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# COSMOS WORKING PAPERS

## **No Way Back: Actors, Structures and Mobilization Opportunities in the 2011-2013 Syrian Uprising**

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“MOBILIZING FOR DEMOCRACY:  
DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES AND THE MOBILIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY” PROJECT  
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## **Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society**

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.

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# ***No Way Back: Actors, Structures and Mobilization Opportunities in the 2011-2013 Syrian Uprising.***

Teije Hidde Donker

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**Abstract:** The following report provides an in-depth, empirically focused, overview of contentious mobilization dynamics before and during the Syrian Uprising. The report describes the period between the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's rule in 2000 until the end of 2012. Instead of an extensive chronological overview, the report is structured along a thematic "periodization". It therefore focuses on a limited number of key issues and transformative events in the development of Syrian contentious mobilization.

The report argues that two aspects stand out in the Syrian case of Arab Spring mobilization. First, the importance of societal structures in defining options available to both protesters and the regime. Second, the importance of cognitive signaling (the resonance of a certain event on a population, sometimes referred to as "thin diffusion") at key turning points in the uprising. Both the social structures and cognitive signaling were crucial in defining (perceived) possible avenues for contestation before and during the uprising.

**Keywords :** Syria, Arab Spring, Contentious Mobilization

## **Introduction**

Who would have thought it? At the end of 2010 Syrian politics had weathered a number of crises under leader Bashar al-Asad, in power since June 2000. Through a combination of changes in the international political arena, domestic patronage and old-fashioned repression, the regime seemed stronger than it had been since 2000. So when a poor Tunisian fruit-seller set off the "Arab Spring" by setting himself alight, many in- and outside Syria thought the country would prove to be impervious to this wave of popular contention.<sup>1</sup> They would be proven wrong. In March 2011, in the southern city of Dara', an uprising began

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the article by Haddad in Syria Comment (Haddad 2011) in which he makes the case as to why Syria will not be next "for now". The article was published 4 days before the start of the uprising.

that is ongoing at the time of writing in November 2012.

The dynamics of the uprising have altered significantly over these initial 20 months. From largely peaceful protests (that were immediately repressed using live ammunition by police) to a full-blown civil war in which an increasing amount of heavily armed and well trained cadres of army defectors, regular Syrian and foreign fighters are staging an armed insurrection against the regime of Bashar al-Asad. Unable to repress the uprising effectively, the regime has gradually come to use more crude and violent methods of repressing dissent. At present random bombings of civilian quarters by fighter jets are a daily occurrence in various parts of the country. The uprising has taken on an increasingly sectarian tone, pitting the Sunni majority against the Alawi minority, and has shown the lengths to which the regime and its supporters will go to secure their survival.

This report discusses contentious mobilization in Syria from the beginning of Bashar's rule in 2000 until the end of 2012. The report has an empirical focus and analyses of the dynamics of the uprising are kept to a minimum. I provide an overview of the structural background to the uprising, key actors in both elites and civil society and protests emerging in Syria both before and during the uprising. Concerning the latter, due to the complexity and duration of the uprising, space and time do not allow for any extensive chronological overview. Instead, I opt for a "periodization" that is much more thematic in nature and only broadly chronological. This means that not every protest will be discussed, but I have attempted to focus on a few key issues and transformative events before and during the uprising. The resulting report provides a broad introduction to the relevant structures, actors and dynamics of the Syrian uprising up to November 2012.

Two aspects stand out in the Syrian case. First, the political regime was, and is, structurally strong before and throughout the uprising. The (elite) political context had no influence, it would seem, on the start of the uprising, nor on its subsequent dynamics. More obvious structural influences on the dynamics of the uprising came from societal structures that defined options available to both protesters and the regime. Second, the importance of cognitive signaling (the resonance of a certain event on a population, sometimes referred to as "thin diffusion") at key turning points in the uprising can hardly be overstated, especially at its start and concerning the eventual use of violent repertoires. As we will see, both social structures and cognitive signaling were crucial in defining (perceived) possible avenues for contestation before and during the uprising.

## **Periodization**

I subdivide the uprising into four periods, differentiated on the use of specific

protest repertoires and (in the case of the last phase) geographical influence on the uprising. These phases are defined by dates, but in reality are much more gradual than this chronology might imply. In Appendix C the gradation is marked by different shades of gray. The different periods that are identified are:

- Phase 0: Pre-uprising, approximately from 2000 to March 2011. Marked by the absence of large scale public protest to Bashar's rule. At various points, for instance during the “Damascus Spring” (2001), the Kurdish uprising (2004) and the Sadnaya prison uprising (2008) contentious mobilizations did occur, but all were localized and/or lacked open forms of contention. Differing in their scale and use of protest strategies, none of these instances were directly related to the outbreak of the uprising in 2011.
- Phase 1: Peaceful domestic uprising, approximately March 2011 to June-August 2011. Marked by peaceful street protests, attempts at staging sit-ins and encampments in public squares. Use of live ammunition by the police and (to a limited extent) the army to disperse protests. The main protests took place in the cities of Homs and Idlib, involving hundreds of thousands of protesters. Demands quickly changed from political and security sector reform to the end of the regime. Some influence from foreign sheikhs observable, but the uprising itself remained overtly non-religious.
- Phase 2: Increasingly violent repertoires, approximately June-August 2011 to July 2012. This phase is defined by the increased use of violent repertoires *on the side of the protesters*. In response to increasing repression (Homs was first shelled in May 2011) and the success of the Libyan uprising in August of the same year, the perception that armed insurrection was the only means to challenge the Bashar regime gained traction in the Syrian opposition. Eventually, internal discussions on the use of violent means became irrelevant as more and more militias emerged in practice and violence increased. Over time the militias became more organized and unified, but attempts at creating a unified “Free Syrian Army” (FSA) continued to lack legitimacy (and influence) on the ground.
- Phase 3: Full Civil War and Increasing Foreign Influence, approximately July 2012 to Present. At the start of the uprising Syrians were explicitly opposed to foreign intervention and attempted to retain the domestic characteristic of the uprising. Over time this tendency faded. Starting with the foreign Syrian councils “representing” the uprising, this trend developed with countries directly supporting the rebels with weapons and money, and the conflict spilling over into Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. The internationalization of the conflict is mirrored in the increased coordination of militias in the name of a “Free Syrian Army” and

demands for foreign intervention (specifically concerning a no-fly zone and the supply of heavy weaponry) among protesters.

## Protests

In this section I follow the periodization as outlined above. In each period the main protests are outlined and their size and protest repertoire discussed. The protests are organized by *who* or *what* is organizing the protests. In Appendix C an overview is included of main protest events (including aims, organizers, number of protests, duration, and repertoires used) and crucial transformative events. Appendix C also provides a more elaborate reference list (mostly English, but also Arabic and French) of newspaper articles covering these protests and a graphical reference to how the various phases overlap. Additionally, appendix A provides a map of Syria as the following account often refers to specific cities, towns and regions in the country.

### *Phase 0: Pre-uprising, the elite opposition (2000-2001)*

The beginning of Bashar al-Asad's presidency seemed to herald a period of relative freedom after the strict autocratic rule of his father. In his inauguration speech he apparently implied the introduction of some political liberalization (Ghadbian 2001), and some practical political changes were introduced. The result was the so-called "Damascus Spring" (2001): a time of relative political freedom during which a political elitist opposition took shape. This opposition became institutionalized in so-called forums – often no more than discussion groups held at the discussions leader's house – that emerged across the country, but most specifically in Damascus. Many of the more important forums were led by a small number of Syrian intellectuals, for instance Riad Saif, Michel Kilo and Riad al-Turk (ICG 2004, 8). The numbers of people that actually took part in these forums was probably less than one thousand, as most organizations were built around specific personalities and distrust between opposition figures was endemic. Apart from public discussion forums a number of key declarations were also published, but hardly any open protests were organized (an exception was a May 8 2004 sit-in at the Syrian parliament).<sup>2</sup> After calls for far reaching democratic reforms were published at the beginning of 2001,<sup>3</sup> mobilization was suppressed (Zisser 2005, 62). Key actors found themselves being arrested – often repeatedly.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Arabic News. "Damascus: Demonstrators Detained Before the Syrian Parliament", March 9, 2004. <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/040309/2004030903.html>.

<sup>3</sup>After a first manifesto (signed by 99 activists) was published in the al-Hayat newspaper on September 26, 2001, there were calls by Riad Saif for the establishment of a new liberal party on January 26. In February president Bashar al-Asad started to give signals that political liberalizations were going to end (see Ghadbian 2001, 636–637).

<sup>4</sup>Riad Saif was arrested in 2001 and spent 5 years in prison. In January 2008 he would be arrested again. Michel Kilo was arrested in May 2005 and sentenced to three years imprisonment. (Landis and Pace 2007). Riad al-

Despite increased repression following the Damascus spring of 2001, the earlier groups of activists and dissidents remained organized and active, albeit to a slowly diminishing extent.<sup>5</sup> The opposition was reinvigorated in direct reaction to the political upheaval that followed the assassination of former Lebanese President Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, though not this time through public forums, as these were increasingly curtailed, but through public declarations instead. On 18 October 2005 (five days before the UN published a report on the Hariri Murder) the “Damascus Declaration” was published demanding an end to the security state and political liberalization.<sup>6</sup> The most important part of this statement was that it was the first credible attempt to unify Syrian opposition movements (including the recently emboldened Kurdish movements, see below) and to start an open dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood (Landis and Pace 2007). When the opposition demanded improved relations with a fully independent Lebanon following the Syrian departure from that country, a wave of severe repression followed.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Kurdish Uprising (2004)*

In the context of the fall of Saddam Hussein and the increased liberty of Iraqi Kurds, Kurds in Syria sensed new opportunities and hoped for more freedoms in the future. These hopes were dashed after a March 2004 soccer match in the (majority Kurdish) town of Qamishli turned violent. Apparently, supporters of the opposing team hurled insults about Öcalan, the then recently arrested leader

Turk was jailed for 30 months in 2001 but released early due to health reasons (ICG 2004 fn. 54). Many others have had similar experiences. For internal schisms within these elite political oppositions during this period, see: ميشال كيلو لـ «الشرق الأوسط»: فوجنا بتسريب وثيقة المثقفين السوريين إلى صحف خارجية، أخبار

January 16, 2001. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=8085&article=21803&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>.

<sup>5</sup>On the increased repression see: New York Times. “Syria: More Dissidents Sentenced.” New York Times, August 29, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/29/world/world-briefing-middle-east-syria-more-dissidents-sentenced.html?ref=syria>. And an example of post-Damascus spring institutionalization, the founding of a league for the defense of prisoners of conscience: as-Sharq al-Awsat. “معتقلي الرأي»، الأولي».

”لجنة سورية للدفاع عن «معتقلي الرأي»، الأولي» as-Sharq al-Awsat, January 15, 2002. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=8449&article=82714&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>. Another example (from 2004): Arabic News. “700 Syrian Activists Demand the Government Reforms”, February 4, 2004. <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/040204/2004020411.html>. Razuq al-Ghawi ( حزب 17

رزوق الغاوي). “سوريا معارضا توقع بيانا يطالب بالإفراج عن رئيس لجان الدفاع عن الحريات، أخبار as-Sharq al-Awsat, April 28, 2004. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=9283&article=231147&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>. From 2005: Razuq al-Ghawi ( حزب 17

رزوق الغاوي). “12 تنظيمًا سوريًا غير مرخص تأسس لجنة للدفاع عن الحريات، أخبار as-Sharq al-Awsat, January 21, 2005. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=9551&article=278612&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>.

<sup>6</sup>Arabic News. “New Opposition Coalition in Syria for Comprehensive Change”, October 17, 2005; <http://www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/051017/2005101717.html>. ; Damascus Declaration. “المجلس الوطني (Damascus Declaration). doc”, December 1, 2007.

<sup>7</sup>Landis, Joshua. “Michel Kilo the Patriot.” *SyriaComment.com*, May 15, 2006. <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2006/05/michel-kilo-patriot.htm>.; as-Sharq al-Awsat. “سورية: اعتقال ميشال كيلو بعد بيان «تصويب» العلاقة مع لبنان، أخبار as-Sharq al-Awsat, May 16, 2006. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=10031&article=363449&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>. In 2007 Al-Bunni was tried: as-Sharq al-Awsat. “الحكم على المعارض السوري انور البني بالسجن 5 سنوات، أخبار as-Sharq al-Awsat, April 25, 2007. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=10375&article=416539&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>.



of the (Turkish) Kurdish PKK party. Riots started and the police responded by firing into the Kurdish crowds.<sup>8</sup> In reaction riots turned into broad based protests. Hundreds of thousands reportedly protested against regime repression and demanded more Kurdish freedoms (Landis and Pace 2007, 53–54).<sup>9</sup> The uprising was harshly repressed: according to Amnesty International 36 people died, 200 were wounded and probably around 2000 arrested. Many of the latter were tortured (Amnesty International 2005). Though protests mostly took place in the north-eastern (Kurdish) part of the country, some protests also took place in Aleppo and Damascus.<sup>10</sup>

### *Islamic Social Mobilization*

As a reaction to the international isolation that followed the 2005 assassination of former president Rafiq Hariri, combined with the emboldened opposition movement, the regime turned to a more conservative force in society in an apparent attempt to both support a conservative counter-movement and shore up the religious credentials of the Bashar regime. In a speech at the University of Damascus in November 2005 the President stated that “*Suria Allah Hamiha*” (Syria, God Protects her).<sup>11</sup> It signaled a willingness on the side of the regime to allow a religious basis to Syrian nationalism, as long as this was within the confines of Asad’s rule. A surge in Islamic mobilization followed: most noticeably in various *dawa’* related (educational) activities.<sup>12</sup> A main example is the women’s movement around Munira al-Qubaysi, the so-called Qubaysyat. The movement is specifically aimed at empowering women within a

<sup>8</sup>Amnesty International. “Syria: Kurds in the Syrian Arab Republic One Year After the March 2004 Events”, March 10, 2005. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/002/2005>.

<sup>9</sup>KurdWatch. *Who Is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition?* European Center for Kurdish Studies, December 1, 2011. [http://www.google.it/url?sa=t&ret=j&q=kurdwatch%20who%20is%20the%20syrian%20kurdish%20opposition&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CC4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fkurdwatch.org%2Fpdf%2Fkurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en.pdf&ei=cx62UMXKOMLZtAbd54HAAg&usq=AFQjCNFr0hnE8wRqEuDy-oqocPjjYJqsEZA](http://www.google.it/url?sa=t&ret=j&q=kurdwatch%20who%20is%20the%20syrian%20kurdish%20opposition&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CC4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fkurdwatch.org%2Fpdf%2Fkurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf&ei=cx62UMXKOMLZtAbd54HAAg&usq=AFQjCNFr0hnE8wRqEuDy-oqocPjjYJqsEZA)

<sup>10</sup> See for instance: “إطلاق سراح 70 كرديا سوريا من المعتقلين في حوادث الشغب بالقامشلي و حلب ودمشق, أخبار”, June 3, 2004. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=9319&article=237429&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>

<sup>11</sup> See for the complete text of the speech: Razuq al-Ghawi and Bashar al-Asad. “النص الكامل لخطاب الرئيس السوري “بشار الأسد على مدرج جامعة دمشق, أخبار *as-Sharq al-Awsat* (November 11, 2005). <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=9845&article=332856&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>. For a (pro-regime) reaction to the speech see: al-Wadi, Ahmad. “Syria, God Protects Her (Op-ed)”, November 11, 2005. [http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/\\_kuttab\\_a.asp?FileName=48996323820051110223605](http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_kuttab_a.asp?FileName=48996323820051110223605). The resurgence of Islam had already emerged before to some extent, mainly in the context of the war in Iraq and the war on terror in general. For a short note see: New York Times. “Syria, Long Ruthlessly Secular, Sees Fervent Islamic Resurgence.” *New York Times*, October 24, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/24/world/syria-long-ruthlessly-secular-sees-fervent-islamic-resurgence.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

<sup>12</sup>To give a sense of the size of the religious educational sphere in Syria, Zisser (2005, 49) quotes Syrian sources in al-Hayat newspaper stating that the number of religious schools in Syria in 2004 was 120, excluding 20 religious institutions or study centers. About 25,000 students studied in these schools. But these figures exclude informal religious schools, which— according to various sources – blossomed throughout the early 2000s. Whereas formal religious schools are under the supervision of the regime, informal schools are not. The religious school of the late Ahmad Kuftaru, the Abu Nur association, and Islamic studies center of Mohammad al-Habbash are two examples, but institutes are present throughout the country.

conservative Islamic framework, through education and informal discussion groups, for instance by emphasizing the role of women at home. The Lebanese journalist Ibrahim Hamidi stresses that the Qubaisiat (The followers of Munira al-Qubaisa) are not concerned only with teaching but also with (political) influence through societal change (ICG 2004, 15–16).<sup>13</sup> In 2006 the movement apparently had tens of thousands of followers, mainly in Syria but also abroad.<sup>14</sup> Fearing their increased power, in 2008 a wide ranging campaign was reported where dozens of Islamic charitable associations were pacified.<sup>15</sup> Islamic teaching institutes would soon follow.<sup>16</sup>

### *Salafist Jihadi groups*

In this context the Salafist Jihadi groups should also be noted. Throughout the period 2003-2009 several (violent) events related to these groups took place, but in all instances it is unclear whether there was (some form of) regime involvement (Landis and Pace 2007).<sup>17</sup> In 2005, for instance, there was a shoot out with “terrorists” in the up-market neighborhood of Mezze. A few years later there was a shoot out with Jihadists on Mount Qasioun, which overlooks the

<sup>13</sup>Hamidi, Ibrahim. “They Wear the Dark Blue Veil and Have a Wide Network for Teaching and Influence... ‘The Misses of al-Qubaysiat’ Are the Entrepreneurs in Syria for Involvement of Women in the ‘Islamic Da’wa’ ... With the Consent of the Authorities”, May 3, 2006. See also: al-Arabia.net. “القبسيات حركة إسلامية” (‘The Qubaisiat – a Secretive Female Islamic Movement That Has More Than 70 Thousand Followers’).” *al-Arabia.net*, March 5, 2006. For an English language article (but less detailed) see: Katherine Zoepf. “Islamic Revival in Syria Is Led by Women.” *New York Times* (August 29, 2006). [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/29/world/middleeast/29syria.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/29/world/middleeast/29syria.html?_r=1&oref=slogin).

