

Syria: Anatomy of a Revolution

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The attention given today to the armed uprising in Syria must not conceal the fact that there also exists a peaceful revolutionary dynamic, which is deeply rooted in society. The new generations, mainly urban and more educated than their parents, are at the forefront of a movement of political contestation that is trying to occupy public space through various means.

Today, in late July 2012, the confrontation between the armed forces of the regime and the militarized branch of the uprising federated under the name Free Syrian Army (FSA) is attracting significant media attention, and rightly so. After the Wednesday, July 18th attack perpetrated in the heart of the security apparatus in Damascus that took the lives of four country security senior officials - including Assef Shawkat, brother-in-law of the Syrian president - the armed opposition now seems capable of undermining the regime even in its Damascus fortress. As these lines are being written, the end of Bashar al-Assad's rule seems near, though its modalities and exact date are difficult to ascertain.

Yet the attention given to the militarized aspects of the uprising, justified in light of the impact these have on the movement's development, conceals the central, peaceful revolutionary dynamic currently at play. This dynamic has spread over the entire Syrian territory, despite significant regional variations and notable exceptions. Numbers confirm this: 51 protests were recorded on Friday, June 17th, 2011; 493 on Friday, January 6th, 2012; and 939 on Friday, June 1st,

2012¹. Moreover, the peaceful revolutionary dynamic remains strong even in regions plagued by the most violent army repression. Thus, on Friday, June 1st, 30 protests were recorded in the Homs governorate.

This article privileges the analysis of the democratic uprising in Syria. It offers a perspective on the movement that accounts for the deep and long-term transformations of Syrian society, and explores in so doing the anatomy of this people engaged in revolution².

The Roots of the ‘Dignity Revolution’

A Political Revolution

On February 17th, 2011, in the heart of the Old Damascus souks of al-Hariqa, a tenuous yet important (as it would have previously seemed inconceivable) signal heralded the revolutionary times to come. After agents of the security forces brutally arrested the son of a storekeeper for wrong parking – a commonplace arrest in a country where security forces have a free hand to do as they please – the local storekeepers closed shop, gathered in the souk alleys and shouted “the Syrian people do not let themselves be humiliated.” Yet it is in Daraa that the movement of contestation caught fire, effectively gaining national resonance. On March 13th, in this southern city of more than 150,000 inhabitants, schoolchildren wrote on their school walls anti-regime slogans that were inspired by those of the January 25th Egyptian revolution. The youths were arrested and tortured by security forces (*mukhabarat*). The anger of their parents became the anger of Daraa (where processions were formed) and then the anger of localities in the surrounding region (Jassem, Nawa, al-Sanamayn). The violence of police repression towards protesters (arrests, tortures, live ammunition fired into the crowd) before army tanks surrounded the city over the following weeks set the country on fire. As of Friday, March 18th, the call for ‘dignity Friday’ has been answered in the capital, in Aleppo (the country’s second largest city, located in the north), in the two large cities of central Syria, Homs and Hama, and in the coastal

¹ Source: Syrian Local Coordination Committees.

² Given the impossibility of going to Syria, I had to use secondary sources (produced by Syrian activist networks, journalists with access to the field, international organization reports) as well as testimonies collected by local personal contacts. My sincere thanks go to Cécile Boëx and Naoura al-Amzeh, who have contributed to the elaboration of this article with their generosity.

city of Baniyas. From that moment on, day after day and Friday after Friday, protests have spread throughout the entire country.

From the start, protesters have demanded respect, dignity (*karama*) and freedom. On March 24th, 2011, after the Presidency announced economic measures intended to appease anger (a salary raise for civil servants, the reactivation of subsidies on a number of basic commodities, etc.), Daraa protesters chanted “the Syrian people are not hungry,” thus emphasizing the political nature of their mobilization. As repression increased in the following days and weeks, protest slogans began challenging the regime and eventually called for its fall: “the Syrian people want the fall of the regime/system.” Meanwhile, the uprising spread from one city to the next with a magnitude unprecedented in Syria’s history. Protests are now being held with varying intensity in every part of the country, except in some areas of the *Jebel Ansariya* (the coastal mountain range) where a number of Alawi Syrians live – i.e. the confessional group from which the Assad family hails.

Several generations had already attempted to foment contestation against the regime that was progressively set up by Hafez al-Assad following a coup d’état in 1970. The repression of the secular left and Islamist oppositions reached its peak in the late 1970s and early 1980s, resulting in waves of arrests, but also in the March 1982 aerial bombing of the city of Hama (between 20,000 and 30,000 people were left dead) in response to a revolt instigated by the Muslim Brotherhood³. In order to fully counter this internal threat, a police state controlled by a growing number of security forces (there were 17 forces in 2010) was gradually put in place from the 1980s onwards. Each one more brutal than the next, these forces oversee the population in its daily activities, keep constant watch over it, and can summon for questioning anyone at anytime as they enjoy full impunity⁴. In al-Hariqa in February and in Daraa in March, the hatred generated by this terror-driven police state proved a powerful source of mobilization as soon as the wall of fear was broken.

