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## **Behind the Screen: the Syrian Virtual Resistance**

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## **Behind the Screen: the Syrian Virtual Resistance**

### **Abstract**

Six years have gone by since the political upheaval that swept through many Middle East and North African (MENA) countries begun. Syria was caught in the grip of this revolutionary moment, one that drove the country from a peaceful popular mobilisation to a deadly fratricide civil war with no apparent way out. This paper provides an alternative approach to the study of the root causes of the Syrian uprising by examining the impact that the development of new media had in reconstructing forms of collective action and social mobilisation in pre-revolutionary Syria. By providing evidence of a number of significant initiatives, campaigns and acts of contentious politics that occurred between 2000 and 2011, this paper shows how, prior to 2011, scholarly work on Syria has not given sufficient theoretical and empirical consideration to the development of expressions of dissent and resilience of its cyberspace and to the informal and hybrid civic engagement they produced.

### **Key words**

Syria, uprising, social movement, new media

Six years have gone by since the political upheaval that swept through many Middle East and North African (MENA) countries begun. Syria was caught in the grip of this revolutionary moment, one that drove the country from a peaceful popular mobilisation to a deadly fratricide civil war with no

apparent way out. Scholars advanced a number of explanations for this event, which included the demographic profile of the younger generations and the economic recession they experienced, rising wealth concentration, high unemployment, the use of techniques from successful campaigns and the coordination of dissent through traditional/offline and new/online forms of contention. The employment of the new media has often been framed as a *deus ex-machina* of the uprising, a Silicon Valley product that came to liberate citizens from the grip of authoritarianism. Nevertheless, did Syrians truly acquire the ability to use the new media technologies at the eve of the uprising or did they slowly mastered their ability through a period of maturation and gestation? How does the epistemic community explain the extensive reliance that Syrian protestors made of the new media at the time of the uprising, when the country was depicted as falling behind international and regional standards of media development?<sup>1</sup> Is the error in the statistics or is it in the bigger picture?<sup>2</sup> Could one argue that Syria watchers have miscalculated the contingent and nonlinear impact of digital media and technologies on Syria's civil society from an empirical as well as theoretical point of view?

For the new media to act as “liberating tools” (liberating in the sense of opposing authoritarian and non-democratic regimes) is it necessary to have the whole population connected online? Or could it be the exact opposite? If one looks at the West where the new technologies have been used for a longer time and where the majority of population has access to them, one would expect citizens to be politically and civically more aware and participative. Yet, this is not always the case. On the contrary, the amount of (dis)information and people's unregulated access to the web is actually producing the exact opposite: distraction and fragmentation. According to Howard and Hussein, for the media to become powerful tools capable of generating political or social changes one does not need to have the whole population tuned online but only a few brokers who act as intermediaries between the strong, yet offline social networks and the wider digital public (Howard and Hussein, 2013:12). Is it possible to argue that academic interest has been oriented towards the role that the new media played at the time of the Arab uprising, while insufficient interest, instead has been directed to the role they

played in the years predating it, the period one might define as constitutive and of maturation? On this line, though the Syrian uprising started in 2011, is it possible to argue that digital media played an even more important role in the years that led to the uprising, reconstructing forms of collective action and social mobilisation that had not existed before in a closed regime like Syria?

What this study does is to explain the outbreak of the Syrian uprising and the role played by digital media by focusing on an aspect that academic work has largely disregarded, the way new media became the major articulators and developers of a change in the political and social fabric of Syria prior to 2011. Up to the burst of Syria's chapter of the Arab Spring, most of the studies on Syria had focused their attention on the strategies and techniques adopted by president Bashar al-Asad to tap new resources, diversify legitimacy bases and redefine state-societies relation, what Heydemann defined "authoritarian upgrading", Perthes called "modernised authoritarianism" and Hinnebusch described as "post-populist" (Heydemann 2007; Perthes 2004; Hinnebusch 2006). Only a niche of Syria's scholars had examined forms of subversive practices in pre-uprising Syria that - with hindsight - could anticipate the weaknesses of the authoritarian upgrading argument. Within this group, the media had been the focus of attention of an even smaller group of scholars, like Wedeen, Salamandra and George who had examined various expressions of political dissent, whether in the press or TV series, but that were interpreted more as safety valves rather than acts of political resistance with long-term consequences (Wedeen 1999; Salamandra 2008; George 2003). On the contrary, this paper aims at contributing to the growing literature that analyses the root causes of Syria's uprising by expanding our understanding on the linkages between pre-war new media and wartime dissidence. In this sense, the Syrian uprising represents the eventual element of analysis, and the concluding state of the narrative, towards which this study is constantly projected. What emerges is that, if the Syrian uprising is said to have formally begun in 2011, its formation is thought to date back to the start of Bashar al-Asad's presidency in 2000. The underlying argument of this paper is that during the decade that led to the uprising in Syria, a (silent) form of mobilisation took place as

an effect of opportunity structures (economic, institutional and social context), conditioned by people's access to new media. If it is true that the Syrian government under Bashar al-Asad was able to modernise authoritarianism or to upgrade authoritarianism to the changing times, this paper holds that these same changes contributed to making the Syrian regime more vulnerable and exposed to the challenge of popular elements of dissent.<sup>3</sup> This scenario determined the creation of loopholes or power vacuums that allowed alternative forces to emerge through the new spaces offered by the digital media. The Syrian regime slowly lost control of two elements on which its stability was based: control of the flow of information and surveillance of people's interaction. The emergence of new media symbolised a turning point for Syria, as they directed the already existing motives for a popular mobilisation and offered a space to express political, cultural and social protest. The outbreak of the revolt in 2011 did not symbolise the start of Syria's revolution but the shift of an existing and unstructured growing social mobilisation from virtual to tangible street mobilisation.

This article elaborates a conceptual model aimed at examining the role that digital media had in the formation of the Syrian uprising. By locating the seeds of Syria's uprising prior to 2011, this article encourages to rethink the concept of social movement and activism within the context of Syria and as an effect of the role that new media can play in closed regimes like the Syrian one. Limiting this study to a theoretical analysis supported by a number of significant empirical examples, this article is structured in two parts. The first part provides an overview of the context (*opportunity structures*) in which Syria's online mobilisation is said to have emerged. The second part instead indicates how the new media became the *mobilising structures* of Syria's uprising. The Internet, in particular, became a tool that channelled the mistrust towards the regime and the hopes for reforms, as well a space, a virtual platform that facilitated manifestations of dissent and protests. As such, the new media did not simply provide the *tool* to spread discontent and mobilise civic engagement, they became the *space* for contention themselves, where new collective subjectivities emerged.