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Levant News. “ناشطون يؤكد استمرار السلطات السورية في مجزرة الجمعيات الخيرية والاجتماعية” (Activists Confirm That the Syrian Authorities Continue ‘the Massacre of Charities and Social Organizations’), December 4, 2008. <http://www.thisissyria.net/2008/12/04/syriatoday/02.html>; Levant News. “اعتقال صلاح كفتارو بناء على اتهامات تتصل” (Salah Kiftaru Arrested on Charges Related to Work of the Islamic Kiftaru Congregation), July 1, 2009. <http://www.thisissyria.net/2009/07/01/syriatoday/06.html>.

<sup>16</sup>Shikai, Janblaat. “إبعاد 1200 منقبة من سلك التدريس في سورية” (Minister of Education Decrees to Transfer Niqabs [away] from Field of Education in Defence of Secularism.), July 1, 2010. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20100701-religious-laic-interdiction-niqab-syrie-education>; “All4Syria :: محامون يشنون هجوماً عنيفاً على منتقدي” (Minister of Education Decrees to Transfer Niqabs [away] from Field of Education in Defence of Secularism.), July 15, 2010. <http://all4syria.info/content/view/29289/161/>; also: Muh. Habbash: “الشيخ محمد حبش يستقيل من كافة نشاطاته الدينية بوزارة الاوقاف” (Minister of Education Decrees to Transfer Niqabs [away] from Field of Education in Defence of Secularism.), September 10, 2010. <http://all4syria.info/content/view/31939/96/>

<sup>17</sup>For instance, in 2004 a shoot out took place in the up-market Mezze quarter in Damascus. The government claimed that Islamic terrorists had taken refuge there. A year later a shoot out took place in Jabal Qassioun, a mountain ridge overlooking the capital, in which two Islamists were killed. A shoot out in Aleppo also occurred (see: New York Times. “Syria Police Foil Terrorist.” *New York Times*, December 5, 2005. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9807E1DF1331F936A35751C1A9639C8B63>). In both instances only a few individuals were involved – according to officials. In July 2008 Islamist prisoners at the Saydnaya prison, a village some thirty kilometers from Damascus, rose up against prison management and kidnapped prison personnel (See: Saad, Houwaida. “Police Kill 9 Inmates During Prison Riot in Syria.” *The New York Times*, July 6, 2008, sec. International / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/06/world/middleeast/06syria.html>). In August that year a car bomb in Damascus killed 17 (see: Worth, Robert F. “Car Bomb Kills 17 in Syria Near Intelligence Office.” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2008, sec. International / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>.) For an overview see: as-Sharq al-Awsat. “أهم الهجمات والأحداث” (The Security Situation in Syria), September 28, 2008. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=10897&article=488597&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>.

capital. In the period 2003-2007 the Aleppo-based Salafi shaykh “Abu Qaqa” gained notoriety for sending Syrians over the border to Iraq to fight Americans (seemingly with tacit regime approval), until he was assassinated in 2007.<sup>18</sup> Another main example of Islamism is the prison uprising that took place in the Sadnaya prison in July 2008 where Islamist prisoners took over in protest against poor living standards. It took weeks to quell the uprising, and many of the imprisoned were never heard of again.<sup>19</sup> All of these examples are shrouded in mystery due to a very strict regime information blockade.

### *Continuing to Phase 1: Non-violent Repertoires*

All of the above represent isolated instances of contention – the regime’s power was never threatened, and this seemed to hold even in the context of the Arab spring. Some Syrians did attempt to mobilize by calling for a Syrian “day of rage” as a reaction to the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, for instance on 1 February 2011, but significant numbers of Syrians failed to take to the streets.<sup>20</sup> What was needed was a spark, a specific “transformative” event that would mobilize larger parts of society. Such an event eventually emerged in the southern town of Dara' on 6 March 2011. The following section describes protests during the first phase of the Syrian uprising, which drew on a mostly non-violent mobilization repertoire. The section after will discuss the increase of violence in the opposition mobilization repertoire as well as the increasing importance of international actors in the uprising. The current section is

<sup>18</sup>Another example in this respect is Abu Qaqa: a supposedly Jihadi shaykh, based in Aleppo, that was helping Jihadi youngsters to go to Iraq and fight Americans. He was only able to do this due to (implicit) support of the Syrian regime. Many, mainly youngsters, in the city were drawn to his basic lifestyle and militant Salafist anti-US rhetoric. As the Syrian position vis-à-vis Iraq changed due to a major international backlash, his position became more questionable. First his sudden increased wealth was reported and doubts raised over his apparent position to American and/or Syrian intelligence services (Moubayed 2006). Then, in October 2007, he was gunned down in front of his mosque in Aleppo. For more information, see: Ghaith, Abdul-Ahad. “From Here to Eternity.” *The Guardian*, June 8, 2005, sec. World news. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jun/08/ir-aq-al-qaida>.; and McGregor, Andrew. “Controversial Syrian Preacher Abu al-Qaqa Gunned Down in Aleppo - The Jamestown Foundation.” *Terrorism Focus*, October 16, 2007. [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=4481](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4481)

<sup>19</sup>Syrian Human Rights Committee. “New Massacre in Sednaya Military Prison,” July 5, 2008. <http://www.shr-c.org/data/asp/d0/3620.aspx>.

<sup>20</sup>France 24. “السوريون في موعد مع ‘يوم غضب’ ضد الأسد بعد صلاة الجمعة - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو الدولية.” FRANCE 24 - Monte Carlo Doualiya, February 4, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110203-syria-demonstrations-bashar-alAsad-day-anger-friday-prayer>.

———. “الشارع السوري صامت حيال دعوات للتظاهر والاعتصام، أخبصار.” FRANCE 24 - Monte Carlo Doualiya, February 2, 2011. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11754&article=606504&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>.

———. “من وراء دعوة ‘يوم الغضب’ في سوريا؟ - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو الدولية.” <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110204-syria-demonstrations-bashar-al Assad-day-anger-friday-prayer>. The New York Times. “‘Day of Rage’ Protest Fails to Materialize in Syria.” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/05/world/middleeast/05syria.html?\\_r=1&scp=37&sq=tunisia&st=nyt](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/05/world/middleeast/05syria.html?_r=1&scp=37&sq=tunisia&st=nyt). And two weeks later small demonstration appeared in Damascus: Landis, Joshua. “Demonstration in Damascus.” *Syria Comment*, February 18, 2011. [http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8410&utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+Syriacomment+%28Syria+Comment%29](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8410&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Syriacomment+%28Syria+Comment%29).

subdivided into four parts on the basis of actors organizing protests.

*Dara's spontaneous protests.* On March 6, 2011, a group of youngsters wrote “*As-sha'ab yurid isqat an-nizam*” (the people want the fall of the regime) on a wall in *Daraa*'.<sup>21</sup> For copying what they had seen on the television about Tunisia and Egypt, they were arrested and tortured. None were older than 15. The story goes that when the local governor was asked about their whereabouts and release, he replied that if they missed their children so much they should give him their wives – he would make them some new ones. In a region where clan ties are very strong, and family honor an important part of social reality, the families and the town were enraged. Relatives first took to the streets on 11 March 2011 and marched to the governors house to demand their childrens' release. They were met by bullets. They took to the streets again on 15 March. And again the next Friday, 18 March, after Friday prayers. An estimated three to four thousand people joined the protests that day to demand the release of the boys and express their anger at the security services.<sup>22</sup> Facing bullets again, four were killed. The next day their funerals turned into even larger protests.<sup>23</sup> The protests were largely non-violent but in their anger local Ba'ath party offices were attacked and burned. (In addition to shops, Syriatel among others. More on this later.)<sup>24</sup>

Dara' provided the event that mobilized a large cross-section of the country in what was to be a wave of *non-institutionalized nationwide protest*. Lacking pre-institutionalization, the initial protests drew on a mixture of (new) social media and pre-existing social (and religious) institutions to mobilize people. Calls went out over the internet – and soon by TV stations such as Aljazeera – for a “Friday of Dignity”, but it was only on the basis of traditional family, clan and religious ties that large scale protests could be organized. Friday prayers, the only events where it was possible to gather large groups of people, were used as springboards for protests.<sup>25</sup> Local social and religious leaders gained early acceptance as crucial actors in the protests.<sup>26</sup> Though often organized around mosques and Friday prayers, the protesters' demands were explicitly non-religious and non-sectarian. The above was particularly clear in

<sup>21</sup>Zoepf, Katherine. “Long Repressed, a Syrian Opposition Takes Shape.” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>. Macleod, Hugh. “Inside Deraa.” *al-Jazeera*, April 19, 2011. <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/04/201141918352728300.html>.

<sup>22</sup>al-Khalidi, Suleiman. “Syrian Forces Kill Three Protesters in Southern City.” Reuters. DERA'A, Syria, March 18, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/18/us-syria-protest-idUSTRE72H88M20110318>.

<sup>23</sup>Leenders, Reinoud. “Collective Action and Mobilization in Dar'a: An Anatomy of the Onset of Syria's Popular Uprising.” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* (Forthcoming), p.13-14.

<sup>24</sup>For a detailed contentious mobilization inspired analysis of the Dara' uprising, see Leenders and Heydemann (2012).

<sup>25</sup>Early protest in Souq al-hamadiya: France 24. “عشرات السوريين يلبون دعوة للتظاهر من أجل التغيير والحرية - سوريا - فرانس 24”, March 15, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110315-syria-demonstrations-change-freedom-bashar-alassad-facebook>. ; The New York Times. “Police Kill 6 Protesters in Syria.” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html>.

<sup>26</sup>Kodmani, Bassma. “The Road to Ruin for the Assad Regime.” *Financial Times*, June 14, 2011. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5bdf4198-96b8-11e0-baca-00144feab49a.html#axzz1PMoNuXKI>.

the first “Fridays of Rage” in Damascus, Homs, Idlib, and Banyas – naturally next to that held in Dara'.<sup>27</sup>

The amount of people on the streets during the first Friday was limited in many places, but over the next few weeks the amount and size of the protests grew rapidly. On the second and third Fridays (25 and 1 April) protests in Homs, Dara' and Banyas numbered from hundreds to a few thousand.<sup>28</sup> Protests also emerged in Latakya, Deir Ez-Zor and Damascus. Demands were aimed mainly against the (power of) the security services and corruption; and for political liberalization.<sup>29</sup> Facebook, youtube and satellite news channels became a central tool in disseminating calls for mobilization. At the same time, Friday prayers and funerals remained the focal points for the emergence of actual protests, as they involved gatherings of people. The same would later, for instance, be true for universities.<sup>30</sup> Protesters by and large drew on a non-violent protest repertoire but were met with bullets. On 25 March 19 were killed, on the next Friday 29.<sup>31</sup> The following days funerals turned into protests.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout these first weeks (and sometimes even before 15 March) “councils” had emerged, for instance in Dara'. They were often founded by people who had met at rallies, and had formed a social bond through their experience of regime repression (and live ammunition). Many had not known each other before.<sup>33</sup> With the increasing size of the protests and continued mobilization these councils became increasingly institutionalized, coming to be known as the *local coordination committees (LCCs)*. (May – August 2011).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Stack, Liam, and Katherine Zoepf. “Syria Tries to Placate Sunnis and Kurds.” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/07/world/middleeast/07syria.html>. Also exemplified by the attention that formal Syrian media gave to the “fact” that local religious leaders were on their side, see: “Daraa Mufti Withdraws His Resignation SANA , Syria,” May 10, 2011.

<http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/05/10/345858.htm>; Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). “Grand Mufti: Confronting Seditious Religious and Moral Commitment to Preserve Freedom of Syria,” May 12, 2011. <http://www.sana.sy/eng/337/2011/05/12/346463.htm>.

<sup>28</sup>France 24. “Protests in Numerous Cities and Increasing Death Toll Despite Assad’s Declaration on Reforms.” France 24, March 25, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110325-daraa-syria-clashes-fire-demonstration-police-dead>.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>France 24. “إحالة 400 طالب من جامعة حلب أمام القضاء بتهمة ‘الشغب وتحقير رئيس الدولة’ - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو” *الدولية*, June 27, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110627-syria-justice-trial-students-accused-demonstrators-kurdish-human-right-shipment-critic-against-alsassad>.

الأمن يفرق تجمعا طلابيا في جامعة دمشق وباريس تدين أعمال العنف والقمع - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو” *الدولية*, April 11, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110411-syria-damascus-university-arrest-demonstrations-paris-condemns>.

<sup>31</sup>Following the numbers provided by: <http://syrianshuhada.com/default.asp?a=st&st=3>. These numbers tend to overestimate the number of casualties by about 10%.

<sup>32</sup>Protesters were mostly male, but women also took to the streets. Though less visible following increasing regime repression, they do play an active role in supporting protests. See: Stack, Liam, and Katherine Zoepf. “Clashes Intensify in Syria as Protesters Reject Assad’s Concessions.” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html>.

<sup>33</sup>Leenders, Reinoud. “Collective Action and Mobilization in Dar’a: An Anatomy of the Onset of Syria’s Popular Uprising.” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* (Forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup>Shadid, Anthony. “Disparate Factions From Streets Fuel New Opposition in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html>. ; Zoepf, Katherine. “Long Repressed, a Syrian Opposition Takes Shape.” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011,

Institutionalized at the neighborhood level, these committees emerged from practical needs associated with collective mobilization: organizing protests, gathering and disseminating information.<sup>35</sup> In time, they became the institutional backbone of peaceful protests throughout the country. Although committees emerged that were mostly Kurdish, Sunni or from minority groups – they always attempted to be as inclusive as possible to any kind of social group.<sup>36</sup>

Emboldened by the seeming early successes in overwhelming the regime, these committees became increasingly active.<sup>37</sup> The Syrian authorities retreated from various cities around the country (most notably Homs and Hama), apparently attempting to focus repression on the two main cities of Aleppo and Damascus and make some concessions to the protesters. Protests only expanded as a result.<sup>38</sup> On 8 April 2011 hundreds of thousands of Syrians reportedly took to the streets (though the number is probably an overestimation) in various Syrian cities on the “Friday of Patience” (*sumud*)<sup>39</sup> – 73 were killed.<sup>40</sup> A week later – on the “Friday of Insistence” – between thousands<sup>41</sup> and tens of thousands<sup>42</sup> of protesters were reported in various cities across the country. “Only” 11 people were killed that day.<sup>43</sup> All of these protests demanded the fall of the regime. Concerning repertoires, they explicitly copied from the examples of Tunisia and Egypt. Generally, they remained explicitly non-violent and non-sectarian. Committees quickly adopted tools that were also used by protesters in other Arab countries: where first there had been nothing, now placards, petitions, songs, Facebook pages, and many youtube videos were used to protest against the regime. More specifically, repertoires differed between cities and their coordination committees. In Hama protesters attempted to occupy the central square, while in Duma (a Damascus suburb) a campaign of civil disobedience was attempted.<sup>44</sup> Every committee charted its own course. The phase ends with various cities being raided and LCC activists (among many

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sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid and see: <http://www.lccsyria.org/about>.

