

SYRIA'S NEW POLITICAL PLAYER

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The Syrian uprising came as a total surprise to all Syrians: the government, the opposition, and also the very people who started the uprising. In February this year, a French blogger asked me if the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions could spread to Syria. I replied with confidence, “no!” and gave six reasons why they could not. Those reasons included sectarian sensitivity, the economic situation in Syria, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. But the first and foremost reason was fear. I said that the degree of fear among the Syrian people was so high that the people would not even consider a revolution. I was stupidly wrong. The people broke the fear.

The uprising took the Syrian opposition by surprise. Contrary to most countries, the regime and the opposition in Syria do not have competing political views. In fact, they have long shared the same ideology, platforms, and social background. Most political parties in Syria come from two traditional parties: the Baath Party and the Communist Party. Through cell division, these two parties produced about a dozen others that share the same political views and ideology, but divided between the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF) and the opposition.

When the uprising broke out, the Syrian opposition was loitering in the backyard of the political scene. The major opposition coalition, the Damascus Declaration (DD), was suffering several problems. In 2008, twelve of its leaders were imprisoned for 30 months. The nationalist (pan-Arab) and Marxist parties suspended their membership and activities in the coalition. Even worse, when the DD leaders were released in 2010, they did not resume their responsibilities in the coalition. The nationalist-leftist parties were in no better shape. When they pulled out of the DD, observers said it was because they could not obtain a seat in the coalition command. Others blamed them for quitting the group when the government was cracking down on it, as if they were fleeing a sinking ship. The Muslim Brothers were also suffering from many difficulties: they did not have many supporters inside Syria, since under Law 49 any member of the group could be sentenced to death. In addition, their image was blemished in 2008 when they announced a truce with the Syrian regime, because of the Syrian position regarding the Israeli war on Gaza at that time.

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The government was also taken by surprise. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal on 31st January 2011, President Bashar al-Assad said that the protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen would not find their way to his country, as his anti-American positions and confrontation with Israel had left him in better shape with the grassroots in his nation.

“Syria is stable. Why?” President Assad said. “Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence... you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances.”

Things did not go this way. In January and February, a group of young men and women started to meet in cafes, homes and public places to ask one question: can we do the same in Syria? If the Tunisians could revolt in Tunisia, they argued, there was no reason why Syrians could not do the same, as in many aspects Tunisia was, similar to Syria, a police state.

The first calls for a sit-in in front of the Parliament on 5th February failed. The brave young men and women then started to organise sit-ins at the Egyptian and the Libyan embassies to express solidarity with the revolutions in both countries. If we can believe one activist, what made her resolutely persist in the uprising was a slap that she got from a security man when she was demonstrating at the Libyan embassy against the Gaddafi regime.¹ However, the revolution did not start in Damascus. It started elsewhere. On 6th March, the Syrian security arrested and tortured a bunch of school kids for spraying graffiti on walls in the city of Daraa (South) calling for toppling the regime. When the security forces refused to release them, the entire city took to the streets. The regime responded by shooting demonstrators, killing a number of them. The spark spread to other cities and towns, while the entire world watched in surprise.

The demonstrations started out peacefully, as one decent researcher puts it.² All the social, cultural, and political parties took part. The slogans were general, calling for freedom and national reform. But the demonstrators felt that their battle was not on the ground only, but also in the media. The government also knew that, so it expelled all the foreign media from the country.³ The government media portrayed the demonstrators as sectarian thugs who wanted to create chaos and establish an Islamic state. It is from the very need of the demonstrators to reach out to the media that a new phenomenon arose on the ground: the *tanseeqiat*, a word that would, thereafter, refer to groups of

1. Marwa Ghamian, a female activist from Damascus who has revealed her experience in the Syrian uprising on her page on Facebook.

2. Hassan Abbas, the Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria, the Arab Reform Initiative Website: <http://www.arab-reform.net/spip.php?article5080>.

3. For the entire LCC statement, see the LCC's Website: <http://www.lccsyria.org>.

young activists who participate in the demonstrations, document them via mobile phone, and reach out to the media. These small groups of activists that were spread across the country needed to coordinate their efforts, to exchange information, and find the best ways to reach out to the media. It was then that the tanseeqiat combined their efforts into a broader group and called themselves the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), which would become a major player on the ground, contributing to organising demonstrations, coordinating the efforts of the activists, exchanging information through a newsroom that they set up on Skype, and then reaching out to the media with news, videos, and eye witnesses to narrate the events on the ground.

LCC activists found themselves without legitimate fathers for their political activity. That was a strong justification for them to develop their own political position which would both support the revolutionary activities and sustain their political demands. With the LCC's first statement⁴ in April, the Syrian revolutionary movement would enter a new phase. The statement would draw up a simple political agenda which called for stopping the killing, releasing all political prisoners, forming an independent investigation commission, disbanding the disreputable security forces, creating a special commission for reconciliation among all elements of the Syrian nation, and amending the constitution to guarantee free elections.


The statement dumbfounded the government and the traditional opposition: the former rushed to silence the newly-born creature, through a cruel campaign of arrests and torture; the latter started to work seriously to develop a political platform that would enclose the dramatic developments. But the LCC would find itself on more than one occasion obliged to take further steps in performing, itself, the role of a political player. The first instance was to limit calls here and there to arm the revolution or seek foreign intervention. Although the revolution has been peaceful in most aspects, there was some diminutive tendency to use violence against security forces and the so-called shabeeha (paramilitary thugs who are affiliated with the government), and some fear that this violence would become sectarian. Therefore, an anti-violence position was greatly needed, and the LCC found itself obliged to adopt a political attitude cautioning against such a threat. Another example was the question of dialogue with the regime, which had started to meet individuals from the opposition and find out if there were possibilities for talks. The opposition was divided on the issue, and started to exchange accusations, without, however, defending their views. The LCC again had to jump in and develop a perspective on the issue. On 15th May, the LCC issued a statement in which it explained its position vis-à-vis dialogue with the government. The statement read that "stopping the security solution immediately and starting a political process is a must, provided that four

4. The Syrian authorities also arrested some of them for a while, including Suleiman al Khalidi, a Reuters correspondent.

conditions are met: to end the killing and violence, release prisoners, allow peaceful demonstration, and allow the media to cover the uprising in Syria." These four conditions would become the common ground for all stances of the different opposition groups whenever they spoke about dialogue with the government.