Bashar al-Assad inherited power after his father’s death in June 2000, instituting a ‘hereditary republic’ for the first time in the Arab world. The arrival of this new president, who

³ See in *Books and Ideas*: Nora Benkorich, “Trente ans après, retour sur la tragédie de Hama,” *La Vie des idées*, 16 février 2012 (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Trente-ans-apres-retour-sur-la.html>).

⁴ By presidential decree, Mukhabarat agents are accountable only to the army’s Chief of Staff, and not to the courts. This decree was renewed and broadened by Bashar al-Assad in 2008.

presented himself as modern and modernizing, gave rise at the time to an unprecedented mobilization among intellectuals and members of the democratic opposition in Syria (public debates, discussion circles, petitions⁵). Such mobilization on the part of urban intellectual elites, which for a time seemed to materialize hopes of a political transition, was nonetheless short-lived. Prominent opposition members were arrested and discussion circles were forced to close down one after the other throughout the year 2001. The last circle was shut down in 2005 following the publication of the Damascus declaration, a text that brought together the whole spectrum of oppositional sensibilities (including Islamist ones) and drew the contours of a democratic future in Syria.

Thus, in a state that tolerates no alternative voice, it has been extremely difficult for the Syrian political opposition to exist – including the Islamist opposition, as the Muslim Brotherhood was almost entirely absent from Syria after the 1980s repression. In 2011-2012, the Syrian revolutionary movement precludes any interpretation of the opposition's political weakness as a sign of Syrians' endorsement of the regime. Such weakness must be read rather as a symptom of the latter's police state authoritarianism.

The Seeds of Anger: Social Grievances and Spatial Inequalities

Similarly, social grievances have not found political expression but worked to undermine Syrian society. In 2011, these grievances were immense in the face of a system that not only failed to keep the promises of progress and development inscribed in the Ba'ath party's original ideology, but turned its back on them in favor of a predatory interpretation of economic openness under Bashar's presidency.

Frustrations stem on the one hand from the country's failure to develop. Persistent poverty illustrates this failure⁶ and specifically affects certain regions - for instance the Jezireh (northeast), which was presented until the late 1990s as the future of Syrian development before it was

⁵ Leïla Vignal, "Comment peut-on être syrien ?", *Esprit*, Juillet 2003.

⁶ In 2005, an estimated 30 % of the population lived below the upper poverty line (measured in terms of real - i.e. not basic - food and non-food needs), and 11% below the lower poverty line (basic food and non-food needs): Heba El Laithy, Khalid Abu-Ismaïl, *Poverty in Syria: 1996-2004, Diagnosis and Pro-poor Policy Considerations*, UNDP, June 2005.

abandoned in the regime's development plans⁷. In the south, the grain-farming region of Daraa suffered from the 2000s drought all the more so because it had to receive climatic refugees from the north (in particular people from the Jezireh) who were affected by the same drought, without the state's pledge to support local authorities being fully honored.

On the other hand, in spite of real progress in basic education (which was extended to all age groups), few Syrians have access to a comprehensive school curriculum. Moreover, the Ba'athist welfare state is no longer able to guarantee employment to the 300,000 young people who enter the labor market each year. Unofficial estimates indicate that unemployment affects at least 20% of the active population. This situation feeds the growth of the illegal sector, which presumably employed about 30% of the active population and produced approximately 30% of the Syrian GDP in the late 2000s.

Grievances are all the stronger given that Bashar al-Assad announced, at the June 2005 Ba'ath Party Congress, the transformation of Syria into a 'social market economy' and the coming of a new era of economic prosperity. While early economic liberalization was accompanied by the modernization of a portion of the regulatory apparatus and economic framework (banks and private insurance companies were set up in 2003 and 2004, and a stock exchange was launched in 2009), and by an explosion of consumption that drove growth up to about 5% a year, the benefits of this openness were not shared by all. A new middle class has indeed emerged, with the means to consume in the shopping malls, bars and new restaurants that developed in the late 2000s. Yet most social categories have remained on the margins of this liberalized economy. And they have suffered its consequences: the end of the social contract and the introduction of a two-tier system in the economy, education and health services. If protesters have rallied from the start in the impoverished outskirts of Greater Damascus – the revolt's epicenters of Saqba, Harasta, Douma, Daraya, Moadamiya, Hamouriya, Irbin, etc. – it is also because the confrontation between a society beset by a deep social crisis and the display of relatively flattering macroeconomic results plays itself out with the greatest violence in the capital's urban space. Syrian society was doubtless more fragile in 2011 than it was ten years earlier.

⁷ Myriam Ababsa, Roussel Cyril, Mohammed Al-Dbiyat, "Le territoire syrien entre intégration nationale et métropolisation renforcée", in Beaudoin Dupret et al (dir.), *La Syrie au présent*, Arles, Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2007, pp. 37-77.

