



Pluralism Lost in Syria's Uprising

How the Opposition Strayed from Its Inclusive Roots

MAY 7, 2019 – JOSEPH DAHER

Pluralism Lost in Syria's Uprising

How the Opposition Strayed from Its Inclusive Roots

MAY 7, 2019 – JOSEPH DAHER

One of the most painful unanswered questions of the Syrian civil war is how an uprising touting the values of democracy, universal rights, and inclusion devolved into an international conflict, with multiple foreign interventions, in which sectarian and ethnic tensions rose considerably. The regime of Bashar al-Assad has argued it was fighting the forces of extremism from the beginning. The narrative of the secular opposition is that the Assad regime intentionally allowed extremist foes to flourish while crushing other activists, in order to discredit the uprising; the opposition was further doomed to failure by the interventions of foreign powers, both regional and global.

While secular activists' position is closer to the truth, it still omits an important part of the reason for the revolution's failure. Syria's mainstream opposition failed to articulate an inclusive definition of citizenship and an inclusive alternative that could allay the fears of minorities, secularists, and other sectors of the society—including Sunnis, who opposed the Assad regime but failed to see a place for themselves in the future envisioned by the armed opposition. Regime violence, repression, and international support best explain the Assad regime's resilience, but the opposition's own platform still bears scrutiny. The armed opposition's failure to craft a compelling vision of Syrian citizenship and an

inclusive alternative explains a significant degree of the limits on its popular appeal. It was never able to reflect the inclusive appeal of the initial protest movement that gathered large sectors of the Syrian population from various backgrounds.

This report explores the record and practice of articulating citizenship among the main opposition bodies supported by the West and regional countries: the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (known as the Coalition). This report also looks at how these factions approached inclusion and citizenship; what they said and did; how they recruited or didn't recruit members of various identity groups; what they articulated or didn't articulate about inclusion in practice; and how that practice appeared to affect their public support or sympathy.

This report seeks to deepen the understanding of the failure of the Syrian opposition by describing its disintegration from a seemingly inclusive and largely peaceful movement. Significantly, it seeks to move beyond explanations of the opposition's failure that ascribe it no agency—it was not only the victim of more powerful forces, but also authored many of its own failures.

This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/pluralism-lost-syrias-uprising/>

The conclusions of this analysis offer proof of the importance of a precise and inclusive vision of citizenship—and, more broadly, of society—for the success of any future reform movements in Syria, or elsewhere.

Context of the Uprisings: Citizenship, Inclusion, and Rights

Pre-uprising Syria was a place of grim political repression, but also of religious and ethnic pluralism. Arab Sunni Muslims composed between 65 and 70 percent of the total population. The remainder was split between various groups. There were Muslim minorities, including Alawites (10–12 percent), Druze (1–3 percent), Shia (0.5 percent), and Ismailis (1–2 percent). There were also various Christian denominations (5–10 percent). Further, there were ethnic minorities of various religious affiliations: Kurds (8–15 percent), Armenians (0.5 percent), Assyrians (1–3 percent), Turkmens (1–4 percent), and others.¹ Important foreign populations also existed, especially Iraqis and Palestinians, prior to the uprising. As of 2011, around 500,000 Palestinian refugees were registered in Syria, and 1.2 to 1.5 million Iraqi refugees resided in the country, a refugee flow that began with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.²

This diversity does not mean that the regime was secular or that there was equality between sects and ethnic groups. In the country, different rights and duties existed according to one's religious identity and ethnicity; the same remains true after years of war. The 2012 constitution, for example, stipulates that the president must be a Muslim man and that "the main source of law is the sharia," a clause that is discriminatory toward other religious sects and women. Syria also has eight different personal status laws, each of which is applied according to the religious sect of an individual. Christian communities and Druze follow their own laws, while the personal status laws for the rest of the Muslim population in Syria is based on a particular Sunni interpretation of Islamic sharia, Hanafi jurisprudence, and other Islamic sources. These laws also include major discriminations against women, some of which maintain noxious practices.³ For example, article 548 of the Criminal Code withholds full penalties from so-called "honor crimes."⁴

Another example is article 489's "legalized rape," which allows a husband to force himself on his wife.⁵

In a similar vein, the Arab ethnic identity is the supreme one in Syria, according to the constitution, while others are tolerated as subordinated identities or nearly forbidden, like the Kurdish one. Kurdish populations in Syria have suffered discriminatory and repressive policies on the political, social, and cultural levels since the independence of Syria in 1946.

This system of laws and this political framework, which are regulated along religious, ethnic, and patriarchal lines, are critical to the maintenance of divisions within society. Thus, despite the regime's supposed "modern" appeal, it in fact has an interest in maintaining such laws as an instrument of division and domination.

In addition to the legal situation, open dissent was, of course, not possible in Syria prior to the uprising. The arrival to power of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 marked the beginning of the building of a patrimonial state and of violent waves of repression against all forms of dissent within the Syrian political scene. When Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000, his son, Bashar, succeeded him. In the decade prior to the 2011 uprising, the patrimonial nature of the state in the hands of the Assad family and relatives was greatly strengthened through a process of accelerated implementation of neoliberal policies and the replacement of sections of the old guard by relatives or individuals close to Bashar al-Assad.⁶

There was, however, a whiff of hope in some sectors of the country with the arrival to power of the junior Assad. The phenomenon of discussion forums, which activists and opposition members used to express themselves, rapidly increased. By 2001, there were more than 170 across the country that engaged large numbers of participants.⁷ However, the regime quickly snuffed out the hope for change. By the end of 2001, a brutal repression campaign led to the arrest or assault of opposition members and activists, and the discussion forums were silenced.⁸

Syrian civil society and political organizations nevertheless continued to mobilize, calling for reforms and a

democratization of the state. This period was marked by an unstable regional political context, which threatened the Syrian regime. This primarily included the American and British-led 2003 war and occupation of Iraq, and Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. In this politically unstable atmosphere, the opposition within the country wanted to push for reforms.

In October 2005, more than 250 major opposition figures from various religious and ethnic backgrounds and political parties signed the "Damascus Declaration," a manifesto that called for "a democratic and radical change" in Syria based on dialogue, the end of the state of emergency (in place since 1963), and the release of political prisoners. The main objective of the coalition was a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy through reforms of the regime, but it was also an attempt to unite the fractured Syrian opposition. The signatories to the declaration included the National Democratic Alliance (a nationalist and left-liberal alliance of five parties), the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, the Democratic Kurdish Coalition, the Kurdish Democratic Front, and a number of independent personalities, including former member of parliament Riad Seif. The Muslim Brotherhood, which was banned from Syria, supported the Damascus Declaration, but in 2006 it joined forces with fifteen other opposition groups, along with the former vice-president of Syria Abdul Halim Khaddam, who had just defected from the regime, in the establishment of the National Salvation Front (NSF).⁹ The "Damascus Declaration" did not join this new coalition, which was roundly criticized by several of its prominent signatories.¹⁰

In 2007, the National Council of the Damascus Declaration was established in Syria, but the elections of its leadership in December of that year brought about deep clashes between the leftist and nationalist factions under Hassan Abdul Azim and Haytham Manna on one side, and the Islamic trends and liberal factions of Riad al-Turk and Riad Seif on the other. Concurrently, the regime launched a campaign of arrest against the Declaration's members. It prosecuted twelve Declaration leaders in 2008 and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from three to six years. Arrests of political activists continued until the end of the decade. At the

same time, however, the coalition was divided from within. The leadership battles paralyzed the coalition, with some factions drifting into new alliances and others into exile. The Kurdish and Assyrian parties had also been marginalized during the leadership battles of 2007–9; two years later, at the beginning of the uprising, they would assert themselves more independently. In 2009, the Damascus Declaration announced a new leadership in exile. However, it was critically weakened, with only a few members in Syria, and it was unable to unite other sections of the opposition.¹¹

In 2009, the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Ali Sadreddine Al-Bayanouni, announced an end to the Brotherhood's participation in the NSF. During this period, Syria was in a process of rapprochement with Western countries, after a period of isolation on the international political scene. Meanwhile, the opposition was deeply divided and weakened. In this context, the Syrian Brotherhood sought an understanding with the regime, since the latter seemed to be gaining stability.¹² When the uprising began in 2011, the Brotherhood would, however, again switch allegiances and end its rapprochement with the government. But the events of 2009 were a foreshadowing of later fractures in the opposition.

