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POLICY ANALYSIS

# The Recent Bombings in Syria: Do they change reality on the ground?

Policy Analysis Unit | June 2012

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Series: Policy Analysis

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## Introduction

The increased frequency of explosions in Syria at the moment raises a number of questions about the extent to which the shape of the Syrian revolution is entering a new phase characterized by emerging indicators, which show the transformation of a peaceful, demand-driven movement to more violent forms, and suicide bombing may indeed become a one of these forms strongly associated with this revolution. Is this new phenomenon an indication of the coming period, which will come to be characterized by al-Qaeda-style bomb attacks, matching the Syrian regime's own justifications for quelling the protest movements from the beginning? What relationship does this phenomenon have with another feature of the Syrian revolution, that of becoming armed in self-defense? Is this new trend an extension of the taking up of arms, or is it something new and structurally different from it? Or is it rather a passing fad, a marginal by-product associated with the revolution's evolution?

The first signs of an armed conflict began to appear in Syria during the first months of the protest movement, and at the time, the crude weapons used reflected the traditional, clan-based social structures from which it emerged. This feature of armed rebellion took form in a context of simple and basic self-defense, legalized by defense and protection in the civil sense. It appeared in multiple guises following the storming of the Al-Omari Mosque in the southern town of Daraa on March 23, 2011. The lack of respect for the mosque's sanctity on the part of the state's security apparatus who attacked it, left Syrian public opinion in a state of shock, driving wide swathes of the Syrian youth to take up arms in a bid to fend off repeated security services' attacks: the aim was to avenge the measures to humiliate the Syrian people and violate their pride, all carried out by the regime's forces or by the militia employed by the regime in an organized, systematic way.

This simple, self-defense-based form was the main feature of the armed conflict during the first stage of the Syrian revolutions in a variety of areas, for example some of the neighborhoods of the city of Homs, and some of the villages, such as East Ghouta, Rif Dimashq (or countryside of Damascus), and the countryside near Hama and Idlib. Desertions from the state's military apparatus, by both commissioned officers and conscripts, also started at an early stage of the Syrian revolution.

However, a new form of armed mobilization began at the outset of 2012, with novel, unfamiliar moves that were totally unrelated to previous modes of arming seen before in Syria. Mysterious explosions and car bombs set off in a number of Syrian cities typified this, though these hit Aleppo and Damascus particularly hard. This new reality made it compelling to answer a number of fundamental questions about how these explosions would impact the Syrian revolution.

This paper shall thus attempt to understand the indicators of this new period, attempting to use induction to reach conclusions about the path of arming or “militarization” of the Syrian revolution, or the “armed struggle,” as well as other auxiliary forms of violence associated with the revolution. The paper will also try to provide an understanding of the social and political implications of these violent forms, both in the present and future Syria. Additionally, the author looks at how these repercussions will impact the democratic transformation that has been the rallying call and ultimate objective of the Syrian revolution. The Syrian regime has faced this revolution with the systematic use of security and military repression as the state’s only gambit and final option for dealing with the popular uprising. This reality cannot be ignored when examining the Syrian situation because it is the primary catalyst for the increasingly violent forms being taken by the Syrian revolution.

## Protesting Religiosity

A confluence of a multiplicity of factors gave rise to a type of grassroots religiosity in a number of marginalized areas within Syria’s territory. Arguably, the most important of these factors has been the spread of institutions providing religious education, some of whose graduates were radicalized by the aftermath of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. There were a number of reasons for these radicalized seminarians not to come into conflict with the regime, perhaps the most significant being that the Syrian authorities did not stand in the way of the seminarians’ proselytizing initiatives, nor of their organizational efforts aimed at fighting the American invasion of Iraq, which they were doing for purely doctrinal reasons. The Syrian authorities even paved the way for Salafi fighters, for example the “Qaqa Fighters” to make their way to Iraq via Syrian territory.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jamal Barout, *Syria: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (in Arabic) (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 2012, pp. 202-203).

The role these acutely religious groups played within Syrian society continued to be very limited, and was confined to marginalized rural villages. With growing cooperation and a meeting of mutual interests between the Syrian and US governments regarding Iraq, starting in 2007, however, the Syrians reversed this policy and began harassing this group, resulting in enhanced coordination with the US authorities on security and intelligence matters.

The Syrian popular uprising was not driven by demands for an Islamist regime, nor was it orchestrated by clerics and religious parties; rather, it was a movement demanding freedom and dignity, in response to a corrupt, tyrannical regime. In fact, the popular movement, from the beginning, expressed its stance based on the citizenship and patriotism criteria, as it made clear, for instance, in its opposition to a number of religious clerics, such as Mohammed al-Bouti and Ahmad Badreddine Hassoun, for their alliance with the despotic regime in Syria. In fact, the battle cry of the Syrian revolution has been one of the integral unity of the Syrian people. In fact, the fact that the protestors' marches often depart from mosques, and that they can be heard to chant "God is Great" – for which the protestors are often criticized – is a reflection of the reality that the Syrian regime leaves no criminal stone unturned in its efforts to prevent any kind of protest gathering in public squares.

The security crackdown on any sort of protest movement has nurtured the growth of extremist movements. An unprecedented development was the emergence, starting in October 2011, of a number of outwardly Salafi groupings in Syria.<sup>2</sup> One of the most prominent of these was the "Movement of Salafi Believers in Syria," led by Louay al-Zoabi, an early proponent of arming the revolution, on the grounds that "peaceful protests will not lead to the downfall of the regime".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "The organization 'The Believers Participate' decides to take up arms against the regime: Rastan regains its vitality," *Al-Watan Newspaper*, October 2, 2011, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=109539>.