Economic openness was accompanied moreover by the coming to power of a new generation of leaders and businessmen. As Elizabeth Picard recalls⁸, Hafez al-Assad's regime was built as a "military-mercantile complex"⁹ relying on client networks composed of state, military and economic bourgeoisies. According to Picard, however, the rigid ethical principles that partly constrained regime leaders under the autocratic and absolute reign of Hafez al-Assad no longer hold for the next generation. Composed in part of the sons of the regime, this new generation practices an unscrupulous crony capitalism, and seeks to grab the wealth of the country through its proximity to power – a process facilitated by economic liberalization¹⁰. New monopolies have been established and are now headed by members of President al-Assad's family, close friends or clients of the regime. The archetype of the practices adopted by these new business circles – but also of the growing confusion between public interests and the private interests of the president's family circle – is the figure of Rami Makhlouf, a first cousin of Bashar al-Assad currently at the head of an economic empire and considered to be the most powerful businessman in Syria¹¹. Rami Makhlouf, who symbolizes the corruption and clientelism that betrayed the promises of economic openness, was emblematically one of the first targets of the protesters' slogans in the spring of 2011.

New Syrian Generations: The Triple Transition

Yet in 2011, the Syrian uprising bore witness to the fact that in this depressed landscape - marked by a weak political opposition, youth without a future, and a regime that exerts arbitrary power and control over its population via intelligence services and *Ba'athist* organizations - the Syrian people demonstrate a striking capacity for mobilization, organization and resistance.

This is likely the effect of the entry into adulthood of new generations composed of youth under 30¹², which differentiate themselves from previous generations from three perspectives.

⁸ Elizabeth Picard, "Syrie : la coalition autoritaire fait de la résistance", *Politique étrangère*, 4: 2005

⁹ Elizabeth Picard, "Espaces de référence et espace d'intervention du Mouvement rectificatif," Thèse de doctorat en Science politiques, IEP, Paris, 1984.

¹⁰ Vignal 2003, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Rami Makhlouf owns the country's first mobile phone company (Syriatel), one bank, the duty-free shops, one construction company, one airline, and two private television stations. He also imports luxury cars and other goods alongside Syria's most important businessmen. Lastly, he is one of the main shareholders in Cham Holding. Founded in 2006, Cham Holding is Syria's second holding company and invests in the sectors of infrastructure, building construction, aviation and finance.

¹² Youth under 30 now constitute the majority of the Syrian population.

First, these young generations, born during the early 1980s demographic transition in Syria¹³, were raised in smaller families than their parents. Second, they are more educated than their elders. Thanks to the extension of primary education to the quasi totality of the population¹⁴, illiteracy is low among young Syrians (the national average is 5.5% for the 15-24 year age group) and the gender gap of previous generations has practically been filled (4% of illiteracy for boys and 7% for girls), even though regional disparities remain strong¹⁵. Yet as Philippe Fargues¹⁶ has shown, lower birth rates and generalized education lead to the in-depth transformation of family structures. In the Arab world, these factors have tended to challenge the patriarchal system that rules family life - a system founded on the subordination of younger brothers to the eldest son among siblings, and of women to men within the family as a whole. Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd¹⁷ consider that the conjunction of these two revolutions was part of a process that unfolded in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards, and later spread across the entire world. Individualized trajectories are now possible, leading to a deep transition crisis whose content varies from one society to next.

Third, the population of Syria today is urban for the most part, a fact that official Syrian statistics (only 53% of the total population in 2010¹⁸) do not account for due to very restricted definitions of what counts as urban. The case of Damascus is illustrative, as only the core center of the city (Damascus governorate) is included in population statistics for the capital. Yet greater Damascus forms a continuous urban fabric with high densities even in remote areas, which is integrated through intense mobilities and functional complementarities and encompasses several cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants. This metropolization process, reflected in the extension of suburbs and the rapid growth of small cities in the peripheries, characterizes urban

¹³ The birth rate fell to 2.9 births per woman in 2010, down from 6.7 in 1985. Source: World Data Bank, World Bank (<http://databank.worldbank.org/>).

¹⁴ Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus, 2011 (<http://www.cbssyr.org/index-EN.htm>)

¹⁵ While illiteracy is now residual for the 15-24 year age group in the country's southern and western governorates, high rates of illiteracy still prevail (10% to 15% for the same age group) - and are accompanied by gender gaps at the expense of girls - in the poor governorates of the north and northeast (Aleppo, al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor, and al-Raqqa).

¹⁶ Philippe Fargues, "La femme dans les pays arabes : vers une remise en cause du système patriarcal ?", in *Population et Sociétés*, 387, Février 2003, and Philippe Fargues, *Génération arabes. L'alchimie du nombre*, Paris, Fayard, 2000.

¹⁷ Youssef Courbage, Emanuel Todd, *Le rendez-vous des civilisations*, Paris, La République des Idées / Le Seuil, 2007.

¹⁸ Source: Author's calculations based on Central Bureau of Statistics data. Central Bureau of Statistics, Damascus, 2011 (<http://www.cbssyr.org/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter2/TAB-12-2-2011.htm>).

development in contemporary Syria. Damascus and Aleppo alone are home to approximately 8 million inhabitants, i.e. more than a third of the total Syrian population (21 million inhabitants).