The main problem with the political opposition in the years before the uprisings was its lack of abilities and capacities to reach wide sectors of the population, especially the popular classes and younger generations. There were a few different reasons the opposition failed to achieve this broader appeal. For one, it limited its demands to a democratization of the government through reforms. At the same time, it neglected to tackle the socioeconomic issues that were the priority for a large majority in the country—especially at a time of rising social inequalities, unemployment, and general impoverishment. Then, there were other major issues the opposition ignored, such as providing a comprehensive solution for the Kurdish issue.

Alongside these problems, a new generation of young activists was rising in Syria who were almost completely uninvolved in the traditional political parties mentioned above. These activists carried out a series of activities in

communities and universities, around democratic, social, and economic issues. This new generation of activists would play an important role in the beginning of the uprising in 2011.

Throughout the period of gathering dissent in the first decade of the new century, Syria was also going through economic changes that would eventually have a seismically large effect on society, and which primed the events of 2011. I discuss the opposition's failure to respond to these changes in a later section.

Early Days of the Uprising

When the Syrian uprisings began in 2011, the popular movement was characterized by its pluralism and diversity in terms of ethnicity and sects, although the largest component was, naturally, from the Arab Sunni population. In fact, there was a great deal of unity of purpose in the early days of the uprising, which has been overshadowed by the years of carnage that followed.

The individuals in this protest movement came from several parts of society. In the first place, there were activists involved in the various struggles against the regime before the uprising of 2011. A great majority of them were secular democrats belonging to all communities, including ethnic and religious minorities. Some of these activists played an important role in the grassroots coordination committees that emerged, and in the development of peaceful actions against the regime. These were young individuals from the working and middle classes, often university graduates and users of social media. This Syrian grassroots civilian opposition was the primary engine of the popular uprising against the Assad regime.¹³ The members of the several activist coordination committees that played an important role on a national level were generally highly educated and globalized male and female youth, including some human rights activists and lawyers.¹⁴ A significant number were women.

Still, the most numerous and most important members of the Syrian uprising, from the beginning, were economically marginalized rural Arab Sunni workers, urban employees,

and self-employed workers, who had borne the brunt of the implementation of neoliberal policies, especially since the coming to power of Bashar al-Assad. Interestingly, these were the same groups that had once been kept afloat by Ba'athist social and economic policies. The geography of the revolts in Idlib, Dera'a, and other midsized towns, as well as in other rural areas, showed a pattern: they were all historical strongholds of the Ba'ath party, which had benefited from the policies of agricultural reforms in the 1960s.¹⁵ The Damascus suburbs and towns surrounding the capital, where protests were important since the beginning of the uprising, were called the poverty belt, while the map of opposition-held neighborhoods in Aleppo from the summer of 2012 was nearly exactly that of the impoverished working-class Arab Sunni neighborhoods: densely packed, poorly planned, and relatively recent urban growth.¹⁶

Except for the Kurdish and Assyrian areas, the minority midsized towns and inhabited rural areas did not experience similar mass mobilizations. However, some dissent was evident—in some cases, in the form of massive street protests—for example in Salamiyah, a Druze-majority city, and in Suwayda, where Druze are also the majority. In addition to this, many activists of minority backgrounds were engaged in anti-regime activities throughout the country in different cities. For example, in Damascus, activists from Christian backgrounds generally worked in partnership with other activists from different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds. Their actions were not restricted to any specific zone.¹⁷

More generally, there was also a pattern of activists, from minority areas but also elsewhere, visiting and demonstrating in other regions at the beginning of the uprising to show the unity of the Syrian people and bring solidarity to other areas suffering severe repression under the regime's security forces. The objective was also to contradict the propaganda of the regime, which was accusing Salafis and "terrorist" organizations of provoking unrests in the country.

Another important segment of the uprising, which was more cosmopolitan, comprised the university students, young graduates, and youth from the lower and middle classes in

major cities. They were a particularly important section of the protest movement at the beginning of the uprising. The Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS) was established in September 2011, to struggle against the regime and work for a civil and pluralistic democracy that would treat all citizens equally. Most Syrian universities with activists established a branch.¹⁸ The UFSS faced the repression of the official pro-regime student union members and of the security services. By July 2012, a quarter of all the individuals killed in the protest movement since its eruption in mid-March 2011 were university students, according to the UFSS.¹⁹

Finally, large sections of the bourgeoisie, without strong connections to the regime, initially adopted a more passive attitude of “wait and see,” especially in Damascus and Aleppo. In general, they were reluctant to participate or get involved in the protest movement, except through ambivalent means that did not put them under the spotlight, although some did directly participate.²⁰ With the deepening of the war, many business elites also decided to leave Syria and transfer large sections of their capital outside of the country.

The various coordination committees determined the dynamic of the uprising through their organization of the popular resistance against the Assad regime, taking many forms, such as the organization of protests, and campaigns of civil disobedience and strikes. Some local coordination committees were not affiliated with any higher coalition, which did not prevent them from coordinating actions with other coordination committees in neighboring areas. As the uprisings turned violent, the committees increasingly had to play a humanitarian role, and eventually supported the militarization of the revolution.

Similarly, there were groups of protesters in certain neighborhoods and areas in which religious clerics played a significant role. Political thought varied considerably among religious leaders who had joined the uprising, from Salafi to more liberal trends.²¹

Finally, elements of the more “traditional” opposition were also involved in the protest movement, among them some Kurdish political parties, left-wing groups, nationalists,

liberals, and Islamic networks. Many former activists or political opposition members acted in an independent manner in various local coordination committees, and through new structures established within the uprising, rather than through political organizations.

Inclusive Roots of the Protest Movement

The large majority of the protest movements in the first years emphasized their inclusiveness and challenged sectarianism, chanting slogans such as “the Syrians are one” and in support of democracy. At the same time, since the beginning of the uprising, some small sectarian groups were present and developed as the regime’s repression became increasingly bloody. These groups tried to promote an exclusively sectarian discourse. In some demonstrations, small groups of protesters mentioned, for example, the Salafi Adnan al-Aroor, based in Saudi Arabia since he fled Syria following the 1982 Hama massacre. Aroor already had a relatively important audience among some sections of the opposition in the early days of the uprisings.²² He became famous at the time for his numerous appearances on two Saudi-owned Salafi satellite channels that were widely watched in Syria. These channels devoted most of their airtime to attacking Shia Islam. Aroor opposed the regime, but by promoting a sectarian discourse against Alawites.

That being said, such ideologues were the exception in Syria in the beginning of the protest movement. The dominant discourse was for the unity and freedom of the Syrian people and against sectarianism.

Slogans such as “we are all Syrians, we stand united” were constantly being repeated in demonstrations and on various social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. In opposition to the constant accusations by the regime that the demonstrators were all sectarianist Sunnis and Salafis, the protesters stressed the involvement and participation of religious and ethnic minorities. At the same time, among activists and youth organizations, solidarity between different religious sects and towns was on display from the beginning of the uprising. During the summer of 2011, the Ismaili-majority city of Salamiyah welcomed around twenty

thousand people displaced by the regime's security forces from Hama, most of whom were Sunni. The position of the displaced Hamwis in Salamiyah was actually a form of political struggle: the fact that the displaced Hamwis, who were almost all Sunnis, found refuge in Salamiyah, full of religious minorities, and the fact that it was the activists of Salamiyah who broke the siege of Hama, demonstrated the protest movement's grassroots solidarity.²³

Feminist activist Razan Ghazzawi explained that the city of Damascus and its government saw a surge of participation in 2012 from women from religious minority backgrounds and non-veiled Sunni women.

