



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES

POLICY ANALYSIS

The positions of the Syrian opposition

Policy Analysis Unit | February 16, 2012

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Introduction:

The Syrian revolt resembles other Arab revolutions in that the slogans and the political literature of the popular protest movement did not engage with the larger nationalist causes, and remained limited to the immediate political demands, which were manifested in the questions of freedom and democracy. In fact, nothing was puzzling about the Arab revolutionary movement keeping away from the crucial national questions, for revolution as a rule is a revolt against despotism, and it naturally tends to focus on that issue and to devote all energies to bringing down the regime. Furthermore, the social movement itself resists the dispersal of its energies throughout various causes aside from the central one, whether they were crucial questions or not. Unlike the situation of Tunisia and Egypt at the eve of the revolution, public opinion trends in Syria¹ disagreed with the regime socially and politically and on the level of development and freedoms, but not on questions of Syrian foreign policy, and especially the posture in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the regime's support for the Arab resistance movement (Hizbollah and Hamas). Thus, many Arab analysts interpreted the delay of the raising of slogans calling for the fall of the regime in Syria, compared to the quick adoption of such slogans in Egypt and Tunisia, to the popular approval of the regime's foreign policy. On this level, popular criticism against the Syrian regime focused on its excessive pragmatism in the relationship with the United States, and the persistent attempts to convince the US of the regime's strategic importance, even if such attempts led to the disregard of people's security and lives and well being. On the same front, the regime is also criticized for intervening in the war against Iraq on the side of the US forces –during the war for the liberation of Kuwait- the regime's shelling of the Tel al-Za'tar Palestinian camp in Lebanon and sponsoring the war of the camps, and even its stance toward the Lebanese resistance in some stages –before the regime decided to fully commit to its support. These issues were the major points of contestation among the Syrian and Arab public opinion vis-à-vis the regime's foreign policy, and not the regime's commitment to the Arab causes and its rejection of submitting to American dictates.

The Syrian protest movement was not capable of achieving a quick and decisive victory to reach its goals; the protraction of the crisis led to international and regional players entering –with their interests and agendas- on the line of direct influence over the evolution of the Syrian revolution, especially after August 2011. This has led the 'major

¹ The reference here is to the trends of public opinion, and not necessarily the opinion of all opposition parties and movements.

questions' to becoming part of the political debates (for and against bringing down the despotic regime) as a result of Syria's strategic weight and its role within international and regional dynamics. This came in tandem with the appearance of political entities representing the Syria opposition, notably the National Council and the National Coordination Committee. These organizations led the Syrian political interactions with the emerging international positions, especially Western ones. The truth is that it would be wrong to limit the Syrian revolution to these entities, for there are local and national forces, improvised and organized ones which are laboring as part of the process of bringing down the regime –and these groups rarely express political postures and programs. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that these popular movements carry lax or defeatist positions in national affairs, especially as the slogans in the street accuse the regime itself of retreat on these fronts. As a result, the political analysis is always focused on the formal political entities that express such positions, and who should not be taken lightly even if they were not organizing the movement or leading the revolt –and they do not claim to do so. At this stage there is a value for the words that are written and said, especially that the discourse of some factions includes an inconsistency in its political concepts, which is clearly manifested when they accuse the regime of being a non-resister, and that it has 'wasted away' national causes. At the same time, these factions produce a political literature and a method of action involving propositions to the West in the language of 'offering concessions', and supportive –in one way or another- of the path of Arab 'moderation' that rejects the resistance, and which does not accuse Syria or Hizbollah of being 'non-resisters', but sees resistance itself as a non-desirable thing, and supports the path of negotiations and peaceful solutions, and perceives the path of resistance as endangering relations with the West, and as a source of 'instability'.

This could be explained as part of the usual political behavior of organized oppositions that tend to contest the regime of rule in their entire host of policies, including foreign policy; however, we find, in the Syrian case, that this contradiction does not involve an acknowledgement by the entities of the opposition of this disagreement, instead, the opposition tries to one-up the regime in the rhetoric of *mumana'a* (*passive resistance*) without adopting *mumana'a* in its political programs.