This urban world is not composed of isolated clusters. It is essentially concentrated along an axis of greater densities that goes from Daraa to Aleppo, splitting along the Mediterranean coast and prolonging itself discontinuously through settlements in the Jezireh¹⁹ and on the Euphrates shores²⁰. Urban Syria is rendered active by the mobility of its inhabitants, itself facilitated by infrastructures (roads) and collective transport networks - namely private ones (minibuses) – that have gained in density since the 1990s²¹. The mobility and diffusion of goods and services have allowed moreover for the dissemination of urban lifestyles into smaller cities (employment, consumption, access to services) that are now less isolated and better inserted into short or long distance networks.

The majority of the new age groups in Syria are therefore experiencing urban life. Yet urban environments help speed up the demographic and educational transitions. They allow moreover for the opening up of family, community and sociability circles, for the sharing and diffusion of information, as well as for common social, and perhaps even political experiences. In 2011-2012, the Syrians who have formed the bulk of protest groups belong to these generations of the demographic and educational transition, namely the generations that are expressing social grievances, emancipating themselves from patriarchal frameworks, and taking to the streets to contest power as well as fathers unable to transform the political and social situation in Syria.

A Deeply Transformed Syrian Society

Thus, Syria in 2011 is a deeply transformed society. The new generations are growing up in contexts unlike those of previous generations. Internal migrations and mobilities have broken the isolation of a portion of the population. Syrians can no longer be simply identified in terms of their geographical origin, since such assignments are being contradicted by important labor mobilities, internal migrations to cities, and the experience of urban life. Similarly, and for the same reasons, they cannot be assigned to their confessional or ethnic affiliation. In light of this,

¹⁹ Notably Manbij (approximately 230,000 inhabitants in 2012) in the Aleppo governorate, but also al-Hasakah (280,000 inhabitants) and Qamishli (250,000 inhabitants) in Kurdish country.

²⁰ Deir ez-Zor (260,000 inhabitants) and al-Raqqa (370,000 inhabitants).

²¹ Law No. 10/1991, which facilitates private investments, has particularly benefitted this sector of activity.

the motivations behind the contestation are not confessional but political, as was noted earlier. As the regime is raising the specter of confessional confrontation, protestors' slogans are calling for unity: "one, one, one, the Syrian people are one." The different Syrian communities, including the Alawi community now summoned to allegiance, have all suffered from a Ba'athist state that built itself up in accordance with its own political objectives, and not with a view to managing Syrian diversity harmoniously²².

In 2011, political and social grievances, structural sociological transformations and the urban social melting pot have together allowed for the co-presence of individuals and groups, and have helped create the conditions for a collective experience of mobilization previously unheard of for these generations. As time progresses, the contestation is enabling an increasingly large section of Syrian society to "escape the solitude" imposed by the dictatorship²³ – to use Ziad Majed's compelling expression.

Actors and Spatial Organization of the Contestation

The revolt's actors are first and foremost ordinary Syrian citizens who have been mobilizing in public space to protest peacefully against the regime. It is in fact these men and women who are dying under the blows of repression²⁴.

Protesters and Activists in Local Coordination Committees

The Syrian uprising has grown out of local initiatives instigated at the level of neighborhoods or small cities that have developed with the movement's expansion. Among these initiatives, activist networks have been formed in neighborhoods and small cities, and then organized within Local Coordination Committees (LCC) – an innovative organizational form unprecedented in Syria and specific to this revolutionary movement. The network of LCCs plays a political role via the positions it expresses – peaceful mobilization, struggle for dignity and

²² Hassan Abbas develops this analysis in a recent article: Hassan Abbas, "Governance of Diversity in Syria," *Arab reform Initiative Projects*, June 2012.

²³ Ziad Majed, « L'État de barbarie persiste en Syrie, mais la tyrannie recule devant la révolution », *Le Monde*, 15 mai 2012.

²⁴ 91% of deaths reported by the site syrianshuhada.com are civilian victims.

freedom and for a democratic Syria – and the watchwords it propagates through the highly political phrases of protest ‘Fridays’²⁵.

The actions conducted vary depending on the local context. For instance, LCC activists have participated in civil disobedience actions (strikes), helped produce highly diverse mobilization materials (slogans, chants, films), and played an essential role in documenting the contestation and its repression, notably through video production²⁶. As the movement became entrenched, the LCCs also began taking charge of support provision for the victims of repression (for instance by setting up underground hospitals)²⁷, the distribution of financial or material aid, and the daily organization of neighborhoods and cities under the control of groups who claim to be part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The operating difficulties of this underground coordination are many, including when it comes to fostering the emergence of movement leaders who are often arrested, killed or forced to leave the country.

Spatial Organization of the Contestation

At the beginning of the revolt, the main meeting points of the contestation were the Friday protests. The mosque compound being the only public space in which meetings are authorized under the state of emergency²⁸, a large number of protests were held either inside the mosque or immediately after prayers. However, as the revolt began reconquering public space in some neighborhoods and even some cities, meeting at the mosque became less crucial. Moreover, protests quickly spilled beyond the frame of Friday processions. Funerals for victims of the repression have thus become the occasion for new processions, which, in turn, often cause new victims.