<sup>36</sup>Leenders, Reinoud. “Collective Action and Mobilization in Dar’ a: An Anatomy of the Onset of Syria’s Popular Uprising.” Mobilization: An International Quarterly (Forthcoming).

<sup>37</sup> Stack, Liam, and Katherine Zoepf. “Clashes Intensify in Syria as Protesters Reject Assad’s Concessions.” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2011, sec. World / Middle East.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html>.

<sup>38</sup>Shadid, Anthony. “Syria Pulls Armed Forces From Some Cities.” *The New York Times*, June 29, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/30/world/middleeast/30syria.html>.

<sup>39</sup> as-Sharq al-Awsat. “سورية تنفجر.. قتلى بالعشرات وحرق مقرات لـ«البعث» الأولى,” April 9, 2011. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=11820&article=616478>.

<sup>40</sup><http://syrianshuhada.com/default.asp?a=st&st=3>

<sup>41</sup>France 24. “الآلاف يتظاهرون في مدن عديدة رغم الإعلان عن حكومة جديدة - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو الدولية,” April 15, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110415-syria-bashar-alassad-demonstrations-friday-prayer-freedom-human-rights-reforms>. ; In Dara' 2,500 to 3000 people took to the streets that day: according to All4Syria. “تظاهرات سلمية في عدة مدن سورية وأنباء عن وصولها لدمشق” *All4Syria.info*, April 15, 2011.

<http://all4syria.info/web/archives/3743>.

<sup>42</sup>“سورية.. شعار جمعة الإصرار «إسقاط النظام» الأولى,” April 16, 2011. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=11827&article=617538>.

<sup>43</sup>According to: <http://syrianshuhada.com/default.asp?a=st&st=3>

<sup>44</sup>Shadid, Anthony. “Disparate Factions From Streets Fuel New Opposition in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html>.

others) being arrested. Despite severe repression the LCCs survived, remained operational and eventually succeeded in creating an umbrella organization: the Local Coordinating Committees of Syria (LCCS).<sup>45</sup> A list of the key protests during this period can be found in Appendix C.

Concerning subsequent dynamics, a deadlock in the protests emerged where the regime's use of live ammunition was not able to completely suppress the uprising, but protesters were incapable of enlarging the protests (or seriously endangering the regime) due to repression. This situation, where protesters persisted in the face of live ammunition, occasional shelling, and mass arrests, marked much of the following year of protests. Though there was a natural tendency to use violence (see the next phase) they were resisted by coordination committees calling for the use of a non-violent protest repertoire. Another dynamic seen in the following year – one that the strong nationalistic message of the coordination committees could not obscure – was the over-representation of Sunnis in the protests. Although protests and committees were (and are) explicitly non-sectarian, some biases within the make up of the committees were soon apparent: it was overtly Sunnis from smaller cities that joined the uprising. Minorities and “elite” Sunnis remained largely on the sidelines.<sup>46</sup> In the Idlib region a primarily foreign-based Syrian Salafi shaykh, Adnan al-Arour, incited protests for many months.<sup>47</sup> Kurdish LCCs also emerged in the Kurdish North-East of the country.<sup>48</sup> In July 2011 Sunni and Alawis clashed in Homs, only to be (relatively) contained through the intervention of local shaykhs, social leaders and committees.<sup>49</sup> The LCC umbrella organization could not hide the fact that certain tendencies – for the use of violence and concerning sectarian tensions within the uprising – had grown stronger.<sup>50</sup>

At the start of Ramadan 2011 (almost five months into the uprising) the death toll stood at around 2000, it had already risen by another thousand by the end of the month.<sup>51</sup>

## Phase 2: Violent Repertoires

This phase is marked by the gradual increase in the use of violent modes of

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<sup>45</sup>See: <http://www.lccsyria.org/about>; Shadid, Anthony. “Assad’s Forces Pound City at Center of Syrian Revolt.” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/28/world/middleeast/28daraa.html>.

<sup>46</sup>Kodmani, Bassma. “The Road to Ruin for the Assad Regime.” *Financial Times*, June 14, 2011. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5bdf4198-96b8-11e0-baca-00144feab49a.html#axzz1PMoNuXKI>.

<sup>47</sup>See his youtube channel at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/adnanalarour>

<sup>48</sup>KurdWatch. “Conflicts with the Kurdish Patriotic Conference Lead to Division of Protest Movement.” *Kurd-Watch.org*, November 7, 2011. <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?aid=2167&z=en&cure=232>.

<sup>49</sup>“Syria Comment » Archives » Syrians Scared and Angered by Sectarian Fighting. Little Unity Among Opposition,” July 19, 2011. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10837>.

<sup>50</sup>Shadid, Anthony. “Disparate Factions From Streets Fuel New Opposition in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html>.

<sup>51</sup>Number according to [www.syriansshuhada.com](http://www.syriansshuhada.com). As they tend to overestimate their death toll, I round the number downwards.

mobilization. From the very start of the uprising there were instances of spontaneous uses of violence against regime officials, security services, army personnel and party (Ba'ath) buildings. The use of violent modes of protest became more organized and escalated as more Syrian soldiers began to defect and the Libyan – violent – uprising proved successful in defeating Gadaffi's army. Militias formed between friends, clans, and neighborhoods rose up next to the civil coordination committees. The phase ends with the entire country sliding into civil war.

### *Spontaneous use of Violence*

From the start of the uprising there were debates over the use of violence in the popular uprising. The general opinion among activists was that violent mobilization repertoires would only invite more regime violence. But, in reaction to violent regime repression, there were instances of spontaneous uses of violence by small groups of people from March 2011 onwards.<sup>52</sup> An early example was explored by Joshua Landis, Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma: in April 2011 an apparent case of defecting soldiers being shot by their commander in Banyas turned out to be an ambush by armed opposition Syrians. 9 soldiers were killed.<sup>53</sup> An activist from Saraqib (Idlib region) reminded the author that youngsters in his village had, at the start of the uprising, used antique rifles to shoot at a car carrying security personnel as they entered the city to arrest protesters. Many other examples of local youths taking up guns by themselves were mentioned in interviews.<sup>54</sup> However, it should be stated again that the use of violent repertoires was, at the start of the uprising, a very spontaneous and localized affair.

What happened at Jisr as-Shourough on 6 June 2011 is noteworthy. It was initially described as a mass defection followed by intra-army clashes,<sup>55</sup> but was probably one of the first successful attempts by local residents to ambush the army and subsequently ransack and attack all the government buildings in the town.<sup>56</sup> The town's inhabitants quickly announced it to be "liberated". The reaction from the regime aimed to send a message: the town was surrounded, shelled relentlessly and retaken a week later by the army (the fourth division under the command of Maher al-Asad) after heavy fighting. It was the first time

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<sup>52</sup>Slackman, Michael, and Liam Stack. "Syria Tense as Protesters Mourn Their Dead." The New York Times, March 26, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/middleeast/27syria.html>.

<sup>53</sup>Landis, Joshua. "The Armed Gangs Controversy," August 3, 2011. [http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=11181&utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+Syriacomment+%28Syria+Comment%29](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=11181&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Syriacomment+%28Syria+Comment%29).

<sup>54</sup>For instance: interview with group of Syrian opposition youngsters, 29 August 2011, Istanbul. Turkey.

<sup>55</sup>Stack, Liam. "Syria, Claiming Heavy Toll in Town, Hints at Retaliation." The New York Times, June 6, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/07/world/middleeast/07syria.html>.

<sup>56</sup>"Syria Comment » Archives » What Happened at Jisr al-Shagour?," June 13, 2011. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=10202>.



that clashes between opposition and army were reported at this scale.<sup>57</sup> Despite the apparent failure of the exploit, Jisr as-Shourough would prove an example for other regions and cities. Where violence had previously been sporadic, it became more widespread after this event.

### *Army Defectors*

Army defection increased, became more organized, and started to play a role in the uprising in direct relation to increasing repression by the regime (see the contingent political opportunities section). In practice, the divide between army defectors and regular Syrians taking up arms was often very blurred. The number of army desertions was very limited during the first weeks of the uprising, but gradually rose as regime repression (and therefore the deployment of the army) became more extensive. Despite hopeful early signs (see the Jisr as-Shourough example above) defections never threatened the stability of the army and/or regime. Numbers were too low, and defectors were by and large Sunnis – while sensitive and crucial positions are often held by Alawi generals and officers. At the same time defections did provide the opposition within the army with a source of military expertise.

On 29 July 2011 (just before the start of Ramadan),<sup>58</sup> the formation of the Free Syrian Army was announced via a youtube declaration. Founded by 7 officers, it explicitly aimed to promote desertions and protect civilians from government repression.<sup>59</sup> The existence of violent repertoires was therefore theoretically legitimized by their purely “defensive” application; safeguarding the peaceful nature of the popular uprising. In addition, the institutional structures and resources of groups using violent and non-violent repertoires were strictly split. In practice this differentiation was often ambiguous, as the earlier spontaneous uses of violence show: what were depicted as army defectors were often to a large degree local inhabitants taking up arms under the banner of a loosely organized “Free Syrian Army”.

### *Militias*

In June-July 2011 various militias began to emerge in some parts of the country to “protect the people”. They were often organized around a small group of people within a neighborhood, mosque or village. Though influenced by the

<sup>57</sup>as-Sharq al-Awsat. “قوات الأسد تقتحم جسر الشغور مدعومة بالدبابات والهليكوبترات.. والمئات يفرون إلى تركيا، أخبار” June 13, 2011. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11885&article=626305&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>.

<sup>58</sup>2011. اعلان تشكيل الجيش السوري الحر. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZcCbIPM37w&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZcCbIPM37w&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>59</sup>Landis, Joshua. “Free Syrian Army Founded by Seven Officers to Fight the Syrian Army.” Syria Comment, July 29, 2011. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=11043>.

successful repression of the first generation within the coordination committees<sup>60</sup> and the ever increasing repression of peaceful protests, the real turning point came through an example from a fellow Arab country. On 20 August 2011 (during Ramadan) a broad coalition of Libyan rebel forces successfully attacked Tripoli, the capital of their country. The success of this operation sent shock waves through the Syrian opposition. Discussions started to tilt in favor of the use of arms.<sup>61</sup> Soon after, cities had multiple (up to more than a dozen) militias. Formally, the FSA was the umbrella organization for all these militias, though in practice it never really took on this role. The legitimacy of the FSA remained limited and was primarily used as a common denominator for the outside world. The emergence of militias also laid the basis for an Islamization of the uprising. Many of the Salafi-style groups proved most adept at securing (financial and armed) support from backers in (mostly) conservative gulf countries.<sup>62</sup>

### *Villages and towns.*

In the year that followed the formation of the FSA and the emergence of the militias, a gruesome deadlock of escalating violence took hold of the uprising. Syrians continued to protest, the army continued to repress, but increasingly militias (more or less under the banner of the “FSA”) would fight the regime back. Neighborhoods, towns, and cities were invaded by the Syrian army, but it often proved unable to fully regain control of the area. Dara' (April 2011)<sup>63</sup> and Hama (August 2011)<sup>64</sup> were early examples of the regime’s retaking control of a city, but Homs (November 2011<sup>65</sup> – March 2012)<sup>66</sup> would be the first example where militias actively – and for a long time effectively – opposed regime incursions.<sup>67</sup> Other examples to follow were the Jebel al-Zawiyah area (January/February 2012)<sup>68</sup> and increasingly the suburbs of Damascus. In all

<sup>60</sup>Bakri, Nada. “In Syrian Town, Uprising Turns Into Grim Standoff.” The New York Times, September 15, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/world/middleeast/in-syrian-town-uprising-turns-into-grim-standoff.html>.

<sup>61</sup>Interview with Alawi opposition activist from Damascus, 24 August 2011, Istanbul. Turkey.

<sup>62</sup>For an analysis of the Free Syrian Army, in relation to militias and Islam from March 2012, see (Rosen 2012).

<sup>63</sup>France 24. “قوات الأمن تقتل ستة أشخاص في اقتحام مسجد في مدينة درعا - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو الدولية.” March 23, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110323-deadly-crackdown-anti-government-assad-protests-omari-mosque-syria>.

<sup>64</sup>France 24. “الدبابات تقصف مناطق سكنية في حماة ومجلس الأمن يعقد جلسة طارئة لإصدار قرار يدين دمشق - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو الدولية.” August 1, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110801-germany-calls-un-meeting-syria-security-crackdown-hama-death-toll-mounts>.

<sup>65</sup>Shadid, Anthony. “Syria Lays Siege to a City, Homs, That Puts Up a Fight.” The New York Times, November 7, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/world/middleeast/syria-city-of-homs-suffers-bloody-assault.html>.

<sup>66</sup>Macfarquhar, Neil. “Syrian Rebels Withdrawing From Key Enclave in Homs.” The New York Times, March 1, 2012, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/world/middleeast/rebels-resisting-on-slaught-in-syrian-city-activists-say.html>.

<sup>67</sup>Fahim, Kareem. “Arab League Delegates Arrive in Syria.” The New York Times, December 22, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/world/middleeast/arab-league-delegates-arrive-in-syria.html>.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

these cases, residents became increasingly well armed, trained and organized in resisting violent Syrian repression. Non-violent protests now began to follow the dynamic of the violent conflict (for instance the “Friday of the Free Army” on 14 October 2011) rather than the other way around. The region encompassing Idlib, Homs and Hama proved the most active:<sup>69</sup> it is a conservative Sunni majority region in which shaykhs such as Adnan al-Arouf were very effective in stirring up mobilization and supporting armed insurrection.<sup>70</sup> The Kurdish regions were to some extent mobilized, especially after the killing of the opposition figure Machal Tammo.<sup>71</sup> Dara’ and the south had been silenced effectively. The largest two cities – Aleppo and Damascus – remained mostly quiet. In Damascus it was impossible to rise up due to the dense presence of security forces, while in Aleppo inhabitants were generally wary of mobilizing due to their (economic) interests in maintaining the political regime.

### *Jihadists*

On 18 July 2012 a successful attack on the elite leaders of the regime killed Asef Shawkat, the minister of defense, and three other elite security leaders.<sup>72</sup> Responsibility was claimed by the FSA and the Jihadi group *Liwa al-Islam* (Brigade of Islam). The attack electrified the opposition by showing the vulnerability of those at the very top of the Syrian regime. Immediately after, an attack on various neighborhoods in Damascus was started.<sup>73</sup> Although rebels were not able to secure the whole city, the regime has to date not been able to regain full control of the suburbs. Soon after, rebels attacked Aleppo and succeeded in securing large parts of the city.<sup>74</sup> The attacks meant that the war had now come to the two largest cities and that the whole country was now descending into civil war. The attacks were only possible because inter-militia coordination had increased: where there used to be many small militia groups,

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<sup>69</sup>Kennedy, J. Micheal. “Kurds Remain on Sideline in Syria’s Uprising.” *New York Times*, April 17, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/18/world/middleeast/kurds-remain-on-sideline-in-syrias-uprising.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>70</sup>Rosen, Nir. “Islamism and the Syrian Uprising.” *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2012. [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism\\_and\\_the\\_syrian\\_uprising](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism_and_the_syrian_uprising).

<sup>71</sup>Bakri, Nada. “Attack by Syrian Forces Leaves Opposition Leader Dead.” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/08/world/middleeast/leading-syrian-opposition-figure-killed-another-publicly-beaten.html>

<sup>72</sup>“Bombing Kills Key Assad Aides as Syria Fighting Rages - NYTimes.com,” July 18, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/suicide-attack-reported-in-damascus-as-more-generals-flee.html?pagewanted=all>.

