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*The General and the Particular in the Ongoing Syrian Popular Uprising**

* This paper is the result of collective collaboration and debate among ACRPS scholars

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The Syrian Arab people seek freedom and dignity, and yearn for both citizenship and the rights of the citizen, as do all Arab peoples. Despite the existence of variations in regime structure among different Arab countries, the main differences are not in the type of the regime, but in the presence (or lack) of a national identity that allows the separation of society from the state, and the presence (or lack) of communal groups that vertically traverse society and the state. What makes it difficult to separate society from the state is the same factor that makes it tricky to separate the state from the regime.¹ This very separation was what allowed the Egyptian and Tunisian societies – as unified societies – to take to the streets demanding the ousting of the regime, and permitted the army to refrain from standing by the regime in a war against the people.

Syria has entered a phase of popular uprising, which has acquired a name, the Revolution of March 15, in a similar fashion to the movements in Tunisia and Egypt at the year's beginning, and in Yemen, Libya, and other countries thereafter. While the Syrian uprising has shown an ability to expand and spread, as happened on two consecutive Fridays, April 15 and April 22, it remains as yet in its early stages, and raises numerous questions regarding the prospective direction that it will take. Answers to these questions will depend on specifics of the Syrian case, the level of awareness in the social movements participating in the uprising, and the reaction of the Syrian regime, in addition to international and regional positions and related factors.

Will Syria, for instance, follow in the footsteps of Egypt by enacting reforms under the pressure of a mass movement that takes the form of incessant peaceful protests? Can we wager that, unlike in the Egyptian case, the Syrian regime will be able to carry out these reforms? Or will the uprising be temporarily bogged down in various social equilibriums, as has been the case in Yemen? Will Syria present a different model in which the logic of force overcomes that of compromise? Or must any transition to democracy in Syria overcome the regime in its current form? The events of April 15 and 22 have shown that the way of compromise is but a mere potentiality that can be made more likely due to the regional and international settings; it's also shown that the ruling regime remains reliant on the security approach by repressing peaceful popular protests. These questions loom large, and require an examination of the specificities of both Syria's domestic characteristics and its interactions with the rest of the region.

The debate on what is taking place in Syria centers on two questions that are commonly asked, in one manner or another, by the regime and its media.

First, what dangers are posed by the sectarian factor in the Syrian arena, namely the possibilities of its employment in the face of popular protests demanding freedom and dignity, and this in the midst of an existing condition in the Arab Levant where the raging democratic revolution may stir latent social contradictions, tribal or sectarian, which often have been nurtured – and sometimes exploited – by post-colonial Arab regimes?

¹ See: Azmi Bishara, *Civil Society: A Critical Study, with a Note on Arab Civil Society*, Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1997.

Second, is it not possible that so-called “conspiracy theories” might be plausible in this instance given Syria’s exceptional position in the regional power balance, its support for the resistance option in Lebanon and Palestine, its opposition to imperialist and Israeli ventures, and its alliance with Iran?

The third problematic question addressed in this paper pertains to the prospect of change in Syria and its possibilities in light of the predicted policies of the decision-makers, and given the cognitive shifts in the general population after a protracted absence of constructive political engagement in the public sphere.

A Peaceful Protest Movement

Syria was no exception to the pattern of peaceful protest that has been manifest in all Arab uprisings, despite the fact that the Syrian scene was characterized by the harshness of repression that was deployed at the beginning of the events, which contributed to their intensification and diffusion. Live bullets are still being used to disperse demonstrators. The peaceful, popular, and mature character of Arab popular revolts was apparent at the beginnings of the Daraa uprising, and was unequivocally confirmed on the “Friday of Resolve” (April 15) when the authorities lessened the level of their repression against protesters.

In public forums, the Syrian regime claimed that its “lessons learned” from the revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia was that Syria’s position vis-à-vis the resistance distinguishes its regime from those in Egypt and Tunisia and makes it more agreeable to the masses and public opinion. However, after the flaring of the uprising in Daraa, it appears that the regime’s main conclusion from Tunisia and Egypt was that the fallen regimes had not used enough force at the start of their respective troubles to in order to quell rebellion in the cradle.

The protest movement in Syria began on March 15 with activists breaking the barrier of fear in the first instance of openly political demonstrations in Damascus and other cities, demanding the release of political prisoners. Despite the significance of previous acts of protest, they were not endowed with a direct political character: the February 17 demonstration, for instance, came as an act of local solidarity with a street vendor who was assaulted by a policeman in the Hariqa district of Damascus. That event witnessed, for the first time, the deployment of a protest slogan in the now-famous chant “the Syrian people do not get humiliated”. Similarly, the youth sit-in of solidarity with the Libyan people of February 22, held in front of the Libyan Embassy, reflected, in its slogans calling for freedom, the lack of basic rights and democratic practices in Syria as well, not just Libya.

Nevertheless, the protest movement evolved briskly after the popular uprising in the city of Daraa and the brutal manner in which the security forces suppressed the demonstrations. The Daraa events began when Syrian security arrested 15 teenagers, none of them more than 14 years of age, for having painted slogans inspired by the Egyptian revolution on the walls of buildings, including “the people want the downfall of the regime”. The ensuing demonstrations were a

reaction to the behavior of the head of the Political Security Branch in Daraa, Atif Najeeb, and the governor, Faisal Kulthum, who insulted a delegation of tribes and notables seeking mediation in order to secure the boys' release. Consequently, the arrest of the teenagers and the affront to the city's notables acquired symbolic and material value as manifestations of injustice and humiliation. Local and security authorities employed the method of humiliation with a society still dominated by traditional structures.

The security response went even further: live rounds were fired by security forces in order to disperse protesters who rallied in front of the governorate hall on March 18, leading to the death of several citizens. This engendered a state of widespread resentment that opened the floodgates for a popular protest movement. That movement was preserved due to its inclusion of a varied group of political and human rights activists who share a culture, political visions, a history of struggle, and traditional communal structures that protect their members in dangerous times.

The Syrian protest movement followed almost the same path as its Tunisian predecessor, beginning as a local reaction to an instance of political and social injustice and the authorities' behavior in dealing with the protests. The movement then spread into various parts of the Damascus countryside, Homs, Lattaqiya, and Hama; it then crystallized into a popular uprising raising slogans of freedom and reform – without targeting the regime as a whole. But this popular uprising stopped at the gates of Damascus and Aleppo, being unable to penetrate these cities so far, despite the fact that negative opinions of the regime abound in these cities in a manner no less intense than in other parts of the country. It seems, however, that certain sections of society, including the middle class, remain hesitant due to their fear of an uncertain future.

