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## **The State of the Syrian Opposition**

Joel Daniel Parker

The latest round of deadly confrontation between Syrian security forces and increasingly emboldened protesters has focused attention on a long-ignored subject: Syria's political opposition. For the better part of three decades, following the decapitation of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, opposition to the Asad regimes was able to operate only outside of Syria. In recent years, however, this began to change, and organized opposition surfaced. In 2005, most of the country's anti-regime factions, from radical socialists to radical Islamists, joined in issuing the Damascus Declaration, which called for the implementation of democracy and the attainment of political rights by the Syrian public, including freedom of speech.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the publicity accorded to the Damascus Declaration internationally, the authorities arrested and harassed its signatories, including its female president, Dr. Fida'a Hawrani.

At first glance, this was just a passing episode. But recent weeks have proven otherwise. While the voices of opposition do not always harmonize, they have managed to break the regime's façade of absolute control and send the government scrambling to contain the fallout.

The recent civil revolts in other Arab countries have undoubtedly stimulated the Syrian opposition movement into action. Its main factions can be identified according to three overlapping categories. Firstly, there are those who want religious and intellectual freedom, either because they

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<sup>1</sup> <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm>

want more religion in public life, or because they want to eliminate state support for ‘official’ religion. The regime accuses these activists of being part of a “Wahhabist” organization or, conversely, part of a Western-Zionist plot. Secondly, there are those who want economic reform, either to better distribute the country's wealth, or to better support entrepreneurship in Syria. This group is accused of being, alternatively, communist or capitalist-inspired. Thirdly, there are those who want to change the ethnic-sectarian status quo in Syria. Such activists are usually either part of the Sunni Arab majority who are tired of ‘Alawi-minority rule, or part of another minority group who are seeking to improve their lot. They are generally condemned as ‘sectarian’— which is also what the Sunni majority brands the Asad regime.

Throughout the rule of the ‘populist-authoritarian’ Ba‘th Party, which took power in 1963, the government has promised to meet the people’s demands, but has taken harsh measures to limit public dissent, for example, through the so-called ‘Emergency Laws,’ which override constitutional freedoms. Accordingly, both secular and religious dissidents have been dealt with harshly. The Ba‘th regime’s confrontation with Islamist radicals since its earliest days was characterized by extreme violence, culminating in a clash that destroyed the old quarter of Hama in 1982, and killed many thousands of Syrians. Concurrently, numerous intellectuals were arrested, tortured, and imprisoned for lengthy terms.

Due to the ideological diversity of the Syrian opposition activists and years of necessary secrecy, new leaders are generally required to have at least one of the following credentials to muster support: strong family or tribal connections that go back to the pre-Ba‘th era, a long history of consistent opposition to the Ba‘th regime, and more recently, a significant presence in the blogosphere, or extensive contacts in a social network like Facebook.

Today, Syrian women such as Suhair Atassi and Fida’a Hawrani represent a new generation of political activists willing to take grave personal risks to advance their cause. Coming from families with a strong pre-Ba‘th history and possessing nationalist credentials going back to the French mandate period, they have the resources and the reputation necessary to carry out significant political work. For example, Hawrani, the president of the Damascus Declaration group, is the daughter of Akram Hawrani (1911-1996), a central figure in the early Ba‘th Party. This new generation of activists is supported, and sometimes joined, by men from an earlier generation, such as Riad Turk, head of the outlawed People’s Democratic Party, who went from being a hard-line communist

to a democrat who even embraces the Muslim Brotherhood in his political activism against the regime.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, those regime opponents who reside abroad and, who either worked at one time for the regime, or, were tolerated by it, have failed to gain the trust of the "inside" opposition. For example, ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam, the former Ba‘thist vice president of Syria, formed the National Liberation Front in exile in 2005 after he broke with the regime. The Front was formed as an alliance between Khaddam and Ali Bayanouni, the London-based leader of the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, but was dissolved in 2007.<sup>3</sup>

Within the Syrian opposition, there is a debate about how much of Ba‘th Party ideology should be discarded. A central Ba‘th slogan is “(Arab) Unity, Freedom (from imperialism), Socialism” (*wahda, hurriya, ishtirakiyya*). The first principle is considered the most controversial. Although all of the Damascus Declaration members oppose Syria’s oppression of the Kurds and religious minorities, for example, the populist tone of the declaration itself seems to embrace the Arab nationalism of the *ancien régime*. By contrast, an opposition figure who is liked in Washington, Ammar Abulhamid, has argued that instead of Arab nationalism, “the core values of Syrian society should be rule of law and respect for basic human rights.”<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, such universal values do not resonate inside Syria as much as they do in Western capitals. Indeed, it is more likely that an orthodox Sunni Muslim opinion criticizing the Asad regime for its heterodox ‘Alawi faith or decrying immorality in the country would find ready support on the Syrian street.<sup>5</sup>