In its political discourse directed toward the West, the Syrian opposition does not accuse the regime of non-resistance; in fact, the opposition forfeits *mumana'a* and speaks broadly about peaceful resolutions and halting the policy of 'exporting problems' that reflect the Western perception of the regime. This contradiction is the result of a totalitarian mentality that does not contend to focus on despotism and injustice as a

sufficient reason to change the regime and to convince the public opinion of the justice of the revolutionary movement and the necessity of its support. Instead, some factions move to deny the character of *mumana'a* and resistance from the regime in the face of the Arabic public opinion, while considering these epithets as accusations when speaking to the West and adopting a moderate tone. In principle, the mission of the revolutionary powers is to focus on despotism and corruption and the security regime and the right of the Syrian people to liberty, which is alone sufficient to grant credibility to the revolution. The foreign positions of the regime cannot be a reason to support despotism, neither should they be advanced as a reason for its overthrow.

The complexity of the Syrian scene is not only related to the nature of the existing regime: the geographic position of Syria, its geostrategic importance, Syria's fateful engagement in the midst of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the interactions of international and regional geostrategic players, are all factors that have imposed themselves on the course of the Syrian revolution. Faced with this reality, numerous scenarios began to emerge predicting the nature of the future political regime if change takes place in Syria, and the foreign policy of this new regime, especially in terms of the position toward the Arab-Israeli conflict (the Golan, Palestine), the position toward Iran, the future of Arab resistance movements, the relationship with the West, the perception of Israel, and the regional alignment, especially in light of the ongoing polarization in the region. All this calls for a process of revision and interpretation of the positions of the opposition factions in Syria vis-à-vis these issues (historically and currently). The aim is to present a political deduction predicting their leanings in the event they reach power, especially in terms of the Arab-Israeli conflict. These postures will be analyzed in two stages: before the popular revolution, and after its eruption; in order to monitor continuities and changes in the broad lines determining the political vision of the opposition.

Prior to the revolution :

- During the era of former President Hafiz al-Assad, and after the political regime accepted the Security Council Resolution 242² in 1973 (following the October War), the Syrian opposition, in its Nasserist and communist sections (the Syrian Communist Party/the politburo), rejected this decision and argued that accepting

² International Security Council Resolution 242 mandated that Israel withdraws from Arab lands occupied in 1967.

the resolution would not lead to regaining the occupied territories –linking liberation to the production of a power balance between popular and military action. The opposition also demanded that priority be given to the building of this balance, on the Syrian and Arab levels. The Islamist opposition (the Muslim Brotherhood) took the same path, according to its political program and ideological line at the time, which did not acknowledge any means outside of the logic of force in the conflict with Israel – which was part of the general trend of Islamist movements in the Arab homeland at the time.

- The traditional party opposition, especially the one descending from radical nationalist organizations³, rejected the Separation of Forces Agreement between the Syrian and Israeli armies in 1974. This agreement was one of the main aspects of the opposition’s discord with the political regime at the time, accusing the regime of “forfeiting” national causes, and of taking the path of resolution along with the United States and the conservative Arab states. The opposition’s posture vis-à-vis the Syrian army’s entry into Lebanon in 1976 also came from this perspective, depicting the Syrian intervention as a continuation of the path of peaceful resolution that is adopted by the political regime, and which led to the opening to the United States of America, and to the containment and weakening of the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinian resistance, in the context of a “secret understanding” with Israel.
- After President Bashar al-Assad took the reins of power in 2000, the opposition factions organized themselves into a political entity that was named, on October 16, 2005, “the Damascus Declaration.”⁴ Following the dissidence of former Vice President Abd al-Haleem Khaddam, the Muslim Brothers withdrew from the declaration forming a coalition with Khaddam under the title “the Salvation Front” in June 2006. The Front raised the slogan of the overthrow of the political regime in Syria in tandem with the increase of international pressures on the regime after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri. This behavior on the part of the Brothers reflected a high dose of pragmatism; the alliance with Khaddam meant rupture with some of the factions in the opposition’s National Democratic Coalition, which contributed to the Brotherhood’s return to Syria as a legitimate political force⁵ through the

³ The People’s Party led by Riad al-Turk, the Revolutionary Workers’ Party, the Arab Democratic Socialist Union Party, a number of which joined the National Coordination Committee following the revolution, while the rest joined the Syrian National Council.

