again it was the power of the image, the irresistible magic of the square. Would my friend and her colleagues be able to travel to Syria to take pictures there?

Therein lies the difference.

The inability to transmit stable images and video footage out of the country does not just deprive Syrians of solidarity from abroad and affect the awareness of the nature of their resistance, it also raise the frightening possibility that if we are unable to properly document all this anguish it will stay buried in our memories and souls, prompting further suffering and creating more long-term divisions and misery in our society. I believe that the image can help exorcise some of this pain and bring it into the public arena where it can be transmuted into a more easily digested narrative. In this sense the image attains a degree of independence over time that helps us to examine old wounds and recollect with a greater sense of calm and balance.

**If we are unable to properly document all this anguish it will stay buried in our memories and souls, prompting further suffering and creating more long-term divisions and misery in our society.**

On November 19, Tahrir erupted again after the security forces used excessive force during an unexpected operation to remove the sit-in demonstrators, which led to the death of a young man. Things began to escalate. The revolutionaries wanted to stay the course: no more tricks; the revolution was only half-finished. In the days that followed Tahrir Square returned to the international headlines, though perhaps a little less prominent than before, while images of the massed crowds and angry young men attacking the Ministry of Interior dominated reports.

I was due to leave Cairo on November 21. It was a hot day, down in Tahrir. I made my way through the centre of the square and approached Mohammad Mahmoud Street, the road that led from Tahrir to the Interior Ministry. Groups of brave young men milled about, playing cat and

mouse with security troops, who were massed by the ministry itself. The square was packed with people, but street vendors and children were still about, along with photographers, of course. From my vantage point, I could see television crews on the balconies overlooking the square, but was unable to make out the names of any of the channels. I was with a couple of Swedish friends, just two of the many foreigners present in the square. My companions were sending out minute-by-minute updates on Twitter and Facebook: their big adventure. I had many friends in Europe who were thousands of miles away from Tahrir, yet still passed on images of the square. I was so lucky, I thought to myself, to be here in the heart of the action. I could walk around and chat to people as much as I liked. Only the stench of tear-gas drifting from the direction of the ministry disturbed my unruffled mood.

The smell brought back memories of our few attempts to hold protests in Damascus, where demonstrators received the tear gas canisters like bouquets of roses, grateful that they weren't bullets or electric prods. In the last demonstration that I attended, back on October 15, more than ten thousand people gathered in the neighborhood of Al-Midan (anyone familiar with events in the capital will realize just how big a number that is). The tragedy of it was that an eleven year-old boy had to die before they took to the streets. Ibrahim Shibani had been killed by a bullet as he left the mosque with his father the day before.

No sooner had we laid his slender, precious body to rest, before the tears could spring to our eyes, than the bullets poured down on demonstrators outside the cemetery. People scattered and sprinted in all directions. The smell of live ammunition would soon cover that of the tear gas. Another young man fell dead, a young man who had come to bury the first martyr. That's quite normal in Syria: martyrs burying martyrs. Others were wounded by the gunfire. One of them was standing next to me. A round hit him in the foot and his friends carried him away, screaming:

*"It's nothing! Put me down!"*

There were no cameras, other than those on our mobile phones (our puny weapons); no television crews; no foreign friends cluttering up Twitter and Facebook with pictures of the funeral procession. But we were fortunate: we got to bury Ibrahim. On other occasions, it would take days before the martyrs could be put on the ground.

### **In Revolutions Terminologies, like Dreams, are Shared**

I was making special preparations for my trip to Egypt. After my time in Europe and Lebanon I was getting ready to face my Egyptian friends and any questions they might have, no matter how harsh. They had just pulled off a great revolution, given the world the example of Tahrir, and the ripples they had created had travelled across the planet, from Wall Street to Rome.

But of all the cities I visited, it was Cairo alone that saved me the trouble to explain the reason for our suffering, to show me that Syrians, deprived of everything except their faith in freedom, had created a miracle with their revolution. I met with the editor of the distinguished literary journal, *Akhbar al-Adab*. I talked to taxi drivers, to a nurse, to the young men and women I bumped into in Tahrir. Every single one demonstrated a solidarity and understanding that I found quite astonishing. They did not complain about a lack of information from Syria, or the poor quality of the videos. A totalitarian, corrupt regime passed here, too, and this saves a lot of discussion.

