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TEPSIS PAPERS  
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*Laura Ruiz de Elvira*

# THE SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FACE OF REVOLT

Since March 2011, Syria has been marred by an internal conflict that has drawn everybody's attention. While the majority of the media has focused on the military and jihadists components in the uprising, there has been little research on its civil aspects, even though it was the key factor in starting the revolutionary process. Attempting to fill this void, the goal for this working paper is twofold: first, recounting the development of a bona fide although fragile civil society in Syria in the years 2000, following decades of lethargy; second, to show that this civil society still exists today, albeit amended, due to a spreading conflict. Our reflection—in an effort to present both elements of continuity and rupture, underlining the dynamics at work during each period—relies on groundwork undertaken between 2007 and 2010 as well as fifteen or so interviews with Syrian activists dated January 2013.

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## SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE YEARS 2000 BLOSSOMING UNDER CONTROL

Since 1963, the year the Baath party seized power, the Syrian civil society has exhibited a strong inertia, due to the expansion of state bodies and stringent control by the authorities. Outside Baath controlled organizations, activity in this domain was confined to a few charities, most of them created in the 1950s. Hence, when Bashar al-Assad came to power in June 2000, the number of legal associations barely reached 550. This legal web hid the existence of another civil society encompassing underground networks who supplied the population with social services and militant organizations looking to promote a democratic transition.

When he came to power, young al-Assad quickly put on his agenda the issue of civil society and reforming a law on associations dating back to 1958. Following in the footsteps of Suzanne Moubarak, the first lady also involved herself in various undertakings. It was the beginning of an era of hope that came to be known as the “Damascus Spring”. Promises of overture, a crackdown on corruption and economic reforms gave rise to a wave of activism organized around discussion forums. However, scared by the scope of the event, the regime shut down one after another the forums created only months before and jailed their leaders.

Such shrinkage of public space, however, did not lead to a return to the *statu quo ante*. Three years later, in 2004, a new stage of euphoria seemed to be on the horizon: the dissident movement appeared again between 2003 and 2007 and transformations in the associations field became tangible during the second half of the decade. Many Syrians then described an opening of the “gate to the creation of new associations”, a metaphor that evokes a set of practices implemented by the government from that moment on, that marked a change in state policy regarding civil society. The leaders’ tone changed, and the *mujtama‘ ahli*, which we’ll translate in the Syrian context by “civil society”, was presented as “inescapable partner” of the state, and the “third pillar” of society. At the same time, a normalization process aiming at registering until then non-licensed associations was implemented. Starting in 2005, the number of newly licensed associations exploded. Last, the field itself underwent a qualitative transformation, along several lines: organization leaders refashioned their communication, newly created associations were more diverse, and charities, which represented more than half of the association field in Syria in the years 2000 went through substantial changes.

This second “loosening” should be understood as the result of several factors working alongside, two of which being crucial. On one hand, the depletion of the state’s financial resources may have encouraged leaders to implement a policy of “discharge”. Within this framework, the adoption of “social market economy” in 2005 may have encouraged a stronger participation of non-state actors to economic activities and the supply of services to the population.

On the other hand, the regional and international conditions of that era, marked by a weakening of Syria's position on the regional scene, may have encouraged the regime to loosen its grip on its own citizens, seeking the support it had lost abroad. One can then recognize a handling "from the top" of the issue of civil society that otherwise allows Bashar al-Assad to wear two hats: chief of the executive and security forces, as well as leader and "father" of the nation. One should however keep in mind that this "liberalization" constituted in fact a survival strategy for the regime, which, moreover came with by new schemes for disciplinarisation, control and repression.

The effects of this new policy engineering were multiple, uncontrollable and contradictory: albeit allowing the regime to secure its durability for a decade, it also fostered a two-track economic growth, underlined the failure of baathist developmentalist policies and bolstered the social capital of actors not necessarily faithful to the Assads. Moreover, starting in 2008, practices aforementioned were jettisoned: the number of newly licensed associations levelled out and a new phase of repression began.

## WHICH CIVIL SOCIETY IN SYRIA SINCE 2011?

Given such a picture of the situation, one can but wonder what became of this civil society since 2011. Unsurprisingly, it underwent significant transformation and growth. Indeed, very quickly, hundreds of networks and structures more or less formal, appeared across the board in order to coordinate the actions of the protest movement and show the world what was going on inside the country.

These groups were sometimes instigated by previous activists (such as lawyers Mazen Darwish and Razan Zeitune) who already had field experience, vast networks of contacts and benefitted from foreign support. However, the majority of these initiatives were started by young people with no previous organizing or association experience who, unlike their parents, had not experienced the dark post-Hama (1) years. A good deal of these new networks were built around sociabilities born out of the first demonstrations organized in February 2011 in front of Egyptian and Libyan embassies in Damascus, during short stays in prison or through social networks.