They were considered less suspect by the regime's authorities than conservative, veiled Sunni women, and therefore not searched at military checkpoints. These women took advantage of this situation to smuggle medication, food, and other necessary items into different areas suffering from the regime's sieges and repression, as well as to smuggle out activists... At the end of 2012, the regime started to notice that women from minority backgrounds and non-veiled Sunni women were playing an important role in support of activists and opposition-held areas, and started to impose more security restrictions and much more systematic control over everyone at checkpoints.²⁴

After the beginning of the uprising, opposition leaders called on their parties to unite despite political and personal differences, in order to develop a common vision.²⁵ The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB) was established in Damascus in June 2011, bringing together fifteen political parties and several independent figures.²⁶ Members of the NCB were committed to three principles: "No" to foreign military intervention, "No" to religious and sectarian instigation, and "No" to violence and the militarization of the revolution.²⁷ Of course, all these lines were later crossed, but their declaration embodied the spirit of the uprising in the early days, even though the leadership of the NCB was mostly disconnected from the popular movement in the streets.

Militarization

From the first days of the revolutionary process, the regime dealt with the demonstrations with great violence. The regime's reaction to the first protests was extremely harsh, killing around a hundred people in the week after the first protest in Dera'a.²⁸ Security services continued on this path and gradually escalated the repression against protesters throughout the first months, while arresting political opponents.

The regime specifically targeted networks of democratically organized activists with secular perspectives, who had initiated demonstrations, civil disobedience actions, and campaigns in favor of strikes, because of their qualities as organizers and their democratic and inclusive rhetoric and message, which undermined the regime's propaganda denouncing a conspiracy of armed extremist and sectarian actors. Large numbers were imprisoned, killed, or forced into exile. Still, by early 2012, there were approximately four hundred different coordinating committees in Syria, despite intensive campaigns of repression by the regime's security forces.²⁹

This situation led to a rising number of defections among conscripted soldiers. Officers refused to fire on peaceful protesters. At the same time, initial unorganized armed resistance against the security services began to emerge in early summer 2011 in some areas. In the following months, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established, as well as a myriad of other brigades. (The FSA became, initially, one of the most prominent armed opposition factions.) Armed resistance against the regime was nearly generalized by the end of 2011, creating new dynamics in the uprising. The militarization was mainly the result of the violent repression of Syrian civilians who opposed the regime—many simply sought to defend themselves. The first armed opposition groups to emerge often had a purely local dynamic and served to defend their hometowns and areas from the armed security services.

The members of FSA units generally originated from the same parts of society that contributed the largest numbers

of individuals to the uprising: marginalized workers of the cities and countryside, including those in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.³⁰ Some of the armed opposition was made up of defected soldiers from the Syrian army, but the vast majority were civilians who had decided to take up arms.³¹ Lacking unity and centralization, fighting groups coordinated on specific battlefields, but rarely on political and strategic decisions. They were generally gathered along village or extended family lines, with little ideological cohesion.

Though fighters tended to be conservative and practicing Sunni Muslims from working class neighborhoods, they were not motivated—as the Assad regime’s propaganda claimed—by a particular religious fundamentalist ideology.³² In a survey of the opposition carried out by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and Pechter Polls of Princeton in June 2012, most of the armed opposition fighters favored a democratic system or process. The survey showed that 40 percent preferred a transitional government in Damascus, leading to elections, while 36 percent declared that they wanted a constitutional assembly, as in post-revolutionary Tunisia, leading to elections.³³

The FSA emerged in mid-2011 as a coordinating body for different rebel factions, and was initially characterized by its variety of political opinions and, to some extent, ethnic and sectarian compositions. The Kurdish Salah al-Din Brigade fighting in Aleppo and northern Syria initially defended a democratic program for all Syrians without discrimination.³⁴ The National Unity Brigades (Kata’eb al-Wahdah al-Wataniyyah) were established in the countryside of Damascus in 2012 and had democratic and inclusive aspirations. The spokesman of this group prominently declared that “religion is for God, and the homeland is for all.” He added that “the National Unity Brigades operates for the sake of a civil, democratic state for all ethnicities and social identities.”³⁵ Two battalions, the Lions of Ghouta and the Lions of God (known in Arabic, respectively, as Oussoud al-Ghouta and Oussoud Allah), were linked to Arab nationalist and socialist political parties in Douma, where they had a historical presence, in competition with Islamic fundamentalist movements.³⁶ Among religious

minorities, involvement in the armed opposition as fighters was very limited, especially in comparison with their higher involvement in the civilian popular movement. Those who joined armed groups typically did so on an individual basis.

Throughout the uprising the various FSA units were, however, never able to formally unite and act as a single organization, despite various attempts from local and foreign initiatives. Another problem was that the Syrian armed opposition was neither well armed nor well funded.³⁷

Similarly, among the various coordination committees, which were previously determined to continue their peaceful struggle, many shifted their position with the increasing militarization of the uprising and in the face of violent repression by the regime.

However, for numerous activists, the increasing militarization considerably weakened the protest movement. In some cases, especially in the expansion of the militarization dynamics of the uprisings, the areas controlled by FSA battalions also often suffered from lawlessness, and some groups got involved in theft and robbery. In some regions, activists began to complain of the sectarian attitudes of individual fighters.³⁸

The Opposition Drifts from Its Ideals

At the same time that the Syrian regime’s brutal crackdown on the uprisings was pushing the opposition toward rapid militarization, foreign powers of both the regional and global variety were beginning to involve themselves much more directly with Syrian rebel groups. The respective favor and often competing objectives of the various Gulf countries, Turkey, Russia, and the United States would have a decisive effect on the evolution of Syrian rebel forces, which were frantically trying to respond to the escalating government response. Foreign intervention and the armed opposition’s drift toward sectarianism had a mutually amplifying effect.

FSA groups on the ground increasingly sought support and funding elsewhere, especially from the Gulf monarchies, which would have significant consequences in furthering

the Islamization of the uprising and of the armed opposition groups. “In the case of the US and Europe,” as political scientist Steven Heydemann describes it, “the political risks thought to accompany direct engagement with the armed opposition or participation in any form of military action, including the creation of safe zones, has led Western governments to cede leadership and influence to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey in providing financial, political, and military support for the opposition—even though they have done so in ways that directly undermine Western interests in preventing sectarian radicalization and political fragmentation on the ground.”³⁹

Thus, competition existed and increased among FSA units as they fought for resources. Organizational cohesion suffered because of this competition and the variety of financiers with different agendas. Infighting between Syrian armed opposition groups surfaced more consistently by April 2012.⁴⁰ Regional states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) contributed to the decline of the FSA from its true potential, despite their supportive intentions, according to analyst Charles Lister. Those states acted independently and often through multiple independent channels relying on personal contacts. These three patrons of the rebellion never coordinated their support.⁴¹

The marginalization and fragmentation of the FSA’s networks continued throughout the war, and they increasingly became proxies for foreign states or fell under the domination of Islamic and jihadist fundamentalist forces.

By the middle of 2015, most of the non-jihadist and non-Salafi armed opposition groups had been marginalized in the military struggle against the regime, firstly by repression of Assad’s forces and foreign allies, Russia and Iran, and secondly as a result of pressure from opposition groups’ regional backers to deescalate their fight against the Assad regime and concentrate on other enemies instead. Eventually, autonomous FSA forces weakened as they were dominated on the battlefield and weathered attacks from Salafi and jihadist forces.