Meanwhile, the traditional political players were arguing over almost everything: dialogue or no dialogue, reform or toppling the regime, internal opposition vs. opposition in exile. At the same time, the demonstrators on the streets were moving in all directions, and the masses were losing active members in thousands to death and in tens of thousands to prison and torture. The masses were calling for a political umbrella to deflect part of the heavy responsibility from the street. The LCC was working with the political opposition to unify their efforts around a roadmap for a transitional period. As part of their efforts, the LCC developed its "vision" (published 11th June). The opposition has to admit that the LCC's vision has not been matched in depth or inclusiveness by any opposition group or even by the opposition as a whole. The LCC's vision saw two paths out of the crisis: the first was peaceful negotiations that would move the country into democracy; the second was the extension of violence against the people, which would lead to the loss of the country and to the sacrifice of Syria for the sake of maintaining an "immoral regime." According to the vision, the ball is in the regime's court and the choice is in its hands. If the regime chooses the second path, it will be responsible for the results including internationalisation of the crisis and possible foreign intervention. The statement said that the first goal of the revolution was to "change the regime in Syria, and, as the first step, to end the mandate of the current president, who is now politically and legally responsible for the crimes committed by his regime against the Syrian people." The LCC called for a national conference, whose focus would be the transition of the country to a democratic and pluralistic state based on freedom and equality. The task of this conference would be to ensure a peaceful and safe transition to avert a violent collapse. The transitional period should not exceed six months, and during this time a transitional council composed of civilians and military personnel will lead the transition to a new Syria through a number of political and legislative reforms. The new Syria will be a republic and a civil state that belongs to all Syrians, and "not to an individual, family or party."

The LCC will now take on the mission of helping to find a united umbrella for the political opposition. At that time, the revolutionaries had lost (either to death or to detention) the elite of their leaders: the most educated, tolerant, civic, and well-mannered activists. Only as an example, I will point out one person: Ghayath Matar, who led a campaign in his town, Daraya, near Damascus, to provide each soldier of the Army troops who were occupying his town with a rose and a bottle of water. Ghayath was later arrested and tortured to death. The new leaders of the demonstrators on the



ground do not necessarily have the same tolerance, patience, and open-mindedness. There was serious fear that the revolution can slither into sectarian hatred and abomination. A political endeavour was immeasurably needed to reduce the responsibility of the street and share the moral and political load which the populace has been carrying so far. Here also, the LCC has played a remarkable role in bringing different parts of the opposition together, whether inside the country or in exile. Many others were also working in the same direction, and the result is the Syrian National Council (SNC), founded in Istanbul. Many would argue that the Syrian people deserve better than the SNC, but many others argue that it is the best the Syrians have right now, and blame the lack of eloquent, adept leaders in the five decades of despotism which the Baath Party has imposed on Syria.

A Sketch of the Current Situation of the Syrian Opposition

One can draw a quick sketch of the current Syrian opposition as follows:

- The hard-line opposition represented now by the SNC, which embraces the Damascus Declaration, the Muslim Brothers and other Islamists, a group of liberal intellectuals and academicians, and the Local Coordination Committees. The SNC's goal is to topple the regime and build a democratic state. It refuses talks with the regime, and, as it says, would only negotiate the regime's departure. When the Arab League reached a resolution on Syria, the SNC rejected it and called on the Arab League to suspend Syria's membership and recognise the SNC as a representative of the Syria people. Although the Muslim Brothers and Damascus Declaration have experienced leaders, the majority of the people on the SNC lack such experience, eloquence, charm and charisma to lead the street.
- The moderate opposition represented mainly by the so-called National Coordination Board (NCB), a coalition of nationalist and Marxist parties. The NCB does not call for toppling the political regime but rather for toppling the corrupted security system.⁵ In principle, the NCB is not against talking to the government but says that the latter has to meet certain conditions before that.⁶ And if we can take the Arab League initiative as a criterion, it is important to say that the NCB has accepted it and called on the government to do the same.
- Yet another newly-born current can be classified in this category: Building the State Current, which believes that the Syrian civil democratic state is not "a settlement formula to compensate for any previous political injustice towards particular groups or parties, but a Syrian constituent agreement for the realisation of justice and equality among all Syrian citizens with no exception."⁷

5. Both regime and system have one equivalent in Arabic: nizam.

6. The conditions are the same as the LCC demands in its 22nd April statement.

7. <http://binaa-syria.com/B/en/content/building-syrian-state-current>.

• On both sides there are, as one can imagine in such times, many voices that fall to the left or to the right of these forces. To the left of the SNC, one finds a number of individuals and small groups that are scattered across the universe from Australia to Sweden. To the right of the NCB is a cluster of individuals and a group of people who have benefited from the regime and are now trying to find a mid-way compromise with it. Of them we can mention MP Mohamad Habash, the head of the so-called Third Path; Qadri Jamil, a wealthy communist leader, who calls for the unity of communists and the return of the Soviet Union; and Ali Haidar, the head of a faction of the Syrian National Socialist Party, who has forgotten to call for the unity of Syria and is now working hard to help the regime find an exit from its suffocating crisis.

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