

**THE SOCIAL OPPOSITION MOVEMENT IN SYRIA: THE ASSAD REGIME
IN THE CONTEXT OF REFORM AND REVOLUTION**

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ABSTRACT

Although the Sunni Arabs were the primary social group calling into question the reform demands through the massive protests on March 17, the Alawis (Nusayris) Arabs have been the primary group protecting the regime. The Syrian opposition alone does not have enough force to overthrow the regime, yet the regime was able to suppress the riot through military measures. Despite the fact that Bashar al-Assad frequently talks about the reform initiatives, civil casualties have been increasing as a result of the use of excessive force against protesters, which may bring about a long-lasting tension among the different sects and religions in Syria. In this context, this study will focus on the social opposition movement and analyze the future of the Assad regime in Syria.

Key words: Syria, Assad Regime, Ihvan Movement, Alawis, Revolution, Reform.

**SURİYE’DE TOPLUMSAL DİRENİŞ HAREKETLERİ: REFORM VE
DEVİRİM BAĞLAMINDA ESSAD REJİMİ**

ÖZET

Suriye’de reform talebinde bulunan en baştaki grup Sunni Araplar iken Nusayriiler ise sistemi korumaya çalışan grubu oluşturmaktadır. Suriyedeki muhalif grubun gücü rejimi düşürmek için yeterli değildir. Tam tersine rejim, muhalefeti askeri önlemlerle bastırmaktadır. Her ne kadar Essad ülkede rahatsızlıkları önlemek için reform yapacağını iddia etse de her geçen gün sivil kaybı daha da artmaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma, Suriye’deki muhalif hareketi ve Essad rejiminin geleceğini analiz edecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Suriye, Essad Rejimi, İhvan Hareketi, Aleviler, Devrim, Reform.

Introduction

A new hope was raised for the implementation of the political and economic reforms in Syria when Bashar al-Assad came to power. Assad, who received medical education in ophthalmology in London, appeared to be a modern leader in the eyes of the Syrian people; indeed, he underscored the importance of democracy and reforms in his first speech as Syria’s

president. In his first speech to the Syrian Parliament, Bashar al-Assad emphasized the need to carry out reforms in the economic sector, struggle against the corruption, and improve democratic values as well as the importance of respecting the rights of the individual. Moreover, he stated that a number of rights and freedoms, such as those related to elections, the press, and expression, are the result of democracy and that the Syrian people also have to improve their own democracy according to their traditions and experiences.

However, the regime supporters thought that the opposition was taking steps that would lead to the demolition of the system as a whole after February 2001; fearing that the opposition was out of control in this sense, regime supporters decided to take action in order to interfere in the calls for reform and launch an arrest campaign against the opposition. At the beginning of the attacks against the opposition leaders on February 2001, the expectations related to reform also started to change. Although the reformists were suppressed, the ideas they put forward were adopted by the other parties as well and, in 2011, the issue was brought into question once again. The ongoing uprisings in Syria first started in Damascus in an effort to focus attention on the problem of the political detainees. The subsequent uprising emerging in Daraa appeared to be a bigger problem, launching criticism against the existence of the Ba'ath regime.

The Socio-Economic Structure of Syria

The Syrian society is heterogeneous in terms of its ethnical, religious, and sectional composition. This heterogeneity is based on the fact that throughout its history the country has hosted different religious groups, peoples, and ethnic clusters. For example, during the age of the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the area of contemporary Syria was the main center of Eastern Christianity and subsequently the epicenter of the first Muslim Omayyad Empire. Following the age of the Omayyad, the Christians in Syria maintained their existence during the Abbasid, Seljuk, Mameluk, and Ottoman periods. In this context, the primary minorities consisted of Alawi, Druze, Ismaili, and various Christian groups. Therefore, both Muslims and Christians were divided into quite different groups (Antoun, 1991: 2-12).

Although it is not possible to have correct and explicit information concerning the percentages of the ethnic and religious groups in Syria today, which has a population of 23 million in 2011, we can reach some results by means of the censuses and data of the past. According to the Syrian writer Husni Mahalli, "15% of the Syrian population is Alawi, 6-7% Druze, 12-13% Christian and the rest is Sunni. And the 10-12 % of the Sunnis is Kurdish, 1-2% is Turkmen and the rest is Arab. A great majority of the Arabs are originally Syrian and

some are of Palestine origins” (Mahalli, 2011). According to Mahalli’s calculations, Sunni Arabs account for less than 50% of the population in the country while the Alawis are the most important minority group in the country. In 1947, the population of the country was 3,043,310: Sunnis numbered 2,040,908, Alawis 447,993, Druzes 96,641, Maronites 14,133, Orthodox Rums 144,517, Orthodox Armenians 104,923, Catholic Rums 49,543 (in 1950 52,000), Jews 30,873, Nestorians (the Eastern Church) 9,630, Catholic Armenians 17,493 (in 1950 18,500), and Catholic Arabs 17,613 as well as other minorities totaling approximately 100,000 (Protestant-Yazidis, Assyrian-European Catholics) (Monroe, 1954:466; Baer, 1962:108-117). As the data from 1947 indicate, various societies emerged from every group. In a study about Syria published in the US in 1965, the Sunni population was 72%, the Alawis 11%, and the Ismailis 1%. The percentage of Christians in the entire population was deemed to be 12% (Perlmutter, 1969:829).