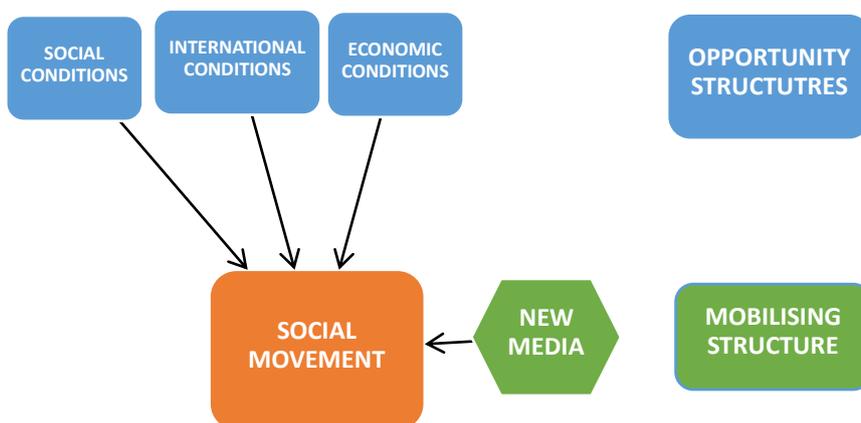
## *The Virtual, and Quite, (Non)Movement of pre-Uprising Syria*

The conceptual framework that this study elaborates stands on two disciplines: media studies and social movement studies. The two disciplines have for long developed along two different tracks and only recently colluded their research focus. The advent of the new media has in fact had such an influence on the formation of modes of communication, collective identity, public sphere and grassroots mobilisation that media and social movement scholars find their research interests intersecting. In reality, the discipline of social movement studies has always taken into account the role of the media, even the most traditional ones, like underground newspapers, outlawed radio, tapes and other old-fashioned information media. However their role has never occupied a central part of study, as in practice the old media supported the development of a group's mobilisation, but have always been considered as constitutive elements with no agency, non-leading factors. Yet all major events in history have been shaped by media technology since the invention of the printing press, from the American Revolution and the civil rights movement in the American South, to the struggles for independence from colonial rule and the peace movements. However today, social movements are influenced by the role of the media as never before.<sup>4</sup> Digital media have revolutionised the process of formation and mobilisation of a social movement, which does not require people to be physically present in the same place, if for "place" we refer to an environment physically existing. The Internet may be thought as a "virtual place" or better a "space" that allows physically dispersed people to converge. It may converge people dislocated in different countries as well people within the same country, maybe only one block away from one another if contexts like that of authoritarian countries do not allow forms of social gathering to take place in the streets. According to Wolfson, the new technologies have simply "enabled new possibilities for the scale, strategy, structure, and governance of social movement" and allowed the grass-roots, populist activism to become global (Wolfson, 2014:

4).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps more than a change in the formation of social movements, the digital space has simply provided a new ground for the evolution and development of activism in the digital age.

Before assessing the role of digital media in the formation of what is here argued to have been a (silent) form of online mobilisation in the years leading up to Syria’s uprising, this section will analyse the context in which opportunity structures created the perfect “astral moment” for the emergence of dissent through online platforms. This study shares Oleinik’s assumption that social, institutional and economic contexts provide the primary conditions for social movements (otherwise called opportunity structures), though it asserts that it is their combination between motives for contention with new media (mobilising structures) that paves the way to popular mobilisation (Oleinik, 2012). As represented in Figure 1, the opportunity structures constitute the opportunities or constraints that drive the social movement, whereas the mobilising structures are the resources necessary for the mobilisation. The new media have become a new way of social networking and therefore a new catalyst tool in the formation of social movements.

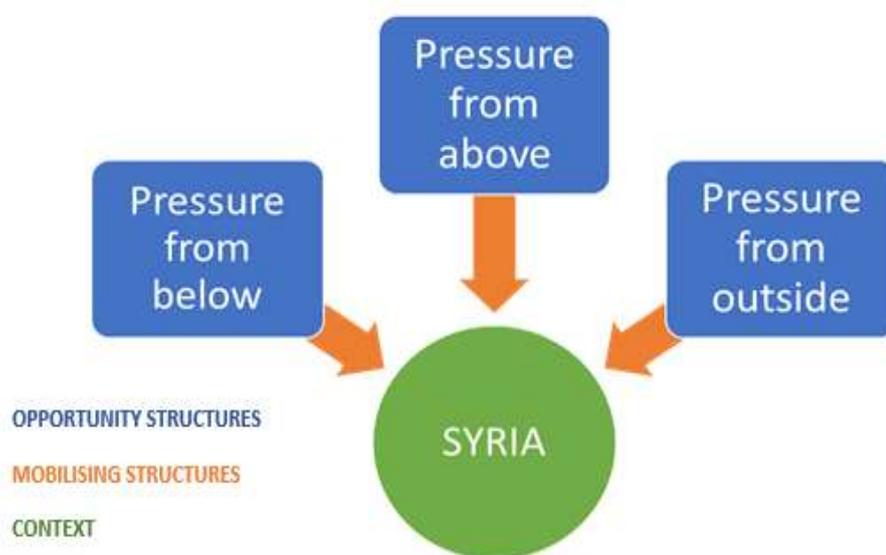
**FIGURE 1 FORMATION OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**



During the presidency of Bashar al-Asad the country experienced the pressures of opposing forces pushing towards authoritarianism, reformism and globalisation. Most research on opportunity structures has shown how changes in some aspects of the political system generate new possibilities

for collective action. The vulnerability of the political system creates the chance for others to seize the opportunity and push through social change. This vulnerability can be the result of many factors such as increasing political pluralism, decline in repression, division within elites or increased political enfranchisement (Cragun, R. and Cragun, D., 2008). In the case of Syria, as represented in Figure 2, three major dynamics are identified as having placed the country under great friction, offering the opportunity structures necessarily for a popular mobilisation: *pressures from below*, coming from the people, pushing for socio-political reforms; *pressures from above*, coming from the government, which granted limited reforms and openings; and *pressures from the outside*, coming from the West, adopting the strategy of supplying development aid, in the format of media projects, to empower civil society organisations to the disadvantage of the state.<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, this study contributes to the existing scholarship on Syria, situating the focus within the wider literature on Arab authoritarianism, Arab media and social movement theory. New media technology, here under scrutiny, cannot be analysed in isolation from other factors, rather feeds into the existing scholarship on Syria and enriches with new connectors. The aim is to understand the Syrian uprising of 2011 not as an inevitable yet unforeseen event, rather as the outcome of a rising civic engagement and digital connectivity that was emerging in the country.