The story of the SNC provides another useful illustration of these trends. The SNC was established in Istanbul in

October 2011.⁴² It was formed by a coalition of groups and individuals, including signatories of the Damascus Declaration, the Muslim Brotherhood, various Kurdish factions, and representatives of the Local Coordination Committees of Syria (the LCC, an umbrella organization of the many committees already formed in the country).⁴³ Over the first years of its existence, the increasing dependence of the Coalition on foreign actors put it in greater difficulties, as the interests of patron states diverged from its own. Ultimately, these divisions would culminate in a rift over whether or not to pursue the overthrow of Assad. But cleavages were already visible much earlier.⁴⁴

The SNC initially enjoyed massive support from Qatar and Turkey, which respectively funded and hosted it. The new coalition was also welcomed by Western powers and other Gulf monarchies. It became the main point of reference for countries backing the opposition. In April 2012, more than one hundred countries in the “Friends of Syria” group recognized the SNC as “the umbrella organization under which Syrian opposition groups [were] gathering.”⁴⁵ Very early on, the SNC adopted a critical position toward some internal opposition groups such as the NCB, because those local groups advocated for negotiations and dialogue with the regime, and refused external interventions.

The Coalition was established in Doha in November 2012, in response to increasing pressure from the United States and other Western states for the formation of a Syrian opposition coalition that was more diverse and inclusive than the SNC. The main goal was to create a coalition that would be able to win more widespread international recognition and increased financial and material support.

Initially, there seemed to be promise that the Coalition could serve the purpose that its Western backers hoped it would. The SNC joined the Coalition, and was awarded more than a third of its sixty-three governing political council positions. About half a dozen other SNC members were also given seats as “independent national figures” or representatives of minorities. This new coalition included representatives from the local coordinating committees, and initially had the support of large sections of the FSA.⁴⁶

However, internal divisions, strengthened by foreign interventions and influences, characterized both opposition bodies. Democratic and progressive sectors of the opposition also took issue with domination of the SNC and the Coalition by the Muslim Brotherhood and conservative Islamic groups and personalities. But these sectors were unable to provide an inclusive and democratic alternative.⁴⁷

Qatar and Turkey politically dominated the SNC for the first two years of the uprising. But from May 2013, Qatar's domination over the Coalition increasingly faded away in favor of Saudi Arabia. Western powers were increasingly frustrated with the Coalition's paralysis, including its inability to create real links with groups in Syria. Under Saudi pressure that month, the Coalition expanded its membership from 63 to 117, with the express purpose of including more minorities. Even the Brotherhood, whose patron had been Qatar, did not want to appear to oppose Saudi Arabia, and now sought good relations with Riyadh.⁴⁸

These changing influences on the Syrian opposition were in turn related to regional shifts. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani gave up his post as emir of Qatar to his son in June 2013. A week later, in Egypt, Brotherhood and Qatar ally Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by Saudi ally Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Qatar's influence had weakened, and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait rushed to congratulate the Egyptian military and pledge \$12 billion to Egypt.⁴⁹ Over the course of the year, the Coalition grew ever closer to Saudi Arabia, although Qatar and Turkey remained key influencing actors within the opposition.

The divisions within the opposition continued and were even exacerbated by foreign powers throughout the years. Especially problematic was the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which was allied with Turkey. Regional actors prioritized their own interests over making the opposition more effective.

For example, in an attempt to unite various sections of the opposition for future negotiation with the Assad regime, Saudi Arabia organized a conference to unify the opposition in Riyadh in December 2015, which gathered civilian and

armed opposition groups and personalities to establish a joint document and select a team to negotiate for a political transition. The conference established the thirty-four-member High Negotiations Committee (HNC), which was supposed to represent the opposition in talks with the government. But the disjunct between the HNC's demands and the regime's strength on the ground made the HNC increasingly irrelevant. It could not claim to represent any meaningful number of fighters in the actual war—instead it had become an organization carefully put together by Saudi Arabia. By the time of the 2016 peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, hosted by Iran, Russia, and Turkey, the HNC was not even invited. Only some armed opposition groups were represented, led by Mohammed Alloush, the leader of the Islam Army (also known as Jaysh al-Islam).

As the war dragged on, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were increasingly less able, and to some extent less interested, in seeking the departure of Assad. Riyadh maintained its main focus on countering the influence of Iran in Syria.⁵⁰ Saudi Arabia and the Emirates were also interested, although to a lesser extent, in countering the influence of Turkey, perceived as a close ally of Qatar. By early 2019, a political rapprochement and reconciliation was occurring between some Gulf monarchies, led by the Emirates, and Damascus.

Riyadh and Doha's rivalry and mutually decreasing appetite for Assad's removal had clear consequences on the strategy of the Syrian opposition. The internal divisions and influences of foreign actors were clearly the most significant obstacles to uniting and consolidating into a consistent and appealing opposition. But the SNC and the Coalition also failed to provide an inclusive political program able to attract large sectors of the Syrian population. At the same time, the unwillingness of foreign powers to directly intervene in Syria to topple the regime progressively pushed the SNC and then the Coalition to turn to, or at least legitimize, the various Islamic fundamentalist forces and jihadist groups, since those groups' influence was growing within the country.⁵¹

Internal Divisions and the Domination of Conservative Muslim Actors

Since its establishment, the SNC was mired by internal divisions and was criticized for being dominated by a large Islamic component, including the Muslim Brotherhood. With nearly one-quarter of the council's 310 seats, the Brotherhood was indeed the largest and most coherent faction within the SNC, and was supported by Qatar and Turkey; the former also gave it access to Al Jazeera.⁵² Building on exile structures, the Islamist fundamentalist movement was rapidly able to play a central role in the SNC.⁵³ Meanwhile, secular members of the SNC complained about its dominance by Islamic fundamentalist movements.⁵⁴ As early as 2012, these cracks were showing in big ways. In May of that year, for example, the LCC issued a statement accusing the SNC of betraying “the spirit and demands of the Syrian Revolution” and marginalizing its representatives. The LCC announced its formal withdrawal from the SNC in November, accusing the group of being under Brotherhood control and of failing to reform into a truly representative structure.⁵⁵

Soon after its establishment, in the spring and summer of 2013, the Coalition faced increasingly similar criticisms from the protest movement. The Revolutionary Movement in Syria, a coalition of various local committees within Syria, issued a statement in May 2013 declaring: “The revolutionary forces that have signed this statement will no longer bestow legitimacy upon any political body that subverts the revolution or fails to take into account the sacrifices of the Syrian people or adequately represent them. We consider this statement to be a final warning to the Coalition, for the Syrian people have spoken.”⁵⁶

The Coalition had repeated the same mistakes as the SNC in failing to win support within Syria, whether from civilian activists or armed opposition groups.

Criticisms on the dominating role of the Brotherhood and actors linked to it were also still very much present among the democratic and progressive actors of the uprising. At the same time, soon after its foundation, the Coalition established many entities in Turkey with the purpose of

assisting local councils.⁵⁷ All these units, however, were politicized and polarized according to personal interests and partisan agendas, and were backed by rival regional sponsors, particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Thus, at the height of regional rivalries in 2013 and 2014, these structures mostly operated in competition with each other, seeking to secure their presence and impose their influence on local councils inside Syria through financial support.⁵⁸

The Coalition was further poisoned by internal rivalries, and defections increased throughout the years. For example, Samira Masalmeh, the vice president of the Coalition, resigned in 2017 after first criticizing the opacity of its funding sources, and then in turn being investigated by the Coalition for making remarks on television criticizing the body.⁵⁹ Veteran opposition activist Fayez Sara also resigned in 2017, saying the Coalition did not have the ability to reform itself, and criticizing its failure to take a position on the “Islamic” forces—from the Islamic State to Jund al-Aqsa and the Nusra Front—which, he reportedly said, played “Satan’s role” in implementing the Assad regime’s policies.⁶⁰

A Deeper Look at the Opposition’s Failings

We have seen that the Syrian uprising transformed from a democratic and inclusive movement with both secularist and religious strains into a civil war with rising sectarian and ethnic tensions. The pre-uprising conditions in Syria made this outcome a potential, but not an inevitability. The Assad regime’s savvy targeting of the most democratic and inclusive leaders in the early stages of the uprising meant that less democratically inclined groups were left standing. Foreign powers’ injection of muscle and resources into the remaining vying opposition factions ensured that they would ultimately embody the most divisive potentials of the uprising.