⁴ The declaration included the following parties: the Democratic National Coalition, the Communist Action Party, the Muslim Brothers, six Kurdish parties, in addition to civil society organizations, national figures, and the Democratic Assyrian Organization.

⁵ According to Law 49 issued by President Hafiz al-Assad in 1980, the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood is treated as a “criminal organization”, belonging to which is punishable by death.

Damascus Declaration (2005). This action contributed to the Brotherhood entering into Western political calculations that overlap with the interests of some Arab regimes.

- The Israeli aggression on Lebanon in 2006 confounded the factions of the Syrian opposition, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. The July 2006 war came as part of a host of international-Arab alignments that divided regional actors into two axes: moderate/rejectionist. The Brotherhood, along with the Salvation Front, took the side of the Western-supported camp, which was manifested in its political positions toward the Lebanese resistance, despite the movement issuing a 2006 statement condemning Israeli crimes. However, the language of the statement came across as broad and generalistic, in the following formula: “as we condemn all the crimes committed by the Zionist enemy against our people in Palestine and Lebanon, and against humanity and civilization, we call on all the sons of our nation to unite and stand together to confront the despicable aggression.”⁶ At the same time, comments by members and leaders of the movement during the aggression were negatively directed against Hezbollah, mirroring the positions of some Gulf States that, at the time, supported the March 14 camp in Lebanon. This contradiction was further pronounced after the statement of the Shura Council in August 2006:

- 1- The Shura Council statement saluted the Lebanese people and its resistance, but it adopted the political and media tone of the March 14 current, when it spoke against “all forms of interferences in Lebanese affairs and in the relationship between the components of the Lebanese people”, in a hint at the active re-positioning of the Syrian role in Lebanon after the Syrian army withdrawal in April 2005.
- 2- The statement warned of a Syrian-Iranian axis that is distancing Syria from its Arab neighbors. The statement criticized the verbal attacks of President Bashar al-Assad against some Arab countries and Lebanese factions, describing these statements as part of “the pursuit of sectarian and divisive policies”⁷ –in a reference to the then-widespread Gulf political slogans (the Shi’a Crescent).

⁶ The media center of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria:

<http://www.ikhwansyria.com/ar/default.aspx?xyz=U6Qq7k%2bcOd87MDI46m9rUxJEpMO%2bi1s78knOo%2bJSwDDCjPIITRIH1%2bBHf0%2bbxYerXhhGtcCpUk%2bZnlbO2%2flmm780O64AfhbiRbdbzVgmhQi7vaypnaGtr4d2w6E2E24NjsMNUjAAmO4%3d>

⁷ Ibid.

This behavior indicated a political pragmatism that could reach the level of opportunism, and that does not correspond to the popular trends that supported the Lebanese resistance in the 2006 War, adopting a critical stance toward the countries that condoned the aggression, and identifying with the regime in its choices –which contributed to an increase in the regime’s popular support, despite ignoring the demands for reform and skirting the democratic promises launched by President Bashar al-Assad shortly after inheriting power, as a way to lessen the impact of the transfer of power through inheritance. It is noticeable that a shift has occurred regarding the type of criticism directed by the Brotherhood against the regime from the phase when it received Iraqi support to the phase following the collapse of the Iraqi regime, when the movement began relying on other states.

- After the occupation of Iraq in 2003, the United States of America began exerting serious and intense pressures on Syria to alter its political behavior regarding its position in Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict and toward Arab resistance movements. In the political debates between 2003 and 2007, strong trends were witnessed –for the first time- among the Syrian opposition inside the country legitimating foreign intervention as the only means to overthrow despotic regimes that have blocked the conduits of change domestically. These currents argued that there was no avenue for change in Syria except along the Iraqi model.⁸ This trend appeared following the Kurdish protests in 2004 in al-Qamishli and other Syrian cities, and it was enshrined after the Hariri crisis, the UN Security Council Resolution 1559, and directing accusations at Syria for the assassination. In light of these events, a meeting was held of the National Council of the Damascus Declaration on December 2, 2007, where divisions

⁸ In the few months following the occupation of Iraq in 2003, new positions began to emerge positively evaluating the experiment of “New Iraq” under American control, presented by some Syrian opposition figures in Arab newspapers. This trend reached its peak when the most notable symbol for the Syrian opposition posed his theory on the “Colonialist Zero”, when he exclaimed in a press interview that “during a recent radio talk they asked me, don’t you see that something positive has taken place in Iraq? I told them: yes I see it, I see that they have removed a despicable regime, and the Americans have taken the Iraqi society from the minus to the zero”. (Interview with Mr. Riad al-Turk: *al-Ra’i* website, September 29, 2003, the same text was published in the Lebanese *al-Nahar* newspaper the previous day).