As previously stated, the current population of Syria is about 23 million. The ethnic dispersion within this population—although not clear in proportional terms—may be as follows: Alawis 11-12%, Ismailis 1.5%, Druzes 3-5%, Christians 14-15%. The population of the Sunni groups during the 1950s was about 67-70%; this proportion is not thought to have undergone significant changes since then. The Sunnis include the Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Caucasians, and some other small groups. The proportion of the Kurds in the whole population is estimated to be 10-12%. Although no clear information exists about the general population of Turkmen, they have a considerable population in Golan, around Lazkiye, and in Aleppo and Damascus. For example, 20 kilometers west of Damascus is a Turkmen village called Kaldi. The local people stated that the village has existed in these territories since the pre-Ottoman era (Interview: 2008). Based on current estimates, Sunni Arabs are thought to constitute approximately 52-57% of the population (United Nations Population Fund, 2011).

Another important feature of the demographic structure of Syria is the increasing population and unemployment. The population growth rate of the Sunni Arabs and Kurds has reached its highest level while it remains proportionally low for Christians, Druzes, and Alawis. In addition to educational factors, the fact that monogamy is an adopted perception among these groups is thought to cause such a low population growth rate. The population growth rate in Syria is 2.7%, which is higher than the world’s average. Syria has a dynamic and young population, with 15- to 24-year-olds constituting 36.3% of the entire population. Syria’s young population structure brings about some challenges related to employment and creating new business sectors. Although some initiatives have recently been enacted to decrease—in a controlled way—the state’s control of the economy, the per capita income is

about US\$2,400. The monthly income of a doctor or engineer working in a public institution is about US\$200-300. According to IMF data, the official unemployment rates were 8.4% in 2010. However, the real unemployment rate is claimed to be as high as 50%. Every year 320,000 people must be offered new employment possibilities to keep the unemployment rates at the same level. This figure imposes the need that new employment possibilities must be created for 604,000 people in 2035.

From The Socialist Republic to The Arab Kingdom: The Bashar Assad Period in Syria

Before Hafez Assad died in June 2000, no important discussion took place about the government change in Syria. Despite the existence of distinguished notions in the Baath ideology and preamble of the Syrian Constitution, such as socialism, union, freedom, public power, and public democracy, it was well known that the ophthalmologist Bashar Assad—who was brought back from London just after the death of Basil Assad, the elder son of Hafez Assad, in a suspicious traffic accident in 1994—would be elected as the new Syrian president. However, the second article of the Syrian Constitution clearly states that the regime of the state was a republic and Syria had put a revolutionary policy into practice. On June 10, a couple of hours after the death of Hafez Assad, the Syrian Assembly gathered to amend the 83rd article of the Constitution, dropping the minimum age required to be elected as the head of state from 40 to 34. During the Assembly meeting, which was broadcast on live on a public TV channel, Deputy Mundhir Al Mawsili stood up to protest the amendment and stated that there was no need for such a constitutional amendment. However, Mawsili's protest was ignored by the majority, and on the following day *Tishreen*, the newspaper published by the Syrian State, wrote that the amendment had been adopted by a majority vote (Kedar, 2005:245). Three days after the constitutional amendment, in accordance with the 84th article of the Constitution, the Regional Command of the Arab Socialist Baath Party nominated Bashar Assad as a candidate for the head of state, and the assembly held a referendum on this candidacy (Yale Law School Press, 2011). In the elections, in which just one candidate participated, Bashar Assad was elected as the second Syrian president with the surname Assad with 97.29% of the votes.

The election of Bashar Assad not only caused the rise of constitutional problems in Syria, but also accompanied an ideological debate. During the period of the Baath regime, Syria blamed many Arab countries for having traditional kingdoms and regimes, suggesting that the Baath government was revolutionary and socialist. However, some newspapers bound

to the regime defined Bashar Assad as the new “Caliph” before he was elected, and the Republic witnessed a power change from father to son, which caused reactions among some Syrians (Kedar, 2005:245). A short time after Bashar Assad’s election, these critics also contributed to the foundation of an opposition wave seeking to establish a democratic system in Syria. Certain families and foundations preserved their authority in this establishment of power in Syria with the election of Bashar Assad, such as the Assad family, including Mahir Assad, the brother of Bashar Assad, Asif Sevket, the husband of Bashar Assad’s sister Busra and the head of the military intelligence, and Rami and Ihab Makhoulf, sons of Bashar’s uncle. Although Asif Sevket is an important name in the intelligence domain, the Makhoulf family is distinguished as an important force in the Syrian regime with their wealth of more than US\$3 billion. The Makhoulf family manages Syriatel, the banking and free-trade region on the border with Lebanon, as well as the duty-free shops in the customs zone.