Egyptians were certainly caught up in their own incredible achievements, but not one of them ever suggested that their revolution was a model that we should follow. The youth in Tahrir were following events in Syria but they never suggested we needed another Tahrir there. They could see the villages and narrow alleys in which Syrians held their protests.

*"Mubarak was a proper gentleman  
compared to your guy," they'd say.  
"God be with you."*

“God be with you,” might seem to be small comfort, suggestion that nothing short of divine intervention was needed, but such things need to be understood in their cultural context. All of us, Egyptians and Syrians alike, are fond of laying the responsibility on God, but we still understand our role in things. Nevertheless, I was powerless to stop the feelings of exhaustion that would sweep over me from time to time. Syrians were all alone in their confrontation against this most brutal of despotic regimes.

Never mind. We'll keep going to the end, and when we get there the only debt we will owe is to our martyrs and suffering prisoners.

**Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.**

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Jon Rich, *The Blood of the Victim: Revolution in Syria and the Birth of the Image-Event*, e-flux, #26, June 2011, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-blood-of-the-victim-revolution-in-syria-and-the-birth-of-the-image-event/>
- <sup>2</sup> Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *About Some Characteristics of the Syrian Uprising*, *Modern Discussion*, 21/6/2011, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=264150>
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> In some of Ossama Mohammed's articles that were published in *Al-Hayat* newspaper, he wrote about how a new aesthetics was established by leaking footages from the Syrian revolutionaries on the ground.
- <sup>5</sup> Jon Rich, *The Blood of the Victim*.
- <sup>6</sup> Exhibition "The People are the Red Line" in Gezira Art Center in Cairo.





# Militarization, Violence and the Revolution

It would mean very little to talk about the increasingly military nature of the Syria revolution, without taking into account the 320 days of conflict with a regime that has used unrestrained violence from the very outset, or the intellectual, political and psychological changes that have taken place in society and the revolutionary movement during these bloody months.

The revolution's non-violence is rooted in its social make up, in the unique nature of the demands it sets out in its use of demonstrations as its primary mechanism for expressing dissent. It does not stem from ideological preferences or conscious political strategizing.

when thinking about its future. This militarization is neither the result of external influence nor adherence to any pre-existing ideology. At the same time it has never compromised the generally peaceful nature of the movement. The revolution's non-violence is rooted in its social make up, in the unique nature of the demands it sets out in its use of demonstrations as its primary mechanism for expressing dissent. It does not stem from ideological preferences or conscious political strategizing. Detrimental comparisons of peaceful demonstrations carrying signs and chanting and armed groups firing bullets say nothing meaningful about the reality of the revolution, they merely reveal the commentators' ignorance about what is happening on the ground and show how superficial their analysis really is.

The fact is that in most locations peaceful demonstrations could not have continued without the relatively modest levels of protection afforded by the military and civil wings of the Free Army against the regime's retribution. Refusing to acknowledge this will not change the fact that it is true. Voicing one's distaste for militarization while ignoring the violence perpetrated by the regime is equivalent to blaming the victims for choosing to resist, and there can be no patriotic or human excuses for such a position.

In the abstract, of course, peaceful resistance is morally preferable to fighting, but we are not free to pick and choose as we like. This is reality, a reality that has forced countless Syrians to defend themselves against a regime that generated violence and hatred as part of its very nature and not, as one bloated Syrian minister recently claimed, 'out of necessity' or in response to 'popular demand'.

The broad outlines are well known. The regime pushed the army into a confrontation with the revolution, executing those who refused to open fire on their fellow citizens.<sup>1</sup> Conscripts and officers began to desert, forming a ragged alliance called the 'Free Syrian Army'. Cities and municipal centers in and around Deraa, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Deir Ez-Zor were subjected to punitive assaults that resembled colonial anti-insurgency campaigns. Here and there, civilians took up arms to fight the regime's forces, which included the shabiha.