“Profiles of Syrian Officials Targeted in Damascus Blast - NYTimes.com,” July 18, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/profiles-of-syrian-officials-targeted-in-damascus-blast.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>73</sup>Macfarquhar, Neil. “Fighting Grips Syrian Capital After Attack on Assad’s Inner Circle.” *New York Times*, July 19, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/world/middleeast/syria-clashes-continue-after-bombing-kills-key-assad-aides.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>74</sup>Macfarquhar, Neil. “Ancient Aleppo Echoes With Gunfire as War Reaches Its Cobble Streets.” *New York Times*, July 24, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/world/middleeast/use-of-warplanes-is-reported-in-syrian-conflict.html?pagewanted=all>.

more powerful rebel groups had now formed through alliances and unifications. Current examples of powerful militias are the Farouk Brigade in Homs and Liwa at-Tawhid in Aleppo – though new militias are constantly being formed and/or renamed. With help from Gulf countries these militias were able to sustain an effective urban-based guerrilla campaign throughout the country. Despite the increased coordination, the effective influence of the FSA remained limited.<sup>75</sup>

At the time of writing large parts of the country are no longer under the full control of the regime and fighting in Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and the capital Damascus has dragged on for months. After Ramadan 2011 the death toll stood at around 3000, before 18 July 2012 (the date of the attack on the security elite) the death toll was around 20,000.<sup>76</sup> With the escalation into a full civil war the social, economic and state structures of the country were also affected: many fled their homes, and in some regions the state ceased to function. New forms of “emergency state structures” were built by LCCs and militias. Popular protests were now eclipsed by the armed struggle. The coordination committees lost importance as compared to the militias. In this context, discussions about foreign intervention also came to the fore.

### Phase 3 (Foreign Influence)

This phase is defined by the ever increasing foreign involvement in the Syrian uprising. Although there were signs of this early after March 2011 as the uprising escalated into civil war, foreign involvement has become more pronounced. I delineate this phase in four sections, based again on the types of actors involved (and their positions vis-à-vis the Syrian nation).

First, *the exiled Syrians*. In the first few months after the uprising many exiled Syrians attempted to build representation for the uprising. These attempts were embodied by many conferences aimed at forming a representative body for the uprising abroad. Many succumbed before even starting,<sup>77</sup> until the so-called Syrian National Council (SNC) was founded on 23 August 2011.<sup>78</sup> Though plagued by internal dissent (the Kurds walked out after a number of months, allegations of corruption were widespread and it was eventually dominated by one party: the Syrian Muslim brotherhood) it still persisted for

<sup>75</sup>Macfarquhar, Neil. “Syrian Opposition Gets Supplies but Unity Is Elusive.” New York Times, June 25, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/26/world/middleeast/syrian-opposition-gets-supplies-but-unity-is-elusive.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>76</sup>Number according to [www.syriansshuhada.com](http://www.syriansshuhada.com). As they tend to overestimate their death toll, I round the number downwards.

<sup>77</sup>See the example of the “salvation” meeting: France 24. “المجلس الوطني يثير انقسامات داخل أطياف المعارضة السورية - ” August 22, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110822-syria-opposition-division-about-national-council-revolution-council>.

—, “معارضون سوريون يجتمعون في اسطنبول لتشكيل المجلس الوطني السوري - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو الدولية.” August 20, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110820-syria-turkey-istanbul-opposition-syrian-national-council-anti-regime-assad>.

<sup>78</sup>Syrian National Council. “إعلان تأسيس المجلس الوطني السوري 2011-08-23.” Aljazeera, August 23, 2011. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5vv-g\\_U1G0&feature=player\\_embedded#%21](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5vv-g_U1G0&feature=player_embedded#%21).

almost a year as no alternative was present. Only in November 2012 was it effectively superseded by the “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces”, or simply the National Coalition (NC).<sup>79</sup>

Concerning mobilization, these councils were primarily important as the link between the domestic opposition and foreign governments. It was hoped that they would galvanize hopes among Syrians that a government in exile could be formed and thereby fan protests inside the country. Instead, the SNC showcased how difficult it would be to build a government after the fall of Bashar, and how deeply internal schisms ran in the country. An initial problem was that these councils were mostly built by earlier exiled Syrians. This resulted in a lack of legitimacy inside the country (specifically in relation to the “FSA” and LCCs) and internal discontent between traditional opposition groups (the Islamists, secular left-wing groups, the Kurds, etc).<sup>80</sup> With numbers of refugees rising throughout the conflict, these councils came to be manned increasingly by more recent exiles with continued legitimacy inside the country. The National Coalition was founded in November 2012, and its president Mouaz al-Khatib (an activist, shaykh and recent refugee) is trying to revive the role of foreign representation of the uprising (including armed resistance), emphasize the national characteristics of the uprising and draw support from foreign governments for the Syrian cause.<sup>81</sup> To what extent he will be successful and the coalition will remain unified remains to be seen.

Second, we find *domesticated foreign influences* that became interlinked with the dynamics of the uprising. Throughout Syrian history multiple foreign groups have found refuge inside Syria, or have built up a special relationship with the country. This is for instance true of a large group of Palestinian refugees – and their opposition organizations – that live and are active in Syria. Their refugee camps have transformed over the decades into indistinguishable parts of Syrian cities and society.<sup>82</sup> Also, for years there have been close relations between various Syrian Kurdish groups, the Turkish PKK and Iraqi Kurdish parties.<sup>83</sup> In addition, on an organizational level, the Syrian regime has always had close relations with the Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hizbollah organizations to bolster its claim as an opponent to – and to strengthen its position in negotiations with – its Israeli neighbor.<sup>84</sup> Finally there are the Islamic movements that had become stronger due to the relative opening to Salafi

<sup>79</sup>Gladstone, Rick. “As Syria Opposition Unifies, Unrest Intensifies at Borders.” New York Times, November 12, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/world/middleeast/syria-war-updates.html>

<sup>80</sup>Bilefsky, Dan. “Factional Splits Hinder Drive to Topple Syria’s Assad.” The New York Times, December 8, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/middleeast/faction-al-splits-hinder-drive-to-topple-syrias-assad.html>.

<sup>81</sup>First signs seem encouraging, see: Landis, Joshua. “New Syrian Leadership Electrifies Opposition: Ten Countries Promise Recognition.” Syria Comment. Accessed November 19, 2012. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=16696>.

<sup>82</sup>For a short analysis on this topic, see: International Crisis Group. “Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges - International Crisis Group,” February 11, 2004. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/023-syria-under-bashar-1-foreign-policy-challenges.aspx>.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Kurdish opposition activist, DATE #, Brussels, Belgium.

groups in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq. They often had links to foreign groups as they had sent fighters to Iraq before facing renewed repression by a Syrian regime fearful of an American backlash.<sup>85</sup>

During the months (and years) of the uprising almost all of these groups took up specific positions within the conflict. This was perhaps the least true for Hamas: they chose to remain relatively uninvolved, distancing themselves from the regime while retaining ties to Iran by quietly leaving Syria during the first year of the uprising.<sup>86</sup> On the other side a Palestinian fringe party (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, or PFLP-GC) continued to support the regime – and actively aided the repression of Palestinians living in those Syrian camps that came out to support the uprising.<sup>87</sup> An intra-Palestinian conflict was the result, and escalated as Damascus was attacked in July and November 2012.<sup>88</sup> Hizbollah also chose to support the Syrian regime as it felt it needed its Syrian ally to continue its fight against Israel. Early stories that Hizbollah fighters were supporting the Syrian army proved correct when a number of Hizbollah fighters were killed inside Syria in April 2012.<sup>89</sup> Concerning the Kurds the relations with, and presence in, the conflict, foreign Kurdish parties (mainly the PKK and the Iraqi KDP) became increasingly pronounced as Syrian troops withdrew from Kurdish areas. This created an unstable situation where the Syrian conflict could easily spill over into both Turkey and Iraq.<sup>90</sup> Finally, as the conflict became more violent and militias emerged, conservative Islamic groups also became more pronounced amongst the Syrian opposition (see above).<sup>91</sup> In this context more and more foreign jihadi fighters began to see Syria as a battleground against an apostate

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<sup>84</sup> International Crisis Group. “Syria Under Bashar (I): Foreign Policy Challenges - International Crisis Group,” February 11, 2004.

<sup>85</sup> McGregor, Andrew. “Controversial Syrian Preacher Abu al-Qaqa Gunned Down in Aleppo - The Jamestown Foundation.” Terrorism Focus, October 16, 2007. [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=4481](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4481)

<sup>86</sup> Farrell, Stephen. “Leader of Hamas Makes Rare Trip to Jordan.” The New York Times, January 29, 2012, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/30/world/middleeast/leader-of-hamas-makes-rare-trip-to-jordan.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Syria War Triggers Rifts in Palestinian Camps in Lebanon.” The New York Times, April 4, 2012, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/world/middleeast/05iht-m05-lebanon-camp.html>. Kershner, Isabel. “Fighters Shoot Protesters at a Palestinian Camp in Syria.” The New York Times, June 7, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/08/world/middleeast/08damascus.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Macfarquhar, Neil. “Syrian Rebels Claim to Kill Dozens of Soldiers.” New York Times, November 5, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/06/world/middleeast/Syria.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>89</sup> Barnard, Anne. “Hizbollah’s Syria Policy Puts It at Risk.” The New York Times, April 5, 2012, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/world/middleeast/hezbollahs-syria-policy-puts-it-at-risk.html>. See also: Macfarquhar, Neil. “Lebanon’s Shiites and Sunnis Fight in Syria, but Not at Home.” *New York Times*, December 19, 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/world/middleeast/lebanons-shiites-and-sunnis-fight-in-syria-but-not-at-home.html?hp&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/world/middleeast/lebanons-shiites-and-sunnis-fight-in-syria-but-not-at-home.html?hp&_r=0).

<sup>90</sup> Arango, Tim. “Kurds to Pursue More Autonomy in a Fallen Syria.” New York Times, September 28, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/29/world/middleeast/kurds-to-pursue-more-autonomy-in-a-fallen-syria.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>91</sup> Rosen, Nir. “Islamism and the Syrian Uprising.” Foreign Policy, March 8, 2012. [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism\\_and\\_the\\_syrian\\_uprising](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism_and_the_syrian_uprising).

regime – and began traveling to Syria.<sup>92</sup> Many within the opposition were opposed to their involvement as it provided the regime with the opportunity to describe the uprising as extremist, but often felt they were left with no other choice as few other foreign countries had come to the aid of the uprising in any military sense.<sup>93</sup>

Third, some *relations between Syria and groups outside its borders* were influenced by the uprising. Personal and cultural linkages have always transgressed Syrian borders. Though most extreme in the case of Lebanon – to the extent that Lebanon is perceived as part of Syria by some Syrians – this is also true of communities in the Antakya region in Turkey and at the borders with Jordan and Iraq. Antakya (the region borders Syria in the North-West) is a mostly Alawi region and many of its inhabitants side with the Syrian regime. As more and more Sunni Syrians – and specifically Sunni rebels – flooded the region tensions arose, though they were effectively contained by Turkey.<sup>94</sup> In Lebanon these tensions were more pronounced<sup>95</sup> due to the sectarian nature of the Lebanese political system and the close connections it has with the Syrian polity. Hezbollah (pro-Syrian regime) currently controls the political system, but the Sunni groups of Sa'ad Hariri (anti-Syrian regime) have been emboldened by the ongoing uprising against Bashar. As a result political and sectarian divisions polarized.<sup>96</sup> In the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli<sup>97</sup> sectarian tensions came to a head in June and August 2012 when Sunni and Alawi communities clashed. Dozens died.<sup>98</sup>

Lastly, there is the influence of the *international political community*. The international community attempted to resolve the ever-escalating conflict, but diverging views on the need for regime change frustrated any coherent

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<sup>92</sup> Macfarquhar, Neil, and Hwaida Saad. "As Syrian War Drags On, Jihad Gains Foothold." *The New York Times*, July 29, 2012, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/world/middleeast/as-syrian-war-drags-on-jihad-gains-foothold.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Gettleman, Jeffrey. "Syria's Conflict Intrudes on Antakya, Turkey." *New York Times*, July 28, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/world/middleeast/syrias-conflict-intrudes-on-antakya-turkey.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>95</sup> Wood, Josh. "Syria's Unrest Seeps Into Lebanon." *The New York Times*, May 4, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/05/world/middleeast/05iht-M05-SYRIA-REFUGEES.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Wood, Josh. "Lebanese Fear Syria's Violence May Spill Over." *The New York Times*, November 9, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/world/middleeast/10iht-M10-LEBANON-TENSION-S.html>; Wood, Josh. "Lebanese City Drawn Into Syrian Conflict." *New York Times*, May 17, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/17/world/middleeast/lebanese-city-drawn-into-syrian-conflict.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>97</sup> Not to be confused with the Libyan capital that bears the same name.

<sup>98</sup> Wood, Josh. "Lebanese Fear Syria's Violence May Spill Over." *The New York Times*, November 9, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/world/middleeast/10iht-M10-LEBANON-TENSION-S.html>; Wood, Josh. "Lebanese City Drawn Into Syrian Conflict." *New York Times*, May 17, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/17/world/middleeast/lebanese-city-drawn-into-syrian-conflict.html?pagewanted=all>; Saad, Hwaida. "In Tripoli, Lebanon, a Deadly Battle Over Syrian Conflict." *New York Times*, June 2, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/world/middleeast/in-tripoli-lebanon-a-deadly-battle-over-syrian-conflict.html>; and Cave, Damien. "Syrian War Plays Out Along a Street in Lebanon." *New York Times*, August 23, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/world/middleeast/syrian-war-plays-out-along-a-street-in-lebanon.html?pagewanted=all>.

international response. International attempts at finding a resolution have been marked by the lack of consensus within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) where Russia has vetoed any (US, French and British) attempts at formulating a binding resolution against the Syrian regime.<sup>99</sup> The most these attempts have achieved to date was a temporary truce in April 2012 that UN observers helped to implement. Although a decrease in hostilities was observed at first, the ceasefire did not hold and the conflict eventually escalated further.<sup>100</sup> Other UN based peace plan has been unsuccessful in getting any kind of project or road map in place (a recent “Eid ceasefire” did not materialize for instance).<sup>101</sup> As a result international engagement has mostly taken place outside the UN framework: either bilaterally or through regional organizations.

Foreign countries have increasingly supported either the regime or the opposition through financial means or by providing (heavy) weapons. Russia and Iran are supporting the regime – and are providing it with weapons.<sup>102</sup> Saudi Arabia and Qatar (both as governments and in a more decentralized sense through wealthy families) are supporting the rebels. This support is often directed to conservative Islamic (Salafi) groups. Turkey supports the Muslim Brotherhood via the Syrian National Council, but is finding that the Muslim Brotherhood enjoys little support or connections on the ground in Syria.<sup>103</sup> The US and Western powers are increasingly vocal in their opposition to the Syrian regime – and openly call for the fall of the president – but are hesitant to support the opposition directly with arms due to endemic corruption and the increasing power of Salafi-Jihadi groups in the country.<sup>104</sup>

At the time of writing the conflict continues to escalate, the death toll in November 2012 was around 40.000.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Macfarquhar, Neil, and Anthony Shadid. “Russia and China Block U.N. Action on Syrian Crisis.” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2012, sec. World / Middle East.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/world/middleeast/syria-homs-death-toll-said-to-rise.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Macfarquhar, Neil. “Violence Intensifies in Syria Before Planned Truce.” *New York Times*, April 7, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/world/middleeast/syria-forces-keep-pounding-rebel-areas.html>. ; and Mac-

farquhar, Neil. “U.N. Observers in Syria Do Not Deter Attacks.” *New York Times*, April 21, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/24/world/middleeast/un-observers-in-syria-do-not-deter-attacks.html>. ; Mac-

farquhar, Neil. “U.N. Observer Leader in Syria Says His Team Is Imperiled.” *New York Times*, June 15, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/16/world/middleeast/russia-denies-shipping-new-helicopters-to-syria.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Al Jazeera English. “Interview: Syria Peace Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi - Middle East -.” Al Jazeera English, September 20, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/09/2012920731664541.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Kramer, Andrew E. “Russia Sending Air and Sea Defenses to Syria.” *New York Times*, June 15, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/16/world/europe/russia-sending-air-and-sea-defenses-to-syria.html>.