However, the analysis would be incomplete—and so far, in studies of the war, often has been—without acknowledgement that the Syrian opposition’s failings also arose from its own deficiencies and unforced errors. To ignore those problems of the opposition would risk a somewhat airbrushed history

of the Syrian civil war. In this section, I identify several themes in the opposition's critical shortcomings.

What Kind of State and Society?

The SNC and the Coalition both declared their willingness to build a Syria for all through the establishment of a civil state based on citizenship and with no discrimination based on sect or gender. However, the discourse and practices of both opposition bodies contradicted these statements. The two groups shied away from detailing their thoughts around various issues, notably including the place of sharia or of personal status laws in a future state, the rights of women, and the Kurdish issue.

Neither did these groups provide any concrete descriptions of their positions on a civil state and citizenship. While some individuals in the SNC and coalition spoke of a civil state and secularism as similar things, Islamic fundamentalist movements completely rejected secularism.⁶¹ The Brotherhood, for example, only seeks a “civil state” as a first step toward an Islamic state, or a state based on sharia. It generally talks about a “civil state with an Islamic frame of reference.”⁶² A 2004 Brotherhood document, “The Political Project for the Future Syria,” stipulates that the group would seek to “Islamize the laws in a gradual manner, due to our belief that sharia revealed by God is a source of mercy for all mankind and that it consists of the most humane, wise, and prudent measures that are in the best interest of all people.” The text's implications for religious minorities are ambiguous: it says that the Brotherhood considers them equal citizens, but also says that Islam should be the basis of the state and of Syrian identity.⁶³ These positions were reflected in the various opposition bodies in which the Brotherhood participated.⁶⁴

Sectarianism

The SNC and the Coalition both claimed that they struggled against sectarianism, but some of their members have acted quite in contradiction with these statements. In addition to this, the inclusion of some Islamic fundamentalists and the normalization or defense of jihadist movements clearly

encouraged sectarian dynamics after the opening chapter of the uprising. This was not only due to the foreign influence and selective Syrian government repression. It must be admitted that, despite an overarching message of inclusion in its initial days, many uprising participants also held sectarian and religiously exclusive views, which were recognizable from early on.

For example, in July 2013, Coalition member Anas Ayrout, a Salafi cleric who was also a leader in the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, called on opposition fighters to target Alawite villages in coastal areas.⁶⁵ A member of the SNC, Saleh al-Mubarak, supported attacking this area (Latakia's countryside), affirming that “the battle may be moved to the ruling family's heartland, and the Alawites be given notice that they cannot be safe if the rest of the people are unsafe.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Brotherhood members have also made numerous sectarian comments and statements against the Shia and Alawite communities, while at the same time considering the jihadist group the Nusra Front a revolutionary force and “brothers in faith.”⁶⁷

Some pro-uprising media outlets were also guilty of sectarian narratives. Orient TV, for example, owned by Syrian businessman in exile Ghassan Abboud (who is known for his sectarian diatribes) presented the victims of the Islamic State's May 2015 massacre of more than forty civilians in the mixed town of Majaoubé as being members of the regime's security forces. In reality, the victims were, in their large majority, Sunni, Ismaili, and Alawite civilians, including children.⁶⁸ The presentation of the events provoked an important controversy.⁶⁹

In March 2013, the former president of the Coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, justified the influx of jihadists into Syria as a counterweight to the presence of Russian and Iranian military experts and Hezbollah fighters, and referred to them as brothers and honored guests.⁷⁰ Later, in 2015, the president of the SNC, George Sabra, characterized the Nusra Front as “part of the revolutionary movement.” Sabra, a member of the liberal People's Party (the former Communist Party Political Bureau led by Riad al-Turk) made the comment in response to the United States' listing of the jihadist group

as a terrorist organization.⁷¹ Similarly, Michel Kilo, who joined the coalition in 2013, initially refuted all accusations against the Nusra Front that characterized it as a fundamentalist organization.⁷² He also rejected any comparison between the Islamic State and the Nusra Front, arguing that the latter was a movement that supported “an Islamic electoral system” and wanted to reach an Islamic state by national consensus, while the former wanted to implement it through despotism.⁷³

The Islam Army, a Salafi organization, was integrated into some of the exiled opposition’s official bodies, while Ahrar al-Sham participated in some meetings and discussions but did not join them. These two organizations were guilty of numerous violations of human rights. The Coalition did not condemn these practices or mobilize to demand the release of activists the armed groups had kidnapped.⁷⁴ And these groups were even directly involved in the Coalition’s activities. Mohammed Alloush, the political leader of the Islam Army, served in 2016 as the chief negotiator for the HNC in opposition peace talks with the Assad regime in Geneva. Sectarian discourses and practices were thus common in opposition bodies, and far from being isolated incidents or the work of individual members.

Lack of Inclusion of Women and Women’s Rights

As noted above, the first two years of the uprising saw important participation from women. The activities of women were wide and diverse. Some women’s organizations and committees coordinated almost daily women-only demonstrations and organized themselves in grassroots cells to deliver assistance and relief to the families of the detainees, and those killed in the region, or to FSA soldiers. Despite these early contributions, however, opposition bodies never embraced the significance of women’s participation in the popular movement.

In some areas, however, women’s activities were more difficult for security reasons. But they were also hampered because of religiously conservative conventions. Women revolutionaries were, for example, given mandatory male protection, while some female demonstrators were segregated from men,

or they were simply prohibited from participation. There was also a gendering of the roles assigned to women in the activities within the protest movement, and a lack of women in the LCC and in its decision-making processes.⁷⁵ The participation of women eventually diminished under the violent repression of the regime, increasing militarization of the uprising, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces.

Increasingly, complaints emerged about the lack or absence of female representation in opposition institutions within Syria.⁷⁶ Women were often limited to symbolic representation without any real responsibilities in the SNC, the Coalition, and then the HNC. The SNC counted just 24 women out of 444 members. Later, the Coalition included only three women in its membership. Female participation in the HNC at its establishment was limited to two of the thirty-three members.⁷⁷

Female activists often characterized most of the opposition groups as unreliable, discriminatory, and elitist—similar to the Assad regime. They claimed that female representatives held only “decorative positions” without any effective role in the decision-making process.⁷⁸

The domination of the Muslim Brotherhood and other conservative forces was also reflected in the opposition’s approach to women’s rights issues. For example, in the July 2012 opposition conference held in Cairo under the sponsorship of the Arab League, the National Covenant document on women’s rights stated that “The Constitution guarantees the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and seeks to create the required legislative and legal environment that enables their political, economic, and social empowerment, in accordance with all relevant international conventions, as well as in harmony with the culture of the society.”⁷⁹

The last sentence, in harmony with the culture of society, was added in response to the demand of conservative Islamist groups and individuals. The phrase was widely denounced by feminists as a way to curtail their rights. More generally, many feminist activists have criticized the fact that

individuals in the SNC and, subsequently, in the Coalition and the HNC inevitably yielded to Islamic fundamentalist pressures.⁸⁰ Feminist activist Lama Kannout explained that, from the beginning of the uprising, in the various alliances and political conferences of the opposition “seculars would inevitably yield to Islamists, sacrificing women’s rights in the process.”⁸¹