<sup>3</sup> A Salafist cleric from Daraa, who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and later lived in Sudan before moving to Bosnia in 1995, was detained for six years in Syria. An interview with him on al-Arabiya TV can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To5xHVGjYFU>. Followers of the sheikh were accused of assassinating the defected lieutenant of the Free Syrian Army in Rastan because he publicly denounced the kidnapping of women in Salamiyyah in one of the protests. The kidnapers were followers of Salafi Sheikh al-Arour. See his statements: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeHS5wuws7E&feature=related>. Later, the "Brigade of God's Men" (*Liwa Rijal Allah*) in Rastan published a statement in which they accused the followers of Louay al-Zoabi of assassinating the officer. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vs6pVqlzA&feature=related>.

The accelerating developments on the ground and the failure of efforts led by the Arab League and its executive auxiliaries in the form of the Arab Observer Mission to put an end to violence have coincided with a number of happenings. With the absence of any kind of political solutions that would help facilitate a smooth transition to democracy, a number of *jihadi* groupings that share a number of important similarities with similar organizations in Iraq have emerged in contained areas. The difference being that Syria was not under foreign occupation, and that the protest movement remains overwhelmingly peaceful, with its grassroots base growing daily. This growth is in terms of both breadth and depth, taking in new social strata and classes that have come out to break their silence or change their stances. This reality in Syria was never reflected in the Iraqi case, at any time between the 2003 invasion and the beginning of the 2011 Arab Spring. One such group is the Front for the Support of the People of Levant (Jabhat al-Nusra Li-Ahl al-Sham).

The Front issued its first communiqué in January of 2012, calling for jihad and asking Syrians to take up arms against their regime. In the same statement, the group described the aim for which it was formed as “an effort on the part of its founders to restore God’s rule on Earth, and to avenge the violations of the honor of our families and the blood which was spilt”. The Front’s first communiqué also voiced opposition to calls for Western military intervention being made by other anti-regime groups within the opposition as a proposal to do away with the Baath Party regime. This position was based on the premise that “Jihadist action” is able to bring down the Syrian regime and to achieve an “Islamic State”. Further to this, the Front criticized the Arab League and its Observer Mission, Turkey and Iran, arguing that their efforts were aimed at saving the Syrian regime.<sup>4</sup>

Since its inception, the Front claimed responsibility for a number of attacks and explosions which rocked the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, and claimed responsibility for the May 19, 2012 explosions to hit the Air Force Intelligence and Military Security buildings in Deir El Zour, as well as the execution of 13 military personnel in the same city on May 29, 2012.

Despite some controversy within revolutionary circles regarding the very existence of the group and the operations it carries out, with there being a powerful tendency to accuse the regime of carrying out these explosions in a kind of “Black Operations”

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<sup>4</sup> See the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fuh1cI9v1R0>.

fashion, experts on Islam point out that the Front's ostensible published statements do not ring true as Islamist outpourings since they are not compatible with al-Qaeda's discourse. There are a number of indicators to suggest that members of Al Qaeda have entered Syrian territory through Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

It is possible that the Front serves as a kind of umbrella organization for these fighters within Syrian territory. It is believed that the Front is based in Homs and Idlib, and that its battle against the regime is informed by a sectarian political consciousness that preaches a kind of "revenge for the Sunnis" in reference to Homs, in particular, but also encompassing all of Syria.<sup>6</sup> The Front has also declared the formation of a special subgroup which it referred to as the "Battalions of Free People of Levant" (*Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham*), which in turn claimed to have carried out a number of attacks in its selected area of operations in and around Idlib.<sup>7</sup> The less overtly religious semiotics in this latter group's name may be an indication of a willingness to fill its ranks with a more ideologically diverse support base.<sup>8</sup>

At the time of writing, the origins of this organization and even the reality of its existence remain shrouded in mystery. Not only is it impossible to verify its existence, it is not known for certain whether or not the regime has infiltrated it. Many observers –

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<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Omar Bakri has been one of the most prominent Salafi figures to cast doubt on the existence of the Front in Syria, despite the fact that numerous other jihadist clerics have come out in support of the group. His doubt is based on the language used in their statements, as well as the fact that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has not come out in support of the group. See: "Islamist experts speak of an internal faction and accuse the regime of standing behind the bombings," *Ash Sharq al-Awsat*, May 22, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> "The Islamist 'Front for the Support of the People of the Levant' declares responsibility for the blasts," *BBC Arabic News Report*, March 3, 2012, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2012/03/120321\\_syria-ban\\_seriousimpacts.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2012/03/120321_syria-ban_seriousimpacts.shtml).

The group released this video of a cleric, which describes how attacks are carried out, through the Al-Manara Foundation, which it is associated with. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDVtCAHmLvc>.

<sup>7</sup> "The Front for the Support of the People of the Levant," *Al-Jazeera Online*, <http://aljazeera.net/news/pages/24579ea8-bbf0-41d0-9ae5-5060f828db76>.

For a video purporting to be from the "Battalions of the Free People of the Levant," in which they claim responsibility for the bombing of the Baath Party offices in Maarat Al-Numan in Northern Syrian, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDVtCAHmLvc>.