## **FIGURE 2 THE FORMATION OF SYRIA'S PRE-UPRISING MOBILISATION**



### ***Opportunity Structures***

*Pressure from below.* Since the start of the presidency of Bashar al-Asad in 2000, an informal social mobilisation has made inroads in the country, challenging the regime’s authority and decision making. “The Syrian uprising of 2011 was not, by any means, the first opposition movement under Bashar al-Asad” (Ghadiban, 2015: 91). As Ghadiban argues, Bashar al-Asad faced growing dissident activism “through rises and declines, articulating several enduring demands but ultimately failing to bring about the desired changes” (Ghadiban, 2015: 91). This process started at the eve of Bashar al-Asad’s presidency, with the bursting of a lively civil society movement called the “Damascus Spring”, where a diversified group of people, made up of intellectuals, artists, and activists campaigned for a change in social, political and economic structures (George, 2003). The country witnessed for the first time in decades to the resurgence of public gatherings, discussion forums, political debates, community associations, cultural forums, women and human rights’ organisations. Independent gatherings (*muntadayat*) spread through the country with the intent of offering a platform for discussions on arts and culture; yet these soon turned into stages to discuss issues about politics,

religion and human rights (Stenberg, Salamandra, 2015: 5). Courageous political stances were taken by many civil society groups, like the “Statement of the 99”, drafted in September 2000, a manifesto signed by 99 Syrian civil society activists demanding the end of the state of emergency which had been in effect since 1963. Along the same lines, but much bolder in its tone was the “Manifesto of 1000” in 2001, which repeated the earlier objectives, but also explicitly attacked the foundation of the Ba’ath party and advocated a multi-party political system with political and constitutional reforms (Sawah, 2012). In 2005, opposition figures as well as religious and secular political parties became signatories of the “Damascus Declaration”, which publicly criticised the government for being authoritarian and asking for profound reforms (Pace and Landis, 2009).<sup>7</sup> It was the first document since the beginning of Ba’th rule in 1963 to receive endorsement from so many different political forces, like the leftists, nationalists, Kurdish parties, the Muslim Brotherhood, intellectuals and artists (Ghadiban, 2015). Hinnebusch and Zintl note how though unsuccessful in achieving their requests, these initiatives provided models of civil society mobilisation that activists would build on when the revolt of 2011 started (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015).<sup>8</sup> Despite their inability to obtain any noticeable change, such initiatives manifested a growing sense of political maturity in Syrian civil society and represented a growing force, exercising pressure on the government (Kawakibi and Kodami, 2003). In 2006 exiled Syrian opposition leaders established the National Salvation Front (NSF), a coalition meant to bring democratic regime change in Syria, which gathered different opponents to the Syrian regime, namely former vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam, the Muslim Brotherhood, Kurdish and communist parties and independents (Ghadiban, 2015: 96). Syrians also plunged into a vivid cultural life represented by fora such as the Forum for National Dialogue and the Jamal Atassi Forum, offering people a place in which to express their opinions and debate the steps to produce reform (Sawah, 2012). A number of human rights demonstrations, like those of the Syrian Human Rights Association and the Defence of Democratic freedoms and human rights took place in the capital.<sup>9</sup> The regime hardly welcomed the emergence of a Syrian civil society movement, especially its political fringes. As a consequence, the movement was strongly ostracised, its members harassed and punished.

Despite the repressive measures adopted by the authorities, the Syrian civil society movement did not die with the Damascus Spring but moved underground, or rather online, abandoning drawing rooms and coffee shops for the virtual space of the Internet. The regime tolerated the existence of such mobilisation if limited to cyber space, believing that it would have been innocuous for the state's stability and would have instead gained the West's sympathy, representing the regime's new openings towards pluralism and making the country seem at step with the globalised world. It is at this point that scholarly interest towards the thriving Syrian civil society phenomenon saw a drastic decline, undermining the role that its online version had had. The beginning of the new presidency of Bashar al-Asad coincided with the country's access to the Internet and social media users, the spread of satellite dishes on the top of Syrian homes and of smart phone holders. The Internet did not just provide a new territory to extend old struggles with new practices, it contested a decades-long culture of fear and established new state-society relations (Shaery-Eisenlohr and Cavatorta, 2012).

*Pressure from above.* In Syria, the new President carried out a series of reforms, which at the time were ridiculed for not being "reformist" enough. With the benefit of hindsight, those reforms may have been the stepping stone of long term effects. Some of these reforms were literally cosmetic, like the ones that changed the school's uniforms from a khaki colour to a light blue for boys and pink for girls. The same genre of reform was the one that allowed the opening of fancy cafes and restaurants for the well-off of the country. Of a different type were the reforms that led to the closing of the infamous Mezzeh prison in Damascus; the release of political prisoners (600 only in November 2000); the replacement of the old guard with young and western-educated ministers between 2000 and 2005; the licensing of several private universities; the creation of a Ministry of Expatriates to encourage the return of Syrian migrants; the country's access to the Internet with projects to develop IT literacy among the younger generations as well as also in remote areas of the country; the new media law (decree no. 50) which opened media outlets to private ownership (Lesch, 2005; Caldwell, 2010).<sup>10</sup> As it will be discussed later in this paper, the Internet played a crucial role in overcoming