²⁵ For example: political message (16th Friday: *Friday of Departure* [of Bashar al-Assad]; 37th Friday: *The Free Syrian Army Protects Me*); message of unity (13th Friday: *Friday of the Tribes*; 28th Friday: *Unification Against the Regime*); message of solidarity with cities hit by repression (47th Friday: *Sorry Hama, Please Forgive Us*; 50th Friday: *We Will Rise Up For You, Baba Amr* – neighborhood bombarded by the army in February-March 2012); appeal to the international community (33th Friday: *No-Fly Zone*); or commentary on the international community’s positions (48th Friday: *Russia Is Killing Our Children* – after Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution in March 2012). Every week a vote is organized on Facebook to choose the name of the next ‘protest Friday.’

²⁶ Source : Cécile Boëx, « Usages de la vidéo par les manifestants et les activistes », communication, Journée d’études, EHESS, Paris : *Syrie: Genèse, dynamiques et enjeux du mouvement de révolte*, 10 mai 2012.

²⁷ Going to a public hospital entails incurring arrest.

²⁸ In force since 1963, the state of emergency prohibits public gatherings. Though it was officially lifted in April 2011, it is maintained in practice.

During the first months of the contestation, large arteries and squares were the rallying points of weekly processions. The Clock Square in Homs²⁹, a platform for urban and regional transport and the downtown area's nerve center, became famous for the gatherings that began converging on it in April 2011 - and were systematically repressed through army and sniper shootings. Adapting to the regime's repressive methods, and in order to limit protesters' exposure to shootings, processions are now held in narrower streets. In areas subject to severe police controls – essentially the central quarters of Damascus and Aleppo - a high number of protests (known as 'flying protests') last only a few minutes: groups gather in a given place at a given time, chant slogans, and then disperse before security forces arrive. Evening protests also allow the contestation to take to the streets while benefitting from the relative protection of the night.

Moreover, Syrians gather in sometimes massive sit-ins, such as when Arab observers came to Homs on December 27th, 2012 (approximately 30,000 people). Yet these are for the most part more modest – e.g. the sit-in held on June 30th 2012, in front of Bir hospital in Salamiyah, to protect people who had been injured that same day during a crack down on a funeral procession³⁰. Crowds chanting revolutionary slogans in the open air, as in Idlib on November 26th, 2011³¹, are a clear a sign of the regime's (at least momentarily) loss of control over certain territories, since this type of gathering is completely forbidden under the state of emergency. There is often a festive aspect as well, as when protesters dance the *dabke*, a very popular dance in Syria, to the rhythm of chants that are being invented every day.

Elsewhere in the country, in a gesture that recalls the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, the colossal statues of Hafez al-Assad (still present in several Syrian cities) have been toppled - as in May 2011 in the city of Rasta, a medium sized town located in Homs's northern periphery. Calls for a general strike have been increasingly answered, and in June 2012 they even reached Damascus³², which had stayed away from this type of mobilization. Souk storekeepers closed shop for several days despite security forces' attempts at forcing them to reopen; the strike was then extended into the following month.

²⁹ The square's real name is Choukri Al Kouwatli.

³⁰ Source : Syrian Local Coordination Committees (<http://www.lccsyria.org/9213>, accessed on July 1st 2012).

³¹ Source : Strategic Research and Communication Centre, Syrian Daily Round-up, 27 November 2011.

³² Following a massacre in the small town of Houleh (near Homs), which caused more than 100 deaths attributed to the regime.

Occupying Public Space

Confronted with a regime that has made the control of space an element of its authoritarian apparatus, revolutionaries have engaged in a wide range of actions to mark the territory of the contestation in public space.

First, the appropriation of public space through practices of dissent has enabled the movement to build its legitimacy from the territory of the contestation itself. Second, it has helped give visibility to the contestation (hence the important role played by videos) and has allowed protesters to send messages to the international community. See, for instance, the response of Binnish residents to the regime's propaganda, which blamed terrorist groups for ongoing troubles.



Protest in Binnish (northeast of Idlib, Idlib governorate)

Lastly, the multiplication of protests over the territory has made the latter particularly difficult to control. Thus, activists have put in place spatial strategies intended to elude repression. A first example: in May 2011, on a Friday, Damascus residents were invited to take a stroll in the streets of the city center so that some of the *mukhabarat* agents would mobilize in the area, and hence stay away from the peripheral neighborhoods where the most important processions were being held. A second example: in May 2012, a delegation of revolutionaries from Sweida - the capital of Druze country where the regime exerts significant control and pro-revolution protests are very quickly repressed - traveled to the city of Bosra (a nearby city located in the Hauran region) where it was greeted with honors. Thus Druze revolutionaries physically took their revolt to their Sunni neighbors, in a gesture that was both public and publicized by the procession (and by the videos that were made of it³³).

To the specter of national division and confessional fragmentation raised by the regime's propaganda, to the difficulties of waging a common struggle when repression significantly hinders both the movement's coordination and the circulation of information and people, Syrian protesters have responded with symbols and images. For instance, reproductions of the clock from the eponymous square in Homs have been brandished in Syrian cities in homage to Homsis. Protestors have marched and shouted messages in solidarity with the regions, cities or neighborhoods that are subject to repression - messages that have been relayed through videos across the country. The invention of a new, solidary national space composed of words and images is the protesters' response to the operation of fragmentation at the heart of the regime's repression strategy.