<sup>8</sup> The formation of the "Front for Syrian Revolutionaries" was announced in Istanbul on June 4, 2012, bringing together a number of battalions who control on-the-ground fighters in Syria. See the following news story: "42 killed in Syria: New military group announce," *Al-Jazeera Net*, June 4, 2012, <http://aljazeera.net/news/pages/6f573921-16f8-45ef-a2a1-b92346da846f?GoogleStatID=9>.



taking clues from an analysis of the group's ostensible literature and from the videos uploaded, supposedly by the group, in which responsibility for explosions is claimed – have called al-Qaeda affiliate's very existence into question. It becomes necessary here to point out the possibility that this organization could have been created by the Syrian regime itself, given the regime's time-tested ability to orchestrate civil wars and "obfuscate realities on the ground," maneuvers it undertakes in order to hold on to power. In this way, the Syrian regime emerges as the power broker most capable of restoring order and stability.

Another feature to emerge from the Syrian revolution has been a kind of populist religiosity, albeit one in which the rhetoric is peppered with Salafi terminology. This form of religiosity remains distinct from the more strictly defined forms of Salafism, which is related to Wahhabi or Najdi references, or on very clearly defined movements that took shape, for example, on the Arabian Peninsula. The rural areas of Syria from which this form of Salafi thought sprang have witnessed a huge decline in indices of human development, particularly those related to income, education, health, and human security. Another factor that influenced this form of religiosity is the proselytizing television stations that promote a fanatic, sectarian discourse.

This form of religiosity is viewed by sections of the society affected as a way to voice opposition, as a kind of protest against the deterioration in their standards of living. This description provides a description of the public consciousness leading up to confrontation, but not necessarily the reasons behind the protests. It explains how the socio-political conflicts and contradictions are sometimes turned into sectarian struggles in a society composed of multiple identities, where a kind of populist Salafism intersects with strong, well-defined sectarianism, taking on an aggressive, chauvinistic form and serving to entrench societal divisions already in place. This then feeds the vicious cycle of sectarian and community conflicts, fomenting the kind of schisms and societal polarizations that are commonplace at times of crises within societies enjoying religious and sectarian diversities.<sup>9</sup>

All of these factors, and the type of rhetoric described above, have contributed to driving the revolution off-track in many local instances within Syria. The result has been

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<sup>9</sup> Homs has been the scene of most of the examples of this false consciousness, which has presented itself in sectarian terms and takes the shape of sectarian-based killings, kidnapping, and the mutilation of bodies. The most horrific visuals of this came from the villages of Shumaria and Houla, with a number of families being massacred in a crude, brutal fashion, reflecting the level of sectarian enmity between the two sides of the town.

the emergence of exclusionary approaches that diverted the revolution from its main civil and democratic approach, drawing people instead into sectarian and other secondary conflicts. However, this discourse, which was adopted by many social strata at the beginning because of its motivating populism, lost its influence as the conflict with the regime was becoming more intense and as the protesters realized that their values and symbols might threaten the all-inclusivity and comprehensiveness of the revolution against despotism.

## Patterns of Violence Associated with the Syrian Revolution

Other developments notwithstanding, the Syrian revolution remains one dominated by peaceful, civic protest; the phenomenon of violent actions that have become associated with the revolution and have sprung up alongside the revolution have not come to define, or reduce the momentum of, the revolution, in most of the instances and in most of the governorates within Syria.

The attack on the security services buildings in the city of Jisr Al-Shughoor, at the beginning of June 2011, ushered in the beginning of the phenomenon of armed conflict within the Syrian revolution. This was further consolidated by the statements of Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmouche, who after having defected from the Syrian Army, announced the creation of the Brigade of Free Officers on June 3, 2011, which was tasked with defending the city of Jisr Al-Shughoor and confronting the regime's regular army. Another defector, Colonel Riyadh al-Assaad, announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army on June 29, 2011. The FSA was to act as an overarching umbrella organization for soldiers and officers who defected from the regime's regular army. Assaad had tasked the FSA's battalions, which, it was claimed, were spread throughout the country, with protecting peaceful protests and fending off security and military crackdowns.

The broad organization known as the Free Syrian Army, with its armed auxiliary battalions, expanded outwards to include armed individuals acting of their own free accord, who took up the mantle of the FSA in their armed actions against the regime, which was cracking down on the protestors. While the phenomenon of militarization within the Syrian revolution can be traced back to the Jisr Al-Shughoor incident, it can only be said to have become a discernible feature at the beginning of this year. This can be explained in part by the fact that all other political attempts to peacefully resolve

the Syrian question, including plans formulated by the Arab League and the wider international community, have thus far failed.

The manner in which the Arab League Draft Plan for Syria was foiled by the Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UN Security Council on February 4, 2012, drove the coordination committees, organizing bodies, and some opposition forces to push the revolution forward to undertake a comprehensive review of the revolutionary path and its sustainability procedures. Thus, organized armed struggle was adopted as an option interacting with the continuous peaceful protests. The prominence of this feature in the Syrian revolution became patently obvious in what became known as “liberated” cities, such as the town of Idlib and the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs, and other towns such as Douma and Zabadani in Rif Dimashq. The regular Syrian Army carried out wide-scale military operations to regain control of these areas, such operations becoming increasingly frequent, becoming a daily occurrence by February 2012. This was true even after the international consensus on the Kofi Annan plan, and the announced abiding by the ceasefire that was due to begin on April 12, 2012. Starting with this background, one can divide the violent armed trajectory carried out as part of the revolution, which has been parallel to the peaceful protests, into three separate patterns:

### **Armed Struggle**

Typical actions that fall into this pattern are visible when locally organized armed groups can be seen fending off military and security apparatus operations on a local level, and when these groups also work to protect and preserve the peaceful protests and safeguard their future continuity. These armed groups do not necessarily take their marching orders from any kind of centralized command of the FSA, nor do they even necessarily coordinate their actions with each other. Rather, their actions come in different guises which are a reflection of their local environments, along the lines of a sort of guerilla warfare which could be fostered by a unified social environment, such as those which exist in Hama and its surrounding environs, Homs, Idlib, Daraa, the villages surrounding Damascus, the villages surrounding Aleppo to the North, and some of the neighborhoods of Deir Al-Zour.