Mohammad Saeed Rasas: “The nearing of the split of the Syrian opposition”, *al-Hiwar al-Mutamaddin*, February 14, 2007.

<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=117323>

“Riad al-Turk concludes that what has happened to the Iraqi people at the hands of Saddam Hussein and his family and their Tikriti clan and the Ba’ath party, the hands of internal occupation, has exceeded the doings of the Syrian internal occupation several fold, both in terms of the numbers of Iraqis killed and in regard to the scale of pillaging and corruption. The Syrian and Iraqi peoples were able to free themselves from foreign occupations within a quarter century, but the two peoples have lost hope of the ability to rid themselves of internal occupations within a third of a century –despite the fact that the conditions of the two peoples have deteriorated below their level at the eve of independence. If colonialism had left us at the “zero” point for fifty years, our Arab peoples are currently –due to internal occupations- at “fifty below zero”. What has happened in Iraq after the American occupation is that the country ascended to the point of “colonialist zero” anew. It is easier for the peoples to resist a foreign occupation than to rebel against an internal occupation”.

Sa’d al-Deen Ibrahim, “Riad al-Turk and the Colonialist Zero”, June 1, 2005.

http://www.mettransparent.com/old/texts/saad_eddin_ibrahim/saad_eddin_ibrahim_riyad_turk_and_colonialist_zero.htm

emerged within the Council between those supporting foreign intervention and those opposing it⁹. Following this debate, the Arab Socialist Union Party, the Revolutionary Workers' Party, and a number of opposition figures withdrew from the Council. As a result of these fissures and of the adoption of positions supportive of foreign intervention by some factions, there was a retreat in the presence of the intellectual elites that met with the Damascus Declaration over the demands of freedom and democracy; and the effectiveness of the Declaration waned within Syria, as well as its ability to stir the domestic political environment, and the Declaration's activism became concentrated abroad.¹⁰

- The parties that withdrew from the Damascus Declaration, over the question of foreign intervention, formed a political coalition under the name of 'the National Democratic Assembly' in 2008. These parties continued to follow their unchanged national and patriotic principles. This could be gleaned through their declared position regarding indirect Syrian-Israeli negotiations –with Turkish sponsorship– in 2008, when the Assembly continued to criticize the demarche of the regime in the so-called 'peace process', arguing that the option of a peaceful resolution must be based on the priorities of Syrian national interests, 'and not on the narrow interests of the regime'. Therefore, the constituents of the Assembly argued that the negotiations option should be viewed as one of the stages of the conflict with Israel and of the liberation of the Golan, "as long as (negotiations) do not close the door to attempts to regain (the Golan) through all legitimate means." The Democratic National Assembly demanded that any resolution option must not undermine national sovereignty or negatively affect the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.¹¹
- Following the Israeli aggression on Gaza, the Muslim Brotherhood moved to reassess its experience as part of the Salvation Front, announcing its withdrawal in April 4, 2009. Subsequently, the Brotherhood declared positions supportive of the Palestinian resistance in Gaza, suspending what it termed "opposition activism" against the regime, which was supporting Hamas during the war. The Brotherhood also adopted the slogans of resistance and *mumana'a*, which were among the ideological pillars of the regime. The Brotherhood also called on the

⁹ The March 14 current in Lebanon, and specifically the Future Current, sponsored a number of the names that signed the Damascus Declaration, especially those who saw, in the Special International Tribunal for Lebanon, a gateway to the overthrow of the ruling regime in Syria.