Revolution and Repression

As was shown earlier, the highly local character of mobilizations is tied to the context of the movement's emergence. It is also an effect of the regime's repression strategy, which aims to

³³ I would like to thank Cécile Boëx for pointing out this video as well as the picture of Binnish.

fragment the space of the contestation, and hence to drag out the uprising so as to better weaken, and then defeat, a contestation atomized into multiple hotspots³⁴.

Fragmenting Space and Society to Suppress the Revolution

Spatial fragmentation is, first of all, physical and reflected in countless checkpoints that are scattered along large roads and highways, as well as city and neighborhood entrances. Some cities or neighborhoods are surrounded by armed forces - almost continuously in some cases, as in certain areas of Homs and around the cities of Rastan (north of Homs), Douma (in Damascus's northeast periphery), or Daraa.

Second, fragmentation is induced through the use of fear. There is the fear of massive arrest campaigns³⁵, of the torture that almost systematically follows arrest³⁶, and of retaliations against family and friends. There is also the fear instilled by the violence of the *shabiha*, the regime's auxiliary militias that fire into crowds and raid people's homes, and that even participated in massacres in the spring of 2011 (namely in al Houleh on May 25th). Exactions and bombing campaigns on cities, which hit populations indiscriminately, are strategies aimed not only at weakening the enemy, but also at striking people's imaginations, disheartening the contestation and fomenting division among populations blindly targeted by these collective punishments.

Third, this fragmentation strategy operates through representations of the situation in Syria that are relayed by the regime's propaganda apparatus. These aim to demonstrate that troubles are geographically circumscribed and caused by foreign elements that have infiltrated the country in order to divide it up. To achieve this, the regime must stage 'calmness': the stability of Syria vs. 'external' attempts at destabilization (by Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, etc.), the protection offered by the president vs. Islamist terrorist groups ('al-Qaeda'), but also the

³⁴ Hamit Borzalan, "Configurations arabes: Syrie et Libye versus Tunisie et Egypte", communication, Journée d'études, EHESS, Paris : *Syrie: Genèse, dynamiques et enjeux du mouvement de révolte*, 10 mai 2012.

³⁵ According to the Strategic Research and Communication Centre (Syrian Daily Round-up, 20 July 2012), more than 216,000 people were arrested between March 2011 and mid-July 2012 – the highest available estimate.

³⁶ See "[Torture Archipelago](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/07/03/torture-archipelago), Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011," Human Rights Watch report, July 3, 2012. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/07/03/torture-archipelago>.

calmness that apparently prevails in regions vital for the regime. These regions are primarily the two large national metropolises Damascus (the capital, with close to 5 million inhabitants) and Aleppo (with 3 million inhabitants), which have stayed away from the uprising and have thus been presented as supportive of the regime. If people living in the central neighborhoods of these two metropolises - middle and upper classes, storekeepers and entrepreneurs concerned with the smooth operation of business – have adopted a wait-and-see posture as compared to other areas, it cannot be hastily concluded that they adhere to the regime. Such situation ought to be examined more closely.

The case of Damascus shows in fact that the ‘calmness’ described by the regime and the media has been highly relative since the start of the uprising. As noted earlier, it is in the alleys of the old city’s main souk that the first slogans burst forth in February 2011. Thereafter, Friday protests have been held in the capital on a regular basis. For instance, on March 25th 2011, one of the country’s first important processions started in the heart of the great Umayyad Mosque and headed out to the old city souks, where a pro-Bashar countermarch was waiting to contain protesters. Other forms of protests (very short, ‘flying’ ones) have multiplied, students have rallied on campuses, and outstanding political actions have been organized in the city. Thus, on September 2011, a group of activists dyed the waters of the Barada (a small river flowing through Damascus and its region) red to symbolize the blood spilled by the regime³⁷.

Most importantly, the view that the ‘troubles’ unfolding in Midan (located in the immediate proximity of the old city), in the periphery of Damascus, or in Moadamiya, Daraya, Jdaidet Artouz, Irbin, and Douma, do not concern the capital stems at best from a poor appreciation of the scale of the metropolis, and at worst from a propaganda operation that is vital for the regime³⁸. This approach ensures that the revolt’s political dimension is dismissed in favor of a socio-economic analysis, which attributes the revolt to poverty and hence confines it to social (a revolt of the poor) and geographical (city or country outskirts) peripheries. Moreover, associating ‘calmness’ in the great metropolises with adherence to the regime misses the wait-

³⁷ Source : Layla al-Zubaidi, “Diary”, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 34, 10, 24 May 2012, p. 39. Freedom Days Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/Freedom.Days.Syria>).

³⁸ Leila Vignal, “Jours tranquilles à Damas. Quelques aperçus sur la révolte syrienne à la mi-mai 2011”, *Esprit*, Juillet-août 2011.

and-see attitudes that are doubtless the most common. Lastly, this ‘calmness’ must be attributed in part to surveillance of the population by security forces.