There are, of course, string resemblances between the Tunisian and Syrian cases at the start of the protests, a similar condition of uneven development among the two countries' governorates and provinces, and widespread popular discontent due to corruption, the police nature of the state, and the bleak horizons for youth in both countries. These resemblances are most apparent in the early forms of protest; the similarity ends with the vast differences in the respective natures of the two regimes, as well as the two societies. We shall see that these differences have had more of an effect on the direction of events than the similarities.

Following the large demonstrations of the “Friday of Resolve” on April 15, the Syrian political scene evolved on two key levels.

First, the protests not only grew in scale but also spread beyond Daraa, Lattaqiya, Baniyas, and Hama, reaching cities that had hitherto remained outside the movement, including in the Kurdish areas and the Jazeera area. These developments established the popular aspect of the demonstrations.

Second, the state's refraining from using direct violence in the face of the protests (in many areas) had a transformative effect on the Syrian political scene, with the realization that the authorities were capable of showing a different face. Beirut's *Al-Akhbar* newspaper spoke of “a

different garb worn by Syria,” “the attire of demonstrations in response to the declared ‘Friday of resolve’ that was devoid of violence, except for in Homs and the north of Damascus. Images of the dead and wounded and ambulances were absent, with demonstrations acquiring a refined civic dimension.”² Later, it became clear that this assessment was a hasty one, reflective of the wishful thinking of those who keep Syria’s best interest in mind: the Syrian regime has often been subjected to the projections of outside parties that see in it what they wish to see.

The expansive peaceful demonstrations of April 15 presented evidence of the fallaciousness of previous official claims to the effect that demonstrators were using firearms (contra claims by the protesters that pro-regime militias were involved in the killings); this came after a large number of deaths, over 200 according to non-official sources, had occurred in bloody clashes between security forces and protesters up to the beginning of April.³ The number of victims noticeably rose in the demonstrations of the following Friday.

In the case of Syria, as in other uprisings in Egypt and Yemen, the mosque was the principal (but not only) location for the gathering and launching of demonstrations. Since Syria is a multi-religious, multi-confessional state, this fact became a matter of debate among the intellectual and political elites in the country, a debate centered on the real catalyst of the demonstrations, their motives, and their target audience.

At first glance, it seemed as if the protests in Syria were the movement of a specific street and a specific sect against the regime. With the escalation of events, and the spread of demonstrations to new regions inhabited by a multitude of sects, fears arose of the potential for sectarian violence. The regime itself alluded to this by using terms like “sectarian sedition”; this language of the regime, and its constant warnings of “chaos,” were met with the claim that the regime was invested in scaremongering against sectarian strife to the point of provocation, as a manner of presenting the authoritarian state as the only guarantor of the unity of the society and state in Syria, and of warning that that democracy would lead to sedition. Given this debate, we must ask: what are the sectarian conditions in Syria, and what are their effects on the rising popular movement?

Sectarianism in Syria ... Causes Near and Far

This is not the suitable place to review the phenomenon of sectarianism in historic Syria; it suffices to say that Syrian society inherited the sectarian phenomenon from the near past and the times of the monopoly of religious legitimacy, when the faiths of sectarian minorities were called into question, forcing them to conceal their religious practices (i.e., their sectarian identity). This has fostered a mentality of persecution among some sects, which dovetailed with colonial interventions in Ottoman lands under the pretext of protecting minorities.

² *Al-Akhbar* (newspaper), April 16, 2011.

³ *The Guardian*. “Soldiers Shot for Refusing to Fire on Protesters”, retrieved April 12, 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/12/syrian-soldiers-shot-protest>

An attempt was made to surpass this legacy through the building of a modern state. The Great Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule in Syria was a prelude to the solidification of natural Syria as a political entity whose ideological bond is Arab nationalism, an idea which was elucidated and propagated by intellectuals and thinkers from all sects and religions, and which drew its principles from the activism of Arab committees that labored to produce a new reality and a historic break with the Ottoman state – by building an independent Arab one.

Syrian society fought for itself again in the face of the French colonial mandate that attempted to form geopolitical cantons with a sectarian character in order to divide Syria into statelets. The Great Syrian Revolution came as a coordinated popular response to this policy of fragmentation. Thereafter, Syrian society adopted numerous initiatives to produce an inclusive identity under the French policies of division that attempted to separate the coastal region from political Syria under the pretext that it was inhabited by an Alawi minority that was religiously distinct. This imposed reality was challenged by a conference held in the Alawi town of Qirdaha in 1936, grouping Syrian religious scholars from all stripes who issued a document acknowledging the Alawite sect as one of the main branches of Islam in Syria, and not a distinct religion.

The Syrian people have always celebrated Arab nationalist figures from Syria, who hailed from all sects, and who rose to prominence during that fateful phase as a patriotic and national leadership for the people of Syria even before Arab nationalism could produce a party and an ideology. Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, Faris al-Khury, Ibraheem Hnano, Saleh al-Ali, and Yusif al-Azma are national symbols for the Syrian people, regardless of their sect.

Anti-colonialism was a unifying factor for the different sections of Syrian society, playing a major role in the formation of national identity, but it could not produce an integrated national community due to the occupation, difficult living conditions, weak economic development, and the isolation of cities from the countryside. Following independence, the issue of building a state on a civic foundation reappeared as a matter of national consensus whose effects were reflected on many levels. In development terms, for instance, social and educational gaps were reduced; in politics, the appearance of inclusive national organizations allowed the representation of all sectors of the population, including individuals who hailed from minorities, through the electoral lists of nationalist parties, such as the Arab Socialist Bath, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and the Communist Party, in addition to the bloc of independents and tribes. The signs of sectarian strife have never appeared except under the regime of Colonel Shishakli.⁴

However, autocracy and the absence of freedoms and democratic practices in recent decades contributed to enshrining segmentary identities and weakening the notion of citizenship. The regime made itself appear as the only guarantor for minorities and for national unity, and the situation deteriorated further with the military confrontation waged by the regime against the

⁴ In the early 1950s, Shishakli led military campaigns against the Druze in the Jabal al-Arab and employed repressive policies against the Alawites on the coast.