In addition, an important part of the illegal smuggling business has been carried out by the Makhoulf family. The Shaleesh family, who are cousins of Bashar Assad on the paternal side, has significant influence on the security units and the commercial domain. Asif Isa Shaleesh and General Dhu Himma Shaleesh, who is responsible for the president’s security, are also important names in this family. Thus, the Makhoulf and Shaleesh families were the focus of critics during the 2011 protests. Other Alawi individuals who play a role in the regime include Nasef Kheir as well as the Khouli, Haydar, Kana’an, Umran, and Duha families. A number of people from these families have considerable influence on the Baath party, security, intelligence, and economic domains (Bar, 2006:381). A large part of these families are members of the Kalabiya tribe, to which Assad is bound as well, which attracts attention. Furthermore, as stated by Cengiz Çandar in his article, in the Syrian regime during Bashar’s period, numerous powerful people are of Alawi-Nusayri origins, including General Abdulfettah Kudsiyya (personal secretary of Bashar Assad); Head of the Air Force Intelligence Cemil Hasan (who replaced Abdulfettah Kudsiyya); Ali Memluk, who is the head of the Muhaberat, and his assistant Zuheyr Hamad; Muhammed Nasif Kheirbek, assistant to the Deputy of President who is responsible for the security affairs (he is also a member of the Kalabiya tribe); Minister of Defense Ali Habib; and General Rüstem Gazali, who was the final commander of the Syrian forces in Lebanon, is directly bound to Bashar Assad, and carried Bashar’s last message to Dera’a (Candar, 2011).

Bashar Assad's Loss of Legitimacy: From The 2000 Damascus Declaration to The 2011 Uprising

The First Opposition Wave: Damascus Spring

Following the death of Hafez Assad, a serious debate process emerged in Syrian society about political reforms. The primary social groups leading these debates on reforms included the intellectuals, intelligentsia, jurists, journalists, non-governmental organizations, and academic society. Although these groups did not have a certain social base, they are important as they performed the ideational leadership of the anti-regime groups. After the death of Hafez al-Assad on June 10, 2000, the Sunni Arabs and Christian leaders were among those who brought forward the demands for reforms, leading the reform initiatives known as "Damascus Spring." The fact that Bashar Assad mentioned democracy and freedoms in his speech on July 17, 2000, was interpreted as support for the movements calling for democratic conversion. A number of parliament members, such as Riyadh Seif, founder of the National Debate Forum, attempted to build a social base regarding the form of the change during meetings held in their own homes. Christian writer Michel Kilo from Homs tried hard to constitute common demands among the groups demanding reforms. Kurds started to discuss the reforms in the organizations that they founded in Al Qamishli. The reform debates launched by the intellectuals provided political change demands within society for the first time since the 1080 events in Syria. In September, the demanders of reforms succeeded for the first time in presenting a reform package signed by 99 people to the attention of the public. The Assad government did not react in a negative way to the September 2000 reform demands, which were signed by different people in society and basically comprised four articles, which was interpreted as a positive development by the reformists. The following demands were included in the communiqué signed by 99 Syrian writers and intellectuals (Leveretti, 2005:91):

- Abolishing the martial rule and state of emergency laws, which had been in force since 1963;

- Granting a general amnesty to all political prisoners, including the returns from exile;

- Guaranteeing the freedoms of meeting, press, and expression by means of legal regulations; and

- Respecting the political, economic, and ideational variety and recognizing civil freedoms.

However, the reform demanders did not call for a presidential election or multi-party political system in their demands. Assad's response to the reform demands was to liberate

about 600 political prisoners in November and, in the following month, close the prison of Mezzeh, which had been for political prisoners. Moreover, newly liberated lawyer Ahkam Naisa was allowed to reopen the Defense Organization of Liberal Freedoms and Human Rights of Syria. The organization named its bulletin "Voice of Democracy" and carried out its first interview with Fatih Jamus, the leader of the Communist Party. Lawyer Halil Matuk, who had signed the communiqué of 99, founded the Organization of Human Rights and started to organize several activities related to social democratic reforms (Kedar, 2005: 245).

In parallel with all these developments, in January 2001, parliamentarian Riad Seif announced that they had made the formal applications to the concerned authorities for the establishment of the party known as the Social Peace Movement. Seif stated that the party was based on a liberal and nationalist philosophy. Within the same month, a newspaper published in Lebanon printed a notice signed by 1,000 Syrians. The most important demands in the notice were demands for political freedoms, principles of separation of powers, and transition to a multi-party system. Unlike the previous notice, the fact that presidential elections had been indirectly brought forward the demands list in 2001 was noteworthy. In addition, for the first time, many segments of society demanded the creation of an alternative civil society and a political zone outside of state control (George, 2003:182-186). In response to the notice, the government declared that the emergency law had been frozen. In February, journalist Ali Ferzad stated that he was allowed to publish a weekly journal entitled "Ad Dumari."

However, the regime supporters thought that the opposition was taking steps that could lead to the demolition of the system as a whole after February 2001 and that the opposition was out of control in this sense; therefore, they decided to take action in order to interfere in the calls for reform and launch an arrest campaign against the opposition. At the beginning of the attacks against the opposition leaders in February 2001, the expectations related to reform also started to change. The popular author Nabil Suleiman was attacked by unidentified persons. In March, Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam warned "the non-governmental organizations not to jeopardize the unity of the county" in his well-known declaration. Khaddam added that, "the non-governmental organizations, which would like to hold a meeting, should get permission from the concerned authorities 15 days before." The government started to criticize those seeking the abolishment of the emergency law. Although certain political prisoners were released due to the Pope's visit in May 2001, the non-governmental organizations' attempts to organize meetings in August and September without gaining permission led to strong reactions, and a significant portion of the opponents—

including Riad Seif, Nizar Naif, Riad Turk, and Mamun Hamsi—were arrested and brought under control of the civil opposition (Dean, 2003:1020). Meanwhile, the non-governmental organizations that organized forums with broad participation during the Damascus Spring were closed, and meetings of opposition groups were not allowed either. The Committee for the Revival of Civil Society and Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue carried out regular meetings, where reforms were actively discussed, during this period as well. Hundreds of people participated in the meetings, which were regularly organized on a monthly or weekly basis, and they discussed reforms and transitions (Landis-Pace, 2007:45-68). All of these were closed by the regime forces as well, and arrest operations against those who participated in the aforesaid meetings were organized. Dr. Kamal al-Labwani, the founder of the Syrian Liberal Democratic Union, took part in the meetings carried out in Türk's, Kilo's, and Seif's houses and was also among those arrested because of their speeches (Ayhan, 2011).