the atomisation of society and providing the basis for a mobilisation against the regime. It is not a case that people's access to the Internet and mobile phones increased from less than 1 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2010 for the Internet, while mobile phone use reached 60 percent.<sup>11</sup> Amid these encouraging attempts of reform, there were also discussions about the abolition of the Ba'ath Party in Syria, which did not lead to its actual realization, but still represented an unprecedented hypothesis.<sup>12</sup> Heydemann aptly defines these reforms as "authoritarian upgrading", indicating an attempt by the new president to hold onto power, and "reconfigure authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic and social conditions" (Heydemann, 2007: 1). However, as detailed by Hinnebusch and Zintl, the economic liberalisation inaugurated by Bashar al-Asad and his technocrats, altered the regime's social base, engineering a turnover on leadership and cadres and concentrating power in the presidency and the Asad family at large (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015: 6). Syrian regime officials referred to the 'Chinese model' of reform, one that improves living standards but for the benefits and stability of the regime. If one bears in mind De Tocqueville's argument holding that the most dangerous moment for an authoritarian regime is when it attempts to reform itself, these reforms had potentially destabilised the status quo. In this regard, Salam Kawakibi observes that Bashar al-Asad's upgrading consisted in the liberalisation of the economy, technological development and reliance on civil society organisations to deliver services that the state was not able to offer (Kawakibi 2012). One example was the establishment of a number of GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations) under the patronage of the Syrian First Lady Asma al-Asad. While at first this strategy allowed the state to keep control of the new civil society actors, with time they widened their activities and audience away from the regime's control. Therefore, the survival tactics adopted by the regime, combined with other factors, produced unpredicted consequences (Hinnebusch, 2012).<sup>13</sup>

*Pressure from the outside.* The change in Syria was not generated only by internal factors, whether coming from the people or the authorities, but also by exogenous causes. An overall picture would

show Syria heavily affected by foreign powers' policies and by ongoing destabilising regional events. On the one hand, the country opted to initiate a process of liberalisation as an effect of the economic and political reforms inaugurated by the government, which led to the signing of economic agreements with new international partners like the European Union, Turkey, Iran, China and several Arab countries (Scheller, 2013). On the other hand, ongoing discrepancies with the US administration, in particular with the Bush presidency, made Syria fall under a dark light and emerge in the list of the Axis of Evil. This came at a time when the country was suffering from regional instability caused by the second intifada (2000-2005), the dramatic event of the fall of Baghdad in 2003 and the fear of facing a similar destiny, in addition to the exacerbating effects in the wake of the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 and Israeli wars against Syrian allies Hezbollah and Hamas. Despite these external pressures, the regime proceeded with economic liberalisation, moving its trade towards China, Iran, Turkey and the Greater Arab Free Trade Association (GAFTA) (Hinnebusch, Zintl, 2015: 14). The new investment inflows produced a boom in private sectors like trade, housing, banking, construction and tourism (Hinnebusch, Zintl, 2015: 288). In this context of reforms, economic liberalisation and increasing diffusion of media technology Syria became the target of media assistance projects promoted by the West. As discussed by Brownlee in her study of Syria's media aid architecture, the country became the target of a number of media development aid programs aimed on the one hand at improving the development of the media sector in line with Western models of independent journalism and on the other at empowering a class of civil society activists (Brownlee, 2017). Arguably, this strategy represented the West's new approach towards Syria and other unfriendly regimes, one which aimed at destabilising them by simply implementing aid programmes, instead of waging an Iraq-like war.

This scenario – which is an oversimplification – of the contextual situation in Syria under president Bashar al-Asad, demonstrates how a combination of factors created the opportunity structures necessary for people to engage through forms of social mobilisation via the channels

offered by the new media and in particular, the Internet. The vulnerability of the political system generated by opposing deviant forces caused by a regime willing to open and modernise the country and at the same time tighten its control and repression, all combined with an unstable political regional setting and the West's investment in media and civil society actors, created the chance for new modes of social and political action through online platforms.

### ***Mobilising Structures***

Goodwin and Jasper argue that social movements are not created by a single factor but by a set of variables that interact. It is a combination of social, institutional and economic conditions – like the ones just described for Syria – which provide the underlying motives for social movements (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). In this regard, multiple studies have demonstrated that grievances alone are not enough to bring people to act collectively (Buechler, 2000). In order to mobilise, people need organisation and resources. Opportunity structures and mobilising structures act *in tandem* to create social movements. Opportunity structures provide the motivation for movement organisations by materialising the political, social and economic conditions necessary for mobilisation. Mobilizing structures, in turn, constitute those formal and informal vehicles through which people organise and engage in collective action.

Communication, one infers, is at the basis of any form of popular organisation. As Tilly holds, social movement theory should not place the individual as the primary unit of social movements, rather it should identify it in the interaction between individuals (Tilly, 1984). In fact, individuals have proved to have participated in collective action only when they are sure that others are participating (Wright, 2001). Trust and confidence in the adherence of other participants can only grow out of communication between individuals (Lim, 2012). Within this design, the new information and communication technologies have inaugurated new paths for popular movements and new

avenues of research for scholars. If one considers a closed regime like the one in Syria, the possibility for traditional media to act as mobilising structures of a popular movement had been practically impossible. State and media almost coincided, as traditional media were owned and jealously controlled by the state. With the coming of age of new information and communication technologies, the capabilities of the Syrian regime to control the flow of information and people's inter-action were drastically reduced. This embodied a turning point in the recent political narrative, given that the underlying motives for a popular mobilisation already existed. People's access to the new media in Syria was the vehicle and the space for social mobilisation.