Muslim Brotherhood in Syria in the early 1980s, which was the most dangerous phase in terms of threats to coexistence and national integration.

Despite the deployment of sectarian discourse by the Brotherhood, which had undergone a period of transformation inspired by the extreme writings of Sayyid Qutb, no communal clashes took place on a sectarian basis. Despite the many attempts to paint the Syrian regime as that of a specific minority, the fact of the matter is that the institutional and constitutional structures of the state in Syria are not based on sectarianism. Instead, they reflect an authoritarian reality that suppresses any movement against it from any side. There is no doubt that familial and clannish loyalties in the coastal region constitute a base of support for the regime, especially in the army and security services, but this does not make it a sectarian regime; all sects suffer from absolutism, and peripheral provinces suffer from developmental inequality and marginalization regardless of their sectarian and ethnic makeups.

The regime sustained an alliance with the services and real estate bourgeoisie and with the merchant class in large cities. This Bonapartist alliance between political and security autocracy and commercial capital is the actual coalition ruling Syria based on domestic deals – recast after each crisis – and marginalizing the liberal section of the middle class and its intellectuals. Recently, this alliance has manifested itself in the rise in affluence of a new class of businessmen in the large cities, who carry the banner of economic neoliberalism and political despotism in a way similar to the “Tunisian Model,” and who push for notions of “Syria First” and for the revitalization of the peace process with Israel.

In the most recent phase, new factors were added that served to reinforce sectarian fears, including political developments in Iraq following the US-led invasion of 2003 and the sectarian polarization that ensued, and debates on the Lebanese scene, especially at a time when sectarian discourse was regionally employed by the so-called “moderation axis” in order to target the Lebanese resistance.

Current estimates of sectarian distribution in Syria, despite being unofficial, point to a Sunni majority ranging between 60-70% of the total population, 10-15% of which is Kurdish. The rest of the population is made up of Alawite and Shia minorities (10-15%), Christians (8-10%), and the Druze and the Ismailis, who constitute almost 5% of the total population.⁵ However, this distribution has no legal value since religious and sectarian belongings in Syria do not currently constitute an acknowledged legal status, and any democratic transformation in the country should separate politics from sect and religion. In that sense, religion and state must be separated in a modern multi-sectarian nation; therefore, effectively dealing with this problem represents the main challenge to any democratic revolutionary movement in Syria.

⁵ The only official Syrian census that took religious identity into account was effectuated in 1985 and showed the following: Sunni Muslims 76.1%, Alawi Muslims 11.5%, Druze 3%, Ismailis 1%, Christians 8%.

The Protest Movement and the “Sedition Thesis”

Some criticize the protest movement in Syria for not having a clear political identity, and allege that because the mosque is its usual spot for gathering and launching demonstrations, it is largely dependent on the Sunni street and not inclusive of all stripes of society.

Regardless of the veracity of these allegations, given the fact that no public current of protest has been allowed in Syria for the past three decades, it is only natural to view the mosque as a locus for legal assemblies under state regulations that ban public gatherings. In reality, the protests also emerged from public squares, despite the heavy price that was incurred (in blood) as a result of attempts to gather. As for non-Sunni Syrians refraining from participating in the protests, this is expected because the beginnings of such processes rarely answer crucial questions of the future – in other words, will the revolution guarantee their continuation as an active part of their society? This does not mean that these citizens are content with the regime, but rather that they need further clarity on the character of the changes to be instituted by the revolution, especially in the absence of clear leadership. The leaders who will emerge from the uprising may be more democratic and civic-oriented than the Muslim Brothers or extremist currents such as the Salafis. On the other hand, the known names that are linked to the opposition tend to alienate most Syrians, whether they were those of Khaddam, Rifat al-Asad, or even some of the Brotherhood leaders who wagered on sectarianism and alliances with Khaddam in previous eras. This hesitant position is found most frequently among the middle classes, which are perpetually concerned about the future.

The level of hesitancy in the Syrian case remains less than that was witnessed in Egypt, where the Coptic Church itself publicly opposed participation in “the Day of Rage,” but that did not prevent Coptic youth from participating heavily; this same activist youth played an important role in the revolution by challenging the language of sectarian incitement employed by the regime, especially after the facts of the Alexandria Church bombing began to trickle out.

As for the chanting of sectarian slogans in some of the early demonstrations, mainly targeting Hizbollah and Iran, these phenomena reflected part of the dysfunction in defining national identity and the mentality that views the regime as an Alawite one, interpreting its alliances as being borne out of sectarianism. But the use of these irksome slogans, which offend many Syrians, was momentary and limited to specific areas. At the time of the launching of these slogans, the street was affected by a media discourse that was floated to justify the intervention of Gulf states to repress peaceful demonstrators in Bahrain, as well as the pro-Hizbollah media discourse, which focused on the Bahraini issue while ignoring the protests in Syria. Another factor was the spread of false and insidious rumors claiming that Hezbollah elements were participating in the repression in Daraa – as some extremists were attempting to ride the protest wave in specific parts of the Damascus countryside.

This state of affairs could also be interpreted as a reflection of the fragmentation of the street and the fact that we are still in a phase where protest slogans are have yet to mature. Furthermore, the protesting street – which began as a spontaneous popular uprising in Daraa, and has not developed a national leadership yet – cannot possibly be disciplined in this form of protest. Therefore, the street often produces momentary slogans that vanish as quickly as they appear, and this is the current state of the Syrian street.

Additionally, while sectarian incitement from some quarters has been pronounced in multi-confessional areas, there have been few, if any, sectarian clashes between the locals, and the debate is still ongoing over precisely what took place in Lattaqiya and Baniyas in the first days of the protests. However, there is no disagreement over the identity of the “Shabbiha” (Thugs) as semi-criminal groups made up of louts who are close to some regime figures, and who usually ransacked Alawi areas until their activities spread to some coastal cities.

There is a historic memory in the country that is patriotic, Syrian, Arab nationalist, and civic, and it could always be summoned in the face of sectarian sedition just as the idea of sedition itself can be invoked. The question remains: what is the political goal of the regime? And what are the political objectives of the protest organizers? Those who have an interest in fostering sectarianism stress an existing part of Syrian memory, while those yearning for a civic democratic system have an interest in reviving the Syrian Arabist tradition, which rejects sectarianism.