In short, the revolution has almost always had a military component, one that cannot be ignored

<sup>1</sup> See Human Rights Watch report from December 2011.

## Yassin al-Haj Saleh

Yassin al-Haj Saleh is a Syrian writer and dissenter based in Damascus. He was a political prisoner between 1980 and 1996. He writes for several Arab newspapers and journals outside of Syria and regularly contributes to Al-Hayat newspaper. Among his book publications are "Syria in the Shadow: Looks inside the Black Box" (Arabic, 2009) and "The Myth of the Others: A Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of the Critique" (Arabic, 2012).

This tendency towards militarization is better understood against a backdrop of general chaos and disorganization. One cannot be a purist these days and reject any armed resistance out of hand or oppose to the revolution simply because of some of the unregulated activities that take place in its shadow. So as long as the regime itself continues to militarize this is an inadequate response. The proper course is for the revolution itself to work to unite the armed soldiers and civilians into one body, or at least achieve some degree of coordination, so that the military component operates in the interests of the revolution as a whole. This will not be easy. There is no guarantee that this ideal state of affairs will ever come to pass. However, harping on about non-violence as an absolute principal is of benefit to nobody, because it is an impossibility.

Structurally speaking, violence is elitist and non-democratic. The more it is used - regardless of whether it is disciplined or not - the more it obstructs the revolution and weakens the participation of women, children and the elderly. Yet we do not have a choice between militarization and non-militarization but between a militarization that is unrestrained and unregulated and one that is curbed and disciplined.

The truth is that some of what is said about militarization is motivated by opposition to the revolution itself, not the legitimacy of the practices that take place in its name.


Political change effected through force of arms creates numerous security, political and social problems and is less conducive to democratic transition than a peacefully obtained transformation. But to make the point once more: we don't have a choice. The military component of the revolution is a side effect of the regime's essentially violent nature: nobody wanted it or planned for it.

The basic point in all this is that our prelapsarian innocence can never be regained. We can never go back to that time before the blood, to the sweet words about confronting the regime's violence with 'bared chests', now that the regime has targeted everyone with its bullets, not just those on the streets with their shirts around their waists. Instead of illusory innocence we need initiatives and hard work to inculcate a military, political and moral discipline in the use of arms. Our reality is running amok. It is chaos. Intellectuals and politicians do their duty when they attempt to order and rationalize it, not when they turn away from it out of high principle and distaste. That is an abrogation.

The truth is that some of what is said about militarization is motivated by opposition to the revolution itself, not the legitimacy of the practices that take place in its name. The revolution is the effort to deny the regime's legitimacy and its patriotic and popular credentials, to declare its violence classist and un-patriotic and to reject the lawfulness of its agencies of state. The revolution aims to establish a new legitimacy, yet this legitimacy does not automatically devolve on everyone who acts in its name. The only credible opposition to random, unregulated violence can come from within the revolutionary movement itself, not from those outside it, still less from its opponents. The violence practiced by the revolution is certainly more legitimate than that of a regime which murders its people, and it is doubly legitimate because it is both imposed on the revolution and defensive, even when it has to be pre-emptive for tactical reasons.

At the same time the revolution contains a genuinely non-violent component, one that rejects all violence even for reason of self-defense. Yet the best way to defend non-violence is to participate in the revolution by turning out in the streets and working to increase its civil nature. Sitting on the fence and hymning the virtues of non-violence is possibly the worst thing one could do.

Looked at practically, the legitimacy and public acceptance of the revolution requires us to move beyond mere words of support and



actively participate in the revolution; to create intellectual, political and organizational structures that respond to its ever-increasing complexity. This engagement should aim to coordinate the various branches of the revolution and lead them towards the ultimate goal. At the moment, such engagement is lacking but the sheer variety and diversity of initiatives being produced by the revolution gives us good reason to remain

optimistic. These initiatives are independent and self-generated, the groups creating them working tirelessly to curb the militarization of the revolution and bolster its civic, inclusive nature.

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