Thus, the first reform wave was ended through the consolidation of Bashar Assad's power. Nonetheless, all of these events also caused Bashar Assad to lose his legitimacy and trust in the people asking for reform. As a result, the Syrian opposition started to claim that Assad was not reformist and that he had the same administrative mentality as his father Hafez Assad. The fact that a transition on the institutional basis did not take place in the Syrian regime after Bashar Assad took office as the head of state indicated that the regime would not be able to democratize. As the military and intelligence structures carried on their oppressions on the Syrian society, individuals closer to the regime made further use of the economic revelation as well.

The Second Opposition Wave

The second reform wave in Syria appeared when the U.S. criticized the policies of Iraq and Lebanon in the post-2003 Iraq invasion period. During an interview in Damascus, a Syrian expert stated that, "between 2003 and 2004 Syria really expected a U.S. invasion. Bashar Assad had newly been elected and the elites in Damascus got the idea that the regime would collapse as a result of the U.S. oppression. Under these circumstances, upon the oppression of the European countries such as France, a UN sanction was brought into question. Under these conditions, on one hand while the Syrian regime had to withdraw its soldiers from Lebanon, on the other hand it closed its eyes to calls for reform coming from inside" (Interview, 2008). The increasing international oppression of the Syrian regime led

opposition groups to once again bring calls for political reform within the country into question.

The Assad administration showed a positive approach toward the reform requests, due to the increasing international oppressions. The opposition groups created the National Coordination Committee for Protection and Promotion of Fundamental Freedoms and Human Rights. The Committee for the Revival of Civil Society once again published a notice aimed at opening the dialogue channels among all social groups, including Muslim Brothers. The leading human rights defender of Syria, Suhair Atassi, tried to revive the Jamal al-Atassi Forum once again. The journalist and activist Ali Abdullah announced a letter from the General Secretary of the Muslim Brothers Ali Sadraddin El Beyanuni, sent directly to the public in Damascus, allowing political party activities. Thus, although capital punishment existed, the Muslim Brothers was represented in the public opinion for the first time since 1982. During this period, even the creation of an opposition party in which the Muslim Brothers could also participate was brought into question. In light of the increasing reform requests, the Assad administration emphasized arrest policies and, in May 2005, the administration arrested 11 activists among the Jamal-al Atassi Forum administrators, including 68-year-old journalist and academician Hussein Aludaat, Suhair Atassi, and Ali Abdullah (Arab Commission For Human Rights, 2005). Despite such developments, at the end of 2005, opposition writer Michele Kilo went to Morocco to interview Ihvan Secretary of General, when it was announced that the opposition had settled on four subjects: the principles of democracy, a violent-free opposition, the unity of opposition groups, and democratic transition. In his speech, the Secretary General Beyanuni stated that Michele Kilo was entitled to conduct interviews with the Ba'ath leaders. When international oppression to the Damascus regime increased, opposition groups both harshly criticized the regime with their "Damascus Declaration" published in October 2005 and called for a serious dialogue; they once again brought their requests for political reforms into question. In the declaration, the Ba'ath regime was accused of establishing an authoritarian, totalitarian, and arbitrary administration; in addition, preparing a new constitution, creating a constituent assembly, and carrying out equitable elections were mentioned. The declaration, which was written by Michele Kilo, was also signed by 250 well-known opponents in addition to five opposition parties. The five-page document was also signed by the Syrian Arab Nationalists, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, the Future Party led by Sheikh Nawaf al Bashir, the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society, and the Kurdish Democratic Front in National Democratic Meeting. Signatories included opponents such as Riad Seif, Cevdet Said, Dr. Abdülrezak, Samir el-

Nashar, Dr. Fida Ekrem el-Hurani, Dr. Adil Zakkar, Abdülkerim el-Dahhak, Heysem el-Malihve, and Naif Qaysiyah as well as political parties and non-governmental organizations (Landis, 2005). However, in March 2006 the International Commission of Inquiry into the Hariri Assassination avoided directly accusing the Syrian regime in its second report (Mehlis, 2005), and the policies of the U.S., which was engaged in Iraqi and Iranian problems, once again led the Assad administration to directly turn towards the entire opposition. In March 2006, large-scale arrests once again occurred. Dr. Kamal Lebwni, who was arrested again in November 2005, was sentenced to twelve years in prison in 2007. Michele Kilo and Christian Anwar al-Bunni were arrested in 2006 and were sentenced to five years in prison in 2007. Although some of the declaration signatories had to flee, others were arrested and their political activities were put an end. Thus, the second Damascus Spring, which started in 2005, gave way to the Damascus Winter.