Regional and International Postures and Syria’s Strategic Location

Syria is on the front line of the Arab-Israeli conflict, on the crossroads of regional/international axes, and it neighbors five countries, all of which makes it an object of keen geopolitical interest. Generally speaking, the official Arab scene seemed to support the Syrian government in the face of the protests that began in mid-March, but the degree of interest varied according to geographic proximity. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad received calls in the early phase from leaders in Iraq and the Gulf states,⁶ in which they expressed their support for the regime against what they described as “conspiracies” attempting to shake Syria’s security and stability. Saudi King Abdullah Ben Abd al-Azeez reportedly affirmed, in a call to al-Asad on March 28, that Saudi Arabia stands with Syria against “those who target it,”⁷ despite the ups and downs in Saudi-Syrian ties in the past – especially in the aftermath of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005.⁸ Saudi support for Syria also went beyond making statements, with Riyadh pledging direct financial support during the crisis: the governor of the Saudi

⁶ Akhbar Surya Website: http://syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=130649

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Relations had improved post-2009 after an initiative by King Abdullah for Arab reconciliation, in addition to mutual visits between the two sides. Relations between the two countries soured again in 2010 after the failure of the Saudi-Syrian initiative in limiting potential risks that could arise in Lebanon as a result of the preliminary indictment that is to be revealed by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating the Hariri murder. The foreign policies of the two countries clashed again over the recent Iraqi elections, with Syria agreeing to support Maliki.

Arabian Monetary Agency, Muhammad al-Jasser, announced in mid-March that the kingdom was offering Syria USD140 million in loans, with further loans being considered.⁹ This is at a time when the official Syrian media is speaking of a “conspiracy led by Bandar Bin Sultan,” the influential former ambassador to the United States, while avoiding direct attacks on Saudi Arabia as a whole. It is clear that Saudi Arabia did not support any revolution, and is concerned by the wave of revolutions and change in the Arab world to the point of prioritizing “obedience to the prince” over any political or ideological differences.

In another telephone conversation with al-Asad, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani reportedly expressed his solidarity with Syria “in the face of the conspiracy that it is being subjected to”; and on April 3 the Syrian leader received a letter with much the same content from Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. The Syrian regime recently supported al-Maliki in his candidacy for the Prime Ministership following the parliamentary elections last year, which helps explain why relations between the two countries have been relatively steady after years of strain.

On the other hand, there have been no statements from Egypt and the Maghreb states regarding events in Syria. The transitional conditions in Egypt – which is currently led by the Higher Military Council – makes it difficult for the Egyptian state to produce statements that may conflict with the expectations of the Egyptian masses and their January 25 Revolution.

Regional non-Arab states (Turkey and Iran) have shown an inordinate amount of interest in the evolution of the situation in Syria. Iran – worried and concerned over her long-standing alliance with the Syrian regime – expressed positions of solidarity with the regime and skepticism towards the protests, which in early April were compared by Tehran’s ambassador in Syria to the “acts of sedition” that took place in his country in June 2009.¹⁰ He also described the Syrian leadership as a wise one that examined popular demands and responded to them. And on April 12, a spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry said he considered the wave of protests in Syria a foreign conspiracy aiming at destabilizing the pro-resistance Syrian government.¹¹

The Turkish government regarded the events as directly affecting the Turkish situation, with its reactions going beyond releasing statements to the offering of advice. On March 23, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he had advised Bashar al-Asad to respond to the calls for reform,¹² adding: “Turkey will not remain a spectator in Syria.” Shortly thereafter, on April 3, the Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a statement stressing that Turkey’s interest “in the security, stability, and welfare of the Syrian people equals that it affords its own people,” and that it accepts no behavior or action that would “destabilize Syria or harm the will of reform in

⁹ Arabian Business/Reuters: http://www.arabianbusiness.com/arabic/583796?tmpl=print_ar&page

¹⁰ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, retrieved on April 5, 2009.

¹¹ Aljazeera.net: <http://www.aljazeera.net/Mob/Templates/>

Postings/NewsDetailedPage.aspx?GUID=7713E80B-4510-4091-99E7-21B29EBF2C01

¹² BBC Arabic: http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/multimedia/2011_110328/03/erdogan_syria.shtml

it”.¹³ Erdogan’s statement was among the few positive ones to follow al-Asad’s first speech to Parliament on the protests.

It should be noted that the diversity marking Syrian society reaches into Turkey, and those familiar with Turkish policy say that Ankara views the events inside Syria as a Turkish affair, and that political and security leaders are eager to offer recommendations and advice, and even alternative proposals for the reform process.¹⁴

It currently appears, however, that a critical Turkish position is beginning to crystallize vis-à-vis Syria: the official Arabic-language Turkish TV channel has begun interviewing Syrian opposition figures, and the government is allowing the Syrian opposition to demonstrate in Istanbul. If the uprising were to develop into a massive revolt in Syria, Turkey could have an important role to play in trying to win the Arab Sunni street and the Islamist groups to its side – with a posture that is supportive of the opposition despite the existing friendship between the two regimes and their leaders. It has recently been proven that there are no limits to Turkish pragmatism in foreign policy.

On the international level, European countries came out with a shared position, asking the Syrian regime to abstain from the policy of repression and to follow the path of reform. The statement avoided taking the form of clear interference, and the position was made at the level of the ambassadors of the six major European states who had expressed to the Syrian foreign minister, prior to the April 15 demonstration, their governments’ concern over the escalation of violence. The German Foreign Ministry transmitted the statement, which condemned the security forces’ use of violence against peaceful protesters, calling for compliance with the legitimate demands of the Syrian people and the adoption of credible political reforms.¹⁵ The following day produced the statement by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, at the close of the NATO Foreign Ministers conference in Berlin, in which she called “anew on the Syrian authorities to refrain from any use of violence against its people,” and for Syrian people’s aspirations to be respected.¹⁶

European and Turkish positions kept encouraging the Syrian regime to abstain from repression and to launch reforms, and the positive response of President al-Asad, which he expressed in his April 16 speech, was met by relief from these circles. Turkish President Abdullah Gul, for instance, declared that “the Syrian leadership has found that there is no alternative to reform,”¹⁷ and British and French statements also urged the regime to enact reforms.

¹³ D Press: <http://www.dpnews.com/pages/detail.aspx?l=1&articleid=80030>

¹⁴ *As-Safir* newspaper, Sati Nureddine, “Syria: a Turkish Matter”, retrieved on April 18, 2011

¹⁵ *Al-Akhbar*, retrieved on April 16, 2011.