The Kurdish Issue

Syrian Kurds’ historical problems reappeared with the popular uprising.⁸² The Syrian Arab opposition rejected the demands of the Kurdish opposition, both from the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (known by its Kurdish acronym, PYD). In July 2011, Kurdish representatives at the Istanbul gathering—which would, a few months later, establish the SNC—walked out of the conference in protest after the refusal of their request to change the name of the country from the Syrian Arab Republic to the “Republic of Syria.”⁸³

Relations between the SNC and the KNC had been difficult from the beginning. The SNC’s first chairman, Burhan Ghalioun, refused the KNC’s main demand for federalism in a post-Assad Syria, calling it a “delusion.” Ghalioun also infuriated Syrian Kurds by comparing them to the “immigrants in France,” implying that they were not native to Syria—a longstanding way to denigrate their claims to rights in the country.⁸⁴ Kurdish activists unsuccessfully attempted to resist the continual ignoring of Kurdish rights.⁸⁵

Tension between the KNC and the SNC increased considerably following the SNC’s publication of its “National Charter: The Kurdish Issue in Syria” in April 2012. The document eliminated an earlier draft’s language recognizing a Kurdish nation within Syria. In response, the KNC withdrew from unity talks with the SNC. The KNC also accused Turkey of excessively influencing the SNC’s policy.⁸⁶ Within Syria, Kurdish youth groups and parties protested against the council and in favor of Kurdish rights.⁸⁷

The KNC then joined the Coalition in 2013, hoping for improvements. But the SNC and the Coalition continued to

act negatively toward Kurdish parties and interests. The KNC was later included in the HNC, but this did not prevent the continuation of the denial of Kurdish rights and of chauvinist comments from members of the Coalition.⁸⁸ For example, in March 2016, the chairman of the opposition’s delegation to the HNC in Geneva, former general Asaad al-Zoubi, said on Radio Orient television that “the Kurds made up 1 percent of the population and they only wanted to get their papers during the era of President Hafez al-Assad to prove they are ‘human beings.’”⁸⁹ In response to these comments, which many Kurds considered racist, demonstrations were organized in various Kurdish-majority cities.⁹⁰ At the same time, the SNC and Coalition continued to adopt a very harsh attitude toward the PYD, which they considered an enemy of the revolution.⁹¹

In autumn of 2016, the great majority of the Syrian Kurdish political movements were angered by the transition plan proposed by the opposition’s HNC. “This document is not part of a solution,” the KNC stated,

but rather a danger to a democratic, pluralistic and unified Syria guaranteeing cultural, social and political rights to all its ethnic, religious and linguistic groups.

Whoever reads the document notes immediately that point 1 of the “General Principles” exclusively lists the Arab culture and Islam as sources for intellectual production and social relations. This definition clearly excluded other cultures—be they ethnic, linguistic or religious—and sets the majority culture as the leading one. As Syrian Kurds we feel repulsed by this narrow perception of the Syrian people. The similarities between this definition and the chauvinist policies under the Assad regime are undeniable.⁹²

A new episode of confrontation happened in March 2017 during a further round of peace negotiations in Geneva, when representatives of the NCB and a few other members of the HNC refused to transfer a document written by the KNC to the UN special envoy, Steffan de Mistura. The

document confirmed the representation of Kurds in the negotiation process and demanded an inclusion of the Kurdish question and of other sections of Syria's population into the agenda of the negotiations. In reaction, the KNC suspended its participation in the negotiations and in the HNC's meetings.⁹³

The NCB, which prioritizes nonviolent action and reforms of the regime through negotiations, has been little better on the Kurdish issue. Its original position envisaged a "democratic solution to the Kurdish issue within the unity of Syria's land that does not contradict that Syria is part and parcel of the Arab world." In February 2012, the Kurdish parties belonging to the NCB (with the exception of the PYD) withdrew and decided to join the KNC. The NCB slightly modified its position in April of the same year, endorsing the implementation of "decentralized principles" in a future Syria. But the Kurdish parties who had left were not enticed to return.⁹⁴

The FSA had no official position on the Kurdish question, but most of its leadership was hostile to Kurdish national rights and demands.⁹⁵

A Turkish military offensive, assisted by Syrian armed opposition forces, entered northern Syria in January 2018. Following the conquest and occupation of the city of Afrin, Syrian opposition fighters linked to Ankara plundered and looted civilian residences and shops, and tore down a statue of Kawa, a central and symbolic figure in a Kurdish legend about the new year celebration of Newroz. More than 130,000 people, almost all Kurdish, also fled their homes after the invasion of Afrin district.⁹⁶ The occupation of the region of Afrin has continued and has been characterized by numerous violations of human rights. In the months following the invasion, tensions between Arabs and Kurds only increased.

The situation worsened in December 2018, when Syrian armed opposition groups announced their readiness to participate in a Turkish-led military operation against the regions controlled by the PYD east of the Euphrates river,

after Ankara redoubled its threats against Kurdish forces.⁹⁷ The Coalition also supported this offensive, despite the opposition of the Kurdish members and groups within it.

No Socioeconomic Alternatives

It is now clear that a major catalyst of the Syrian uprisings, if not a core cause, was the deteriorating economic situation, especially from 2008 to 2011. Syria had undergone an accelerated implementation of neoliberal policies in the decade after Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000. There was extensive privatization and liberalization of the economy accompanied by reductions in subsidies, a hiring freeze in the public sector, and a reduction of the state's role in domestic investment. In 2005, the "social market economy" was adopted as a new economic strategy at the Syrian Ba'ath Party's Tenth Regional Conference. The government tried to position the private sector rather than the state as the leader in the process of economic development and in providing employment.⁹⁸ The state withdrew from key areas of social welfare provision. Between 2000 and 2010, more than a thousand new laws and decrees were implemented in this process of liberalizing the economy.⁹⁹

These measures simply aggravated already existing socioeconomic problems. Bashar al-Assad's political rule and economic policies led to unprecedented impoverishment while wealth inequalities continued to increase. Despite GDP growing at an average rate of 4.3 percent per year from 2000 to 2010 in real terms, this growth only benefitted a small stratum of economic elites. GDP more than doubled from 2005 to 2010, from \$28.8 billion to around \$60 billion.¹⁰⁰ But inequality rose.¹⁰¹ By 2007, the percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line was 33 percent, representing approximately seven million people, while 30 percent of Syrians were only just above this level.¹⁰² This represented a large shift from the late 1990s, when only 14.3 percent were recorded as living below the poverty line.¹⁰³ Poverty was especially concentrated in the countryside; as of 2004, 62 percent of Syria's impoverished living in rural areas compared to 38 percent in urban areas.¹⁰⁴ By 2010, the continuous neoliberal policies and the impact of four consecutive droughts since 2006 had been dramatic for both small-scale

farmers and herders. In the affected regions of the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the northeast of the country, the income of these groups dropped by as much as 90 percent.¹⁰⁵

It is no stretch to say that the economic reforms in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's presidency catalyzed the Syrian uprisings. But the SNC and Coalition never provided a viable socioeconomic alternative in the interests of the popular classes, instead promoting neoliberal policies not very different from the regime's. In 2013, a group of leading Syrian experts affiliated with the opposition published a policy document called "The Syria Transition Roadmap," which planned for a post-Assad Syria. The plan called for the privatization of Syria's publicly owned companies, price liberalization, lifting subsidies, downsizing of the public sector in order to develop the private sector, the return to their "rightful owners" of all assets nationalized by the Ba'ath Party (lands, whether agricultural or not, corporations, factories, houses, and buildings), and supporting Syria's entry into multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization.¹⁰⁶ "Syria needs to gradually abandon its state-led, dirigiste economic model in favor of a market-based one," it concluded. "The country needs to unleash the great entrepreneurial spirit that has characterized its industrialists and merchants throughout history... The key objective here is to enhance the Syrian economy's productivity and competitiveness, and thus to put it on a path toward where growth and employment generation are led by the private sector."¹⁰⁷

These were hardly the kind of recommendations that would have had any relevance for the Syrians who had already been hurt by similar reforms in the years immediately preceding the uprisings. It was, in fact, more of the same.