One factor enabling the opposition to function more coherently has been its access to new means of communication, such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and mobile phone instant messaging (SMS). Although these new means have been able to mobilize the youth, the government has not shied away from suppressing those who go over the line with such devices. For example, despite garnering a negative image abroad, the

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<sup>2</sup> March 2005 Interview with Joe Pace, <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/10/riad-al-turk-interviewed-by-joe-pace.htm>; and with Joshua Landis that same month, <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/03/riad-al-turk-interview-11-march-2005.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8864>

<sup>4</sup> Ammar Abulhamid, “Syria: Mobilizing the Opposition, March, 2006”, Ch. 7, pp. 85-92 in Jeffrey Azarva, Danielle Pletka, and Michael Rubin Eds *Dissent and Reform in the Arab World: Empowering Democrats*, American Enterprise Institute, Washington D.C., 2008. [http://www.aei.org/docLib/20080818\\_DissentandReform.pdf](http://www.aei.org/docLib/20080818_DissentandReform.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Such as can be seen in the recent statement by Salafi opposition activist Abu Basir al-Tartusi, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/5174.htm>.

regime imprisoned 19-year old Tal Mallouhi, who blogged against its Palestine policies. In advance of the proclaimed “Day of Rage” on March 15, 2011, a widespread internet campaign called on young people to take to the streets and demand their freedom. In addition, the campaign called for subversive graffiti writing. It was the latter that triggered the arrest of youths in the southeastern city of Dar‘aa. This sparked a wave of spontaneous protests, followed by government crackdowns, and the subsequent unrest which has not abated.

Local Syrians have been uploading videos to YouTube with content ranging from an instance of a civilian man assaulting police officers, to footage of Suhair Atassi’s political forum meeting in Damascus. Oppositionists view any political action caught on camera as worthy of uploading. It is important to note that the opposition is seeking Western support for a *Syrian* opposition movement, and they want to avoid appearing as Syrians supporting a *Western* one. Hundreds of videos expressing general discontent with the regime are now helping disaffected Syrians find each other.

Facebook posts from Suhair Atassi and dozens of other activists have become more forthright since Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution.” This trend reveals that romanticism is giving way to hard facts. For example, neatly designed posters with quaint slogans about the future are increasingly replaced by inflammatory videos of protests in Damascus and peripheral cities. Atassi’s Facebook page is a window onto the dynamic Syrian-based opposition. Atassi abruptly stopped posting shortly after the March 15<sup>th</sup> demonstrations, after she was arrested along with 32 activists including nine women.<sup>6</sup> Atassi’s mother was able to raise the funds to release her and 30 of the others on bail on April 3<sup>rd</sup>; their imprisonment and release added further momentum to the opposition.<sup>7</sup> Renewed Facebook activity of such activists reveals a tone of urgency and, simultaneously, forces the regime to choose between allowing dissent and showing its harsh face to the world.

More than violence, imprisonment, and use of the secret service, controlling the media has generally proven to be the Syrian regime’s most effective means of oppression. The lack of reliable information has pervaded Syrian political culture, creating a situation where the government can convince the masses of any number of common threats,

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<sup>6</sup> *Agence France Presse*, “Jailed Syrian activists on hunger strike,” March 19, 2011,

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=251963>

<sup>7</sup> *Gulf News*, “Freed Al Atassi swears by rights fight,” April 5, 2011,

<http://gulfnews.com/news/region/syria/freed-al-atassi-swears-by-rights-fight-1.787622>

with the recent protests and deaths falling into Bashar al-Asad's stock category of a 'foreign plot.' However, this situation is slowly changing, in part, because the internet provides access to more information that is now not only coming from foreign (and therefore suspicious) sources, but also from local Syrians on the ground who witness events as they happen and record them immediately. This new wave of locally based information has provided some of the necessary credibility to move the protesters to the streets from Dar'aa to Duma, and adds new imagery and intensity to the Syrian opposition movement.

*Joel Daniel Parker is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate School of Historical Studies at Tel Aviv University.*

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