According to limited sources within these groups, their main mode of action is to act to hinder infiltrations by the government forces into the towns and cities in which the groups operate. They also work to attack military installations, such as security and

military checkpoints, with rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), or, for the most part, locally improvised explosive devices. Such actions are contextualized by understanding the evolutionary path of armament and the nature of the revolutionary's movements since they are a response to the regime's efforts to crush the rebellion through the use of the military and the security apparatus.

This category of activity is also directly and causally linked with the tidal flow of weapons to the country's rebels, internally as well as externally. Despite the FSA's acquiescence to the Annan plan and the ceasefire, which is concomitant to that plan, the frequency of such attacks has increased of late. This increase has been a result of the relative winding back of the activities of the regime's military operations, as well as the increased willingness of foreign countries to arm and sponsor the rebels in a bid to create a balance of military powers in Syria through reliance on guerilla warfare.

### **Criminal and Sectarian**

The Syrian regime's military and security crackdown on the protests in many of the towns and cities with a mixed sectarian social fabric has led to a wave of social unrest in response, one which has come to the fore since September 2011, and is particularly evident in Homs. The breakdown in state control has been cited as one factor in this, as has the fragility of Syrian national identity and the weakness of the country's civil society. The scenes produced by this pattern of fighting have been reminiscent of the fighting of Dayala Province in Iraq, which became synonymous for communal violence and mass killings based solely on sectarian affiliation. As in Dayala, there have been instances of back-and-forth kidnappings and brutal, visceral scenes of murder.

The most gruesome example of this was the attack on the Karm Al-Zeitoun neighborhood in Homs, in which 47 people, mostly women and children, were killed on March 12, 2012. This attack was carried out by an armed group ("militia") in the predominantly Alawite Akrama neighborhood, but it was also carried out, in turn, to avenge the killings of Alawites whose mutilated corpses had been found in Akrama. With the humiliation and resentment being clear in these pictures, with the repeated stab wounds, the gouged out eyes, immolation, and mutilation all being clearly visible, it is no surprise that there is a growing sense of sectarian hatred and dehumanizing the "other" in this conflict.

The invasion against the Baba Amr neighborhood in Homs, in addition to its destruction, drove the already fragile state of social boundaries to a new low, leading to a cyclical

repetition of the sectarian violence in its myriad forms. The Karm Al-Zeitoun neighborhood was the template for the Al-Rifai neighborhood in Homs on March 21, 2012. Re-enacting such crimes of sectarian violence, which were obvious in Diyala of Iraq, and bringing back to life a long history of sectarian violence that has led to the lynching, desecrating and mutilating of bodies; in Al-Rifai, the pro-regime militia, following the regular Syrian army, cleaned the area of all fighters before killing 39 of its residents.

There was indeed a reduction in violence and the number of attacks once the Kofi Annan Plan for a ceasefire became effective on April 12, 2012. This ushered in a drop in the communal and sectarian violence, particularly cases of sectarian murders and kidnappings; the number of mutilated corpses that could be seen also dropped. The lull in the violence and the relative calm allowed for a number of public efforts to broker deals that would secure the release of hostages held by both sides. However, this calm did not last for long before the Houla massacre in the Tildo region,<sup>10</sup> where more than 100 unarmed civilians, mostly women and children, were killed in barbaric fashion on May 25, 2012, bringing the earlier massacres back to mind.

A number of incidents coincided with this massacre, such as the preparation of the regime's regular forces for an assault on the town and for a battle with the defectors and their volunteer supporters in the town, making use of heavy artillery. There were also criminal acts of sectarian violence which took place in the nearby village of Shumaria, where a number of unarmed children and women were killed in the same barbaric fashion, an act for which the Syrian authorities blamed armed opposition groups. In retaliation for the events at Shumaria, Alawite militia struck out at Houla, killing women and children in the same vindictive, barbaric way as what happened in Shumaria, and in other nearby towns, such as Misyaf.

The Houla massacre was a turning point for the protest movement of the Syrian revolution, which was intensified in all of Syria's cities as a result of the increasing spread of media images of the massacre. In the meantime, a number of the forces within the political opposition, alongside the leadership of the FSA, openly declared the failure of the Annan plan and prepared for the beginning of the new, armed phase of the Syrian revolution, a phase which will be of central importance to the coming period.

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<sup>10</sup> This attack led to the death of 44 people, and 166 were wounded, as well as considerable material costs. After preliminary investigations, Syrian authorities blamed al-Qaeda for the two explosions.