¹⁰ Part of the testimonial of Hazem al-Nahar to the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies on the Syrian opposition, during an interview conducted by Hamza al-Mostafa and Nairuz Sateek in Doha in Summer 2011

¹¹ Ibid, quoted from the Op-ed of the *Democratic Position Newsletter*, which speaks on behalf of the National Democratic Assembly (November 2008).

regime to accept national reconciliation¹², and to resolve the domestic social discords in order to regain the occupied territories and to support the Palestinian people.¹³

An examination of these positions shows that the majority of the traditional parties of the Syrian opposition, with the exception of the parties belonging to the National Democratic Assembly, have shaped their political vision regarding crucial Arab causes from the perspective of their opposition activism and their political alignments within the opposition. This can be especially observed among the leftist and Islamist parties which in the 1970s, advanced radical positions accusing the regime of forfeiting Arab causes, only to change their perspective at a later stage following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This could be clearly observed in the crisis of leftist forces that changed their ideology and programs, with some adopting a stance encouraging international intervention to engender change in states where change from the inside was not possible (such as Iraq and Syria) –with the help of states that were consistently categorized, in the old political literature and values of these leftist forces, as part of the enemy camp. This phenomenon was to be expressed in a clearer manner through the positions of these parties during the revolution.

After the outbreak of the revolution:

Following the eruption of the Syrian revolution, the factions of the traditional opposition and the popular movement refrained from presenting any positions regarding the future outlook on foreign affairs. The June 11, 2011 statement by the local coordination committees was the first political statement from outside the traditional opposition carrying an executive program for the path to produce change in Syria. However, the local coordination committees did not mention Arab national questions and questions relating to Syrian sovereignty, such as the liberation of the Golan or the posture toward the Palestinian cause and toward resistance movements in Palestine and Lebanon; or the position regarding the question of foreign intervention. This path was followed by the majority of the forces of the traditional political opposition, with all the statements

¹² We must remember that the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria and many of the opposition symbols abroad had leaned, during that period, toward reconciliation with the regime, less than two years before the revolution. At the time, the regime had broken its international isolation and appeared confident. However, its arrogance prevented it from seizing the opportunity to allow political opening while at an advantage. Then, the revolution came, ending the regime's arrogance and the opposition's demands for dialogue and its readiness to accept middle solutions, dialogue with the regime became an accusation hurled in the face of those calling for it. This was imposed by the popular revolution demanding the overthrow of the regime.

¹³ The Encyclopedia of the Muslim Brotherhood, "A statement by the Muslim Brothers in Syria regarding the position toward the National Salvation Front" (September 4, 2011).

http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A8_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86_%D9%85%D9%86_%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B5_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A

emanating from opposition conferences (Antalya, Brussels, Semiramis, Salvation) being devoid of a single phrase referring to these matters.

In this context, the clearest position was that offered by the Deputy General Supervisor of the Brotherhood Faruq Tayfur, during an interview on Al Jazeera in September 12, 2011, which came as follows:

- Tayfur framed his position toward Israel within international law and UN resolutions, which also applies to the posture toward the Palestinian cause and the liberation of the occupied Syrian Golan.
- Linking the signing of a peace treaty with Israel to the application of the UN resolutions relevant to the Golan and Palestine.¹⁴
- As for the relationship with the resistance movements, Tayfur accused Hezbollah and his Secretary General of supporting the regime logistically and on the field, claiming that evidence exists to prove these accusations. In this regard, he linked the future relationship with Hezbollah and Iran to the course of their behavior toward the revolution and to Hezbollah and Iran reassessing their support for the regime, adding that his organization is considering legal action against Hezbollah.¹⁵
- Tayfur gave a pragmatic justification to the participation of a Brotherhood representative in the Paris conference which was called for by a Zionist author Bernard Henry Levy “for the support of the Syrian revolution”. Tayfur said in his defense that over 400 political personalities were present at the conference, noting that the Brotherhood representative came as a representative of the Antalya conference.¹⁶

Subsequently, the National Council was formed on October 2, 2011, hosting the broadest spectrum of Syrian opposition forces: secular, Islamic, and the factions of the Damascus Declaration; but without the parties of the National Coordination Committee. On the political track, a number of ‘soft positions’ were expressed regarding these national causes, the most notable of which was an interview by the head of the Syrian National Council, Burhan Ghalyoun, with the Wall Street Journal on December 2, 2011, and which featured an unfamiliar tone that attempted to capture the support of the

¹⁴ However, Tayfur said: “the crucial questions and decisions relating to the Palestinian cause are the purview of the democratic rule and the people, and they are to decide, whether we were a majority or a minority in any coming regime.”