This economic "vision" was especially blind to the concerns of average Syrians, but it was also not appealing to large sectors of employees in the public sector.¹⁰⁸ What the tone-deaf recommendations did reveal were the weight and influence of the former bourgeoisie and landowning families among the leadership of the political opposition. It was yet another example of the gulf between official Syrian

opposition bodies and the people living through the war—a gulf for which the opposition had no one to blame but itself.

The Means Determine the Ends

The dominant message from the protest movement in its initial demonstrations and statement was inclusive, democratic, and unthreatening for a majority of Syrians, including minorities. This message challenged the regime's claim that it was the only barrier against extremism. However, the opposition bodies in exile—the SNC and the Coalition—were unable to formulate a credible alternative and act as representatives of the protest movement's initial objectives and its diversity. They also failed to provide a political strategy and leadership, both in its civilian and armed components, to unite it and lead efforts to overthrow the regime.

The political opposition formed in exile was unable to play this role for various reasons ranging from internal division, growing corruption, and interventions of foreign states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey). The successive failures of these opposition bodies increasingly allowed Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups to dominate the military scene in Syria, while being integrated and normalized by some sectors of the opposition bodies. The various Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements defended an exclusionary vision of society that was not appealing to religious minorities, women, or those who had a different understanding of Islam.

The personalities and groups within the SNC and the Coalition believed that collaboration with the various Islamic fundamentalist groups was worth it—that the ends justify the means. I argue, to the contrary, that the failed outcomes of the Syrian opposition's efforts show that the ends are determined by the means. Opposition leaders' strategies led to a lack of an organized democratic opposition bloc on a national level within or outside the country. Similarly, they were not able to develop any solid and inclusive institutions as alternatives to the regime.

It is beyond the scope of this report to predict the future of Syria, but the incompleteness of the uprising signifies that

the regime will still face challenges despite the repression of opposition within the country. The resilience of the regime has come at a very high cost, and it faces numerous internal contradictions, in addition to the growing dependence on foreign states and actors.

Revolutionary processes are long-term events, characterized by higher- and lower-level mobilizations, according to the context. They can even be characterized by some periods of defeat, as the uprising in Syria is experiencing at the time of writing. The effects of the war and its destructions will most probably weigh for years. No structured opposition body with a significant size and following has offered an inclusive and democratic project that could appeal to large sectors of society. The failures of the opposition bodies in exile and armed opposition groups have left a legacy of frustration and bitterness in people who participated in or sympathized with the uprising.

There is nevertheless a valuable development in the midst of this terrible and bleak situation, one that could play a role in shaping future events. This is the documentation of the uprising, which has perhaps been more thorough than any other in history. There have been significant recordings, testimonies, and documentations of the protest movement, the actors involved, and the modes of action. In the 1970s, Syria witnessed strong popular and democratic resistance, with significant strikes and demonstrations throughout the country that had mass followings. But this memory was all but lost, and few in the new generation of protesters in 2011 were even aware of it. The same will not be said of 2011 the next time around. Memory will persist, and the lessons of the uprising will not only be there to observe, but will continue to be living ideas that can be seized upon to build on future resistance. The political experiences that have been accumulated since the beginning of the uprising will not fade away.

This policy report is part of *Citizenship and Its Discontents: The Struggle for Rights, Pluralism, and Inclusion in the Middle East*, a TCF project supported by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Author

Joseph Daher holds doctorates from the School of African and Oriental Studies at the University of London and from Lausanne University in Switzerland, where he teaches.

Notes

1 M. Izady, "Syria Ethnic Composition 2010," 2010, accessed February 10, 2019, http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_Detailed_Ig.png; Friederike Stolleis "Discourses on Sectarianism and 'Minorities' in Syria," in *Playing the Sectarian Card Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria*, ed. Stolleis (Beirut: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013), 7–10, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf>; Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

2 "Where We Work," United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 2011, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria>; "The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria," World Bank, July 10, 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria>.

Of course, the percentages for all of these groups in Syria have likely changed significantly during the course of the war, since a large percentage of the total population of the country has left their homes, as refugees or internally displaced persons.

3 More generally, Syrian personal status laws are, as argued by Syrian Lawyer Daad Mousa, "based on the principle that the man is the head of the family, which undermines women's rights as human beings." See Mousa, *Syrian Personal Status Laws* (Beirut: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/14969.pdf>.

4 For a discussion, see "Syria: Situation Report on Violence against Women," EuroMedRights, November 2017, https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Factsheet_VAW_Syria_EN_Nov2017.pdf. Most of the time, honor crimes are not penalized or receive a maximum of five to seven years.

5 The text of Article 489 is as follows: "Anyone who uses violence or threat to force a person other than his spouse to engage in sexual intercourse shall be punished with a minimum of five years of hard labor." See "Initial Report of States Parties: Syria," United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, August 29, 2005, <https://www.refworld.org/country,,,STATEPARTIESREP,SYR,4537782e0,0.html>.

6 By "neoliberalism," I mean a particular organization of capitalism to ensure the conditions for capitalist reproduction at a global scale as part of a ruling-class offensive, which emerged during the recessions in the 1970s and 1980s and resulted in the restructuring and generation of new and expanded forms of capitalist accumulation. See Eddie Cimorelli, "Take Neoliberalism Seriously," *International Socialism*, March 31, 2009, <http://isj.org.uk/take-neoliberalism-seriously/>. The basic goal of neoliberalism, as David Harvey has emphasized, is the development of a new "regime of capital accumulation characterized by a minimal direct intervention of the state in the economy, limited to setting up the legal, political and military functions required to guarantee the proper functioning of markets and their creation in those sectors where markets do not exist." Cited in Roberto Rocca, "Gramsci in Cairo: Neoliberal Authoritarianism, Passive Revolution and Failed Hegemony in Egypt under Mubarak, 1991–2010" (PhD diss., University of London, London School of Economics, 2012), 72.

7 Hassan Abbas, "Reinforcing Values of Citizenship" in "Syrian Voices from Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society against All Odds", ed. Salam Kawakibi, Hivos and Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, Special Bulletin no. 2, April 2013, https://hivos.org/sites/default/files/publications/special20bulletin202-salam20kawakibi20_6-5-13_1.pdf.

8 Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

9 These included the former vice president of Syria, Abdul Halim Khaddam.

10 Liad Porat, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Asad Regime," *Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, Brandeis University, December 2010, <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB47.pdf>.