## Bombings and Explosions

This unexpected and unfamiliar pattern first became a feature of the Syrian revolution toward the end of the previous year. It is worth pointing out that the bombings differed qualitatively, in terms of characteristics, from the previous forms of violence, as the aims being made by these bombings surpassed the limited, local demands. Most of the bombings were concentrated in major metropolises, such as Damascus and Aleppo:

- Two car bombs were detonated in two districts of Damascus on December 23, 2011, outside of state security buildings: the first in the Kafrsousa district, outside of the State Security bureau, while the second was detonated outside of the local security offices in the Baramkeh district.<sup>11</sup> From the very first moments, the Syrian authorities placed responsibility for the attack on al-Qaeda. This first explanation was quickly followed by accusations by the pro-regime private sector media in Syria that the Muslim Brotherhood was behind the attacks, based on an announcement found on the Brotherhood SY website which claimed responsible for the attacks.<sup>12</sup> The latter accusation was dropped and blame was restricted to al-Qaeda, after the Muslim Brotherhood pointed out that the website in question on which the announcement was made was “a fabricated ploy,” blaming the Syrian government for the deception (See Appendix 1-B).<sup>13</sup>
- The ability of the Syrian authorities to create a deceptive website and use it to lay the blame for the explosions on the door of the Muslim Brotherhood points to the Syrian regime’s ability to make gains from such bombings. This ability was honed after they gained much experience in Lebanon and Iraq; it also raises some questions about the possible role of the Syrian government in these types of bombings.
- A suicide bomber struck the Al-Midan neighborhood in Damascus on January 6, 2012. The attack took place in the most prominent, rebellious, and anti-regime

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<sup>11</sup> “The Brotherhood SY: Our Operations in Damascus Begin with Kafrsousa,” published on a Brotherhood-affiliated website, December 24, 2011, <http://ikhwan-sy.com/?p=90>. The website was retrieved at a later date from the Internet, with the full text found in Appendix I-A.

<sup>12</sup> A statement released by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Media Center on December 24, 2011. See: <http://www.ikhwansyria.com/ar/default>

<sup>13</sup> “Terrorist explosion in the Damascus neighborhood of Al-Midan leaves 26 dead, 63 injured,” *Syrian News Agency*, January 6, 2012, <http://www.sana.sy/ara/336/2012/01/06/392646.htm>.

district of the capital, and led to the deaths of 26 people and the wounding of 63 others, including civilians and members of the civil defense forces.<sup>14</sup>

- A further two explosions took place on March 17, 2012, in Damascus. The first struck at the Air Force Intelligence building in Tahrir Square, while the second struck at the Criminal Security building in Jamarek (or "Customs") Square. The majority of the 40 killed and 140 injured in these two attacks were civilians.
- Another car bomb, which targeted the Political Security Bureau in the Suleimaniya area on March 18, 2012, went off without causing any casualties.
- On May 18, 2012, the most violent explosions to date rocked the Qazzaz area, which contains the Palestine and Patrol sections of Military Security, as well as a number of other state security buildings. These explosions led to the deaths of 55 people.
- Another car bomb, which went off April 19, 2012, targeted a number of residential buildings in the Ghazi neighborhood of Deir Al-Zour, an area that contains the offices of Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and the Military Hospital. The majority of the 100 injured, and all of the nine killed by this explosion, were civilians.<sup>15</sup>

There remains some level of mystery surrounding these explosions: questions and doubts surround the identity of the party/parties responsible, and whether or not those groups who claim responsibility truly exist, and the extent to which they have been infiltrated by the state security services. The fact that the surge of such explosions has coincided with a number of international political initiatives, such as the visit of the Arab Observer Mission and the international observers, raises another question: who benefits? This ambiguity allows the opposition to accuse the regime of being responsible for the explosions. The plausibility of these accusations is also fed by the confusion expressed by pro-regime media when assigning responsibility for the explosions. They flip-flopped between quick-fire, seemingly arbitrary accusations against al-Qaeda, without prior investigations and the provision of concrete evidence, only to switch to accusing the armed opposition and political parties on other occasions.

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<sup>14</sup> "Terrorism strikes Deir Al-Zour," *Al-Watan Newspaper*, May 20, 2012, <http://www.alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=123040>.

<sup>15</sup> In the Al-Midan explosion, for example, images shown on Syrian state television showed a member of security services placing bags of food near blood spots, which it later claimed to be from one of the casualties. This scene can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEKRe8NmcPE>. Another member of the security services can be standing up after having posed as a casualty here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3fjQz0PCXs&feature=related>.

These doubts were further exacerbated by evidence that was revealed, showing that the Syrian regime had fabricated some of the images at the scene of the explosions, in a strategic bid to manipulate the pictures to tar the revolution.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that, the above doubts notwithstanding, it is still a distinct possibility that the responsibility of Jihadist groups for these actions may be inspired by their own agendas, particularly given the weakness of the state's security apparatus. Nonetheless, these bombings shall remain extraneous to the true path of the revolution, even if those who carry them out claim to be supporting its aims.

## Do the Explosions Usher in a New Stage?

There is no way of telling with certainty whether or not these bombings are an indication of a coming stage of the Syrian revolution, a stage which would differ in crucial respects from those which came before. This development comes in spite of the escalating level of rhetoric being employed by important international players, who have warned of the dangers apparent in the downward slide of the Syrian revolution towards this level of violence, and the possibility of the emergence of a civil war that may result from it.