¹⁵ To watch the interview, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtS74miDE2Q>

¹⁶ Tayfur exhibited a contradictory perspective on this question. On the one hand, he claimed that the objective of the conference was the support of the Syrian revolution, despite the presence of many figures and organizations that support Israel. On the other hand, he said that the Brotherhood is prepared to partner with any group that is not accused of Zionism and of being an enemy of the Arab people and the Palestinian cause –despite the widespread writings of Levy against Gaza and the resistance and the Palestinian people.

West, not through the position toward democracy, but through exhibiting “moderation” compared to the regime on national causes:

- Ghalyoun limited the path of regaining the Golan to the production of the political and geographic conditions to launch negotiations with Israel that would achieve its return, relying on the “special” relationship with the European Union and the Western powers. He also described the question of the Golan as an important “symptom” of Syria’s sovereignty and stability.¹⁷ This position is even more “moderate” than that of Tayfur, as Tayfur did not discount the possibility of war, merely conditioning peace to the return of the Golan.
- The relationship with Hezbollah was presented as part of the relationship with the Lebanese state, on the basis of mutual acknowledgement, common interests, and the concern for the region’s stability, adding that Syria’s relationship with Hezbollah will change because the position of Hezbollah will change after the fall of the regime in Syria.
- Ghalyoun focused on Syria’s Arab links, due to Syria’s geopolitical and historical stature, and as a result of the Arab positions supportive of the revolution, especially in the Gulf. Ghalyoun used this premise to discuss the future relationship with Iran, which he limited to the aspect of material interests, preferring the ending of the military alliance with the continuation of economic relations.
- Ghalyoun limited the relationship with Hamas to the Syrian relationship with the Palestinian Liberation Organization as a whole, opining that “Hamas today is different than the Hamas of yesterday, whose interests were supported by the regime.”

Despite the controversy regarding the confirmation of Ghalyoun’s interview with the Wall Street Journal, and Ghalyoun’s denial of what he was reported to have said on these matters, the head of the National Council eventually reiterated the content of his previous positions in an interview with the Lebanese al-Mustaqbal newspaper on December 5, 2011. In fact, Ghalyoun added a new indicator regarding the vision of the Syrian opposition, when he framed Syria’s future foreign relations within the concept of ‘Syria first’¹⁸, affirming the primacy of the Syrian interest over the Arab national interest. This opinion reflected the statements of a number of opposition figures and

¹⁷ *The Wall Street Journal*, Syria Opposition Leader Interview Transcript , December 2, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203833104577071960384240668.html>

¹⁸ *Dar al-Hayat*, “Ghalyoun to al-Hayat: the initiative by a wing in the regime to dismantle it would safeguard our people from the calamities of an alternative foreign power”, January 1, 2012 <http://www.daralhayat.com/portalarticlendam/345462>).

parties abroad at the time. The regime had implicitly employed the “Syria first” slogan following the March 14 instigation of anti-Syrian sentiments among the Lebanese public after 2005; but the regime eventually abandoned the slogan due to the policies of Western states aimed at Syria and due to the nature of its coalitions that forced the regime to address the Arab public opinion. Ghalyoun’s adoption of this ‘Syria first’ perspective exhibits a great contradiction between his new stances and his former writings.

It could be argued that this direction is encouraged by opinion on the street, which has adopted the independence flag and raised it in demonstrations and protests as an alternative to the current Syrian flag which symbolizes the banner of the 1958 United Arab Republic. However, it is likely that the matter of the independence flag was an impulsive reaction by the protestors due to its need for symbols. The same did not take place in Egypt and Tunisia and Yemen, where the masses distinguish the state from the regime, but this phenomenon took place in Libya and Syria, as in Iraq following the regime change. However, this does not change the conviction of the authors that democratic revolutions, in general, are often accompanied by a trend to reproduce national identity.