<sup>103</sup> According to Syrian interviewees in Antakya (Turkey) September 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Worth, Robert F. “Citing U.S. Fears, Arab Allies Limit Aid to Syrian Rebels.” *New York Times*, October 6,

2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/world/middleeast/citing-us-fears-arab-allies-limit-aid-to-syri-an-rebels.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>105</sup> Number according to [www.syrianshuhada.com](http://www.syrianshuhada.com). As they tend to overestimate their death toll, I round the number downwards. On 2 January 2013 a United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) commissioned report was published which placed the death toll much higher at around 59.648 deaths. In my opinion the methodology used in the OHCHR report is not sufficient to warrant this exact number. But it does seem likely that the actual number of casualties was (far) higher than 40.000 by November 2011. See: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/PreliminaryStatAnalysisKillingsInSyria.pdf>



In conclusion we can state that Syria has always been deeply embedded in the conflicts playing out in the region – and that this has rendered the current conflict highly complex. In fact, part of the former Syrian President Hafez al-Asad’s strategy was to play a more powerful role in the international political arena (see section on “structural conditions”). It might be argued that this, in the end, remains the strategy now. By pushing for the disintegration of the Syrian nation, some argue, the President will become indispensable in stabilizing the country – or at least an indispensable part of a peace deal between various warring factions.<sup>106</sup> In addition, internal conflict will buy the president time: as long as various groups are fighting each other they are not fighting the Syrian regime. To properly understand the dynamics described in this section, we have to consider the structural conditions present within the country and the resulting (political) opportunities and threats for mobilization. This will be done in the following two sections.

## **Structural conditions**

The following section will focus on the historical emergence of the current Syrian political regime and provide an overview of social divisions within the country. In doing so, it will also provide descriptions of key historical events that contributed to shape the dynamics at the intersections of these political and social characteristics. The section after – contingent political opportunities – will provide a more detailed layout of the practical impacts of these various dynamics on perceptions of opportunities and threats, and of the strategies available to actors in both the regime and the opposition.

### General Background

Syria is positioned on the Eastern side of the Mediterranean and has borders with Turkey in the North, Iraq in the East, Jordan in the South and Lebanon and Palestine in the West (see also the map in Appendix A). The country itself is inhabited by a high number of various religious and cultural groups, giving Syrian society sectarian (in Arabic: *ta'ifiya*) undertones.<sup>107</sup> Kurds live mainly in the North, in addition to a large minority of Palestinian and Armenian refugees. There are Christians of all denominations (different types of Orthodox and Catholics), Druze, Sunnis, Shiites, Alawi, Ismaeli (the latter two are officially Shiite denominations) and a few small communities of Jews. Sunni Arabs form

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<sup>106</sup> See also: ICG. Popular Protest in North Africa and The Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime’s Slow-motion Suicide - International Crisis Group, July 13, 2011. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/109-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-vii-the-syrian-regimes-slow-motion-suicide.aspx>.

<sup>107</sup> While understanding that in sociology the term “sect” and “sectarianism” often have different meanings, the term sectarianism is widely used in (Arab) regional studies and specifically Syria to denote a socially clearly defined (religious) group that has a high degree of internal organization. The word “sect” is used in this report in this sense. Sectarianism denotes the social process in which boundaries between various sects polarize.

the majority (about 65 per cent) followed by Shiites. Christians make up about ten per cent of the population (CIA, 2007). Syria is generally a religiously conservative society, although economic and political elites are often more Western oriented and hold more liberal world views.

### Asad Rule Emerges

Most of the dynamics in the ongoing uprising have their historical roots in the emergence of the current regime in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hafez al-Asad (b. 1930 – d. 2000), the father of the current president Bashar al-Asad, emerged as the ruler of Syria in 1970. At the start of his rule, Hafez al-Asad's power was built on an extremely small popular base – coming as he did from an Alawi rural background (Perthes 1992). To stabilize his personal rule within the army and key security positions he overtly depended on informal relations (or *asabiya*) in his own tribe and family (R. A Hinnebusch 2001).<sup>108</sup> As a result Alawis came to dominate the armed forces and security services. Thus, to understand the power structures of the Syrian regime the “normal” state institutions (president, government, parliament [or People's Assembly], security services and army) matter – though mostly insofar as they are part of an informal power structure forming the basis of the authoritarian regime (Zisser 1998). For instance, the main security services (political, military, air force and general) and their various branches act almost completely independently from the judicial system and also operate prisons independently (ICG 2004, fn. 10).

Additionally, Bashar used the Ba'ath party as a tool for state-induced clientelism. The rural villages, before largely non-politicized, were unionized from above following a corporatist logic implemented through the Ba'ath party. The army, intelligence services and Ba'ath party organizations became instruments for institutionalized corruption in which powerful patrons secured support from lower ranking members via a highly developed clientelist system (Perthes 1997). *Wasta* (having connections) became the prime vehicle for achieving economic and political success (R. A Hinnebusch 1995, 314–315). In this context the military developed into a main political and economic player (Mora and Wiktorowicz 2003, 109). There is no effective oversight of these institutions, and stories of corruption within security forces have abounded since the early days of the regime (Batatu 1982). An extreme example of state institutionalized corruption is the drug cartels of the late 1970s that, in return for allegiance to and (both financial and armed) support for the regime, were tacitly allowed to form semi-militias and run their drug businesses between Lebanon and Syria. Due to their clandestine nature they were soon called “*shabiha*” or “ghosts” (Salih 2012).

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<sup>108</sup>In the 1980s the important names in Syria were the brother of the president and chief of the *siraya al-difa'* (Defence Forces) Rifa'at al-Asad; chairman of the Presidential Intelligence committee and chief of air intelligence Muhammad al-Khawli; and the head of military intelligence 'Ali Dubah. All these individuals are Alawis and from Asad's tribe (Batatu 1982).

In an attempt to overcome the sectarian backlash this might involve, Hafez al-Asad took pains to placate various minorities, and the Sunni majority. A number of Christians, Ismaelites and Sunnis were given high-ranking - but non-influential - positions within the army and political bodies (Kelidar 1973, 17). The Sunni elite classes - now sidelined from real political influence - were in addition economically tied to the new regime; for instance by leaving control of the Chamber of Commerce in their hands (Batatu 1982; R. A Hinnebusch 2001). But nothing could hide the fact that the Sunni bourgeoisie had lost out on both political and economic power after the Ba'ath and Hafez's ascent to power.

### The 1979-1982 Islamic Uprising

These above mentioned attempts seemed effective and Syria under Hafez was reasonably stable. But in the mid 1970s Syria was hit by a severe economic recession (Perthes 1997, 23–36) and the state reacted with liberalization (*infatih*) policies which saw companies privatized and a new commercial bourgeoisie created (Perthes 1997, 50–58). Individuals close to the regime used their advantageous political positions to capitalize on these new *infatih* policies. Through their relations they gained near monopolies in specific economic fields and created an elitist economic position for themselves and their families (Perthes 1992, 124). Economic disparities within society were growing wider.

It was in this general context that a domestic opposition to the regime emerged. Although from the outset opposition to the Hafez regime took the shape of a unified structure of various parties and (urban) labor unions, soon the most prominent movement was the Islamic one:<sup>109</sup> the religious frame had great resonance within Syrian society, in addition to the fact that mosques and religious institutions provided a well developed institutional structure for the emergence of a broad based movement. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was its main embodiment, but many other movements were present – though dividing lines were often hard to make out. From 1973 onwards these movements started to frame their conflict with the Ba'ath party as a fight against Alawi minority rule. By focusing on the Alawi sect the movement hoped to galvanize support but ended up isolating itself from other religious minorities and secular groups (Lobmayer 1995, 199).

The uprising climaxed in February 1982 in the city of Hama. Where *Mujahedeen* (Islamist fighters) provoked the army – although accounts differ – into a violent response. Soon the mujahedeen had forced all government troops out of the city and proclaimed the city 'liberated' (Lobmayer 1995, 323–324). Regime troops closed all roads into the city, cut off electricity and phone lines – and started shelling. At the height of the battle for Hama, Sa'id Hawwa, a spiritual leader from Hama and the successor of Marwan Hadid, called on all

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<sup>109</sup>For an exhaustive account of the 1979-82 uprising see: Abd-allah (1982), Lobmeyer (1995) and Ziadeh (2008).

Syrians to strike. He had no success: the next day, everyone outside Hama went to work as usual. The regime's hands thus freed, it focused all its attention on the city. Civilian quarters were shelled and whole families were shot, even after the town of Hama was pacified (Seale 1988, 333). Estimates of the death toll range from 5,000 to 40,000 civilians, thousands of regime soldiers and about five hundred *mujahideen*. Soon after the Islamic uprising in Syria was crushed (Lobmayer 1995, 325–327 fn. 152).

The uprising had turned out to be a complete failure. As a result of its increasingly Islamic and Sunni focus, Hafez al-Asad had been able to isolate the uprising within one societal sect and one part of the country: specifically the city of Hama that is predominantly (conservative) Sunni Muslim. He was able to repress the uprising effectively – leveling the city center in the process. Anyone belonging to the Muslim Brothers (a catch-all phrase for any Syrian Islamist) faced the death penalty.<sup>110</sup> Islamic political movements within the country itself were destroyed and seemingly ceased to exist (see also Ziadeh 2008).<sup>111</sup> Syrian Islamists found themselves rooted out of their home country and scattered across the Arab world and Europe.<sup>112</sup> The non-Islamist opposition that had been at the inception of the uprising – mainly the urban-based unions – were pacified and incorporated into a national Ba'thist union structure (Raymond A. Hinnebusch 1993).

### International relations

Before continuing it is instructive to briefly consider Syrian international relations during this period. Throughout the three decades of his rule, Hafez al-Asad's regional politics were marked by a combination of strategic pragmatism and often antagonistic relations with Syria's direct neighbors. Concerning Israel, he tried to achieve military parity through Soviet military assistance, aiming to pressure Israel into returning the Golan heights, lost in 1967. He changed his strategy when the Soviet Union collapsed and engaged with Israel through US-led negotiations without result before his death in 2000. Syria remained formally at war with Israel, did not recognize the country and hosted most Palestinian resistance movements, including Hamas, the PLO and PFLP-GC, thus strengthening its importance (and position) as a negotiation partner in a possible Palestinian-Israeli peace deal.

Concerning Lebanon, Syria sent troops to the country in 1976 within the

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<sup>110</sup>The law stipulating the death penalty for Muslim Brothers (law no. 42 from 1980) is still in effect. For a practical example see: Syrian Human Rights Committee. "The Ruling on Youngster Amr Hiyaan ar-Razuq, Under the Provision of Law No. 49-1980 (Arabic)," January 9, 2010. <http://www.shrc.org/data.aspx/d18/4048.aspx>.

<sup>111</sup>This did not only concern the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist and Hizb al-Tahrir activists were also repressed and exiled. In addition, any religious institutes that had supported the uprising - or whose students had supported the uprising - were dismantled: examples are the Abi Dharr and Jama't Midan groups and the Zayd movement (Pierret 2009, 3). Hundreds of shayks and *'ulama* (religious scholars) were exiled.

<sup>112</sup>For an insider view of this process see the five volumes by Adnan Sa'ad ad-Din "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: Memos and Memoirs" (*Arabic*), 2006, Dar Ammar (Amman).

framework of an Arab “peacekeeping” army during the then recently started Lebanese civil war. They never left, and Syria became an increasingly important player in Lebanese politics. Lebanon’s fragmented political structure and close national and cultural linkages to Syria made it an ideal context for symbiotic political and economic relationships between elites in both countries – with Syria the more powerful party. When the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990 and the Lebanese construction tycoon Rafiq Hariri returned from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon, Syria supported his presidency as he proved an ideal actor to open up corrupt construction deals – a huge market was to be had in the reconstruction of war-ravaged Lebanon. At the same time they supported Hizbollah, shipping Iranian weapons to southern Lebanon, and thereby further increasing their importance as a negotiation partner to Israel and gaining legitimacy as one of the last Arab countries continuing armed opposition to Israel.

### *The Rule of Bashar*

In June 2000 Bashar al-Asad became the president of Syria following the death of his father president Hafez al-Asad.<sup>113</sup> Bashar embodied a promise of a new era. In the first year of his rule a relative liberalization of the political sphere took place and initial changes in government seemed to imply a focus on technocrats that would support regime reforms (Perthes 2004). The immediate effect was a short-lived period in 2001 – dubbed the “Damascus spring” – in which more civil and political freedoms seemed imminent. When opposition figures started to demand substantial political reforms, however, the regime backtracked and many activists were jailed.

The “Damascus spring” would prove to be only the first episode of relative instability in the country: over the next ten years Syria lurched from one crisis to the next. In 2003 the U.S. invaded Iraq. After the invasion Syria was accused by the US and its allies of aiding Jihadi insurgent groups in the country, and international political isolation was the result.<sup>114</sup> Next the Syrian regime was sent into turmoil following the murder of former Lebanese president Rafiq Hariri (2005). After Rafiq Hariri had become increasingly frustrated with new Syrian policies in Lebanon, he pushed for more Lebanese independence. As a result relations with Syria had been extremely strained until he was killed by a car bomb on 14 February 2005. An initial UN inquiry suspected Syrian (and Hizbollah) involvement, strongly denied by the regime itself. The head of Syria's security apparatus in Lebanon (and Minister of the Interior), Ghazi Kanaan, committed suicide a few months later just two hours after denying

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<sup>113</sup>New York Times. “Syria Human Rights Advocate Welcomes New Leader’s Reforms.” New York Times, December 17, 2000. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/17/world/syria-human-rights-advocate-welcomes-new-leader-s-reforms.html>.

<sup>114</sup>The Associated Press. “Iraq Sends Thousands of Police to Syria Border to Stop Insurgents.” The New York Times, September 5, 2009, sec. International / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/05/world/middleeast/05iraq.html>.

allegations of having spoken to UN investigators.<sup>115</sup> As a direct result Syria retreated from Lebanon, lost many lucrative business deals in the country and became even more isolated in the international political sphere. It also lost - for a period at least - its influence over its direct neighbor. Syria's international isolation only decreased after French president Nicolas Sarkozy invited Bashar al-Asad to join his newly initiated Union for the Mediterranean in July 2008.<sup>116</sup> Throughout this period, as will be discussed in the next section, domestic perceptions of opportunities for mobilization rose and fell inversely to Syria's international political isolation.<sup>117</sup>

Despite these crises and the new leadership, the authoritarian regime itself changed little. Even while most individuals in the upper political echelons have been replaced, the ways in which these key individuals gain and exercise their power has remained the same (Perthes 2004, 9). The synthesis of political and economic spheres that emerged under Hafez remained, with the children of key actors taking over their parents' positions from the mid-1990 onwards. All these actors have vested (economic) interests in the maintenance of the regime. Despite calls for battling against corruption, the latter has thrived under Bashar. The structural context before the uprising can thus be summarized as follows:

- The country was marked by religious and ethnic divisions, with around 16 different sects present. Although the state and its institutions were explicitly national, the spread of political power was unevenly distributed along sectarian and clan lines, favoring the Alawi sect of the President and, to a certain extent, other minorities.
- An informal structure of regime power built on family and tribal links, and institutionally focused around army and intelligence services. Any dissent, especially Islamic, harshly and effectively repressed.
- Close integration between (informal) political power and economic power. Those at the top of the political regime profited greatly from *infatih* policies. Therefore a clear disconnect between political-economic elites and the rest of society emerged.

<sup>115</sup> See for instance: Almustaqbal. "Ghazi Kanaan Commits Suicide in His Office by Shouting Himself in the Mouth." *Almustaqbal Newspaper*, October 13, 2005. <http://www.almustaqbal.com/storiesv4.aspx?storyid=145695>. as-Sharq al-Awsat. "Ghazi Kanaan Gives His 'Last' Declaration to the Radio Station 'Voice of Lebanon': What New TV Showed Was Meant to Offend Us and Minister Hariri." *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 13, 2005. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=328099&issueno=9816>; and as-Sharq al-Awsat. "نهاية .. رصاصة في الفم، الأولى" *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 13, 2005. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=9816&article=328163&search=%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7&state=true>.

<sup>116</sup> Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). "Union for the Mediterranean Summit Kicks Off with the Participation of President al-Assad SANA , Syria." Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), July 13, 2008. <http://sana.sy/eng/183/2008/07/13/183894.htm>.