Among these networks, Tansiqiyyats (local coordinating committees) are of particular interest. Usually consisting of 10 to 20 members, they appear by the dozen during the first months of the uprising. They mostly operate along two axes: arranging peaceful demonstrations and collecting and circulating information. They operate within the limits of a village, a small town or even a single

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(1) We are referring to the years that followed the Hama massacre (February 1982) during which close to 20,000 persons were killed by troops led by Rifa'at al-Assad, brother of Hafez al-Assad. The Hama massacre marked the end of an insurrection led by the Muslim Brotherhood, from then on forced into exile.

neighbourhood in the case of larger cities. Most of them have joined two main coalitions: The Syrian Revolution General Commission (August 2011) and the Local Coordination Committees (April 2011). However, the strength of the links between the leadership of these two coalitions and the micro-local level is varying.

Likewise, very early on, citizen groups supporting a non-violent revolution and advocating civil disobedience emerge. Ayyam al-Hourriyya (Freedom Days), which includes almost 400 members, and Hirak al-Silmi al-Suri (also named Syrian Non-violence Movement), which consists of a hundred Syrians or so, belong to this kind of networks. Their militants can be found both inside and outside of the country, and undertake actions in several provinces, such as rechristening streets with martyrs names or pouring red paint in public fountains. A different and more recent incarnation of this non-violent movement are those groups who support a “third way”, such as Mussalaha (literally “reconciliation”). Looking to avoid taking sides for or against the regime, it advocates “grassroots reconciliation” and sets up meetings between activists and religious or tribal leaders.

In this revolutionary context where physical contact between militants constitutes a danger, both Facebook and Skype became crucial virtual spaces in which to discuss future projects. The Berze neighbourhood tansiqiyya, for instance, consists of approximately 25 young people who do not know each other and communicate under assumed names.

However, as the insurrection became militarized, the number of casualties and refugees soared, and early activists were either killed, jailed, or forced to flee the country, humanitarian organizations took the upper hand over previous initiatives.

Nadja Now (literally “assistance now”) is one of the *igatha* (assistance) associations created in Damascus after 2011. By virtue of significant funding—from Syria and in large part from abroad—this association registered in Germany regularly distributes food, clothes and medicine, provides care to the wounded, as well as psychological support to children suffering from traumatic stress. Other structures such as *Jam’iyya Ghiras al-Nahda* (Association of the Seeds of Renaissance) are less visible and their rhetoric is laden with Islamic references. According to one of its leaders, this association created in January 2012 reaches 180000 persons per month in the provinces of Damascus and Damascus-countryside, by virtue of funding transiting through Qatar. Its activities are particularly wide-ranging, as it not only provides material, medical and financial help, but also engages in development initiatives such as bread oven building. Last, there are also numerous humanitarian organizations created in link with the Syrian diaspora, most notably in the north of the country.

Meanwhile, in the “free zones” where the state is now absent, *majalis mahalliyya* (local councils) have been established. According to Ahmad, an activist now

residing in France, their expansion since 2012 is linked to the international bodies desire to support civil organizations, as opposed to armed groups. Following a decentralization logic shaped by the war context, these councils clearly aim at replacing the state. Although they lack in resources, they operate certain public services such as garbage collection and schools. Their chain of command varies from one town to the other, and is either comprised exclusively of civilians or associate civilians and military.

It can be seen, hence, that the Syrian uprising gave rise to a multitude of civilian initiatives. What became, however, of the structures predating March 2011? A number of them, such as Jam'iyyat al-Bustan al-Khayriyya, sided with the regime. Founded in 1999 in Lattaquié by Rami Makhoul, an extremely wealthy cousin of Bashar-al-Assad, this association supposedly funds chabbiha (2) activities and provides help to their families. Other, which will go unnamed, are supposedly secretly providing help to displaced populations and members of the Free Syrian Army. Such disparity in positioning can be explained by their political inclination. Although some of them were ran by people close or supportive of the regime, others comprised Syrians rather opposed to the regime. Last, a number of these organizations had to cease activities due to lack of funding, because their members had to flee the country, or because the beneficiaries were unable to come to their offices.

## IN CONCLUSION

The elements presented herein allow us an overall view of the situation and make possible to isolate three fundamental points, that is the continuous transformation of the entities that make up the Syrian revolutionary civil society, its high level of fragmentation, in spite of ongoing initiatives to federate and coordinate, and ultimately, the importance of the local aspect.

As to the actors of this civil society, it is necessary to emphasize the exhaustion and disheartedness that has grown in the ranks of early activists. Confronted to the militarization of the rebellion and the degradation of living conditions, they are compelled to recognize that their efforts have lost some of their initial significance. However, these activists, who live in exile for many, have been replaced by a new generation still hardly known, who nevertheless display signs of resourcefulness and a readiness to take risks on a day to day basis.

As a whole, these initiatives may seem rather insignificant in the light of the situation that prevails today. However, they are bonding Syrians together and contribute to sowing the seeds of a future Syria.

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(2) Mafia-style groups armed by the authorities and used as auxiliary repression forces