11 Jean Pierre Perrin, "Damascus Puts the Opposition in the Shade" (French),

- Libération, 2008 <http://www.liberation.fr/monde/0101165847-damas-remet-l-opposition-a-l-ombre>; Wael Sawah, "Syrian Civil Society Scene Prior to Syrian Revolution," Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, Working Paper no. 21, 2012, https://hivos.org/sites/default/files/publications/wp_21_wael_sawah_final.pdf; "The Damascus Declaration," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 1, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/01/damascus-declaration/czvu>.
- 12 Porat, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," 1–4.
- 13 Doreen Khoury, "Losing the Syrian Grassroots," SWP Comments 9 (February 2013): 3, http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2013C09_kou.pdf; Assi Abi Najm, "Coordinations: Born from underneath the Ground" (Arabic), Al-Akhbar, 2011, www.al-akhbar.com/node/22408.
- 14 Samir Seifan, "Income Distribution Policies and Their Role in the Social Explosion in Syria" (Arabic), in *Backgrounds of the Syrian Revolution: Syrian Studies* (Arabic), ed. A. Bishara (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), 123.
- 15 Samir Seifan, "Income Distribution Policies and Their Role in the Social Explosion in Syria" (Arabic), in *Backgrounds of the Syrian Revolution: Syrian Studies* (Arabic), ed. A. Bishara (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), 123.
- 16 Liam Stack and Katherine Zoepf, "Protesters in Syria Plan Large March Near Capital" *New York Times*, April 7, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/08/world/middleeast/08syria.html>; David Kilcullen and Natt Rosenblatt, "The Rise of Syria's Urban Poor: Why the War for Syria's Future Will Be Fought Over the Country's New Urban Villages," PRISM, 2012, http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_4-syria/The_Rise_Of_Syrias_Urban_Poor.pdf.
- 17 Rand Sabbagh, "Attitudes of Christians in the Syrian Capital," in Stolleis, *Playing the Sectarian Card*, 71–89.
- 18 "Founding Statement for the Union of Free Syrian Students," Local Coordination Committee (LCC) Facebook page, September 29, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/اىروس-ي-ف-تي-ح-ل-ا-نا-ج-ل/founding-statement-for-the-union-of-free-syrian-students/291890390838104/>; "Union of Free Syrian Students," Syria Untold, May 6, 2013, http://www.syriauntold.com/en/work_group/union-of-free-syrian-students/; Allan Hassaf (former member of the UFSS), interview with the author via Skype, July 9, 2018.
- 19 Syria had five government universities in 2011: Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Latakia, and Deir al-Zour, with regional branches in Dera'a, Suwayda, Idlib, Tartus, Hama, al-Hasakeh, and Raqqa.
- 20 Hassan Abbas, "The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria," *Jadaliyya*, October 19, 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2906/the-dynamics-of-the-uprising-in-syria>.
- 21 Omar Hossino, "Syria's Secular Revolution Lives On," *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/04/syrias-secular-revolution-lives-on/>.
- 22 "Damascus—Hama—Halfaya—Evening Demonstrations Rejecting the Conference 27-6" (Arabic), published on YouTube July 27, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ari1HXh4PjU.
- 23 Sabr Darwish, "Cities in Revolution: Salamiyah," Syria Untold, August 9, 2016, http://cities.syriauntold.com/#_ftnref45; Anonymous former activist from Salamiyah, interview with the author, Paris, July 9, 2017.
- 24 Interview with the author via Skype, July 10, 2018.
- 25 These leaders included figures such as Burhan Ghalioun, Michel Kilo, Hussein al-Awdat, Aref Dalila, Habib Issa, Abdulaziz al-Khair, and Hazem Nahar.
- 26 At its inception, the NCB encompassed opposition figures and parties from leftists and Arab nationalist backgrounds, in addition to the Syrian Union Party and two Kurdish leftist movements, including the Democratic Union Party (known as the PYD). "National Coordination Body for Democratic Change," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 15, 2012, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48369?lang=en>.
- 27 "National Coordination Body for Democratic Change," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 15, 2012 <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48369?lang=en>; Narmin Amir and Yusuf Fakhr ed Din, "Interview with Abdulaziz al-Khair, Leading Figure of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, Syria," *Anti-Imperialist Camp*, May 16, 2012, http://www.antiimperialista.org/en/al_khair.
- 28 "La contestation s'étend dans le Sud syrien," *L'Orient le jour*, March 22, 2011, http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/695752/La-contestation_s%27etend_dans_le_Sud_syrien.html.
- 29 Khoury, "Losing the Syrian Grassroots," 3.
- 30 Darwish, "Cities in Revolution: Salamiyah," Darwish, "Cities in Revolution: Deir el-Zor," Syria Untold, September 10, 2016, http://cities.syriauntold.com/#_edn10.
- 31 Joseph Halliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition," *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report, no. 3, March 7, 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias_Armed_Opposition.pdf; Erika Solomon, "Rural Fighters Pour into Syria's Aleppo for Battle," Reuters, July 29, 2012, <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/marketsNews/idUSL6E8IT0TY20120729>.
- 32 Adrien Jaulmes, "Une insurrection syrienne plus conservatrice qu'extrémiste," *Le Figaro*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2012/07/30/01003-20120730ARTF1G00409-syrie-une-insurrection-musulmane-conservatrice.php>; "Q&A: Nir Rosen on Syria's Armed Opposition," Al Jazeera English, February 20, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/02/20121315020166516.html>; Felix Legrand, "The Strategy of Jabhat Al-Nusra / Jabhat Fath Al-Sham in Regarding the Truces in Syria," *Network of Research of International Affairs*, October 2, 2016, <http://www.noria-research.com/strategy-regarding-truces-in-syria/>.
- 33 Cited in Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Reagan Arts, 2015), 181.
- 34 Hossino, "Syria's Secular Revolution Lives On."
- 35 Interview with Member of the 'National Unity Brigades' of the FSA," Darth Nader, October 17, 2012, <https://darthnader.net/2012/10/17/interview-with-member-of-the-national-unity-brigades-of-the-fsa/>.
- 36 Majd al-Dik, *A l'est de Damas, au bout du monde, témoignage d'un révolutionnaire syrie* (Paris: Don Quichotte Editions, 2016), 190–91.
- 37 Al Jazeera English, "Q&A: Nir Rosen."
- 38 "Kurdish-Arab Fraternity Coordination Committee," Syria Untold, February 21, 2014, http://www.syriauntold.com/en/work_group/kurdish-arab-fraternity-coordination-committee/.
- 39 Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (October 2013): 5.
- 40 Halliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report, no. 5, June 21, 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias_MaturingInsurgency_21June2012.pdf.
- 41 Charlie Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand," *Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper, no. 26, November 26, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army1.pdf; Michael Young, "Syriana," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 7, 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/68366?lang=en>.
- 42 It was initially called the "National Salvation Council" in its first meeting in Istanbul in mid-July 2011.
- 43 However, the LCC entered an ambiguous position in relationship with the SNC when it became a member of the new national body, according to Ciwan Youssef, a founding member who had left the LCC. The decision for the LCC to become a member followed pressure from Burhan Ghalioun, the first president of the SNC, and influence from the People's Party, a founding member of the SNC. The leadership of the LCC hoped to boost the legitimacy of the SNC within the country, while avoiding getting too politically involved with the new opposition body's decisions and policies. (Ciwan Youssef, interview with the author via Skype, July 28, 2018). However, this situation would not last.
- 44 In November 2017, the head of the Syrian opposition's High Negotiations Committee (HNC), Riyadh Farid Hijab, along with chief negotiator Muhammad Sabra and eight other members, announced their resignation from the committee ahead of the Riyadh Conference. Their aim was to unite the opposition in the face of international pressure to force it to accept that Bashar al-Assad would remain in power, according to Suheir Atassi, one of the members who resigned. See "Resigned Syrian Opposition Figure: We Were Asked to Accept Assad or Leave," *Middle East Monitor*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171122-resigned-syrian-opposition-figure-we-were-asked-to-accept-assad-or-leave/>.
- 45 "Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, February 4, 2013, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50831?lang=en>.
- 46 "The Syrian National Council," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, September 25, 2013, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48334>.
- 47 Earlier in 2012, fourteen leftist and democratic organizations had attempted to form their own coalition, but it fizzled in the face of regime repression. The coalition was created with the objective of participating in the revolution and reinforcing it in order to overthrow the regime and build a civil and democratic state (Abi Najm, "Coordinations"). Because the regime severely repressed most of its members and made organizing impossible, the group gradually disappeared, though some organizations were still operating in some regions throughout the uprising.
- 48 Hassan Hassan, "Saudis Overtaking Qatar in Sponsoring Syrian Rebels," *National*, May 15, 2013, <https://www.thenational.ae/saudis-overtaking-qatar-in-sponsoring-syrian-rebels-1.471446>; Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 122.
- 49 Mohsin Khan and Richard Lebaron, "What Will the Gulf's \$12 Billion Buy in

