

**DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES OF NONVIOLENT  
RESISTANCE IN VIOLENT CONTEXTS:  
THE CASE OF SYRIA, 2011-2014**

Submitted by

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# **Abstract**

## **Discourses and Practices of Nonviolent Resistance in Violent Contexts: The Case of Syria, 2011-2014**

Before the Syrian Uprising transformed into a violent conflict, ordinary people engaged in nonviolent resistance against the regime, in the hope that it would bring about change. Both the media and academic researchers often evidenced a tendency to focus on violence, at the expense of non-violent forms of protest and resistance. This thesis directly addresses this defect by focusing on nonviolent resistance and its continued significance within the Syrian conflict. This thesis explores how ordinary people with no history of civic engagement become involved in nonviolent resistance. It argues that the nonviolent resistance in the context of extreme violence become very complex. It cannot be classified into hidden or public resistance but rather becomes a continuum of hidden actions and public confrontation. In other words, nonviolent resistance actions become a mixture of both hidden and public transcript where borders between both spheres blur.

This thesis examines these nonviolent by studying the case of Syria between 2011 and 2014. It traces the origins of nonviolent resistance and seeks to identify how ordinary citizens continued to use this form of resistance even as the regime extensively applied techniques of armed violence. The continued relevance of non-

violence within a violent context is, therefore, one of the key conundrums which this thesis seeks to address.

It also engages with the question of mobilisation; more precisely the question of why those who had previously been politically disengaged or apathetic took the decision to directly join protest which called for the removal of the Assad regime. The second part of the thesis seeks to identify how these motivations translate into actions, along with the precise techniques that are used to resist the regime power via nonviolent means. The final stage of the thesis traces non-violent resistance and examines how its techniques were deployed, with a view to reclaiming space and resisting the regime's attempts to dominate physical, intellectual and virtual space – these are the three levels that this thesis will engage.

The thesis is based on the personal reflections and self-understanding of the activists. It examines how they understand their role and involvement and how they perceive their nonviolent actions. The data for this thesis is based on 78 interviews with activists and ordinary people who are/were active participants in the nonviolent resistance. Participant observation is a key source of information that complements fieldwork and direct contact with target participants.

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## **Note on Transliteration**

In this thesis, I use the system of Arabic transliteration of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). However, for names of people and places, I do not follow a particular format. They are written as they pronounced using the most common English spelling of these names.



# Introduction

## The Thesis

This thesis examines discourses and practices of nonviolent resistance that are exercised by ordinary people in opposition to authoritarian power within the context of violent conflicts. This thesis explores what motivates ordinary people who have not been formerly involved in civic actions to become actively engaged in nonviolent resistance and to persevere in an environment of extreme violence. The general argument of this thesis is that the nonviolent resistance in an environment of extreme violence becomes unique in the sense that it mixes public and hidden actions. More importantly, the borders which separate the two are not always clearly defined. There is no linear or natural progression from hidden to public action, but rather people alternate these two and often mix them. This is affirmed by the fact that, even within the most violent contexts, ordinary people and activists frequently choose to continue resisting the power of the oppressor through nonviolent means.

The thesis develops this argument by engaging with Syria during the period 2011-2014. This period encompasses the initial years of the conflict that preceded the emergence of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) as a powerful player in the Syrian conflict, which has introduced additional changes to the map of violence and nonviolence in the country. The thesis focuses upon power relations between the regime and the people which seek to resist in its power. In isolated instances, it refers to interactions with ISIS at its earlier formation stage in Northern Syria. While the main subject of the thesis is nonviolent actions against the regime, the

thesis also occasionally considers how regime supporters participate in the conflict through nonviolent means.

The thesis traces the process and practices of nonviolent resistance. It begins by considering what motivates ordinary people to resist the power of the oppressor via nonviolent methods and proceeds to ask why they continue to do so even when the dominant power resorts to brutality and the context becomes increasingly violent. It examines why ordinary people, who had never been politically engaged or involved in community work, took the risk and called for the regime to be overthrown. The second part of the thesis studies how these motivations translate into action and asks which techniques are used to continue to resist the dominant power via nonviolent means. The final part of the thesis, in tracing the process of non-violent resistance, examines how these actions were employed in the struggle to control and dominate the space in which activists operate; in particular, it focuses upon the disparate techniques and strategies that are used to assert control over the space and to resist the regime's attempt to dominate the space. The space is examined across physical, intellectual and virtual levels.