The fourth element in the regime’s fragmentation operation consists in staging the threat of confessional confrontation, as well as the risk a Sunni majority would represent for other religious communities in Syria³⁹. President Bashar al-Assad even presents his own belonging to a minority community (the Alawis) as the guarantee of national unity and minority protection. Beyond such propaganda, the regime instrumentalizes confessional diversity in Syria through an exercise in selective repression. It has been careful to preserve from the most brutal repression the historical cradles of certain religious and ethnic minorities, the low number of victims among them appearing as proof of their support for the regime. This is for instance the case in Salamiyah, a city of 130,000 inhabitants located on the edge of the steppe region east of Hama, and one of the centers of the Ismaili community. According to available reports⁴⁰, there have been numerous protests in the city, yet the number of dead remains low. Similarly, a low number of casualties has been reported in the most important Kurdish settlement (al-Hasakah governorate), where people in the main cities (al-Hasakah and Qamishli) have mobilized and where Kurdish parties seem to have enjoyed, since the start of the contestation, a relatively high (and unprecedented) degree of tolerance on the part of authorities.

In order to spark confessional confrontation, the regime also utilizes its *shabiha* militias, which form along with the army’s elite units and some secret services one of the three armed wings that sustain the regime. Since their loyalty must be absolute, these militias are selected exclusively among the Alawis, which is also a way of linking the fate of this community to that of the Syrian president’s family. The brutality demonstrated by the *shabiha* can potentially ignite tensions with the targeted (mainly Sunni) groups. Local configurations are also cynically exploited. For instance, as part of the different exactions committed against the Ghrab plain people in the spring of 2012, residents of small Sunni cities were attacked by regime forces that

³⁹ Of the Syrian population, 70% to 75% are Sunnis, 12% (to 20%, according to the highest estimates) are Alawites (a sect of Shia Islam), 5% to 10% are Christians (in different Churches), 1 to 3 % are Druze (a sectarian branch of Sunni Islam), and 1 to 3% are Ismailis (*idem*). Syrian Kurds, who are Sunni, form approximately 15% of the population.

⁴⁰ For instance, focusing strictly on videos of protests posted on youtube, we find that 55 correspond to protests held in Salamiyah (counted on June 24th 2012), which is an average of six protests per month between April 2011 and June 2012. Based on a single source, this count is necessarily limited, yet it is indicative of the local dynamic of dissent.

comprised Alawi militias recruited in the surrounding villages⁴¹. Some Sunni families were abducted and slaughtered by Alawi militias, for instance the ‘Arib al-Salim’ family⁴². If the confessional divisions bred by the regime have not developed until now into a spiral of retaliation and intercommunity clashes, the prolongation of the conflict could make this a reality - a trump card the regime is not ready to forego.

From Armed Resistance to Armed Revolution

During the first year of the contestation, the regime deployed its police forces, armed forces and militias, responding to the uprising with systematic repression. Regime troops – in particular the Fourth Armored Division’s elite unit commanded by the president’s younger brother Maher al-Assad – moved incessantly from one part of the country to the next, repressing protests, sometimes bombing cities (for instance Latakia, the large coastal city shelled by warships in mid-August 2011) or effectively laying siege to them (Daraa).

Confronted with this state violence, Syrians decided to take up arms, first to defend protesters and ordinary citizens, and then in some cases⁴³ to contribute directly to the fall of the regime. Long limited to a few poorly equipped battalions, the ranks of the armed opposition have grown significantly since the spring of 2012. In early June, the number of combatants was estimated at approximately 40,000⁴⁴.

Members of these armed groups, who describe themselves as ‘the resistance’ (*muqawama*), are for the most part Syrian citizens⁴⁵ joined by deserting officers and soldiers. If most armed groups claim to belong to the FSA (Free Syrian Army), only a few battalions fighting in the field fall directly under its chain of command⁴⁶. The armed uprising is conducted for the most part by locally organized brigades, with more or less developed forms of cooperation, yet

⁴¹ In the governorates of Homs and Hama: Houleh, Taldo, Qbeir, al-Haffeh, Salma, Souran, Treimseh.

⁴² Source : local contact’s personal account and Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/aribalsalim>).

⁴³ This position was debated within the opposition, though the FSA recognized and was recognized by the Syrian National Council (the main opposition platform).

⁴⁴ Source : Report *Syria’s maturing insurgency*, Washington D.C., Institute for the Study of War, June 2012.

⁴⁵ Source : Rapport *Syria’s armed opposition*, Washington D.C., Institute for the Study of War, March 2012.

⁴⁶ The Khalid bin Walid brigade active near Homs; the Harmoush Battalion in the mountain region of Jabal Zawiya, southwest of Idlib city; the Omari battalion in the south, in the Hauran plain (region of Daraa); the Abou al Fidas and Osama Ibn Zaid battalions north of Hama city; or the Farouq battalion in Homs, at the heart of the February 2012 confrontation with the army.

without a truly unified command – though there is coordination on a regional scale in the form of ‘Military Councils’⁴⁷.