¹⁶ Clinton added: “The Syrian government did not answer the legitimate demands of the Syrian people. It is time the Syrian government stopped repressing these citizens, and to begin in achieving their aspirations,” Agencies April 16, 2011.

¹⁷ Gul warned about the possibility of the situation getting out of control “because, then, third countries will interfere and organize our internal house according to their wishes.” *As-Safir* newspaper, retrieved April 16, 2011

In spite of that, international predictions on al-Asad's likely path include important variations, as is made clear by the postures of various American think tanks. While there is clear concern in many Western articles and statements over Syria's stability (namely, fear of the chaos that could be engendered by conflict), we also find skepticism regarding the Syrian regime's ability to reform. Some doubt the wisdom of wagering on the regime's enacting reform, even in conditions that directly threaten its existence. An assessment prevails to the effect that the regime may resort to extreme repression, using the fear tactic of "sectarian chaos," in tandem with a package of symbolic and cosmetic reforms. More extreme than the skeptical position, other voices call for the felling of the Syrian regime, Iran's ally and the friend of the resistance in Lebanon.

Politics and the Question of "Change"

Before the Syrian protests began, and during the first months of the Arab revolutions, the Syrian regime behaved as if it were isolated from the sweeping changes taking place in the Arab world; it remained silent during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts, but al-Asad blessed the processes of change after they had succeeded. This came in an interview that he gave to *The Wall Street Journal* on January 31, in which he called on Arab leaders to learn from the lessons of Ben Ali and Mubarak by answering to the political and economic ambitions of their people. He opined that the Egyptian regime's closeness to Israel was a direct reason for the flaring of the revolt. In the same interview, he characterized the situation in Syria as "stable" because "the President is close to the beliefs of the people, which loves [sic] him," and because Syria had launched a political reform process by preparing for municipal elections soon, granting non-governmental organizations broader freedoms, and enacting a new media law.

In that interview, al-Asad rejected the adoption of quick and radical reforms because Syria, he argued, needed to build institutions and improve education before opening up the political system, and because "demands of quick political reforms may have a negative effect if Arab societies were not ready for them."¹⁸

We find in that interview all the Orientalist elements that are needed to appeal to the West, which falls under similar attempts by Arab leaders to impress Western powers and opt out of democratization by labeling their own peoples as "too immature" for democratic practice. Such rhetoric also aims to "Westernize" the image of the leader (and sometimes his spouse) without making the slightest changes to the despotic nature of the regime; this usually takes place by painting those leaders as "civilized" in the Western consumerist sense of the word through interviews with popular magazines in which they appear with their families living "Western" lifestyles, wearing jeans, and enjoying family life.

¹⁸ *The Wall Street Journal*, "Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad", retrieved January 31, 2011 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>. See also "Syria Strongman: Time for 'Reform'". <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704832704576114340735033236.html>

Al-Asad kept reiterating this approach to change in one speech after another, even after the wave of protests reached Syria itself. He affirmed in first speech on March 30 – in the hall of the Syrian Parliament – that Syria was being targeted by a conspiracy designed to incite “sectarian sedition”. While admitting that the enactment of reforms had been delayed, he did not offer any promising steps, contenting himself with the dismissal of the cabinet of Naji al-Ittri on March 29 and then appointing Agriculture Minister Adil Safar to form a new government. The speech was shocking to many Syrians, but it reflected the image of a regime that remained steadfast in its hard-line positions, refusing to offer any concessions that could be interpreted as signs of weakness and encourage the protesters to demand more. All al-Asad offered were the committees formed to investigate the killings, the granting of Syrian nationality to Kurds who were stateless, and consideration of abolishing the Emergency Laws and replacing them with an anti-terrorism act.¹⁹

Al-Asad also did not indicate any shift in his notion of “change” in his speech during the cabinet inauguration on April 16, but he presented a more comprehensive view of that notion, expressing his will to put these propositions into practice. In other words, the speech was more explicit than previous ones in betting on “reform,” regardless of what shape this reform will take. He offered good-will gestures by announcing readiness to lift the state of emergency within a week, expressing pain regarding the scenes of death in Syria, describing all those who fell – both civilian and military – as “martyrs”, and, finally, moving to stay the bloody machine of repression by issuing orders against shooting at demonstrators.

The current policy of the regime aims to keep Syria in a state of waiting, as a tool to rebuild authority on a new basis, and to postpone the recreation of the regime along pluralist and representative lines, while a discourse of “conspiracy” is constantly reiterated, which invokes the tools of repression rather than sidelining them. It has become clear that this “waiting” option is not working. Demonstrations are growing and so is repression, as they spread to cover the entire country on all days of the week. The optimistic interpretation posits the existence of a conflict between a security wing and a reformist wing within the regime, and that – with the failure of the security option – the president must side with the reformists. From this perspective, it is left to the people to abort the security option, but the question then is: would the people accept the reforms granted by the regime after they had defeated the security option with their blood? There is no space for additional scenarios, and reform should not be enacted as a last resort, but must be the first choice.

Discussing Reform

Syria has known two faces of reform since Bashar al-Asad inherited the position from his late father in 2000, one of which was political – and was quickly reversed – and the other economic, and is still in its infancy. But what was visible of reform (in both its facets) was the increase in

¹⁹ Elaph website, March 30, 2011.

the margin of freedom granted to capital, whether it was in real estate, commercial, service-based, or parasitical, i.e. reliant on direct loyalty and personal relations with regime figures.

The first reformist experiment took place with Bashar al-Asad's assuming the presidency in 2000. His first months brought promises of reform and political opening, which began with a July 17, 2000, presidential inauguration speech that included promises of a unique democracy emerging from the Syrian character.²⁰ This fomented an elitist form of activism in Syria that was led by debate forums and some opposition figures, and participation included personalities from the ruling Bath Party. That dynamic became known as "the Damascus Spring," but the reform process was halted a short time after its departure.²¹ The Damascus Spring began to gradually recede, while security repression returned as a major tool of the regime's functioning.

Unquestionably, external factors contributed to the abortion of this reform process, including the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and US-imposed sanctions on Syria, which refused to comply with American demands. In addition, the Syrian government was subjected to a far-reaching campaign of pressure in the aftermath of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri on February 14, 2005. That was followed by another wave of political tension in the context of Damascus's being accused of assassinating Hariri by the International Investigative Committee. Nonetheless, President al-Asad was able to turn these external challenges into domestic credit by turning the Hariri investigation into a rallying point for the masses around the regime, and namely around his person.