While previous social movements had generally been organised around traditional hubs like cafés, universities and underground reunions, with the coming of age of the new media, people found new ways and spaces to meet, discuss and organise, opting for a strategy more convenient in terms of timeframe, money and safety. This was the case in Syria, where the civil society movement born on the eve of Bashar al-Asad's new presidency was crushed vehemently by the regime and was obliged to go underground (virtually). The movement had, somewhat naively, believed in the initial promises for reforms from the new president, promoting initiatives and debates on public matters in public spaces. However, in the course of a few months it became clear that the regime was not seriously committed to respecting the promises made, inaugurating a staunch witch-hunting of all initiatives that the regime presumed could jeopardise the state's stability. Satellite TV and the Internet produced the most visible changes in terms of civil awareness and engagement. Arabic-language satellite television in general, and al-Jazeera in particular, became a major source of information for Syrians, replacing national news production. Al-Jazeera's effect in Syria was felt not just in terms of news and information production, but as a platform for the Syrian civil society movement. For instance, at the time of the Damascus Spring in 2001, satellite television played a significant role in keeping Syrians updated with events, which went unreported by state-run television.<sup>14</sup> Ghadiban notes how al-Jazeera infringed on all the regimes' redlines, covering issues on democracy, human

rights and Islamic fundamentalism, and having extensive coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Ghadiban, 2015). This generated new understanding and motive for reflection when programmes like *Bila Hudud* (Without Limits) hosted the leader of the banned Syrian Muslim Brothers, who presented himself as a promoter of democracy, demanding the end of the State of Emergency law. Even more daring was al-Jazeera's interview of the opposition of Monzer al-Mouseli, an independent member of the Syrian People's Assembly, who opposed the constitutional amendment passed to allow Bashar al-Asad to run for president despite his youth (Zisser, 2006: 78). Beside established satellite TV station like al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, other media offered Syrian opposition a place to express their views, like the two satellite TV stations launched by Syrian dissidents in Brussels and London, respectively Zanoobia and Barada TV (Ghadiban, 2015: 106). The latter, in particular, played a fundamental role in the years predating the uprising as an anti-regime information campaign venue, with shows like "Toward Change"- a panel discussion on current events-, and "First Step" – a programme produced by Syrian dissident groups based in the US. Syrians responsiveness to the new programmes offered by satellite TV channels was evident from the proliferation of satellite dishes on the roofs of Syrian homes as well as from the number of callers from Syria participating on live TV shows (Ghadiban, 2001: 81).

Alan George compares the proliferation of satellite television and the Internet to a concrete nightmare for authoritarian regimes like the Syrian one (George, 2003: 134). The advent of the Internet produced the most thought-provoking examples of civic engagement, as it was used by the political opposition to circulate its bulletins and statements; to spread petitions and collect signatures on political and social issues; to inform the public of the regimes wrongdoings; and to publish literary works that had been censored by the state. Numerous news websites served as online windows to discuss topics like drug consumption, homosexuality, female harassment, interfaith marriage, progressively infringing on many established taboo topics. Examples of this type of civic engagement are numerous but we are here going to mention only a few in order to save space for the theoretical

speculations. A significant case is represented by the news website *All4Syria.com*, one of the online most read bulletin, with over 15,000 daily subscribers (Kawakibi, 2010). The longevity of the website was constantly obstructed by the regime for its content. In fact, *All4Syria* offered a collection of articles from the national and foreign press and a ‘readers complaint section’ that took charge of exposing problems of corruption in the country, by directly naming those causing it. The digital space welcomed people from different walks of life to find their preferred communication means, whether through blogs, Facebook pages, news websites. All these means offered Syrians the opportunity to carry out crucial battles on social matters for the first time, some worthy of being mentioned. For instance, a university student launched a campaign on Facebook, called “We want to go forward, not backward”, which counted 1,339 members in March 2010 (Baiazy, 2012). The group was concerned with women’s rights and hosted debates on topics such as interfaith marriage, honour crimes and discrimination against women in Syrian law. Rami Nakhle, a prominent Syrian activist who gained an international reputation only after 2011, launched two important online campaigns in 2009, the “Get Your Rights”, to help Syrians to circumvent Internet censorship and the “Enough Silence Campaign”, calling for the lifting of the Emergency Law and the release of political prisoners.<sup>15</sup> In other cases, the Internet turned into a window to denounce malpractices, like the YouTube video that showed a police officer receiving a bribe, which was watched 366, 703 times and received 1,323 comments (Baiazy, 2012).

Significant is the role that the Syrian digital space played as a platform for citizens to carry out crucial battles on social matters and mediate new roles in relations to the state. Successful campaigns like the *National Campaign against Honour Crimes*, aimed at improving women’s rights in Syria and promoting citizenship and the *Personal Status Law Campaign* to promote civil rights, the national campaign to annul an amendment of martial law, the campaign for women’s right to confer their citizenship on their children, the campaign to lower mobile rates and the one to protect young women who had been victims of rape, all occurred through the Internet (Sawah, 2012).<sup>16</sup> These

online campaigns were impressively well-organised, raising awareness about the implications of such laws, signing petitions calling for the withdrawal of the laws and presenting them to officials of the government. Similarly, many petitions and denunciations on a number of topics have circulated online. In particular, two political events have had a great success thanks to the Internet: the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (October 2005) and the Beirut-Damascus/Damascus-Beirut Declaration (April 2006) (Kawakibi, 2010). Both documents circulated online and collected large number of signatories. The importance of such initiatives was not simply that they managed to change laws and raise civic awareness but they showed how the Internet could become an effective tool for expressing political, social and cultural protests. These initiatives represented a changing social and political pattern in Syrian civic life, which broke the civilian stagnation that the regime had created and so much invested in. Moreover, the type of dialogue that emerged in the digital space broke with the traditional hierarchies based on an imbalance of powers and mostly deconstructed the fear that the regime had inculcated into citizens. All in all, the Internet became the only effective *tool* and *space* for expressing political, cultural and social protest.

### ***Rethinking the Notion of Social Struggle with the New Media***

Before the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, Syrian studies mainly covered issues of elite politics, foreign policy, and ethnic/identity politics. Few focused on civil society and those that did mostly tended to conclude that the government's practise of promoting autonomy and transferring responsibilities to citizens was a tactical expedient to infiltrate society and control it (Gilbert and Ward, 1997). As such, most of the epistemic community - before the outbreak of uprising in 2011 - failed to recognise the fact that in the long term these quasi-autonomous dynamics created unintended consequences for the country's political and social stability (Kawakibi, 2012). If not for the scholarship on Syrian *musalsalat* (TV series), studies on the role of new media in Syria were scant as

the expansion of the Internet and the new technologies was weighted with Western terms for comparison, therefore appearing irrelevant of study and non-effective vis-à-vis the perspective of social or political change. However, what this paper argues is that Syria witnessed the emergence of an unstructured form of civic resistance and mobilisation through the digital space in the years that predated the uprising. How can we define this type of mobilisation? Is it a prototype of Syria's uprising of 2011? Does it classify in terms of "social movement", understood as an organised and territorially based movement qualifying for Castell's "social transformation" or Van Naerssen's "emancipation" or should it opt for other definitions? (Bayat, 1997).