During the winter of 2011-2012, the territories under FSA control expanded. In some cases, the FSA exerted its control temporarily. For instance, in Zabadani, a small city located in the mountains close to Damascus, the FSA was ousted in February 2012 after having controlled the town for a few weeks. Similarly, in the Baba Amr neighborhood in Homs, the FSA withdrew on March 1st, 2012 following an intense, one-month long government offensive. In other cases, FSA control has become perennial, as in the Idlib region north of the country where the regime’s presence is now virtual.

In July 2012, there is no denying that the regime has failed to reconquer the country. Even in Homs, even in the neighborhood of Baba Amr, the FSA was able to regain a foothold a few months after being ousted. In other regions, for instance the Hauran plateau (Daraa governorate), FSA groups do not control the land but have engaged in multiple skirmishes against armed forces, forcing the regime to station troops permanently in the area and hence preventing it from deploying them elsewhere. In June 2012, a report by the UN observer mission estimated that 40% of Syrian territory was under the control of the armed opposition⁴⁸. Since mid-July, battles between regimes forces and FSA combatants have taken place in the pericentral neighborhoods of Damascus (Midan, Kafer Souseh, Nahar Aisha), but also in some of the central quarters of Aleppo (Salah ed-Din, al-Sakhour).

In numerical terms, the power balance is unfavorable to FSA combatants, since it is estimated that approximately 200,000 men form the core of forces loyal to the regime (the army’s elite units, the security forces, and the *shabiha*). Moreover, FSA combatants only have light weapons at their disposal - essentially arms brought by deserters or snatched from the army during victorious attacks. In fact, the strength of the armed opposition lies above all in its being scattered. An effect of the opposition groups’ low integration and atomization, this dispersion enables the FSA to fight on multiple fronts, from the north to the south of the country. Regime forces cannot stop the propagation of an increasingly militarized uprising, for as repression continues, the fire of revolt is kindled everywhere.

⁴⁷ Source : Report *Syria’s maturing insurgency* 2012 (*op. cit.*).

⁴⁸ Cited in Thomas Pierret, « Syrie, possible succès des rebelles », *Le Monde*, 2 juillet 2012.

Aiming to fight the expansion of territories under FSA control, to compensate for the inadequacy of garrisons in a theater of operations that is now national in scope, but also to evade the difficulty of controlling urban environments that are partly mobilized against the regime and whose configurations do not facilitate the deployment of troops, Bashar al-Assad launched a massive repression campaign in February 2012.

As an example, on June 18th alone at least 14 cities located in nine governorates were shelled by the army, while four Damascus neighborhoods were besieged and controlled through checkpoints (see Table)⁴⁹.

June 18th 2012	Bombing	Siege
Homs Governorate	Homs	-
	Houleh (northwest), Talbiseh and Rastan (north), Qusayr (south)	-
Greater Damascus		
Damascus	-	Nahar Aisha, Kafer Souseh
Suburbs	Douma, Harasta, Zabadani	Qadam, Qabun
Aleppo Governorate	Atareb	-
Daraa Governorate	Tafas	-
Deir ez-Zor Governorate	Quriya	-
Hama Governorate	Hama, Sahl al-Ghab	-
Idlib Governorate	Ma'arat al-Numan	-

Source: June 19th 2012 Daily Round-up, Strategic Research and Communication Centre. Counted by: L. Vignal

This campaign has three objectives. First, it aims to reconquer the territories controlled by the FSA via the deployment of heavy artillery, helicopters and army tanks. Second, it seeks to sanctuarize the main urban centers by setting up blockades around cities and neighborhoods that

⁴⁹ Source: Count based on daily round-up published by activist think-tank Strategic Research and Communication Centre.

have joined the opposition, and by conducting raids and summary executions in them. Lastly, as noted earlier, it tries to reestablish fear through the indiscriminate and punitive use of heavy artillery on cities, and through targeted terror operations that are presented as ‘terrorist’ hunting operations (with deserters and FSA combatants being the real targets⁵⁰), yet are in fact a pretext for massacres.

Conclusion: Towards a New Syria

In the summer of 2012, the country is at war. This is not a civil war, as commentators have been quick to repeat, but a war waged by the regime against its own population. The war goals of the repressive military and police operation launched by Bashar al-Assad, however, have not been met. Protesters continue to take to the streets, and armed opposition groups are extending their control over Syrian territory, all the way to the heart of power. Yet if the regime seems weaker on the military and police terrain, its striking force - which relies notably on Russian weapons – and its capacity to mobilize the most loyal segments of the security apparatus cannot be underestimated.

The regime is nonetheless condemned, in the short or medium term, by the impossibility of remaining in force in a society that has largely become hostile. From this perspective, the suggested scenario of a withdrawal of the Assad clan to a rump state centered in the Alawite Mountains seems unrealistic. The Alawi region is not a homogenous and immutable bastion that would be impervious to national tensions and divisions. Bashar al-Assad’s regime will be brought down by the revolt of a Syrian society that has undergone deep transformations over the last decades, and that has been discovering since March 2011 its capacity for political innovation, solidarity, and collective resilience.

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⁵⁰ This is, for instance, what the United Nations observer mission concluded following the massacre that took place on July 14th 2012 in the small town of Treimseh (Hama governorate) (<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/d/20687.html>).