Despite the oppression and arrest policies, the opposition groups reorganized under the name of the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change on December 1, 2007. The opponents, who created a National Council amongst themselves, determined a plan of attack to carry out the reforms they had already put forward. Dr. Fida al Hewrani was elected as president of the National Council, while Abdulhamid Darwish and Abdülaziz Alkhaier were elected as vice presidents, Riad Seif was elected as secretary general, and Amin Obeidi, Nawaf El Beshir, Riad Turk, Suleiman al Shammarve, and Ali Abdullah were elected as members of the executive board (The Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change, 2011).

Shortly after the opponents established the National Council, many members were arrested. A considerable part of the council's administrators arrested in 2008 were sentenced to 2.5 years in prison. In this way, the policy of suppressing all the opposition voices within Syria was carried on (The Syrian Human Rights Committee, 2008). Although the reformists were suppressed, the ideas they put forward were adopted by the other parties as well and, in 2011, the issue was brought into question once again.

2011 Uprising: The Third Opposition Wave and The Future of The Assad Regime

Anti-regime demonstrations started to be organized in February 2011 and culminated in mass participation actions in different regions of the country, including Damascus and Daraa in March, which were carried to a new stage after the troops entered Daraa on April 22. Although the opponents constantly called for mass actions after the Daraa invasion, the

international community—particularly the UN—started to send harsher messages to the Syrian administration to prevent another Hama. As the army directly intervened with the demonstrators, especially in Daraa and Baniyas, the issue was tried to be carried up to the UN Security Council's agenda, and France fervently tried to issue a resolution against the Syrian administration. When the tanks laid siege to Daraa on April 25, because of the different opinions among the Security Council members, which brought the decision-making process into question on April 27, the issue was directed to the UN Human Rights Council. Based on the England's and France's declarations related to the draft resolution, they strongly supported reprobating the regime. In the UN Secretary General's statement made before the conference, the fact that tanks were used against civilian demonstrators was harshly criticized (Malas-Lauria, 2011).

On the other hand, a severe increase was observed in the attacks a short while after the first armed attacks against civilian demonstrators in Daraa, located near the border with Jordan and whose total population is approximately 1 million. As a result of the intervention in the demonstrations organized in major provinces of the country, including Homs, Latakia, Hama, and Damascus, the civilian death toll rose to approximately 700 in the first week of May; hundreds of demonstrators were wounded by rogue bullets during the assaults. Although Bashar Assad made some efforts for reform, such as launching reform attempts, leaning toward creating a new government, changing the governors of Daraa and Homs, disannulling the 1962 census in Al-Hasakah, creating a new commission to confer Syrian citizenship to some of the Kurdish with no identification, actively fighting against illegal activities, increasing salaries, and declaring the abolishment of the emergency law that had been in force since 1963. Within 7 days of the beginning of the demonstrations, the demonstrators were subjected to attacks that led to further events.

The demonstrations that took place in Homs, on the same day with the aforesaid declarations, showed that the people do not rely on the Bashar Assad administration and that Bashar Assad had lost his legitimacy. Indeed, by March 19, as social opposition increased, the Assad regime had to make fundamental changes for the first time in its history. After the Council of Ministers meeting on April 19, several important decisions were made: "Closing the State Security Courts, which were created with the decision dated 1968 and numbered 47 and transferring the inclusive cases to the concerned legislative authorities; approving the enactment draft in the legislative decrees regulating the peaceful demonstration right of the citizens, which is identified as a right among the fundamental human rights in the Constitution; abolishing the Emergency Law and political parties law from the concerned

ministries; demanding the information and local government enactment drafts as soon as possible” (Sana News, 2011).

Although the new legal regulations show that the regime failed its policy of suppressing the developing social opposition movement by resorting to force, they also indicate that the Syrian people exceeded the fear threshold. Several days before the adoption of these laws, the government announced that all demonstrations and meetings were illegal. However, the rapid expansion of the demonstrations in Homs and the harsh intervention of the security forces in the demonstrations taking place on April 18 and 19 led to intensified reactions. Another indicator demonstrating that the fear threshold was being exceeded is the fact that a military opposition was launched against the security forces for the first time since the February 1982 Hama events. The fact that armed attacks were organized against the high-level security forces in different regions of the country, particularly Daraa, Homs, and Aleppo, shows that the demonstrators did not overlook the military methods for a radical change as a choice. On the other hand, Assad wanted to give legitimacy to the force policies that he would carry out in the forthcoming days by bringing certain reforms into question instead of giving priority to the reforms. As such, the regime was headed toward persuading the national and international public opinion by resorting to force.

Attempts to Suppress the Social Opposition by Military Methods: Demonstrations of Challenging the Invasions

After the April 29 demonstrations, the opponents once again put forward their reactions to the regime by organizing major actions on Friday May 6; the security forces resorted to serious measures in Sunnite Arab regions under the administration of Damascus, Baniyas, Latakia, and Homs. In this context, during the demonstrations organized on April 29, approximately 60 civilians lost their lives, including people in Daraa. In fact, in the tension starting in early February and March between the regime and opposition movements in Syria, the organization of Frustration Days on March 17 pointed out the beginning of a new period. The demonstrations, which continued with mass participations in the post-March 17 period, continued with increasingly larger demonstrations every Friday on a regular basis. After the Frustration Day demonstrations, the Assad administration decided to make reforms in a short period of time while attempting to suppress the demonstrations with force; however, the death of approximately 800 people during the events eliminated the importance of the reform arguments (YaLibnan News, 2011).