The Damascus Spring lasted for a short period extending from the inauguration speech in July 2000 until February 17, 2001, when Syrian security froze the activity of intellectual, cultural, and political forums. Reform promises seemed then to have been a ploy used by the regime in order to ease the passing of rule from father to son in the eyes of Syrian intellectual and political elites. That was the first and last successful bequeathing of rule in an Arab republic so far. Reform and combating corruption were the basis for Bashar al-Asad's legitimacy, since republics do not acknowledge hereditary rule. But the Damascus Spring presented an opportunity that many saw as a prelude for democratic change in Syria. Many unprecedented debates ran during the Damascus Spring on matters linked to the very core of the regime, such as the state of emergency, Article 8 of the constitution (which enshrines the Bath Party as leader of the nation), the failure to hold presidential elections, and the absence of a law guaranteeing the rights of political parties. These interactions kept reverberating throughout the Syrian popular scene, but al-Asad's regime kept distancing itself from the sources of its legitimacy until corruption reached levels exceeding those during his father's tenure, and arrests over matters of opinion once again became routine.

²⁰ *Al-Thawra* (newspaper), retrieved March 21, 2007 from http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_kuttab_a.asp?FileName=99217485120070320230509

²¹ By the end of January 2001, then-Minister of Information Adnan Umran announced that "those calling for civil society are a new form of colonialism." On February 18 of the same year, six months after the inauguration speech, Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam waged an attack on intellectuals, affirming that the regime "will not allow Syria to become another Algeria or another Yugoslavia".

The main achievement of the initial March 15 uprising in Syria was that it took the causes of the Damascus Spring away from the field of “presidential grants” – which can be easily retracted – and onto the field of popular demands, which will enshrine them as the achievements of its movement. It would not be easy to return to the state of an eternally suspended debate, or to an arbitrariness in application that seeks to limit the popular movement.

The second attempt at reform came after the first phase, which dealt with the civic rights of the masses, was discarded. This second attempt sought to expand the margin of economic freedom to the benefit of a limited class. The new economic system that emerged in the last decade was allowed to gravitate towards the model of a market economy, with the state largely retreating from the production process, gradually lifting subsidies on staple goods, allowing the formation of commercial banks and a private wireless telecommunications company, founding a capital market and investment funds, and making changes in rules and regulations in order to attract capital and investment from abroad, especially the Gulf states.

This new economic transformation, widely referred to as “liberalization,” came from within the ruling regime. It was fomented by a complex, interconnected, and trans-sectarian alliance of interests between the new capitalism and the political/military leadership – and with the emergence of what Azmi Bishara has dubbed the “Tunisian Current” within the Syrian regime. It advocated taking the economy in an ill-conceived liberal economic direction, and produced political literature along the lines of “Syria First”. The same current lobbied for the opening of a miniscule margin of freedom in the media, moved away from the idea of supporting resistance, and tended to accept the conditions of US Secretary of State Colin Powell before President al-Asad ended the debate by rejecting US demands following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The “Tunisian Current” is a euphemism for regime elites that combine political despotism with economic liberalism, and who tend towards “political moderation,” using support for the resistance tactically when needed, and benefiting from new businessmen close to the regime, including relatives of officials.

The aforementioned economic transformation contributed to the development of widespread poverty and a shrinking of the middle class, in addition to a lower amount of services and subsidies offered by the state. During this shift from a quasi-welfare state to a free-market one, along with the retreat in the public sector’s role, public lands and monies were put to private use, most famously in the case of the wireless communications contracts, which lost the state coffers over USD 7 billion. Corruption was linked to personalities within the regime, along with their commercial partners, such as Rami Makhlouf and Muhammad Hamsho, and around 100 other businessmen. This explains why their media tools lunge into attacks against any call for reform. One of the ironies of this “second phase of reform” was that this same corrupt, parasitic, regime-linked capital was given the right to establish private media, whose character was one of consumerism and entertainment. Currently, these media outlets have become veritable tools of incitement that almost exceed the official Syrian media, which seems to be coming from a completely different era, in form and in content.

This snapshot of economic shifts places the “change” uprising in Syria in its larger context: as a movement calling for change, against political repression, but also against the corruption that lies at the core of the economic system – in that regard, the Syrian experience resembles the Egyptian and Tunisian ones.

The Syrian Opposition

The Syrian opposition can be divided between domestic opposition and the opposition in exile, as well as between different forms of opposition ranging from broad currents to various political parties, most of which have a traditional structure and vary in ideology, with movements that are nationalist, Islamist, Nasserite, communist, or liberal.

During the era of the late President Hafiz al-Asad, the opposition was most visible in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, which led an armed insurrection against the rule of the Bath Party and its coalition formula, the National Progressive Front, which ordained the Bath Party as the leader of the state and society, according to the aforementioned Article 8. As for the other currents, they were capable of articulating an opposition discourse and an effective culture of opposition, but could not produce a politically effective popular phenomenon due to the many dissensions that fragmented most of these groups, especially socialist and communist ones.

As a result, and due to the atmosphere of the Cold War, the absence of real media, and the lingering effects of Syrian history, the equation between the regime and the opposition since the 1980s has been limited to the binary of “the Bath vs. the Islamists”. It was also possible to violently repress the Islamist opposition, which carried arms against the state and raised sectarian slogans, especially in the era of international bipolarity – when the media could be pushed out of the picture. Today, however, all of these elements have ceased to exist.

After Bashar al-Asad’s assumption of power in 2000, a new form of reformist discourse emerged, attempting to make a break with the rhetoric of the past. Opposition currents began debating the current reality with the objective of forming an action plan for the coming phase, but the reform process was halted before it could mature. The Syrian opposition was affected by these realities and subsequently failed to formulate a national program that could impose itself as an objective alternative to the ruling regime’s political, economic, and social approaches. Ideological contradictions continued to plague the opposition’s ranks, and coordination was reduced to the point of discord. To fully understand the state of the Syrian opposition and its nature, we must review the characteristics of some of its major parties and movements.

Movements and Parties of the Opposition

The Muslim Brotherhood (part of the international organization of the Muslim Brothers): The Brotherhood started in Syria as a political current inspired by the ideals of Hasan al-Banna, who had founded the organization in Egypt in the late 1920s. The Muslim Brothers had a clear presence in Syria’s political scene during the period of the French occupation.