The most significant determining factor for this new stage of the Syrian revolution is the lack of a political resolution. This absence has been a result of the Syrian regime's structural inability to contain the crisis or proactively deal with its causes. Being unable to understand the revolution in anything other than a narrow security situation means that they cannot encompass the social, economic, and political roots of it. It has failed to present a procedural, political mechanism for a genuine democratic, political transition in Syria. The Syrian regime has further declined to deal positively with any of the political initiatives which would change in a fundamental way the political current regime and its mechanisms; one can see how the Arab League initiative was foiled due to the machinations of regional and international geopolitical actors and the intertwining of their interests.

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<sup>16</sup> General Mustafa al-Sheikh reveals the existence of a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated military wing in Syria, in *Syria Politic*, <http://syria-politic.com/ar/Default.aspx?subject=507#.TeWDztkRTCN>. A cached version of the original new story from the London-published *al-Hayat* can be found here: [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:3Buyeu8KC\\_oJ:www.daralhayat.com/print/380079+&cd=1](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:3Buyeu8KC_oJ:www.daralhayat.com/print/380079+&cd=1)



The absence of any political resolution, thus far, leaves open the possibility of increased militarization driven by the taking up of arms by civilians and by organized groups who join the FSA. While the option of armed struggle has become a milestone in the development and evolutionary path of the Syrian revolution, it has not led to a silencing of the public protests. These protests have maintained their momentum and staying power in their traditional strong holds, and touched Aleppo and Damascus, being particularly felt at Aleppo University. The persistence of these protests have also come to be associated with a functional role – they serve to demonstrate the failure of the “military option” that the Syrian regime proposed to use in a bid to regain control of rebel areas in the aftermath of the Sino-Russian veto. The indicators described above present a number of questions about the features and characteristics of the coming period, as well as how the Syrian revolution shall progress on all fronts. One can come to the following conclusions inductively about the future characteristics of the Syrian revolution:

### **Locally**

The armed conflict is no longer limited to a primitive, rural setting, nor is it limited to actions undertaken by individuals or small groups. It has become, rather, a civil movement in those towns where the regime’s security and military grip on power has weakened. The idea of an armed conflict has become increasingly attractive to wide swathes of protestors and other opponents of the Syrian regime. With the absorption of the FSA into the Syrian National Council, which encompasses a wide spectrum of the Syrian opposition, armed struggle has become an officially endorsed aim of the opposition.

One of the most prominent indicators of this stage is the regimentation of the arming of the opposition, and attempts to institutionalize it to avoid the implications of the arbitrary spread of armament. These attempts to institutionalize the armed conflict take the shape of local military councils in towns and cities across Syria. These local councils, which include officers, defected soldiers, and armed volunteers, are supervised by active leaders from political parties and charity and relief organizations. These leaders are also responsible for the funding and arming of the councils.

The Muslim Brotherhood, and its sister organization, the Syrian Relief Committee, are arguably the two most active organized groups that operate in this way. The Brotherhood has been prone to criticism from a number of opposition groups for

ensuring that only communities supportive of the Brotherhood are provided with arms. In fact, FSA Chief of Staff, General Mustafa al-Sheikh, even went so far as to accuse the Brotherhood of forming a separate armed wing within Syria, under the guise of “the Authority to Protect Civilians,” which, al-Sheikh claimed, was being provided with weapons at the expense of his own FSA.<sup>17</sup> Most sectors of the Syrian opposition have interpreted the international consensus surrounding the Annan plan as an attempt to fill the vacuum formed from the lack of any initiatives or procedures that may shift the balance of powers on the ground. Of course, such a re-balance is impossible because of Sino-Russian opposition to such a move. Thus, the various spectra making up the Syrian opposition adopted the Annan plan, but they did so as a political maneuver and cautiously. They knew that it would be difficult for the regime to implement its stipulated articles, and that the regime would allow the plan to fall in the public squares where the protests take place.

For the opposition, this reality drove home the need for specific and organized armament such that they could impose a new balance of powers on the ground. This would be done by sapping the energy from the regime’s military apparatus, contributing to an overall breakdown of security in such a way as to lead to a breakup of the regime. The opposition will be able to make use of the sense of exhaustion the protests, ongoing since March 2011, have left in their wake.

This can be sensed from a statement made by the Supreme Guide (*al-murshid al-aam*) of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Riyadh al-Shaqfa, who admitted the futility inherent within the Annan plan, and affirmed the Brotherhood’s coordination with Syrian businessmen abroad in a bid to supply the opposition with weapons. Defending these behaviors, al-Shaqfa stated, “self-defense is a right enshrined in all of the Abrahamic faiths”. Shaqfa added that the Brotherhood was not alone in demanding that the revolutionaries be armed, but rather that “effectively almost all members of the Syrian National Council have made this demand”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “The Supreme Guide: the international community has failed the Syrian people ... after the failure of the Annan Plan, the only thing left is to demand that the FSA be armed,” *Muslim Brotherhood Media Center*, <http://www.ikhwansyria.com/ar/default>.

<sup>18</sup> “Al-Qaeda operates in Syria,” *Russia Today Arabic Service*, February 22, 2012, [http://arabic.rt.com/news\\_all\\_news/analytics/68756/](http://arabic.rt.com/news_all_news/analytics/68756/).