While reform promises were being made, tanks and heavily armed forces were entering the demonstrators' settlements in Al-Baida, Deraa, Baniyas, and Rastan. A great arrest campaign was launched against the opponents by searching from house to house; this resulting in the opposition and the international public losing their trust in the reform promises. Indeed, despite the declaration of legal regulation related to the abolition of emergency law that had been in force since 1963, no improvement in practice was evident.

Demonstrations initially organized in Daraa and Haseki soon spread to Latakia, Homs, Hama, Bayda, Baniyas, and Deir al-Zor; soon, anti-regime protests were observed in many settlements. The Republican Guards—the sole troops deployed in the center of Damascus—achieved partial success in preventing anti-regime protests from occurring in Damascus. However, after the anti-regime protests took place in Duma, which administratively belonged to Damascus, both Republican Guards and elite troops under the command of Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher al-Assad were poised to launch an intense operation against the opposition groups. During the protests in Daraa, assaults against the security forces took place; the armed forces then surrounded a settlement for the first time, where the opposition groups were active and blamed them for cooperating with terrorist groups. As protests were occurring in Daraa, news emerged that the subordinate units of the 4th Mechanized Division under Maher al-Assad's command began to surround the city on April 25; after the protests on April 29, they entered the city and started hunting dissidents, house by house, similar to behavior in the 1980s. Approximately 62 people were killed during the demonstrations in different regions of Syria on Friday April 29 (Oweis-Al Khalidi, 2011).

After the security forces launched direct operations against dissidents, approximately 10,000 people were arrested, and tens of people were killed during the conflicts in Daraa, Damascus, Homs, Baniyas, Al-Rastan, and Bayda, where dissidents were active. Although the security forces entered the city after the attacks against the security forces in Bayda, the troops that remained outside the Daraa city center on April 25 entered the city center after the demonstrations on April 29, and 27 protestors were killed during the clashes. The security forces entered Banias on April 3, providing once again that the regime would give priority to applying rigid responses to protestors. In addition, the al-Assad administration declared the end of the operations in Daraa, where the Friday protests took place, on April 5, which was perceived as a setback on the part of the government. However, the ongoing anti-regime protests by the Syrian opposition—despite the declaration of retreatment from Daraa and the initiation of the retreatment—will make the international community prioritize more active policies for Syria.

Consequently, important developments took place during the demonstrations on Friday May 6 for both the dissidents and the regime. Although the al-Assad administration declared that the troops would retreat from Daraa, where the protests had begun, it intensified its military presence in Baniyas, Al-Rastan, Homs, Hama, and Damascus in order to get the clashes under control and stated that they would not allow the protests. As a result, the dissidents took action to organize a demonstration on May 6. Approximately 30 people were killed during the protests that started after the Friday prayers. The Syrian Human Rights Group stated that the total death toll was 28, including 16 people in Homs, 6 in Hama, 2 in Jableh, and 4 in Deir al-Zor (Al Jazeera News, 2011a).

The armed forces entered Baniyas and the Sunni districts belonging to Damascus and Homs, then started to arrest the dissidents in a house-to-house hunt, which increased the tension. *Al-Watan*, the daily newspaper, interviewed Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, who put forward that they sped up the reform initiatives and the riots were about to come to an end when the Syrian Ministry of Interior urged them to give extra time to the protesters to turn themselves in and hand over their weapons (until May 15). According to a report by the Interior Ministry, the number of individuals who turned themselves in reached 1,093 by May 8-9, and they were immediately released after they affirmed their regret (TRT News, 2011a). According to a statement issued on May 11, the number of individuals who turned themselves in to the security forces reached 3,308 (Sana News, 2011b). As the latest statements indicated, the Damascus regime proved that it would use all its power to terminate the demonstrations. The most significant of all the methods applied to stop the demonstrations was the mass arrest of dissidents. The security forces launched a wide-scale operation against the dissidents in Homs, the third biggest city of the country. According to a statement issued by Ammar Qurabi, the head of the Syrian National Organization for Human Rights, dozens of people lost their lives due to the crackdown by the security forces in Homs, Hama, Latakia, Daraa, and Deir al-Zor, where peaceful demonstrations occurred. According to Qurabi, on May 11, 19 Syrian citizens were killed by the Syrian security forces in Harra, belonging to Darra. The mass arrests against the dissidents in Homs and in the cities where the Sunni Arabs live deserve attention. The activists stated that not only were 10,000 people arrested, but also hundreds of people remained missing (Shibeeb- Tayel, 2011). However, the dissidents' continuation of the anti-regime protests despite the suppression will cause serious problems for the Damascus regime.

In the time since the March 17 public protests in Syria, it has become evident that the Assad administration could not take control over and suppress the anti-regime opposition

movements. Starting with democratic demonstrations in different regions of Syria, the opposition focused on a strategy of military resistance, following Libya's example. Unlike efforts in Tunisia and Egypt, the success of the opposition movement in Libya in ousting the Gaddafi administration with military methods by receiving external support has affected Syrian opposition movements the most. In a statement made by one of the founders of the opposition armed structure, called the Free Syrian Army, Colonel Riad al-Assad said some 15,000 soldiers, including officers, had already deserted, and he was waiting to move his command inside Syria. The most senior Sunni Arab officer to defect from Syria's armed forces said "there is no option but to topple President Bashar al-Assad by force and he was directing a military uprising against the Syrian leader" (Ya Libnan-2, 2011).