<sup>117</sup> In 2009 the entire leadership behind the Damascus declaration was arrested. See: Levant News. "اعتقال عضو في "المجلس الوطني لإعلان دمشق منذ سنة أيام" *Levant News*, November 20, 2009. <http://www.thisissyria.net/2009/11/20/syriatoday/03.html>. Concerning Islamic Mobilization (and Abu Dzar) *Levant News*. "أحكام بسجن 16 مواطناً من 'مجموعة مسجد أبي ذر' في حمص لما بين 8 و 12 سنة." *Levant News*, December 2, 2009. <http://www.thisissyria.net/2009/12/02/syriatoday/03.html>.

- The country has always had influence on various important conflicts in the region. This is true of the Israeli-Arab conflict, but particularly the US-Iraq conflict and internal Lebanese affairs.

During the uprising all these factors played a role, albeit at different times and stages. The direct contingent political opportunities, and how they developed over time, will be discussed in the next section.

## **Contingent Political Opportunities**

Contingent political opportunities show how the structural conditions described above form the backdrop for quickly changing perceptions of fear and opportunity among protesters both before and during the uprising. They provide insights as to how structural conditions interlink with the dynamics of the uprising described in the section on protest. The contingent opportunities and threats are discussed following the different phases as described in the first section of this report.

### *Phase 0: Pre-uprising*

Concerning “traditional” political opportunities (operationalized for instance as party alliances, divisions in the political elites, emergence of potential allies within the political sphere, contested elections), there were no openings to speak of before the uprising. This is not to say that no changes took place: in the decade before the uprising there was a perceived opening following the ascent of the current president, which subsequently closed. This closure was followed by international isolation and the perceived weakness of the regime. But in the two years before the uprising the Syrian regime had clawed back its position on the international political stage, and was recognized as playing a decisive role in various neighboring conflicts. It could therefore fully repress any internal dissent. Opposition movements unified in either loose “declaration” structures or became irrelevant or fell apart. Any social mobilization (critical of the regime or otherwise) had to have some form of informal relation with regime actors – if only to know what was going on within the various intelligence services so as to know if repressive measures were to be expected.

When looking for a reason as to why the Syrian uprising did eventually emerge, the main trigger identified is cognitive: the signaling effect from the uprisings and sudden “revolutions” in Tunisia and Egypt. The cross-sectional nature of the uprisings in both these Arab countries and their non-violent methods created the perception that Syrian citizens had both the means and the possibility to build a cross-sectional uprising in their own country. In addition, the exceptionality of the moment was widely recognized. In 30 years no event had resonated with so many different groups within Syrian society

simultaneously: it was either now, or Syria might have to wait another 30 years. Small groups throughout the country continued their attempts to start mobilization and/or express their frustration at the Syrian regime throughout February 2011. But none ignited nationwide outrage. This did eventually happen when the group of youngsters was arrested and tortured in Dara'.<sup>118</sup> Though the initiation of the protests was mostly due to a cognitive signal from revolutions in fellow Arab states, to explain how specific opportunities and threats evolved *during* the uprising we need to turn to more structural characteristics as discussed in the previous section. The development of the peaceful uprising into violence and increased foreign involvement is closely related to structural characteristics of Syrian regime, state and society.

### Phase 1: Non-violent Repertoires

Pre-existing Syrian (socio-political) structures influenced the dynamics of the uprising in a number of ways. First, the core pillars of the regime remained stable throughout the uprising. The close connections between regime, security services and army – indeed it may be said that the army and intelligence services *are* the regime – mean that many within these organizations have a direct interest in maintaining the regime. Stronger still, as many within the top echelons of power are Alawi, they fear the return of Sunni dominance as before the 1960s. Many feel they are fighting for their own survival – and will go to any lengths to defend their group.<sup>119</sup> As repression mounted – and Sunni feelings of vengeance towards Alawis increased – this effect was exacerbated. Some regime supporters, by and large from (Alawi) minorities, were given weapons to “defend” their towns. Pro-regime militias were the result, and were soon named after regime related militias long forgotten: the Shabiha – Ghosts – of the 1970s. Not now involved in the drug trade, they became a crucial tool in the application of repressive measures across the nation.

Second, the actual implementation of repression was marked by stark differences between different army divisions and intelligence services. With formal state institutions subservient to informal allocations of power, some intelligence services and army divisions are near states-within-states. Some have immense resources – for instance the fourth division under Bashar’s brother Maher – while the regular army has almost none. The initial campaign against Homs (in May 2011) was carried out by the fourth division led by Maher al-Asad and marked by its professionalism, while in other campaigns more “regular” army divisions were used and repression was seemingly

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<sup>118</sup> Macleod, Hugh. “Inside Deraa.” *al-Jazeera*, April 19, 2011.

<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/04/201141918352728300.html>.

<sup>119</sup> ICG. *Popular Protest in North Africa and The Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime’s Slow-motion Suicide - International Crisis Group*, July 13, 2011, p.10. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/109-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-vii-the-syrian-regimes-slow-motion-suicide.aspx>.



random.<sup>120</sup> With the emergence of Alawi-dominated militias, these differences increased as these “shabiha” were often accused of perpetrating the most random and deadly acts of violence in various mobilized areas of Syria.<sup>121</sup> To what extent the violent reactions were orchestrated by political elites or not remained somewhat unclear at the start of the uprising. In personal meetings the president would claim ignorance.<sup>122</sup> But all of the above fed the perception that the regime had a survival logic of its own and could not be negotiated with.

Third, the complete lack of any institutional framework for social mobilization before the start of the uprising meant that mobilization emerged around pre-existing social and religious institutions: mosques, clans and family ties. Thus we can note that pre-existing tribal and clan ties structured the early dynamics of the uprising, with families and clan members taking to the streets in the first weeks of the uprising in Dara'. We also see that protests emerged after (Friday) prayers,<sup>123</sup> as the only occasion on which large groups of people could gather without being immediately arrested. Religious leaders were also forced to take sides in the uprising, due to the importance of religious institutions as mobilization structures. At the same time, the uprising itself was explicitly non-religious (protesters were not making any “Islamic” demands, as the previous (1979-82) uprising had shown the dangers of an uprising falling into the “sectarian trap”).

### Phase 2: Violent Repertoires

As in phase 1, a combination of cognitive signaling from a fellow Arab state – this time Libya – combined with structurally influenced dynamics of regime repression also shaped the perception of opportunities and threats now. These perceptions concerned general mobilization, but more specifically what repertoires to use. From the very beginning, in March 2011, discussions had been held among opposition forces on the desirability and potential of drawing on a violent protest repertoire. Though some activists took a principled stance against the use of violence, most denounced its use due to their perceptions of opportunity: they could never effectively fight the Syrian regime as it had more

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p.10-13.

<sup>121</sup> Landis, Joshua. “Military Casualties Rise; President Spreech; Houla.” Syria Comment, June 4, 2012. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=14859>. See also: <http://syriansshuhada.com/default.asp?a=st&st=3>.

<sup>122</sup> Slackman, Michael. “Syria Tries to Ease Deep Political Crisis.” The New York Times, March 27, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>. “Ammar Qurabi, the chairman of Syria’s National Association for Human Rights, said that, in his view, elite opinion in Syria was divided along three axes: “Security opinion, government opinion and Baath Party opinion. Speaking in Cairo, he cited the example of Al Watan newspaper, owned by Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of President Assad. Mr. Qurabi heard that last week the editor, Rabah Abdorabo, was called in to the Ministry of Media and told to stop printing that day’s issue of the paper. Half an hour after he left, he was called in to the secret police, who ordered him to keep printing.”

<sup>123</sup> Stack, Liam, and Katherine Zoepf. “Clashes Intensify in Syria as Protesters Reject Assad’s Concessions.” *The New York Times*, April 18, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html>.

weapons, was better trained and would have the legitimacy – if protesters used violent repertoires – to use full force in repressing the uprising. A marked change within these discussions took place in July and August with the result that a majority now began to see armed struggle not only as desirable but also as necessary and possible.

There are a few reasons for this change. First, and rather ironically, increased repression provided a sense of opportunity as it increased the number of defections from the army. As regime repression had increased so, albeit slowly, had the number of defections.<sup>124</sup> The hoped for turning point in this respect seemed to come on June 6 when – according to protesters – mass defections ended with civilians and defectors taking over the town of Jisr al-Shourough and burning the local police station. The town would only remain outside regime control for a week: in the morning of 12 June, after days of shelling, the fourth division overran the town.<sup>125</sup> Diplomats also began defect to an increasing extent.<sup>126</sup> Though the number of army defections remained limited, what it did provide was a source of military expertise that in turn increased perceptions that violent mobilization was a viable option.

Second, the perception that a non-violent repertoire was not effective enough grew over time. The idea was that regime legitimacy would collapse as result of the violent repression of non-violent mobilization – as seen in Tunisia and Egypt. Protesters saw Ramadan as a real opportunity to enlarge protests. In the days and weeks ahead of Ramadan regime repression gradually increased, hitting its worst point on the first day of Ramadan when 138 people were killed.<sup>127</sup> Hama and Deir ez-Zor were surrounded, shelled and then invaded (both around 5 August 2011),<sup>128</sup> Idlib and Latakya would suffer the same fate in the days leading up to Ramadan. Yet no meaningful schism between army, security services and the political regime appeared: they were too closely interlinked in the Syrian context. Defections never threatened the integrity of core parts of the army or the regime. The large majority of defectors were Sunni, and among the higher ranks solely Sunni. This meant that the most powerful sections of the army and intelligence services – positions filled by Alawis – remained fully under the control of the regime.<sup>129</sup> This again seemed to show the relative ineffectiveness of non-violent protest repertoires in the Syrian

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<sup>124</sup>Bakri, Nada. “Amid Syrian Raids, Reports of Desertions.” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/world/middleeast/30syria.html>.

<sup>125</sup>Stack, Liam. “Thousands Flee as Syria Retakes Rebellious Town.” *The New York Times*, June 12, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/13/world/middleeast/13syria.html>; Arsu, Sebnem, and Liam Stack. “Syrians Flee Another Town, Fearing Military Attack.” *The New York Times*, June 15, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/world/middleeast/16syria.html>.

<sup>126</sup>The New York Times. “Manaf Tlass Confirms Defection From Syria.” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2012, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/world/middleeast/manaf-tlass-confirms-defection-from-syria.html>; Landis, Joshua. “Manaf Tlass Defection Confirmed: His Statement from Paris,” July 6, 2012. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=15233>.

<sup>127</sup><http://syriansshuhada.com/?lang=en&a=st&st=3>

<sup>128</sup>Bakri, Nada, and Anthony Shadid. “Syria Broadcasts Scenes of Destruction in Hama.” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/world/middleeast/06syria.html>.

context. The regime would use any means to repress protests, irrespective of whether they were peaceful or not, and seemed to get away with it.

Due to the above, the position of adherents to non-violent protest tactics within the uprising gradually weakened. But the real “tipping-point” was 22 August 2011: when a Libyan opposition attack on the country’s capital proved an enormous success. From an opposition force pummeled by the regime – as was the case in Syria – the Libyan opposition had transformed into an effective armed uprising that was able, with help of NATO, to overrun Gaddafi’s regime. The attack on Tripoli sent shock waves through the opposition.<sup>130</sup> It meant that both the means – trained soldiers – were available, and a successful example. Soon proponents for a purely non-violent uprising found themselves in the minority. Militias “to defend the protesters” became more numerous and soon after became an increasingly offensive force.

A final key change in the perceptions of threats and – specifically – opportunities was came on 19 July 2012 when a large section of the regime’s security elite was assassinated in a bomb attack in Damascus.<sup>131</sup> This meant that the very top of the regime was vulnerable and many in the opposition began to boast that soon the president himself would be targeted. A surge in (violent) mobilization was the immediate result, which resulted in the attacks on both Damascus and Aleppo, and subsequently the enlargement of the armed insurrection to a full scale civil war as all parts of the country were dragged into armed strife.<sup>132</sup>

### *Phase 3: Foreign Influence*

Foreign influence became more pronounced as the conflict between the opposition and the government escalated. With it the perceptions of threats and opportunities became increasingly linked to the international (political) sphere. These were related to specific bilateral support for the rebels or for the government, and depended on dynamics within the UN and more specifically its Security Council.

To start with bilateral support for the regime, it was obvious to most Syrians that as long as there was support from both Russia and Iran (and to some extent China) for the Syrian regime, it would always have sufficient resources to continue its repression. As it became increasingly obvious that there would not be any meaningful change in the positions of these two countries vis-à-vis the uprising, the general perception of the political strength

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<sup>129</sup>For an enlightening interactive overview of diplomatic defections, see: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/syriadefections/2012730840348158.html>

<sup>130</sup>Interviews with Syrian activists in Istanbul (Turkey) August 2011.

<sup>131</sup>Macfarquhar, Neil. “Fighting Grips Syrian Capital After Attack on Assad’s Inner Circle.” New York Times, July 19, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/world/middleeast/syria-clashes-continue-after-bombing-kills-key-assad-aides.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid.

of the regime increased. This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that no large scale support from the US or Europe materialized, severely hampering the effectiveness of the militias fighting the regular army. The very fact that the opposition is a non-state actor and poorly institutionalized on the ground renders acquiring support from foreign actors a challenge, increasing the perception of the strength of the regime and the threat to the uprising.<sup>133</sup>

At the same time the fact that various countries had a stake in the fall of the Bashar regime meant that the uprising did eventually gain support from Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, strengthening the perception that the armed opposition was both necessary and possible. Many groups – specifically conservative Islamic and Salafi groups – were increasingly successful in securing support from other (non-state) actors in the Gulf: mainly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This helped to strengthen the perception that Islamist actors have a decisive advantage over secular opposition figures – thereby automatically “Islamizing” the opposition. Many groups feign to be more pious than they really are in order to secure the weapons needed for their militia.<sup>134</sup> To what extent the uprising is therefore really “Islamizing” remains hard to gauge and will only become clear when both the opposition and its support (in terms of finances and arms) becomes better institutionalized.

### **Actors in transition: Elites**

In the following section the most relevant (political) elites of the uprising are discussed. A short description is provided of each, and crucial actors are discussed and relevant dynamics explored. As no relevant institutionalized social elites existed before the uprising, I focus here on Politically Relevant Elites (PREs). I do not provide a full mapping of these PREs (a task impossible within the scope of this report), but opt instead for a preliminary outline of the most important individuals.

#### *Bashar al-Asad's Clique*

This includes the president and his close (family) allies, who together form the apex of the political regime and often hold positions within the most powerful army divisions and the intelligence services. For instance, Maher al-Asad, brother of Bashar al-Asad, commands the fourth division of the Syrian army – widely known as the best trained and maintained division. The division is also known for the high percentages of Alawi and other minorities among its ranks.

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<sup>133</sup>Shadid, Anthony, and Steven Lee Myers. “In Syria, Support for Assad Government Shows Signs of Weakening.” The New York Times, August 10, 2011, sec. World / Middle East.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/11/world/middleeast/11syria.html>.

<sup>134</sup>See also: Arango, Tim, and Anne Barnard. “Syrian Rebels Tied to Al Qaeda Play Key Role in War.” New York Times, December 8, 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0#h\[\]](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0#h[]).

Another example is Asef Shawkat, the brother-in-law of Bashar, who was head of the military intelligence and central in formulating the strategy to counter the popular uprising. Finally, Hafez Makhluf, first cousin of Bashar, is the head of the Damascus branch of the General Intelligence Directorate – the most important intelligence branch in the country.<sup>135</sup> These are just a few examples, but they serve to make it clear that those with close family and clan ties to the president tend to fill the most sensitive positions in the army and intelligence services. No apparent divisions have emerged within this “inner circle” of the political regime during the uprising thus far. This does not of course mean that no divisions exist,<sup>136</sup> but that if they are present they have been successfully limited. The only publicly observed shock within this circle is represented by the bomb attack of 18 July 2012 that killed Asef Shawkat.<sup>137</sup> It is rumored that Maher al-Asad was also wounded in the attack (apparently he lost a leg) but this has not been confirmed.