## Internationally

Iraqi Interior Minister Adnan al-Assadi was the first to sound the alarm bells of the dangers of non-Syrian fighters moving to Syria, regardless of the ideological backgrounds motivating them, on February 11, 2012. Al-Assadi affirmed that jihadists were infiltrating Syria through Iraqi territory.<sup>19</sup> This statement was closely followed by remarks made by Libya's foreign minister, whereby he unofficially acknowledged the possibility that Libyan fighters may be present and taking part in the Syrian revolution.<sup>20</sup> These statements were followed by the Tunisian Interior Minister in the middle of May 2012, acknowledging the presence of Tunisian fighters in Syria.<sup>21</sup>

The change in tone of international statements with regards to the Syrian situation has been noticeable after the explosions, particularly after the bombings of May 18, 2012. In fact, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon acknowledged in a speech, for the first time, that al-Qaeda could be responsible for the Qazzaz explosions (the author notes that the Secretary-General later qualified these statements as not entirely certain).<sup>22</sup> Despite this change by world powers in the wake of the explosions, there has been no letup in the efforts to diplomatically besiege the Syrian regime, particularly given that state oppression is still ongoing, a striking example of which is the Houla massacre. A non-binding statement from the Security Council's Presidency, issued on May 27, 2012, denounced the presumed involvement of the Syrian regime in the Houla massacre; unprecedentedly, neither the Russian nor the Chinese delegations blocked the move. This international condemnation was followed by another measure intended to up the ante – Syrian ambassadors and Charges d'Affairs were expelled from France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia, Canada, the UK, the US, and Turkey.

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<sup>19</sup> "Libyan foreign minister acknowledges Libyan fighters at work in Syria," *UPI Newswire*, March 16, 2012, <http://arabic.upi.com/News/2012/03/16/UPI-61841331907189/?spt=mps>.

<sup>20</sup> See *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today%5C18qpt999.htm&arc=datat%5C2012%5C05%5C05-18%5C18qpt999.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> "Ban Ki-moon: al-Qaeda responsible for the twin terrorist explosions in Damascus," *Syrian Arab News Agency*, May 19, 2012, <http://www.sana.sy/ara/3/2012/05/19/419807.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> "Al-Alaw: Syrian oil sector lost USD 4 billion due to sanctions," *Al-Watan Newspaper*, May 24, 2012, <http://www.alwatan.sy/pdf/?issue=1416>.

It has become obvious that the adoption of ambiguous, not well-defined international communiqués by international players does not change the fundamental determining factors driving states' foreign policies, which are instead driven by national interests and other domestic political factors. The balance of powers as it affects the Syrian case has entailed that there shall be no foreign intervention in the country. For the present time, efforts shall be restricted to a policy of an embargo and diplomatic isolation. There have also been a number of proposed measures around which there is no international consensus, in particular the question of arming the Syrian opposition.

In the meantime, the Syrian regime is attempting to make the most of the international impasse, politically and in terms of media coverage, by making the best use of the violent features associated with the Syrian revolution, especially the bombings. The Syrian regime is trying to project, retroactively, its own narrative on the Syrian revolution. It is attempting to divert the path of the Syrian revolution into something resembling Algeria in the 1990s, in an effort to stay in power through the legitimacy of maintaining domestic security, also fighting al-Qaeda and terrorism, as far as the foreigners are concerned. The use of this rhetoric to address the West is perhaps the clearest indication of the regime's loss of its political legitimacy and moral authority, both at home and abroad. Even those parties that are allies of the Syrian regime base their support on the self-same factors, though in relation to their own geostrategic interests.

## Conclusion

Despite their importance, the above stated factors will only be able to hinder, and not actually put a final end, to the progress of the Syrian revolution for the following reasons:

- The state of civil rebellion, with the pressure it is bringing to bear on the regime, is ongoing and continues to produce peaceful protests, and is in fact expanding to cover geographical areas where there had been no revolutionary movement at the beginning. This reality emerges in spite of the increased level of military response from the state, and the new incidence of the bombings. The recent movement in the socially and economically vital city of Aleppo provided evidence for the possibility of the rebellion taking root and sustaining its own momentum there gradually. The general strike that affected nearly all markets in the entirety of Greater Damascus presented a further turning point in the progress of the

Syrian revolution, indicating a shift in the attitudes of the Bourgeoisie sections of Syrian society, and their attitudes toward the revolution and the regime. The intensification of these aspects will turn up the level of domestic pressure applied on the Syrian regime, and will impact its primary sources of power. This may indeed induce a change in the balances of power in the country, tipping the scales in favor of the revolutionaries, which will impose on the democratic groups among the revolutionaries a need to have clearly defined political agendas, and motivating democratic discourse. It will also have a large influence on a number of the international and regional power brokers who have thus far served to protect and sustain the regime and its staying power. Of particular importance is the moral responsibility placed on the shoulders of these powers, as a result of the horrific images resulting from the ongoing security crackdown on the Syrian revolution. The confluence of all these factors shall certainly make the possibility of regime change greater. The revolution will have succeeded in destabilizing the regime and undoing links in the chain that keep it in power. It will force the regime to contain the forces and personages within it that stand in opposition to change and reform, going as far the head of the regime itself, and will pave the way for the beginnings of a democratic transformation.