However, in October, it became obvious that the Syrian regime did not take the steps expected by the international community, including Turkey, and did not have the will to do so. Although the Assad administration could not demonstrate a solid will for the transformation to a democratic system, it also failed in oppressing the opponents. Therefore, after this step, Syria is moving toward a civil war, which will turn into a denominational power struggle; the international community, including the UN, will not determine a common approach against the developments in Syria. During this process, while one seeks to determine the main actors in the power struggle in Syria, the actors are divided into two groups: internal and external. Regarding the national actors, President Assad and military and civil units who have devoted themselves to the protection of the regime constitute the internal actors. Officially and unofficially organized actors are in the military and civil units. With regard to the opposition figures, internal actors include civil initiatives that are mostly composed of Sunni Arabs, which have different organizations in each city. The intellectuals, politicians, and enlightened figures who supported the Damascus Spring in 2000 need to be added to this group. It is also possible to categorize the national actors of the power struggle in different ways. For example, it is necessary to define the soldiers who recently resigned from the army to establish an opponent military army within the national actors.

The Position of Sectarian, Ethnic, and Security Forces against the Riots

It is really interesting that the individuals from different segments of society participated in the demonstrations, although some regime-minded authors argue that the anti-regime protests were organized by the opposition groups supported by some ethnic and sectarian groups in Syria (Interviews, 2011). For instance, the fact that the intellectuals leading the anti-regime opposition from 2000 to 2011, including journalists, lawyers, and

doctors with liberal and leftist orientations, came from Sunni Arabs, Kurdish, and also Christian ethnicities deserves attention. For example, after 2000, Michel Kilo—one of the symbols of opposition—is of Christian origin. He was in contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in the course of reform initiatives in 2005. Nonetheless, it is thought that the anti-regime opposition was supported by Syrian citizens, who are of primarily Sunni Arab and Kurdish ethnicities, as a social base. On the other hand, the position of the Druze is not clear. Especially, after President Salah Jadid was captured in As-Suwayda in 1966, Hafez al-Assad threatened to bomb the city and purged the majority of the Druze officers from the army ranks, resulting in a rift between the Druze and the regime. Before the intra-Baath coup attempt in 1966, Mansour al-Atrash—whose father was Sultan al-Atrash, the spokesman of Revolutionary Command Council (parliament chairman)—and the ousted president Amin al-Hafiz were arrested and sent to Mezzeh Prison. This event negatively affected the Druze. Furthermore, the policy the Syrian regime applied against the Lebanese Druze disturbed some segments of the Syrian Druze, particularly Kemal Jumblatt. Social support for the regime existed among the Druze despite economic problems and unemployment. In addition, Sultan al-Atrash's daughter Muntaha al-Atrash, who is a human rights activist, made a statement on April 12 that Syrian President Al-Assad put forward the sects as an excuse and never approved of launching reform initiatives; however, she emphasized that the sectarian tension would not take place, and thus the president should step down (Al-Tabaei, 2011).

The second opposition group is composed of Sunni Arabs, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Atassi family. These groups have both rooted and efficient backgrounds throughout Syria's history. In this context, it is important to touch upon the opposition movement starting at the early 1970s, which transformed into an armed rebellion in 1978. During the civil war in Lebanon, the fact that the Syrian regime supported the Maronites and declared war against Palestinian and Sunni Muslims caused the Syrian Sunni Arabs to question their relations with the Syrian regime. The Sunni opposition first started to protest the policies of the regime in a non-violent way; however, they resorted to armed assaults after the government used force against them in 1978 and the Muslim Brotherhood became prominent as an organization that carried out the armed Sunni Arab opposition. The other Sunni dissident groups were either suppressed or forced to flee abroad because of the suppression of the regime. Nonetheless, Assad's regime tended to solve the problem through military methods against the first opposition movement, which had broad social support. He managed to suppress the opposition as a result of the 1982 Hama massacre. Nevertheless, the Sunni opposition movement carried on its presence in society over time. As previously

mentioned, the Sunni Arabs were leading the social group upon which the opposition movement was based during the first and second reform waves. The Sunni Arabs played a determinative role within the inception period and the continuation of the third opposition wave in 2011.

The other opposition movement was composed of Kurdish anti-regime groups. The Kurds emerged through the demands for enfranchisement and constitutional equality, which is different from the opposition of the Sunni Arabs. The relations between the Syrian regime and the Kurds have always been up and down. The Kurds, who faced Arabization policies after 1960, came to Syria from Turkey. However, some Kurds who had problems with the Arabs after the French left the region were disfranchised after the 1962 census in Haseki. It is estimated that the Kurds—who have two different statuses: “outlander” and “displaced”—number between 300,000 and 400,000 people. After the Iraq War in 2003, the Syrian regime seriously altered its point of view toward the Kurds, who were perceived to be in cooperation with the US. Within this framework, in 2004, after the conflicts between Arab and Kurdish football teams, the Kurds participated in mass protests in Al Qamishli, during which civilians were killed. Al-Assad’s government tried to prevent the conflicts from spreading by means of promises about the reform and forming a commission. Nonetheless, due to the fact that the government did not keep its word about reforms over time, the distrust of the regime increased. The regime protested during the mass demonstrations that were organized for Sheikh Khaznawi, who was tortured to death in June 2005. Many Syrian Kurdish politicians were arrested because of their political activities between 2004 and 2011. Kurdish figures including members of the Yekiti Party, Azadi Kurdish Party, Syria Future Party, KDP-Syria, and PYD were included amongst the arrested politicians. Unlike the political parties, the social organizations and the student associations faced suppression. On March 12, 2009, 12 students were arrested for allegedly organizing the demonstration to remember those killed during the clashes in Aleppo in 2004 (Human Right Watch, 2009). In 2011, the Kurds initially remained quiet against the incidents that commenced in Daraa, but due to the ongoing protests, they started organizing demonstrations in their region. It is important to note that the Kurdish groups continued protesting even though the census in 1962 was declared “null and void” and Bashar al-Assad talked to the Kurdish tribes directly. After the leader of the liberal Kurdish Future Movement Party was assassinated on October 7, 2011, the Kurds accused the Syrian government of killing Tammo; the next day more than 50,000 mourners marched through the streets of Qamishli in a funeral procession for Tammo. Syrian security forces fired on them, killing at least five people. Tammo's son, Fares Tammo, urged Syria's Kurds to