The movement did not choose the path of armed opposition outright; in fact, its activism was mostly effectuated in the context of traditional parties, such as the People Party and the National Party, while maintaining good relations with other effective currents in Syria, such as the Communist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and the Bath.

As with the international organization, the Syrian branch of the Brotherhood was affected by Sayyid Qutb's ideas and began to close in on itself as a result, especially with regard to its definition of violence. As mentioned earlier, the Syrian wing of the Brotherhood led an armed insurrection against the late President Hafiz al-Asad during the early 1980s. The insurgency ended with most of the Brotherhood leaders out of Syria, and with the diminishing of its stature on the domestic scene. Instead, an opposition front solidified abroad, with most of its leadership residing in London.

During the past decade, the Brotherhood began to effectuate revisions regarding its ideology and positions on freedom and democracy. A wing of the Brotherhood emerged that rejected violence, acknowledging ballots and other elements of the democratic process as the doorway to power and change, and adopting a more open attitude towards the diverse currents on the Syrian scene.

After the defection of former Vice President Abdul Haleem Khaddam and his founding of the Salvation Front, the Brotherhood – led by Ali Sadr al-Deen al-Bayanouni – joined in under the Front's banner, which pointed to the instrumentality of the movement and raised questions about its motives among many observers. In turn, these doubts led to the movement's withdrawal from the Front in 2009 and announcement of its suspension of opposition activism against the Syrian regime in recognition of the latter's support for another Brotherhood wing, Hamas, during the Israeli war on Gaza. This move was all the more notable when one considers that the Brotherhood did not take a similar position after the Syrian regime stood firmly on the side of the Lebanese resistance during the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon. The movement is currently led by Muhammad Saeed Shaqfa, considered among the group's foremost reformists. It also should be noted that the Muslim Brotherhood is banned in Syria and that Law 49, passed in 1980, makes membership in the movement punishable by death.

The National Democratic Opposition Congress:

Groups a number of socialist and communist parties, which were offshoots of socialist and communist parties from the pro-regime National Progressive Front, namely the Arab Socialist Union that was founded in 1964. Some of its leadership joined the National Front, but then withdrew after the passing of Article 8, which put the Bath solely in charge of the state and society. Because Article 8 fractured the democratic Arab Socialist Union, a number of parties began to participate in the congress. Among the other parties in the Congress is the Democratic People's Party, previously called the Syrian Communist Party – Political Bureau, and led by Riad al-Turk, who defected in 1972 from Khalid Bakdash's

Syrian Communist Party, which continues to participate in Syrian cabinets today. The other two parties in the Congress are the Movement of Arab Socialists and the Revolutionary Workers' Party.

These parties were actively persecuted in the past, but their general character in the run-up to the current uprising has been marked by weakness in performance and activism, in addition to low levels of popular support. Accordingly, the Syrian authorities have frequently turned a blind eye to these parties' publications, and only arrested their leaders in exceptional circumstances. Nonetheless, there has been a noted rise in these parties' activities since the March 15 protest, especially on the part of the Democratic Arab Socialist Union, which makes it impossible for the objective observer to discount their effect.

Communist Action Party:

This party was founded in the mid-1970s by Syrian opposition figures, and originally known as the Communist Action Association. In the early 1980s, it adopted the Communist Action Party moniker. The party has many notable positions on its record, notably its rejection of the behavior and violence of the Muslim Brotherhood, and its siding with Kurdish parties in their demands for Kurdish cultural rights. As a result of that stand, most of the party's leaders were arrested, including Aslan Abd al-Kareem, Fateh Jamous and Abd al-Azeez al-Khair. Despite its limited activity, the party continues to raise the slogan of radical change in Syria.

Kurdish Opposition:

The Kurdish opposition is made up of several political parties with leftist leanings, and is headed by the National Democratic Kurdish Party ("the Barti"), as well as the Kurdish Leftist Party founded by Uthman Sabri in 1965. A wing split from the party and calls itself the Yekiti Party, led by Ismail Umar. Among the Kurdish parties is also the Democratic Progressive Kurdish Party, which recently merged with the Kurdish Leftist Party under the banner of the Azadi Kurdish Party. There are other smaller Kurdish factions in the opposition, such as the Syrian Kurdistan Party led by Jan Kord and the Kurdistan National Congress Party led by Jawad al-Mulla. Kurdish parties are generally distinguished by their ability to communicate and interact with their popular bases, maintaining a major role in directing the Kurdish street, but they also suffer from internal discord, particularly over relations with the regime, and they tend to raise contradictory demands: some factions would content themselves with cultural and social rights for Kurds, and others with semi-autonomy under an Iraq-style federal system, but some movements based abroad demand nothing less than full independence for Syrian Kurdistan.

The currents and parties discussed above represent the main actors in opposition activism, in addition to some parties based abroad, such as the United National Congress headed by Rifat al-Asad (the president's uncle), one of the symbols of despotism and corruption in the past era.

There is also the Reform Party led by Fareed al-Ghaderi, who became notorious for visiting Israel, the historical enemy of Syria. He also has close links to the United States government as an anti-Brotherhood figure, but he has no credibility and is not known to conduct activism on the Syrian domestic scene. In addition to these, a number of other minor parties exist, but they gravitate around the major ones and have little authentic support, being small groupings of individuals dismissed by many in Syria as “Microbus Parties”.

The New Political Dynamic

The Damascus Spring was launched during a summer that witnessed a new phenomenon for Arab revolutionary republics: bequeathing rule. The Damascus Spring was the “down-payment” paid by the regime to cultural and political elites in Syria in order for them to ease the transition and refrain from objecting to it. As a result of this bargain, Syria lived a Spring in name only, extending from a hot and tense summer that saw the amendment of the constitution and Bashar al-Asad’s assumption to power and inauguration at the Parliament, to a frosty winter that was buzzing with political activism and was uprooted on February 17, 2001, after Syrian security suspended the cultural, intellectual, and political forums that had temporarily flourished.