- The intensified armed conflict, supported as it is by a number of regional players, will also result in an intensification of the security breaches. A number of Gulf states have theoretically supported supplying the rebels with weapons, while information collected from on-the-ground sources suggests that the revolutionaries still do not possess offensive, high-grade weapons. The supply chains for these weapons continue to resemble the traditional methods of weapons smuggling, albeit more rapid. Another indication of the increasingly unstable security situation is the increased scope of the conflicts, which have grown to encompass a majority of Syria's governorates, including the capital, Damascus. Armed rebel groups are now in control of an increased share of the country's territory, particularly those areas which lie on the frontiers with other countries, such as Al-Qusayr and Zabadani on the Lebanese border, Mount Riha and the Aleppo countryside near the border with Turkey, and Al-Bukamal on the border with Iraq. Despite the wide reach of its military apparatus, the Syrian regime has been unable, as of this time, to contain this instability in the security situation. The area that escapes the control of the regime continues to grow, making military operations increasingly costly, depleting the regime's resources. This reality is reflected in the economic slump, the lack of investments, and the

loss of Syria's monetary reserves, leaving aside the fuel crisis – the Syrian regime has been expending its foreign reserves on military operations. With the persistence and extending spread of the military operations, combined with the effects of the economic sanctions on the Syrian energy sector, have been responsible for the sharp drop in Syria's monetary reserves. Syrian Minister of Oil, Sufyan al-Alaw, forecasted that the country's oil sector stood to lose USD 4 billion as a result of the international sanctions on the Syria energy sector,<sup>23</sup> further serving to highlight the shakiness of the regime's military, economic, and security infrastructure. Combined with a variety of other factors, it will lead to a collapse in the regime's ability to oppress the revolution. In this manner, a supply of high-impact weapons may indeed be able to impede the Syrian military's ability to suppress the rebellion and create a new balance of powers that will destroy the efficiency of the regime's repressive military apparatus, provided that the weapons have offensive capabilities. Such a supply of weapons may even serve to help the popular, peaceful protests spread more widely and become more effective, all of which will help bring about change. Of course, such a change would entail the threat apparent in the spread of weapons in a context where the state has collapsed, and all of this would be happening while other forms of identity extraneous to citizenship are formed. An avoidance of the previously suggested negative outcomes necessitates cooperation from all social and political actors that believe in the importance of a democratic transition in working towards reducing the possibility of this. It shall also draft a strategic political agenda, most notably in the period following the collapse of the regime, such that no genuine obstacles can be placed in the path of a democratic transition.

This is how the Syrian revolution has been able to preserve its own momentum and spread in spite of all of the factors standing in its way. At this point, the Syrian revolution is at a stage where its progress is unstoppable; it is moving into an existential crisis with the oppressive regime. The violent forms described above can be contextualized sociologically by pointing out the composition of Syrian society, and closely examining the level of security oppression to which it has been subject. The deviations from the revolutionary path and the bombings cannot be considered to be dominant in the Syrian revolution, with its strong rootedness in unifying national calls in

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<sup>23</sup> "Al-Alaw: Syrian Oil Sector Lost USD 4 billion due to Sanctions," *Al-Watan Newspaper*, May 24, 2012:

<http://www.alwatan.sy/pdf/?issue=1416>

opposition to tyranny. The Syrian revolution will be able to contain the spread of such violent forms through the awareness of the revolutionary masses, the political elites, and democratic forces, as well as utilizing the available mechanisms of social control. The ability to control the course of actions and reactions to those actions, however, will become increasingly difficult with each passing day during which the regime is in power.

**Appendix 1-A: Text of Announcement**

*But God wished to favor those who were oppressed in that land, to make them leaders, and the ones to survive.*

The Holy Quran, *The Story*, verses 5

By the glory and grace of Almighty God and his bounty, one of our combat jihadist brigades, the Victorious Sunni Party, carried out an attack on the State Security Bureau in Kafrsousa in the heart of the Umayyad capital, Damascus. The successful attack was carried out by four of our finest young men in a martyrdom operation, leading to a number of casualties in the ranks of the pro-Assad gangs.

We, as defenders of the Syrian people and all that is holy to this nation, are sending a message to Assad's gangs: the oceans are made of drops of water; this is the just the tip of the iceberg, and only a small of fraction of what we are capable of. It is the beginning of the liberation of Damascus. God is our guardian, and there is none better than He.

We caution our brothers and sisters, the Syrian people, to avoid approaching government buildings and security offices, as our fighting units are now in a state of heightened readiness to carry out high-impact operations in Damascus, Aleppo, and the entire land of Syria in the coming 10 days.

As God is our witness, we have delivered this message.

The Media Coordination Commission in Syria: Muharram 28, 1433 Hijri

The Muslim Brotherhood of Syria



**Appendix 1-B: Text of Reply to Appendix 1-A**

The Syrian State Security apparatus have resorted to a devious, evil ploy. They have produced the draft of a publication that purports to be from the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria, and claims responsibility for the bombings of the State Security Bureau in Kafrsousa. They even placed the Brotherhood's insignia on the announcement to try and deceive the people. Making matters worse, they planted the announcement on a website which they themselves designed and implemented, a website which closely resembles the Brotherhood's own and on which they placed the Brotherhood's insignia.

On this website, they have deployed a number of suspicious phrases, such as "the Free Officers' Command," "the Glorious Syrian Revolution," "the Abi Ubayda Ibn Al-Jarrah Brigade," and so on. These self-same forces even went so far as to place a completely fabricated interview with the supposed General Monitor of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, though managed to get his name wrong. Further, they added a number of other communications to the site to fool web surfers visiting it. The domain name for the website where this statement was published is completely different from the true website of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, and has nothing at all to do with us. We take solace in the fact that the crimes and fabrications of this regime have now been exposed for what they are the world over; even should this regime aim to be truthful once, which they do not intend, nobody will believe them.