If one had to adhere to the classic definition of a social movement, it would most probably identify the Syrian uprising of 2011 as such, and not its preliminary mobilisation. If social movements are classified as durable structures of collective action aimed at producing social change, then the Syrian pre-uprising online mobilisation was not a self-identifying movement, with structured action and with clear-cut objectives. More likely, it was a form of collective action with strong elements of spontaneity, whose organisation focused on single-scope campaigns, and whose unwrapping was largely self-generated and primarily concerned with action over identity or meaning. According to Diani, the nature of regimes in the Middle East, which criminalises politics and imposes strategies of control and repression, does not allow citizens to challenge the authority through coalitions and movements, rather through community-based informal resistance (Diani, 2008). In this light, Syria's online mobilisation can be defined as the expression of "everyday forms of resistance", which however differs from Scott's definition in that its actions are not individualistic and quiet, but exemplified by collective campaigns that search for visibility through the digital space and that aim at widening adhesions (i.e. the numerous online petitions) and visibility through online platforms. In a way, these campaigns may be seen as forming a "movement in itself", a social movement *per se* only when the actors involved become conscious of their shared grievances and articulate their actions within a wider and long-lasting plan aimed at social transformation. This may be identified with the

uprising in 2011, where the anti-establishment campaigns moved from digital platforms to the streets. This shift from the online to the offline street protests marks the change from atomised episodic collective actions, limited to cyber space to “molecular” durable mass campaigns, conscious political acts targeting political authority.

I argue that what Asef Bayat defines as “street politics”, the physical and social space of the “streets” where citizens confront the authorities, has moved from the alleyways, pavements and public parks of the city to the virtual alleys of the Internet (Bayat, 1997). As Fahmi holds, the new information technologies have created new “geographies of protest”, “shifting their [activists’] campaigns and resources to alternative virtual venues” (Fahmi, 2008). Citizens now have the chance to choose or combine traditional mobilisation in the urban space with online platforms where they can engage in debates and organise collective protests. In Syria, no real anti-establishment movement would have been able to mobilise in the streets of Damascus or Aleppo, as the regime would have crushed it as it did in Hama in 1982 (George, 2003). Wiktorowicz stresses that contrary to Western democracies where social movement activity takes place largely through social movement organisations, in the Arab world this can be pursued only through dense informal networks (Wiktorowicz, 2004). Fear has been the most powerful weapon adopted by the Syrian regime, which translated into obedience, civic disengagement of people, social fragmentation and atomised connectivity (Wedeen, 2013).<sup>17</sup> With the new media (satellite TV and the Internet), Syrians not only learnt about other realities but they engaged in communication exchanges, discussion forums, awareness campaigns and petitions on social matters which it would have been impossible before. The online platforms became the only existing space where organisation, communication and networking among citizens was possible. If the Asad regime had been able to impose full dominion in the public space, ensure full respect and discipline of its citizens in the streets, to put it in Foucault’s words, *where space is power*, this could not be replicated in the infinite space of the Internet (Foucault, 1998). Here ordinary people could exercise what Bayat defines as “the art of presence”,

citizens' ability to circumvent constraints and discover new spaces of contestation, to confront the authorities, expose the state's wrongdoings and re-appropriate the code of symbols and language that the regime had monopolised for long time (Bayat, 2010).<sup>18</sup> Bayat argues that the "street" has the capacity of mobilising people without an active network, through the instantaneous communication that the public space of the street generates. The street gathers people and sentiments and thereby becomes the space where citizens engage in collective actions, driven by the force of necessity, the realisation of sharing the same grievances and of desiring the same goals, rather than articulating conscious political acts. Instead, the new information and communication technologies have the capacity to create a durable communication among atomised citizens, create a network based on a common identity and produce conscious public campaigns with broader adhesions.<sup>19</sup> While the state's police might occupy a street or square, breaking the solidarity and cohesion that that physical space had created, with the Internet, the bond among people is rarely broken by the state's interference or if it happens, this only lasts for a few hours, maximum days. Both Bayat's "streets" and the Internet have the advantage of also rounding up the passive networks, bystanders, meaning people not politically engaged and who are drawn into the contestation by the fact of simply walking-by at the time of the contestation, or in the case of the Internet, following online debates and campaigns.

Syrian online mobilisation resembles more Bayat's definition of non-movement different from the prevailing social movement theories formulated by Western social scientists, as the non-movement is the collective action of non-collective actors, "ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognisable leaderships and organisations" (Bayat, 2010: 14). Syria's online mobilisation identified with a collective and growing phenomenon of intolerance towards the state's authority and request for political and social reforms, taking the form of episodic and single-target political and social campaigns through online platforms. Only in 2011, did this (non)movement become self-conscious and cohesive, organized under common objectives and coordinating public

acts of contestation. The online predecessor of this movement was its virtual avatar, smaller in size but still unifying voices under common targets and actively involved in contrasting the authorities through the online public spaces. The success of such (non)movement was limited by its virtual existence. In fact, in order for a non-movement to become a *real* movement – as opposed to a virtual one – the virtual space needs to meet the real ground, online activism needs to be coupled with offline activism. Accordingly for the Internet to influence political participation it must include activities that can be carried out both online and offline, activities that can be executed only online and activities that can occur only offline (Anduiza, 2009). In 2011, by spreading contention from the virtual peripheries to the physical space of the streets, the Syrian mobilisation acquired the full degree of social movement, complying with the mainstream framework of Euro-American social science studies.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper intends to explain the outbreak of the Syrian uprising of 2011 by looking at the changes occurring in the preceding decade. It appears that the presidency of Bashar al-Asad from 2000 to 2011 was a period of great changes, strong pressures coming from the authorities, ordinary people and external powers, with contrasting forces pushing towards modernisation, conservatism and globalisation. Under these circumstances, the hybrid regime of Bashar al-Asad witnessed the development of modes of social and political action that have eluded common conceptual frames of social movement, for their online format that developed despite the presence of a recalcitrant authoritarian government.