The thesis focuses mostly on the nonviolence side of the story. This is because the material and data was skewed towards anti-regime activists who are mostly involved in the nonviolence resistance. For various reasons related to access, ethical limitations and safety issues, the majority of the participants in this research are anti-regime activists who are involved in the nonviolence resistance, with limited participation from regime supporters and activists who are involved in violent resistance. Therefore, this should be considered when reading throughout the thesis, as the focus is mostly on nonviolence.

This Introduction provides information about the research puzzle and the personal motivations which underpin the current study. It also introduces the research questions and the argument of the thesis. The methodology and data collection are then briefly introduced before the thesis is then set out, with specific reference to each individual chapter.

## **Personal Background and Research Puzzle**

The current study represents the culmination of almost a decade of experience working in the field. During my experience of working with various organisations (both national and international) in the management and implementation of development projects that were focused upon rural areas of Syria, I identified various issues that could potentially reward further research. I decided to begin a PhD that would relate to development and empowerment, which would leverage my hands-on experience in the field. In 2010, I began working on my first research proposal. The research question asked why local communities become apathetic and disconnected to the point where they no longer participate in community work at the grassroots level.

The question drew upon personal observations derived from years of working with local communities in rural Aleppo and rural Idlib in Northern Syria. For almost six years, I worked directly with these communities on rural development issues. I managed the largest NGO that is mandated to undertake rural development, and my team included some of the most educated and skilled young people in Syria. They worked through an exhaustive repertoire of techniques and methods in an effort to motivate people to establish initiatives that would direct priorities that they themselves had identified. Even with the added incentive of

funding raised from international and national donors, the communities' interest was at best limited, if not entirely absent.

Towns such as Saraqeb and Kafranbel had no established tradition of civic engagement. When the state encouraged civil society during the 2000s (Heydemann, 2007; Perthes, 2004; Hinnebusch, 2012; al-Sayyed, 2004; Aarts and Cavatorta, 2013), local communities did not respond to the various projects that were implemented by national and international organisations. NGOs, such the one I worked for, tried to encourage people to start community-based organisations, in the clear expectation that they would later assist in the implementation of development projects. These efforts failed due to lack of public interest of the people. I witnessed this myself, and I can safely say it was not unique to the case of Idleb and Aleppo. The same issue was encountered in Deir Ezzor, Hama, Homs and Latakia. Local communities, who had been disenfranchised and marginalised for decades, appeared to be comfortable with the status quo.

This raised the question of precisely why this was the case. With this question in mind, I applied to the University of Exeter in 2010, with the intention of beginning my research in October 2011. I came pre-prepared, with an extensive portfolio of field notes and local connections. However, events preceded me — the same communities whose apathy and disengagement I had presumed to explain suddenly mobilised and joined a popular movement. Protests and demonstrations spread everywhere and were particularly prominent rural areas. Towns like Saraqeb revolted against the regime, and their surrounding areas were among the first to be “liberated” from the regime. Kafranbel emerged as one of the leading centres of peaceful demonstrations against the regime, despite the fact that it is in one of the country's most intense conflict zones. Kafranbel continues to demonstrate peacefully, and its graffiti, signs and slogans have attracted the

attention of national and international media (e.g. Aljazeera), and the town became a symbol of peaceful demonstrations in the country.

From a personal perspective, these changes were intriguing to watch. It was amazing to see a community who had not been willing to volunteer to pave a two-mile road to connect their village to the main highway, suddenly mobilise and organise. In these radically altered circumstances, ordinary people were willing to leave their farms, schools and shops to demonstrate against the regime. The community started to organise itself to fill the void that was left after “liberation” from the regime. In addition, towns and cities (most notably Saraqeb) began to organise Local Councils that were elected to replace the state. Civil servants took the initiative and continued to provide services to the people, even when they became disconnected from the government in Damascus. Youth in villages where it had previously been impossible to attract people to volunteer in a local mobile library were mobilised to the extent of starting grassroots initiatives that would resist the regime, in open defiance of the considerable costs and risks that this entailed.