Putting aside the contradictory press statements of the leaders of the National Council, especially those which relate to foreign intervention and to Syria’s future role; and the Council’s political program which was adopted in Tunisia in mid November 2011, the Council declared broad positions that overlap with the statements of its leadership on the question of the Golan and the Palestinian cause, most notably:¹⁹

- The new Syria will be a positive state and a factor of stability in its Arab and regional surrounding and on the international level.
- The new Syria will work to regain its sovereignty in the occupied Golan based on the relevant decisions of international legality.
- The new Syria will support the full and legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.
- The new Syria will work to invigorate Arab solidarity and regional cooperation and will build its relations with states on the basis of mutual respect and national interests.

As for the Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change, which includes most of the factions that split from the Damascus Declaration (2007) on the backdrop of the posture toward foreign intervention, it has clearly delineated the distance with its former allies through its political literature during the revolution. However, the

¹⁹ The Syrian National Council: draft of the political program of the Syrian National Council (November 20, 2011, <http://www.syriannc.org/archives/76>)

Committee did not produce statements or political programs determining its position regarding the central causes, since the majority of its parties has a clear Arabist and nationalist history in what regards the Palestinian cause and the resistance.²⁰ Nevertheless, the text of the agreement signed between the Committee and the National Council in early 2012 –before the Council announced that it withdrew its signature from the document- included several principles denoting Syria’s future position in the region:²¹

- Committing to the integrity of the Syrian Homeland and the liberation of occupied Syrian land, establishing relations of fraternity and cooperation with Arab states, strong relations with regional countries based on parity, and relations of cooperation and mutual respect with foreign countries. The aim is for democratic Syria to occupy its active position in the Arab, regional, and international society, in a manner serving the higher national interest, and security, peace, and stability in the region and the world.
- Adhering to international conventions and treaties, to the UN charter, the Arab League charter, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

However, Arab national causes were not discussed.

THE POSITIONS ON THE POPULAR LEVEL:

Since the beginning of the revolution in Syria, popular protestors have tended to criticize Hezbollah and its support for the regime, a current went as far as doubting the authenticity of its resistance and accusing it of submissiveness to Iran, which was manifested in many slogans that appeared in different parts of Syria. The negative mood toward Hezbollah reigned within the protest movement due to the pragmatism with which the Lebanese party dealt with Arab revolutions. The protestors focused on the sectarian dimension in Hezbollah’s actions, such as supporting the protests in Bahrain and denying them in Syria and adopting the official version of events. As for the Hamas movement, its neutrality during the crisis has led to the protest movement abstaining from criticizing it or raising slogans against it. The slogans directed at Hamas and the head of its political bureau were limited to requests to support the revolution and to rupture relations with the existing regime. As for the occupied Golan, the

²⁰ From the testimonial of Raja’ al-Nasir, Secretary of the Coordination Committee, which was presented at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha on September 12, 2011.

²¹ The Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change: the text of the agreement between the National Coordination Committee and the National Council, December 31, 2011, <http://www.ncsyria.com/news.php?action=show&id=369>

protestors' slogans –especially in the regions of al-Qadam, al-Hajr al-Aswad, and Judeidat Artuz, which contain a significant population that was displaced from the Golan after the 1967 war –were centered on popular accusations against the political regime of failing to liberate the Golan²², and of neglecting the human and living conditions of the displaced; a line that was also reiterated in a number of Syrian cities such as Hama, Deir al-Zur, and Idlib.²³ This direction was supported by a tendency –especially on the Internet- to highlight articles and statements of some Israeli officials expressing Israeli concerns vis-à-vis the fall of the regime in Syria and of Israel losing the stability and calm that had been “provided” by the Syrian regime on the Golan Front (in reality, those Israeli positions were expressions of fear from the chaos that might ensue and that could be exploited by Jihadi Islamist movements, and not fear from the policy of the coming regime). Thus, the protestors accused the regime of instrumentalist exploitation of the central Arab causes on the domestic scene, especially the Palestinian cause, with the regime acknowledging –in the midst of the crisis- the Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, logistically facilitating the crossing of the borders by dozens of Palestinian and Syrian youth at the occupied Golan, and focusing the media attention on this event as an attempt to steer media attention away from the continuing repression of domestic popular protests. An interview of Rami Makhlouf by the New York Times²⁴, in which he linked Israel's security to the security of the regime in Syria, contributed in galvanizing the popular position against what was seen as the myth of the rejectionist and resistant regime.