throw their support behind the revolt, telling the *New York Times*: “My father's assassination is the screw in the regime's coffin. They made a big mistake by killing my father” (Blomfield, 2011). As a result, the opposition movement continued, including the Kurds as well.

By identifying the other opposition groups in Syria, it is possible to unite all the segments that were supposed to be exposed to discrimination because of the political, constitutional, and economic practices of the regime. Consequently, it can be assumed that this group includes the youth demanding more freedom and democracy from different ethnicities and sectarian orientations, for which the corruption, unemployment, and wealth of the regime supporters caused considerable discomfort. In Syria, under martial law, different segments of society faced lawless arrests and suppression through the activities of the security apparatus. Numerous problems existed, including corruption, income injustice, and underemployment as well as political imprisonment. Furthermore, the Sunni Arab tribes have undertaken a serious opposition. Since the protests in Daraa were suppressed, the loyalty of the Arab tribes to the regime has been negatively affected, which forced them to participate in the opposition movement. The majority of tribes in Daraa play an important role in trade and relations with Jordan. During the border trade with Jordan, they had to remain silent when the security forces exerted violence upon them, which caused the regime to lose legitimacy over the tribes.

The possibility of a Sunni-Alawite conflict after the clashes deserves attention as well. Some Alawites have problems with the regime. The anti-Assad groups include Rifaat al-Assad, uncle of Bashar al-Assad, and Ribla Rifaat al-Assad, his cousin. Thus, it is not true that all Alawites support the regime. Some Alawites have even had trouble with the regime. In forming a new democratic system, including the representation of Sunni Arabs, Alawites, and other Syrian groups will help the construction of peace and stability. Indeed, the Alawites will ultimately stand with the regime.

Conclusion

For the first time, the Bashar al-Assad regime faces a serious opposition movement. The 2011 opposition movement has an important public support whereas the oppositions in 2000 and 2004 did not. Although Bashar al-Assad promised to launch reforms for 11 years, no changes have taken place, which has decreased the legitimacy and reliability of the regime. The loss of legitimacy and unreliability indicates that opposition will rise despite Bashar al-Assad's statement of reform initiatives. However, al-Assad's government proved that it would apply all methods necessary to stop the demonstrations when it recently sent troops into

Banias, Homs, and Daraa. Contrary to expectations, it is obvious that Syria is facing a difficult period including international intervention.

The impacts will be shaped by the ongoing social opposition crisis in Syria. If we categorize the possible scenarios, in the first scenario, the Syrian regime will provide stability in the country through partial reforms. Those who put forward this hypothesis assume that the al-Assad's regime has the capacity and competence to manage the crisis in the medium term (Landis and Abdulfettah, 2011). The first scenario is based on the assumption that riots will be prevented by means of affording some rights to Christians, the Druze, Alawis, Ismailites, and finally the Kurds. Apart from the support of these groups, the dissident protests will be prevented from spreading from specific regions and borders through the active intervention in the process of the security forces and the intelligence units; the system is expected to be stabilized by granting some economic and political privileges to these groups in the medium term.

Meanwhile, the second scenario is based on the spread of the crisis throughout the country and an internal conflict among the different social and ethnic groups. Within this scope, disintegration will occur in every department, from the security forces to political and diplomatic units; consequently, all groups will clash with each other. Such disintegration, especially amongst the security forces, is likely to let this kind of scenario emerge.

The third scenario assumes that the regime will take harsher measures to ensure its survival despite its failure in the management of the conflicts; as a result, Syria will face economic and diplomatic sanctions. Weakening the Syrian regime via economic and diplomatic sanctions imposed by the US, EU, and UN Security Council remains on the agenda. It will be extremely difficult for the Damascus government to overcome the possible economic problems in the long term if the decision of the economic and diplomatic sanctions is accepted. A possible crisis related to spare parts, access to raw materials, and food problems will have a direct impact on daily life, which will strengthen the anti-regime groups.

The last scenario involves an international intervention in Syria, such as in Libya. This scenario is the least likely; however, it is obvious that this scenario might be brought to the agenda in case the crisis escalates. Another scenario is that the Syrian regime will overcome the crisis by giving priority to the reforms, thereby initiating a democratic process. The minority groups who lead the security forces and the presidency may agree on switching to a multi-party system in the political field. Consequently, it is likely to prevent the ongoing crisis by means of initiating a process that includes all Syrian groups, particularly the Sunni Arabs.

END NOTES

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