### PREs and the army and intelligence services

This is the “outer circle” of the regime elite, constituted by leaders and generals from the army and intelligence services. I make a division between an “inner” and “outer” circle here on the basis of kinship, yet in reality differences in influence between the two groups are incremental. Two examples in this group are Mohammad al-Shaar, current minister of the interior, who is an Alawi. Another example is Jamil Hassan, head of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate – also an Alawi, but from Homs. The latter was assassinated on 26 August 2012.<sup>138</sup> Ali Mamluk succeeded Hisham Ikhtiar as director of the National Security Bureau after the latter was killed in the 12 July 2012 bomb attack. This directorate theoretically oversees all the intelligence services in the country, but (as noted before) in practice the different intelligence services have high degrees of autonomy. Both Ali Mamluk and Hisham Ikhtiar are Sunni Muslim. Another relevant Sunni elite actor is Manaf Tlass, a former Brigadier General of the Syrian Republican Guard. He is the son of Mustapha Tlass, a close friend of former president Hafez al-Asad. Manaf Tlass became a close friend of Bashar al-Asad. All the names above are people that belong to the so-called “inner circle”, but are not members of the actual regime leadership. They all function as advisors to the president, but it is impossible to know exactly

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<sup>135</sup> Atassi, Asma. “Interactive: Tracking Syria’s Defections.” al-Jazeera, November 25, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/syriadefections/2012730840348158.html>. See cited website for more information on elite defections.

<sup>136</sup> Infamously, Bashar al-Assad’s uncle attempted to take over power from his father in the early 1980s after Hafez had fallen seriously ill. When his health improved Hafez took back power and had Rifat al-Asad exiled.

<sup>137</sup> Macfarquhar, Neil. “Bombing Kills Key Assad Aides as Syria Fighting Rages.” *New York Times*, July 18, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/suicide-attack-reported-in-damascus-as-more-generals-flee.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>138</sup> al-Arabiya. “مقتل جميل حسن مدير المخابرات الجوية السورية.” Al-Arabiya, September 26, 2012. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/26/234290.html>.

how much influence they have over crucial decision making.<sup>139</sup>

Not one Alawi member of these circles has defected since the beginning of the uprising. The only real changes within these circles have resulted from assassinations or defections by Sunni elites: most notably Manaf Tlass in July 2012.<sup>140</sup> Overall the number of defections has been very limited (at the time of writing in November 2012) and the overall integrity of the regime remains intact. Together with economic interests and the influence of sectarian and clan ties, the fear of what will happen if Sunni Syrians take over creates an incentive to remain loyal to the regime.<sup>141</sup>

### Economic Elites

A third relevant group is made up of those that have gained a central position in Syria's economic life, mostly due to their informal (kinship) relations with the political regime. These “children of the powerful”, or *awlad al-masu'lin* in Arabic, became the beneficiaries of the new wave of Syrian *infatih* (economic liberalization) policies in the 1990s. In the 2000s they gained wide recognition throughout the country. The main example in this case is Bashar's cousin, Rami Makhlouf<sup>142</sup> – the son of Adnan Makhlouf, the former commander of the Syrian Presidential Guard – he was able to use his close connections to the regime to form and own, among others, one (of the two) Syrian mobile telephone companies (Syriatel), duty free shops and hotel chains, thus creating a vast business empire. He reportedly used his contacts within the intelligence services (including his younger brother) to harass rivals out of the market.<sup>143</sup> Another example is Firas Tlass, another brother of Manaf Tlass, who created a business empire due to his father's friendship with Hafez al-Asad.<sup>144</sup>

Many of these economic elites were lightning rods for discontent throughout the uprising. Rami Makhlouf was singled out above the rest, and at

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<sup>139</sup> For a full list of regime members (but somewhat outdated) see: Revolution intelligence System. “Syrian Regime أركان النظام.” *Revolution Intelligence System*, 2011. <http://www.revolutionintelligence.com/pillarsofregime>. For an overview in English (but far less complete): BBC. “Bashar al-Assad's Inner Circle.” *BBC*, July 30, 2012, sec. Middle East. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13216195>.

<sup>140</sup> Landis, Joshua. “Manaf Tlass Defection Confirmed: His Statement from Paris,” July 6, 2012. <http://www-joshualandis.com/blog/?p=15233>; The New York Times. “Manaf Tlass Confirms Defection From Syria.” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2012, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/world/middleeast/manaf-tlass-confirms-defection-from-syria.html>.

<sup>141</sup> ICG. Popular Protest in North Africa and The Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide - International Crisis Group, July 13, 2011, p.10. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-syria-lebanon/syria/109-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-vii-the-syrian-regimes-slow-motion-suicide.aspx>.

<sup>142</sup> Shadid, Anthony. “Reviled Tycoon, Assad's Cousin, Resigns in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/world/middleeast/17syria.html>.

<sup>143</sup> BBC. “Bashar al-Assad's Inner Circle.” *BBC*, July 30, 2012, sec. Middle East. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13216195>.

<sup>144</sup> as-Sharq al-Awsat. “«رجل الأعمال فراس تلاس: 45 ضابطاً من عائلتي انشقوا عن النظام.. ووالدي «حزبين وصامتين»» as-Sharq al-Awsat, July 13, 2012. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=686212>.

the very beginning of the uprising the offices of Syriatel were burned down.<sup>145</sup> After Rami Makhoulf angered Bashar al-Asad with comments made in an interview in the New York Times<sup>146</sup> he was publicly sacrificed and declared he would withdraw from business and focus solely on charitable work.<sup>147</sup> Many within the opposition were doubtful of the true intent behind these statements. Firas Tlass defected – as did Manaf and many others within the family – and has since declared that he supports the uprising financially.<sup>148</sup>

It should be made clear that the strict boundaries drawn here between these various groups are ideal types, and that in reality these differences are not as stark. The first and second “inner circles”, in combination with the economic elite, form an unified whole, an elite group that commands politics, the armed forces and the economy. It should also note that members of parliament, diplomats and cabinet ministers do not feature as specific groups. This mirrors an empirical reality as political power is not embodied within the legislative bodies, but the executive (security).

### **Actors in transition: Civil society**

Here the most important actors in society are discussed, using the same structure as above. I start with actors that were present before the uprising and then move on to discuss those that emerged during the uprising.

#### *The “Damascus Declaration” Opposition*

This is embodied by those opposition parties, groups and individuals that signed the October 2005 “Damascus declaration” calling for the “establishment of a democratic national regime” as the basic approach to political reform. They stated that this reform had to be “peaceful, gradual, founded on accord, and based on dialogue”.<sup>149</sup> The signatories included a few Kurdish parties (see below) in addition to the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, an organization that emerged from the 2001 “Damascus Spring” period. In addition a number of “elite opposition figures” signed the petition: Riad Saif (former MP and businessman and founder of the Forum for National Dialogue), Michel Kilo (Christian and longtime opposition figure and publicist), Jawdat Said (Shaykh and Islamic scholar from Quneitra near the Golan Heights) and Haitham al-

<sup>145</sup> Shadid, Anthony. “Rami Makhoulf Becomes Magnet for Syrian Dissent.” *New York Times*, April 30, 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/world/asia/01makhoulf.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/world/asia/01makhoulf.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0). ; Shadid, Anthony. “Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to ‘the End’.” *New York Times*, May 10, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhoulf.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>146</sup> Shadid, Anthony. “Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to ‘the End’.” *New York Times*, May 10, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhoulf.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>147</sup> Shadid, Anthony. “Reviled Tycoon, Assad’s Cousin, Resigns in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/world/middleeast/17syria.html>.

<sup>148</sup> *as-Sharq al-Awsat*. “«رجل الأعمال فراس تلاس: 45 ضابطا من عائلتي انشقوا عن النظام.. ووالدي «حزبين وصامت».” *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 13, 2012. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=686212>.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

Maleh (former Judge and Islamist-leaning Human Rights activist).<sup>150</sup> Most of these names and organizations have played a role – albeit not a pivotal one – in the uprising. Haitham al-Maleh was one of the first to attempt to establish a foreign council to represent the Syrian uprising – but failed. Riad Saif became a senior member of the National Coalition in November 2012. They are seen to be the traditional elite opposition but their position in a future Syria is uncertain.

### Kurdish Opposition Parties

The Kurdish region has traditionally been one of the most politicized in Syria – as a consequence there are numerous parties and movements. A few examples of Kurdish parties are the Kurdish Future Movement of Mashaal Tammo and the Democratic Union Party (PYD, which has close connections with the Kurdish PKK).<sup>151</sup> Many of these parties are at odds with each other over their relationships with other Kurdish parties in Iraq and/or Turkey, their positions vis-à-vis the Bashar regime, et cetera. Splits are common: after the assassination of Mashaal Tammo in October 2011<sup>152</sup> a leadership crisis developed.<sup>153</sup> The PYD is a strong proponent of far-reaching autonomy for Kurdish Syria. In the context of the foundation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) in October 2011, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) was also founded through the direct mediation of the Kurdish Iraqi president Barzani. With the exception of the PYD, these parties are in favor of a Kurdish role within a future unified Syria. In July 2012 both groups were reported to have united in the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC).

Two related issues were at the fore throughout the uprising: one concerned the position of Kurds in Syria, and the other the position of Kurds in the uprising against Bashar. Immense differences exist between movements, parties and regular Kurdish Syrians on both issues. Many Kurdish parties have hesitated to join the uprising as they see often perceive it to be anti-Kurdish in its Arab characteristics.<sup>154</sup> At the same time, many have not forgiven the fact that in 2004 – when the Kurds rose up against Bashar – Arab Syrians remained silent, leaving Bashar ample opportunity to quell the riots. An exception to the

<sup>150</sup>Damascus Declaration. “المجلس الوطني لإعلان دمشق من أجل التغيير الوطني الديمقراطي (Damascus Declaration).doc”, December 1, 2007.

<sup>151</sup>Arango, Tim. “Kurds to Pursue More Autonomy in a Fallen Syria.” New York Times, September 28, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/29/world/middleeast/kurds-to-pursue-more-autonomy-in-a-fallen-syria.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>152</sup>Shadid, Anthony. “Activist’s Killing Stokes Tensions Among Syria’s Kurds.” The New York Times, October 8, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/world/middleeast/killing-of-opposition-leader-in-syria-provokes-kurds.html>.

<sup>153</sup>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “The Kurdish Future Movement.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011. <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48524>.

<sup>154</sup>KurdWatch. Who Is the Syrian-Kurdish Opposition? European Center for Kurdish Studies, December 1, 2011. [http://www.google.it/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=kurdwatch%20who%20is%20the%20syrian%20kurdish%20opposition&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CC4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fkurdwatch.org%2Fpdf%2Fkurdwatch\\_parteien\\_en.pdf&ei=cx62UMXKOMLZtAbd54HAAg&usg=AFQjCNFr0hnE8wRqEuDy-oqocPjjYJqsEZA](http://www.google.it/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=kurdwatch%20who%20is%20the%20syrian%20kurdish%20opposition&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CC4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fkurdwatch.org%2Fpdf%2Fkurdwatch_parteien_en.pdf&ei=cx62UMXKOMLZtAbd54HAAg&usg=AFQjCNFr0hnE8wRqEuDy-oqocPjjYJqsEZA).



rule is the Future Movement led by Mashal Tammo, which has supported the uprising from the very beginning. The other issue is to what extent Kurds will push for a federative state after the fall of Bashar al-Asad. To what extent the KSC can unify the Kurds and settle these issues is still unclear.

### The Muslim Brotherhood

As discussed above, the Muslim Brotherhood was exiled in 1982 and since then has lost most of its infrastructure inside the country. During the leadership of former general secretary Ali Bayanuni an increasingly pro-democracy and pro-human rights discourse was used in their opposition to the regime. A good example of this is the Muslim Brotherhood's "project for a future Syria" published in 2004.<sup>155</sup> In 2006 the Muslim Brotherhood initiated the National Salvation Front (NSF) with former vice-president Abdel Halim Khaddam with the aim to create a government in exile and destabilize the regime. The project failed and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood left the group in February 2009.<sup>156</sup>

During the uprising the Muslim Brotherhood has struggled to re-emerge as a (or the most) relevant opposition group. Although it remains the only Islamist political party with a history in Syrian politics, it has not been able to recreate a structure inside the country. The Brotherhood has been criticized by opposition figures from all ideologies and backgrounds for its authoritarian tendencies, especially concerning the Syrian National Council (SNC, see below) and its dominant position within that organization. With the SNC effectively replaced by the National Coalition – in which the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood holds between 20 and 45 percent of seats – the effect on internal Muslim Brotherhood political strategies remains to be seen.<sup>157</sup>

### Religious Leaders

'Ulama (religious scholars) and Shaykhs (religious leaders) have always held an important position in Syrian society. 'Ulama such as al-Buti, Jawdat Sa'id and the late Ahmad Kiftaru are known far beyond the boundaries of the country. Unsurprisingly they have also played an important role in the uprising. Religious leaders (mostly Sufi) with close relationships with the regime – such as al-Buti, but also Ahmad Badr ad-Din Hassoun (the Mufti of the Republic) – have mostly remained allied to the regime. A prominent exception is Mohammad Habbash (former MP and religious scholar), who decided to defect

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<sup>155</sup> (Brief: مختصر: المشروع السياسي لسورية المستقبل). (The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood). "جماعة الاخوان المسلمين في سورية (Brief: a Political Project for the Future Syria)," 2004.

<sup>156</sup> Levant News. "جماعة الاخوان المسلمين في سورية تعيد تقييم موقفها من جبهة الخلاص الوطني وتنفي 'مصالحه وشبكة' مع النظام." February 14, 2009. <http://www.thisissyria.net/2009/02/14/syriatoday/06.html>.

<sup>157</sup> Oweis, Khaled Yacoub. "High Stakes as Syrian Opposition Tries to Form Government | Reuters." Reuters, November 27, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/27/us-syria-crisis-opposition-idUSBRE8AQ1CM20121127>.

in January 2012.<sup>158</sup> Other scholars that were traditionally more independently inclined, such as the Rifai' brothers (long exiled but returned to Syria in the early 2000s), Shaykh Nabulsi (a prominent radio shaykh) and Mouaz al-khatib (former Imam of the main mosque in Damascus) have sided with the uprising.

These “opposition Shaykhs” have often taken a very active role in the uprising, with the Rifai' brothers for example apparently using their extensive contacts in the Gulf to finance and organize secret arms purchases and smuggle them into the country.<sup>159</sup> In this respect one name should be mentioned: Adnan al-Arouf, a Syrian Salafist religious scholar who was exiled from Syria during the 1980s, and settled in Saudi Arabia. He was the first person to openly and directly oppose Bashar. Many accused Adnan al-Arouf of inciting sectarian hatred by encouraging a Sunni Islamic uprising against an Alawi (unbelieving) regime. Support for al-Arouf was strongest in the Idlib region, in Homs and Hama. In the months between May and November 2011 he was the main instigator of protests in this region.<sup>160</sup>

### Local Coordination Committees (LCCs)<sup>161</sup>

Institutionalized at the neighborhood level, these committees emerged during the uprising due to the practical need to organize protests and gather and disseminate information.<sup>162</sup> In June 2011, around 100 to 200 people were estimated to be fully engaged in these committees.<sup>163</sup> Most people active within these coordination committees are young and have not been involved in organized opposition activities before. They often did not know each other before the start of the uprising and have been “socialized” into forming councils through their shared experiences in the streets.<sup>164</sup> Although committees that were mostly Kurdish, Sunni or from minority groups did emerge, they always attempted to be as inclusive as possible towards all social groups.<sup>165</sup> With the increase in protests in the first months of the uprising, institutionalization also increased. Despite severe repression the LCCs survived, remained operational

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<sup>158</sup> All4Syria. “تسريبات عن انشقاق ” محمد حبش ” ولجوء الى دبي.” All4Syria.info, January 15, 2012. <http://all4syria.org/web/archives/46343>.

<sup>159</sup> Interviews in the Antakya and Istanbul regions (Turkey) September 2012.

<sup>160</sup> Interviews in Istanbul (Turkey) August 2011.

<sup>161</sup> Shadid, Anthony. “Disparate Factions From Streets Fuel New Opposition in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html>. ; Zoepf, Katherine. “Long Repressed, a Syrian Opposition Takes Shape.” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>.

<sup>162</sup> See: <http://www.lccsyria.org/about> Shadid, Anthony. “Disparate Factions From Streets Fuel New Opposition in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html>. ; Zoepf, Katherine. “Long Repressed, a Syrian Opposition Takes Shape.” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Shadid, Anthony. “Disparate Factions From Streets Fuel New Opposition in Syria.” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2011, sec. World / Middle East. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html>.