Furthermore, rudimentary popular comparisons –apparent in the slogans and banners of the protestors- accused the regime of practicing “brutal repression” which exceeded Israeli practices in the occupied territories, which reflected the enshrined hostile view of Israel in the popular memory and the collective popular consciousness. However, these remained broad expressions without the emergence of clear positions, especially with the deviation of the slogans of the protestors –due to the escalating confrontation and the rising repression of the regime- toward demands of Western intervention, especially the slogans of “the no-fly zone” and “the buffer zones”. Thus, there is a concern of a psychological shift in the Syrian popular perspective regarding these national causes, such as the right to resistance, the cause of Palestine, and others. This is due to the

²² Numerous video clips uploaded by Syrian activists on Facebook reflected the popular mockery of the positioning of army units in Syrian cities, with slogans such as “to the Golan, to the Golan.”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcbGoq-7AoY&feature=player_embedded

²³ The following clip shows a massive demonstration raising banners that read: “the Golan was lost due to the regime's complicity and not because of Palestine”, see on the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UI8QMcFiOE>

²⁴ “Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to ‘the End’”, *New York Times*, May 10, 2011
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhlouf.html?_r=3&pagewanted=1&hp

regime's attempts in exploiting these causes to prop up its own political legitimacy which was undermined by the persistence of systemic repression, in addition to the opposition's discourse and the confusion of its concepts regarding these causes, as well as its amenability to concessions, in the context of a limited understanding of international support –which should be for a just cause, which is the cause of democracy, and should not be linked to other causes and battles. This potential collective psychological effect is a result of a propagandistic policy that presented just causes as part and parcel of despotism; along the lines of that which took place in some Eastern European countries, where hostile trends emerged against central causes that used to be adopted by communist regimes in their political discourse.

Conclusion:

It could be said that the positions of the Syrian opposition in the last decade, especially after the American occupation of Iraq, became unclear and marred by confusion regarding the central Arab causes, while the same opposition factions used to adopt radical positions vis-à-vis these questions. The opposition began to offer positive or negative reactions toward these causes based on the antagonism with the regime, without focusing on popular opinion, which did not disown the just causes that were historically adopted by the existing political regime in its discourse. The opposition also approached these crucial issues without giving due attention to the complex Syrian reality and to Syria's strategic weight, especially that whoever desires to rule Syria will be forced to deal with this reality and this significance.

After the flaring of the revolution, many of the traditional opposition parties were quick to offer unconditional concessions on the central national causes. The opposition, believing that foreign intervention to impose no-fly zones had become imminent, began to see inspiration in the image of Iraq in 1991 or the Libyan scenario. It appears that this behavior goes beyond mere pragmatism to reflect a methodical behavioral pattern by some factions that have been active abroad for a very long time, and that lack the democratic and nationalist mindset that is capable of imagining the building of national identity on the bases of citizenship and belonging to the committed 'state of citizens', while preserving the dimension of Arab identity and of identification with central Arab causes, especially the Palestinian cause.

The Syrian revolution is waging a battle of life or death to overthrow despotism. The length of the battle and the regime's ferocity in defending itself have allowed the

introduction of strategic, international, and regional factors, due to Syria's strategic weight. This has opened the space to debating these issues; and just as the politically organized Syrian opposition is required to remain firm in its posture toward the regime until its overthrow and the emergence of democracy, it is also required to liberate itself from its shallow foreign discourse. This organized political opposition was not a reason for the outbreak of the popular revolution, nor was it instrumental in the persistence of the revolution and its achievement of the goal of bringing down the regime; focusing on combating despotism and achieving democratic change are, alone, sufficient factors to garner the sympathy of Arab public opinion and international opinion in democratic states. This should be the motivator for the launching of positions that support the Syrian revolution, and it is a must to warn against the attempt to gain support by offering concessions on central causes, for that would enshrine a negative popular culture toward these causes in a manner that does not benefit Syria's historical role and strategic weight –regardless of the regime that is in power.