The online nature of the mobilisation generates some difficulties in terms of theoretical conceptualisation, having to collide two field of research, media and social movement studies and clashing with Western-centric scholarly works. Indeed, except for few exceptions, the Middle East

has been analysed with Euro/Western-centric normative assumptions, which have emerged from specific historical formations in the West and which are still assumed as teleological, universalistic and totalising ways of understanding the world (Matar, 2011). European studies have been framed by the Marxist/Hegelin tradition and notion of history, while the North American tradition adopted a more empirical approach, concerned with the specific conditions that facilitate or impede the rise of such movements. What these Western approaches have somehow failed to do is to engage with the rise of collective mobilisation in non-Western societies and specifically in the Arab region, at least till the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. Bayat aptly suggests that the main problem derives from assuming the Western model as the “norm” to uncritically explain non-Western contexts which have clearly different social composition, political institutions and thereby different dynamics of resistance. Ignoring the fact that the Middle East might not be compatible with the modern Westphalian nation-state has, on the one hand, turned a blind eye to the vast array of often institutionalised and hybrid social activities occurring in the region and on the other hand, produced a body of work that conceptualises the Middle East as, inherently, “exceptional”(Bayat 1997; Matar 2011). This study, though deeply indebted to mainstream Euro-American political science, privileges alternative narratives to those that had hitherto failed to understand the changes maturing within the Syrian social fabric and that have been at the basis of the outbreak of its uprising. According to most Western sociologists, the definition of social movement applies to those movements that present an organised and sustained claim on the authorities; display a repertoire of performances (i.e. street protests, public meetings) and are represented by the presence of a (charismatic) leader (Bayat, 2010). This type of structure does not necessarily comply with Middle Eastern states (and often not even with Western cases if one considers the anti-austerity and anti-corruption movements that have recently developed from Europe to South-America). Social mobilisation in the Arab world seems to be oriented towards the attainment of economic and political rights rather than more generalised human rights. In Syria, the authoritarian structure of the state, the overwhelming presence of secret service agents ingrained in the social fabric and the fear that the regime instilled in its subjects, would

have not permitted the rise of any type of dissent, chiefly if represented by a leader and taking place in public areas (George, 2003).<sup>20</sup> The Internet opened the way to a new type of social mobilisation, with a new *modus operandi* and a different repertoire of tactics to confront the authorities. The Syrian online mobilisation, whether one classifies it as a movement or non-movement, sustained claims on the authorities, but not as anti-establishment movement, with defined objectives, established strategies and ideologically driven. The repertoire of actions differed from traditional offline protests, and opted for online petitions or campaigns with no recognisable leaderships, as the Internet tends to dismantle pyramidal power structures, allowing everyone to be part of the same voice. This movement developed overtime, circumventing constraints and transforming the online platforms into spaces in which to make “oneself heard, seen, felt and realised”(Bayat, 2010). This implies that the analytical treatment of social movement may require a more fluid and flexible framing, one that is grounded in the cultural landscape, aware of the influence played by the new media technologies and the power dynamics exercised by all operating structures.

What has been said hitherto on social movement theory can easily be extended to media studies. Scholarly work on Arab media, including some recent research, is deeply embedded in Western methodology of research, with a tendency to conceptualise the region with top-down analysis (Mellor, 2007: 42). The advent of the new information technologies has not produced any substantial change in the analysis, which still remains confined to Western approaches, whether for narrative or thematic reasons. Thematic research is mostly interested in issues of structure, censorship and ownership, while the narrative is ingrained in Western paradigms of analysis, which tend not to problematise the issue in question within the socio-political context and its agents. For instance, the focus of scholarly work on transnational satellite broadcasting and its impact on the construction of identities and politics, lingers on institutional changes (private media) and structure (talk-shows with call-in audiences), discarding completely the non-institutional transformation that satellite TV channels produce within private domains and domestic spheres. The obsession with finding the

“public sphere” within the new broadcasting phenomenon diverts the question to whether such concept can be transported to other contexts, *tout court* (Matar, 201: 203). Another common trait of the literature on Arab media studies is the tendency to flatten the subjects of their inquiry to a monolithic group of people. This appears when it comes to referring to the Arab people as a coherent and unitary group, speaking one language and sharing the same cultural background, but also when referring to the class of media professionals or the audience (Mellor, 2007). In Syria, journalists working in the private sector developed a stronger sense of responsibility and higher professionalism, while ordinary citizens responded positively, and enthusiastically, to this form of media, both becoming part of a new process of civic consciousness. As a consequence, journalism became more accountable and citizens more participatory, each one contributing to the development and empowerment of the other. This means that the effect that the new media may produce on society cannot be measured in terms of the number of existing satellite channels or private media outlets. It needs to be coupled with a more in-depth analysis of what that change produces at an individual and collective level.

Similarly, studies that looked at levels of Internet penetration in Syria and to the phenomena of blogging and social networking have been limited in scope due to their quantitative approach and because of an unshakable Western bias. Studies have focused on data that quantify the number of web surfers, websites, Internet cafes existing in the country, rather than looking at the way the new technology is leveraged by its people (Wheeler, 2006). This data has proved non-objective for not taking into account factors such as the fact that Syrians primarily accessed the web at Internet cafes, or that family members logged-in using the same account. Moreover, this data does not reveal the most interesting aspect of the use of digital technology, meaning the effects that this technology produces not in terms of activism but in terms of civic engagement and human interaction offline. This means that the study of the Internet’s use in Syria prior to 2011 required an assessment within the specific local circumstances to perceive its real meaning, rather than being compared to Western

standards as has often been the case, where the Internet has had a longer history.<sup>21</sup> Yet, these results have not been supported by studies that looked at who was using the Internet, what the content of online activism was and what offline connectivity was created among peers or family members once the laptops were switched off.