<sup>164</sup> Leenderris (unpublished), Interview Alawi from Damascus (Istanbul).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

and eventually succeeded in creating an umbrella organization: the Local Coordinating Committees of Syria (LCCS).<sup>166</sup>

### *FSA and Popular Militias*

As noted above, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was founded on 29 July 2011 (just before the start of Ramadan).<sup>167</sup> It aimed to promote desertions and protect civilians from government repression by splitting the institutional structure between peaceful and armed mobilization.<sup>168</sup> In practice the differences between the two were more ambiguous, as there were widespread incidents of spontaneous violence from the start of the uprising. With the success of the Libyan uprising, militias became much more numerous and active throughout the country. Like the FSA, they were officially formed to “protect the people” but were often much more offensive in their tactics in practice. At the start grouped around small cliques tied to family, clan or shaykh, in the following year (August 2011 – July 2012) they became increasingly organized, well trained and unified. Examples of powerful militias are the Liwa al-Tawhid in Aleppo and the Farouk Brigade in Homs – though new militias are still constantly formed and/or renamed. These militias pay lip service to the FSA, but are in reality highly autonomous.

### *(Jihadi) Salafists*

An increasingly important group among the militias – and one that refuses to fight within the framework of the FSA – is the Jihadists. Though it is hard to estimate numbers and the spread of these movements, it is clear that members are likely to number into the tens of thousands and are probably present in most parts of the country. They include Arabs from all countries in the region.<sup>169</sup> At the time of writing the most powerful Salafist fighting group appears to be *Jabhat an-Nusra* (Lund 2012), an Al-Qaeda affiliated group that is explicitly not active under the banner of the FSA or National Coalition.<sup>170</sup> Many within the opposition are wary of the impact Jihadists are making on the image of (and

<sup>166</sup> For more information on these organizations (and protests being organized) see their website at <http://www.lccsyr.org/en/>. See also: Shadid, Anthony. “Assad’s Forces Pound City at Center of Syrian Revolt.” The New York Times, April 27, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/28/world/middleeast/28daraa.html>.

<sup>167</sup> 2011. اعلان تشكيل الجيش السوري الحر. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZcCbIPM37w&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZcCbIPM37w&feature=youtube_gdata_player).

<sup>168</sup> Landis, Joshua. “Free Syrian Army Founded by Seven Officers to Fight the Syrian Army.” Syria Comment, July 29, 2011. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=11043>.

<sup>169</sup> Rosen, Nir. “Islamism and the Syrian Uprising.” Foreign Policy, March 8, 2012. [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism\\_and\\_the\\_syrian\\_uprising](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism_and_the_syrian_uprising).

<sup>170</sup> Arango, Tim, and Anne Barnard. “Syrian Rebels Tied to Al Qaeda Play Key Role in War.” New York Times, December 8, 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0#h\[\]](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0#h[]), and see: Syria-Politic. “سوريا - بوليتيك | موقع سوري سياسي إستراتيجي إخباري مستقل - 83 تنسيقية وكتيبة تسمي الجمعة القادمة ‘لا للتدخل الأمر يكي- كلنا جبهة النصره’.” <http://syria-politic.com>, December 9, 2012. [http://syria-politic.com/ar/Default.aspx?subject=1188#.UNBko\\_n0Hdl](http://syria-politic.com/ar/Default.aspx?subject=1188#.UNBko_n0Hdl).

support for) the uprising among foreign nations. At the same time many others feel they have no other choice but to accept the assistance of these often well trained fighters. Indeed, as rebel-controlled areas expand and the problems of administering the occupied territories grow, some are joining Jihadist groups in protest against the new “corrupt practices” of FSA-related militias.

### *Syrian National Council and the National Coalition*

These are the main opposition bodies abroad, and are attempting to form the representation of the uprising abroad. As mentioned before, early attempts were marred by old rifts within the Syrian opposition. Many of the initiatives never took off until the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed.<sup>171</sup> The Council initially found wide support from Syrians inside the country, but a struggle lingered over whether a future Syria should be named an “Arab” republic (which the Kurds opposed). Allegations of corruption and authoritarianism soon surfaced and its legitimacy in- and outside Syria gradually decreased. Increasingly the SNC came under the domination of the Muslim Brotherhood, which used the body as a tool to fund various opposition militias inside the country. This all continued until a new initiative began in November 2012, the National Coalition (NC, headed by the previously mentioned Syrian Shaykh and activist Mouaz al-Khatib), which took over the central role of representing the domestic Syrian uprising abroad.<sup>172</sup> All groups (including the Kurdish National Council) are part of this new coalition.

### *Syrian Labor movements and Student Movements*

Finally, two groups that are often at the forefront of collective mobilization have remained largely absent from, or have played only a minor role in, the Syrian uprising. The first are the *Syrian Labor movements*. Due to the historical development of labor unions (unions in the Syrian periphery emerged as corporate Ba'athist structures in the 1960s) the Syrian regime was able to effectively pacify unionism in the country. After the 1979-82 uprising, even the urban labor unions (those that predated Ba'athist rule) were co-opted into a national Ba'athist organization and rendered ineffective as regime opposition groups (Raymond A. Hinnebusch 1993). The historically close relations between rural labor movements and the Ba'ath regime can be seen as one of the main causes for their current quiescence: at both local and national levels labor organizations have been effectively tied to the regime. In previous episodes of mobilization, as in the current uprising, they played no significant role.<sup>173</sup> The

<sup>171</sup> France 24. “سنة أشهر من الاحتجاجات والمعارضة تعلن تشكيل المجلس الوطني من تركيا.” France 24, September 15, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110915-syria-opposition-six-months-demonstrations-national-council-turkey>.

<sup>172</sup> Gladstone, Rick. “As Syria Opposition Unifies, Unrest Intensifies at Borders.” New York Times, November 12, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/world/middleeast/syria-war-updates.html>.

<sup>173</sup> See the website of the national Syrian union: <http://wu-sy.org/c/>

same holds for organized politicized *student movements*. They are largely absent in Syria as their institutional structures, together with general unionism in the country, have historically been effectively co-opted into Ba'athist structures. This does not mean, that students have not been active, or that universities have not been a breeding ground for mobilization: university dorms have become infamous as centers of mobilization.<sup>174</sup> As the uprising emerged, specific student coordination committees emerged at various universities. But these groups did not build on pre-existing organizational structures or collective identities.

## Conclusion

The report provided a general overview of the historical and structural background of the Syrian uprising which started in March 2011 and is ongoing at the time of writing (November 2012). In the preceding pages I have explored the structural characteristics of the Syrian political regime and society, discussed the resulting (political) opportunities for social mobilization, provided an overview of key actors, and an initial overview of the protests and transformative events that took place throughout the period. I hope it is clear that Syria's particular structural conditions – its sectarian social composition, regional embeddedness and the military-security character of its political regime have been crucial to how the uprising developed. Second, I hope the report showed that “political opportunity structures” (as traditionally defined) remained stable and closed throughout the uprising. Instead, cognitive “shocks” from fellow Arab countries were important influences on the perceived opportunities and threats among protesters, thereby influencing subsequent mobilization dynamics.

What the future holds for Syria remains unknown, but many are fearful. The fear of a sectarian backlash that will strengthen the regime is growing. With rebel forces proving more powerful by the week, a regime victory (as in 1982) and a return to a pre-2011 situation is highly unlikely. At the same time a sudden regime collapse, though possible, is also unlikely. A gradual retreat from various areas is far more likely. More chaos, more destruction, and more deaths will be the result until the regime falls. With Syria's state institutions shattered and its social fabric both uprooted and polarized, and radical Jihadists groups increasingly strong, every passing day makes a post-Bashar civil war more likely.

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<sup>174</sup> France 24. “إحالة 400 طالب من جامعة حلب أمام القضاء بتهمة ‘الشغب وتحقير رئيس الدولة’ - سوريا - فرانس 24 - مونت كارلو”، June 27, 2011. <http://www.france24.com/ar/20110627-syria-justice-trial-students-accused-demonstrators-kurdish-human-right-statment-critic-against-lassad>.

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## Appendix A: Map of Syria, Geographical



From: <http://personal.frostburg.edu/jnmartin0/Maps.htm>

Accessed 30 November 2012. May be subject to copyright.



## **Appendix B: Abbreviations**

Hamas – Harakat al-muqawama al-Islamia (The Islamic Resistance Movement).

KNC – Kurdish National Council.

KSC – Kurdish Supreme Committee.

LCCs – Local Coordination Committees.

LCCS – The Local Coordination Committees in Syria (umbrella organization).

MP – Member of Parliament.

NC – National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

PFLP-GC – Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

PKK – Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, (Kurdistan Workers' Party).

PLO – Palestinian Liberalization Organization.

PYD – Democratic Union Party.

SNC – Syrian National Council.

NC – National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or National Council.

NSF – National Salvation Front.

UNSC – United Nations Security Council.

## Appendix C: Table of selected protests 2000 – 2012

The table below notes the main protest events in the period under review. It aims to provide a general overview of the crucial protests and a possible starting point for a more representative (and thorough) event analysis of Syrian protests during this period. Cells left blank indicate irrelevance or a lack of information.

0	1	2	3	Date/duration	Name	Cities	Aim	# protesters	Forms/repertoires	Actors organizing
				26 September 2000 <sup>i</sup>	Declaration of the 99 <sup>ii</sup>	Damascus <sup>iii</sup>	Political Liberalization and end of emergency law <sup>iv</sup>	99 signatories <sup>v</sup>	Petition <sup>vi</sup>	Prominent Establishment Figures <sup>vii</sup>
				15 January 2001 <sup>viii</sup>	Declaration of the 1000 <sup>ix</sup>	Damascus <sup>x</sup>	End of emergency law and Democratization <sup>xi</sup>	(+/-) 1000 signatories. Probably fewer. <sup>xii</sup>	Petition <sup>xiii</sup>	Prominent Establishment Figures, “Friends of Civil society” للجان إحياء المجتمع المدني <sup>xiv</sup>
				8 March 2004 <sup>xv</sup>	Sit-in in front of parliament <sup>xvi</sup>	Damascus <sup>xvii</sup>	End Emergency Laws <sup>xviii</sup>	A Hundred <sup>xix</sup>	Sit-in <sup>xx</sup>	the committee in charge of democratic freedoms and human rights in Syria (umbrella Organization) <sup>xxi</sup>
				March 2004 <sup>xxii</sup>	Kurdish uprising <sup>xxiii</sup>	Qamishli, Kurdish Region. <sup>xxiv</sup> Also Aleppo and Damascus <sup>xxv</sup>	Minority Rights, Political Liberalization. <sup>xxvi</sup>	Thousands. <sup>xxvii</sup>	Protest marches, stone throwing <sup>xxviii</sup>	
				October 2005 <sup>xxix</sup>	Damascus Declaration <sup>xxx</sup>	Damascus. <sup>xxxi</sup>	Political Liberalization <sup>xxxii</sup>		Declaration, press statements <sup>xxxiii</sup>	A variety of Syrian political movements <sup>xxxiv</sup>
				July 2008 <sup>xxxv</sup>	Sadnaya uprising <sup>xxxvi</sup>	Sadnaya (prison, very localized) <sup>xxxvii</sup>	Better prison environment <sup>xxxviii</sup>	Dozens/Hundred? <sup>xxxix</sup>	Hostage taking, killing, press statements <sup>xl</sup>	(Salafi) prisoners <sup>xli</sup>
				11 March 2011 <sup>xlii</sup>	First Dara' Protests <sup>xliii</sup>	Dara' <sup>xliv</sup>	Freeing prisoners <sup>xlv</sup>	A few hundreds at most. <sup>xlvi</sup>	Street protests <sup>xlvii</sup>	Family/Clan based. <sup>xlviii</sup>
				18 March 2011 <sup>xlix</sup>	1st National “Friday of Rage” <sup>l</sup>	Dara', Baniyas, Homs, Damascus <sup>i</sup>	Against repression <sup>lii</sup> Economic corruption and clientelism. <sup>liii</sup>	From several Hundred <sup>liv</sup> to 3 to 4 thousand. <sup>lv</sup> In Damascus around 150. <sup>lvi</sup>	Street protests <sup>lvii</sup>	“Spontaneously” formed council of 80-odd people form Dara' <sup>lviii</sup>

		18-29 March 2011 <sup>lix</sup>	The 1st week of protests <sup>lx</sup>	Dara', Damascus Qunaeitra <sup>lxi</sup> Latakya. <sup>lxii</sup>	The abolition of Syria's 48-year emergency law; more freedoms; and an end to pervasive corruption.. <sup>lxiii</sup>	Thousands <sup>lxiv</sup> to tens of thousands. <sup>lxv</sup>	Peaceful street protests, Arson attempts to police, party buildings. <sup>lxvi</sup> In Dara': encampments attempts mosque <sup>lxvii</sup>	Locally formed groups. <sup>lxviii</sup>
		29 March → Today <sup>lxix</sup>	Every Friday <sup>lxx</sup>	Whole country (see report)	Regime Change, every Friday special "theme" <sup>lxxi</sup>	Between hundreds to hundreds of thousands <sup>lxxii</sup>	Peaceful street protests	LCCs <sup>lxxiii</sup>
		3 June 2011 <sup>lxxiv</sup>	"Hamza al-Khatib" Protests <sup>lxxv</sup>	Throughout the country, Dara' less: too much repression. <sup>lxxvi</sup>	Regime Change, as reaction to torture 13-year old Hamza Khatib. <sup>lxxvii</sup>	70,000 in Maarrat an Numan and 50,000 in Ariha <sup>lxxviii</sup>	Peaceful street protests <sup>lxxix</sup>	LCCs <sup>lxxx</sup>
		6 June 2011 <sup>lxxxi</sup>	Jisr al-Shoughour "Army mass-defection" <sup>lxxxii</sup>	Jisr al-Shoughour <sup>lxxxiii</sup>	Refusal to shoot civilians, in combination with low living standards <sup>lxxxiv</sup>	Hundreds?	Attacking army and police stations <sup>lxxxv</sup> explosive traps <sup>lxxxvi</sup>	
		22 July 2011 <sup>lxxxvii</sup>	Protests in "liberated" cities <sup>lxxxviii</sup>	Dara', Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zour. <sup>lxxxix</sup>	Regime change, against sectarianism. <sup>xc</sup>	Hundreds of Thousands. <sup>xcii</sup>	Mass Peaceful street protests. <sup>xcii</sup>	LCCs. <sup>xciii</sup>
		25 May 2012 <sup>xciv</sup>	Houwlah Massacre. <sup>xcv</sup>	Houwlah. <sup>xcvi</sup>	Sectarian hatred. <sup>xcvii</sup>	Unknown.	Civilian Massacre. <sup>xcviii</sup>	Possible Shabiha. <sup>xcix</sup>
		12 July 2012 <sup>c</sup>	Tremseh Massacre. <sup>ci</sup>	Tremseh. <sup>cii</sup>	Possibly Army attack against FSA / Militias. <sup>ciii</sup>	Unknown.	Civilian Massacre. <sup>civ</sup>	Syrian Army, possibly in an action against FSA/militias. <sup>cv</sup>
		18 July 2012 <sup>cvii</sup>	Bomb attack on elite security and military individuals. <sup>cvii</sup>	Damascus. <sup>cviii</sup>	Regime change. <sup>cix</sup>	Unknown.	Bomb attack (either suicide or remotely detonated). <sup>cx</sup>	Ansar Islam (Jihadists) / FSA. <sup>cxii</sup>
		10 April <sup>cxii</sup> - June 2012 <sup>cxiii</sup>	Kofi Annan Peace plan & observers <sup>cxiv</sup>	Damascus, whole country <sup>cxv</sup>	N/a	Hundreds of observers <sup>cxvi</sup>	N/a	Arab league (?), subsequently UN. <sup>cxvii</sup>
		May, June August 2012 <sup>cxviii</sup>	Lebanon infighting. <sup>cxix</sup>	Tripoli (Lebanon), Beirut. <sup>cxx</sup>	Sectarian: support or against Syrian Uprising. <sup>cxxi</sup>	Hundreds?	Violence, Small arms. <sup>cxxii</sup>	
		June 2011 and (more extreme) April 2012 <sup>cxviii</sup>	Palestinian infighting <sup>cxviii</sup>	Damascus: Yarmouk <sup>cxv</sup>	Intra-Palestinian: support or against Syrian Uprising <sup>cxvii</sup>	Hundreds?	Any type of violent mean at disposal <sup>cxvii</sup>	GFLP-GC against other Palestinian factions (Hamis already left) <sup>cxviii</sup>

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- iii Ibid.
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lxx See [www.syriansshuhada.com](http://www.syriansshuhada.com).

lxxi See an overview of the names of each Friday at [www.syriansshuhada.com](http://www.syriansshuhada.com).

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