During the six months of the Spring, the country witnessed an unprecedented era of political and social debates that dealt with the matters most pressing to the Syrian citizen, including:

- The State of Emergency, imposed since 1963, with the Bath’s ascendancy to power on March 8, and the autocracy it produced by excluding all other actors from the political scene.
- Article 8 of the 1963 Syrian Constitution, which codified the principle of the “Leader Party,” which heads a “progressive” front that gravitates around the Bath and is directed by it.
- The absence of democracy and public freedoms, and the security incursions into all aspects of citizens’ lives.
- The absence of a modern parties law organizing party activism in Syria. This dovetails with the lack of a legislative elections law and the continuation of the “quota” system, which guarantees that at least a third of the Parliament members originate from the National Progressive Front.
- The lack of pluralistic presidential elections, which have morphed into a system of “referenda” over the personality of the president, a mere electoral formality. The referendum also prevents the running of other candidates apart from the one chosen by the Regional Leadership of the Arab Socialist Bath Party.

The Damascus Spring was seen by many as an entryway for democratic change in Syria. But as soon as the rule of al-Asad the son began to solidify, a counter-attack against began in earnest. The first punch was delivered in January 2001 by Information Minister Adnan Umran, who described actions of civil society advocates as “a new colonialism”. On February 18 of the same year, then-vice-president Khaddam – who now calls for freedom and democracy – lashed out at intellectuals, warning: “we will not allow Syria to turn into another Algeria or another Yugoslavia.”

After that, the authorities suspended the work of public forums and placed regulations on their functioning. Out of 70 forums operating before the new regulations, only two were allowed to continue, “the Forum of Suheir al-Rayyis” and “the Forum of Jamal al-Atasi”. Soon thereafter, al-Asad began criticizing the forums and pre-empting any political statements that might call for democratic change by taking a new turn in his rhetoric. During military maneuvers by the Syrian Armed Forces in mid-March 2001, he stated that “in Syria there are constants that cannot be touched, consisting of the interests of the people, its national objectives, national unity, and the path of the immortal leader al-Asad and the Armed Forces.” Following that, in April, came a statement by a former defense minister who said: “we are in the right, and we will not accept that anyone takes power away from us, for it emerged from the muzzle of the rifle and we are the ones entitled for it. We have made numerous military actions and paid with our blood for power.”

This string of statements was the beginning of the Syrian regime’s renegeing on the promises to allow public freedoms and to head towards change and democratic transformation. The process continued with the arrest of many civil society activists in Syria, including Riad Sayf, Haytham al-Malih, Arif Dalila, Mark Hussain and others.

The Damascus Spring crumbled, but debates continued to rage in the Syrian popular arena, especially since the ruling regime was not in a position to assimilate calls for reform in society. Regional and international conditions that swept through the Arab region, such as the invasion of Iraq and the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, served to help postpone these debates, with the authorities neglecting the reform process by entering into a maze of deliberations on definitions and the priorities of reform.

This process was reached cloture at the Tenth Regional Bath Party Conference in 2005, which launched reformist promises that remain undelivered. The aforementioned “Tunisian Current” was unleashed to take the Syrian economy in an unplanned liberal direction that relies on the principles of market economy, reduces the role and influence of the public sector, encourages conspicuous consumption without granting civic and political rights, and permits public displays of the fruits of economic corruption.

In Conclusion

It appears that the acts of protest in Syria have passed the point of no return. It is clear that the regime will find itself forced to choose between total confrontation and total reform, for there is no more space for partial reforms that serve specific sectors of the population in the context of a totalitarian regime that can easily neutralize these reforms with its security services and unlimited authority. Comprehensive reform means something specific: that the ruling elites strike an agreement with the popular and political opposition in order to lead a paced process of democratic transition.

Regarding the popular opposition, it still requires a lot of work to produce its leaderships and political visions, and the public is ready for a civic democratic proposition, having tired of dictatorial and totalitarian regimes and, at the same time, not wanting its continuation under the guise of a sectarian or religious state. This has been a popular uprising in which everybody participated, and it cannot be said that any of the known opposition factions were leading it.

As in Egypt and Tunisia, removing the regime in Syria, Libya, and Yemen has not been a goal in and of itself; the objective is to build democracy, and changing the regime or bringing it down is only becomes part of the program where and when the regime is an obstacle to democratic transformation. The main challenge, then, lies in transitioning to democracy and engendering the thought and culture that are necessary for that in the ranks of the opposition – and this must take place during the process of struggle. This democratic culture and clear political vision, along with the institutional structure of activists and leaders, is the guarantee against falling into communal sectarian (and non-sectarian) strife in multi-ethnic states where the impression abounds that the conflict is sectarian, and where opposing or defending the regime is made to seem part of an inter-communal conflict.

After reviewing the main traditional opposition parties and classifying them as domestic or exiled, we find without the slightest doubt that the overarching characteristics of the opposition are fragmentation and weakness, coupled with a lack of organization and communication with the Syrian people. These parties have no structures and no clear symbols in politics and culture. They also lack a clear strategy or a well-formulated alternative to the existing system: they seem content to merely describe reality and showcase injustices and transgressions. Therefore, we find that the new popular movement and its popular demands are significantly more advanced than the traditional opposition. In addition to the foregoing, the instrumentalism of many opposition groups ends up erecting a barrier between them and the Syrian people, especially after many of its figures allied themselves with former Vice President Khaddam and formed “the Salvation Front,” despite Khaddam’s having been one of the most corrupt regime figures, and the most aggressive towards these opposition parties while he was in power.

Another requirement in the Syrian case is that the opposition must have a clear position in support of the resistance in Palestine – and in Lebanon as well, for this is one of the few remaining open fronts with Israel, and because it represents a force for Syria regardless of regime. Resistance is synonymous with the Arab identity of Syria, which is the identity-guarantee that preserves Syria, and the whole of the Arab Levant, from communal strife. It is also one of the ways to assure the urban middle classes of a safe future.

In sum, the Syrian opposition needs now to produce a literature and strategies that can contribute to new dynamics within the political system; they also need to ponder the tools of democratic transformation in Syria, starting with equal citizenship, proximity to the street and its demands, surpassing ideological and theoretical discords, and producing a healthy opposition body, especially since the Syrian opposition is endowed with a multitude of elites and intellectuals who can identify with the ongoing activism and the protest movement. The current mission is to seize this historical moment to produce a comprehensive political, social, and economic program based on the just demands of the Syrian people. Such a program should insert “anti-bodies” within the regime that would force it to commit to change and to enact the process of democratic transition in various ways and according to the formula chosen by the street and the people of Syria – since the street currently stands as the decider in terms of imposing facts on the ground.