When quantitative analysis is not supported by a qualitative and contextual study, the data retrieved is poor in informative content and risks (re)producing disorienting knowledge or, as is often the case for the MENA, labelling the region with a sort of unescapable exceptionalism. Surely, new media diffusion cannot be interpreted as an index to determine political and social change if the data perceived focuses on the *hic et nunc*, while ignoring the historical transformation that brought to the emergence of the new media. Moreover, to transform the Internet into an information weapon, as Howard points out, it is not necessary to have all citizens tuned online, as a networked society only needs a few “brokers” or “tech-savvies” to keep everyone else up to date (Howard, 2010). In Syria a group of brokers with high standards of IT knowledge constituted a minority, approximately 10-20% of the population, usually made up of professionals, students and governmental employees, that assumed the task of keeping an online connection between the strong, yet offline social networks (i.e. universities, mosques, unions, families, etc.) and the wider digital public (Della Ratta and Valeriani, 2012). The role of these “bridge leaders” is explained by the “Two-Step Flow Theory” developed by sociologists Katz and Lazarsfeld (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 2006). The theory holds that a minority of people who have access to broader information sources, receive the information and channels it into the broader public. In Syria, a pocket of online dissent propagated by activists like Rami Nakhle, Razan Ghazzawi Razan Zaytouneh and Rami Jarrah, became essential at the time of the uprising of 2011, where to ensure mass participation in protests and manifestation, it was fundamental to homogenise the strong ties of the online social networks with the weak ties of the offline ones, turning to graffiti, collective revolutionary hymns and public gatherings (Brownlee, 2013). However, these activists played an even more important role prior to the advent of the uprising, using the Internet as

a medium to stir debates among citizens, stimulate critical thinking and coordinating online campaigns, which expressed the new power relationships establishing between citizens and authority.

In view of what has been discussed this far, this study frames the outbreak of the Syrian uprising by looking at the historical formation and processes that brought to emergence a new type of media and at the effects this produced on the local social fabric. The aim is to place the Syrian case in a wider debate, which moves towards a reconceptualisation of social movement theory as an effect of the tremendous impact that the information and communication technologies are having on popular contentious politics (Carty, 2010). After all, revolutions were always aided by new technologies: the reformation in Europe went hand in hand with the printing press (Rubin, 2011); the revolutions of 1848 were loosely supported by the use of the telegraph that transmitted news across Europe (McKeever and Rapport, 2013); the age of modern terrorism started with the invention of dynamite (Merriman, 2009). Today, newly emerging ICTs are redefining social relations, cultural practices, economic and political orders, offering perspectives of hope also for closed regimes. With a specific reference to the Syrian case, the new technologies allowed the counterweighting of the culture of fear and the offer of the possibility to new civil society agents to carry out campaigns challenging centralised hegemonic vision of the ruling elite in ways that traditional media would have never permitted.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> For further details see, “Freedom House-Syria”. 2001. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2001/syria> accessed 14 September 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> See, “False Freedom: Online censorship in the Middle East and North Africa- Syria”, *Human Rights Watch* 17 (10) 2005: 66-20.
- <sup>3</sup> Cfr. Stephan Heydemann, 2007. *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*. Analysis Paper at the Brooking Institution 13, 1-37.
- <sup>4</sup> The idea that digital technology can foster political participation and social activism dates back to Howard Rheingold’s concept of the *smart mobs* (2002), used to refer to a crowd that acts co-ordinately as an effect of the technology-mediated participation of a number of people. Howard Rheingold, 2002. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*. Perseus Group Book.
- <sup>5</sup> Ivi, 11.
- <sup>6</sup> This argument is closely related to Schlumberger’s thesis of the three phenomena absent from the records of the Arab world until 2000: political protest, political reform and pressure from external players. Cfr. Oliver Schlumberger, 2007. “Arab Authoritarianism”, in Oliver Schlumberger ed. *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*. Stanford: Stanford University, 2.
- <sup>7</sup> On Syrian civil society and opposition refer to Joe Pace and Joshua Landis, 2009. “The Syrian Opposition: the Struggle for Unity and Relevance, 2003-2008” in Fred Lawson ed. *Demystifying Syria*. London: SAQI, 120-143.
- <sup>8</sup> Ray Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl, “The Syrian uprising and Bashar al-Asad first decade in power”, 294.
- <sup>9</sup> In the months following Bashar al-Asad’s taking office, human rights organizations like the Committees for Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria (CDF) and the Syrian Human Rights Association (SHRA) emerged.
- <sup>10</sup> According to Amnesty International (AI), the majority of those released were Muslim Brothers and members of communist parties. The number of political detainees amounted to 1,500 after November 2000, with another 140 political prisoners released in 2001. Amnesty International also commented that in Syria there were fewer instances of torture.
- <sup>11</sup> “Percentage of Individuals using the Internet-Syria”, *UN Data*, <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Syr-ian%20Arab%20Republic>
- <sup>12</sup> In June 2005 the Ba’ath Party Congress recommended the establishment of a new political party law, which would allow non-religious and non-ethnic parties to run in future elections. See, ‘Syria: a Wasted Decade’, *Human Rights Watch*, July 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Ray Hinnebusch. 2012. “Syria: form “Authoritarian Upgrading” to Revolution?”, *International Affairs* 88(1) 95-113. Salam Kawakabi, “The Paradox of Government-Organized Civil Activism in Syria” in Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta ed. *Civil Society in Syria and Iran*, 169-186.
- <sup>14</sup> See, *Arab Media Outlook 2009-2013*. 2010. Dubai: Dubai Press Club, 148.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Syrian activist Rami Nakhle via Skype, July 2, 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> Wael Sawah, 2012. Syrian Civil Society Scene Prior to Syrian Revolution, *Hivos International*, <https://www.hivos.org/syrian-civil-society-scene-prior-syrian-revolution>, accessed September 2, 2017.
- <sup>17</sup> Lise Wedeen. 2013. “Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria”. *Critical Inquiry* 39 (4): 841.
- <sup>18</sup> On “the art of presence”, see Asef Bayat. 2010. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1-26.
- <sup>19</sup> Cfr. with Asef Bayat. 1997. *Street Politics: Poor People’s Movement in Iran*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- <sup>20</sup> Alan George argues that Syria in 2001 had one full time secret policeman per 257 Syrians, considering the country’s population of 16.7 million. This means that if 59.5 per cent of Syrians are aged over fifteen years, and that only these adults are of interest for a secret agent, then the ratio is of one policeman per 153 Syrians.
- <sup>21</sup> The access of web users increased from 0.2 in 2000 to 23 percent in 2012. See, “Freedom on the Net 2012”, *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2012#.VZjwHPntmko>, accessed September 10, 2017.