As I watched these changes unfold, I became aware that the first research question was of limited relevance, and possibly even redundant. I watched as circumstances reconfigured the question. The main question was now why ordinary people, who were previously apathetic and had no history of civic engagement, decided to organise themselves and become part of the grassroots resistance, even in a situation of extreme violence? An additional line of questioning arose in the fact that communities were not willing to initiate community-based organisations under optimal conditions but were willing to do when this course of action could potentially cost them their own lives. Young people, who had never been involved in community or voluntary work, began to establish structures and networks that would help neighbourhoods under siege, assume the responsibilities of the state and ultimately work towards the overthrow of the regime.

In addition to the general mobilisation, the precise ways in which people operate and resist regime power is fascinating. Scott (1990) argues that when subordinates cannot, whether due to lack of resources or potential risk, engage publicly in acts of resistance to the dominant power (public transcript), they resort to subtle and clandestine tools to resist (hidden transcript). However, he notes that in some rare cases hidden transcripts are publicised. These rare and difficult moments of publicised hidden transcripts are one of the core issues that will be examined in this thesis. Wedeen (1999) examined the false compliance of the people in Syria under Hafez Assad's regime and clearly identified how, in reality, the people did not subscribe to the regime's rhetoric and were not completely submissive. Although scepticism and mockery of Assad's cult and regime rhetoric were often hidden, they were present on an everyday basis to the point where any observer would be predisposed to question to what extent they actually remained hidden.

In the case of the nonviolent resistance in Syria, it is fascinating to observe that activists are still engaged in hidden and clandestine acts of resistance at the same time, as they are publicly involved in overt and explicit resistance against the regime's power. For example, activists who organise and participate in overt and direct public campaigns or demonstrations against the regime still resort to subtle acts of resistance. These acts include approaching the regime, bargaining and using a different language, as the circumstances require such as for delivering of humanitarian aid to civilian populations.

Here it is instructive to note that the literature on resistance largely focuses on either hidden transcripts or public transcripts and pays little attention to the relationship between the two. As a result, it is predisposed to perceive actions as being either overt and public or clandestine and hidden. Equally importantly, it does



not examine or explain how in violent context resistance simultaneously uses both public *and* hidden transcripts.

## Research Question

This thesis focuses on the actions of ordinary people and grassroots activists. In doing so, it seeks to understand how and why ordinary people resist the power of the regime non-violently even when the context becomes extremely violent – this implies, and indeed necessitates, closer engagement with how they operate, how they interact with each other and how dynamics within society change. These questions are engaged by studying activists' self-understanding of their role, along with the process through which this translates into collective action within the society. The assumption is that changes in the society are not merely the product of the conflict but instead result from changes within the individual's perspective and self-understanding. The self-understanding of activists relates to the question of how they perceive and express their civic engagement, along with their role as part of the nonviolent resistance. In addition, it also refers to their grasp of the possibilities of nonviolent resistance, along with the potential for their actions to have a transformational effect upon their own life.

The thesis attempts to address three main questions of *what motivate ordinary people to choose nonviolent resistance in a context of extreme violence? How they translate these motivations into actions? Where do these actions take place?*

These research questions are addressed through a case study of nonviolent resistance in Syria which engages with the period 2011-2014. I propose to answer these questions through the application of practice tracing methodology (Bennett and Checkel 2015b; Pouliot, 2015). This entails answering the research question by examining the intermediate steps in the process in order to test the hypothesis and establish inferences about the findings (Bennett and Checkel, 2015b:6). In other words, the thesis will engage nonviolent resistance within the violent context in an effort to understand what makes people choose to be involved in nonviolent resistance even when they operate in an extremely violent environment. moreover, how that affects the power-resistance relationship. The focus will be on the practices at the micro-level – that is, by engaging with the practices either as they are reported by the people themselves or as they observed during the fieldwork. This will be addressed by engaging the following sub-questions and addressing them from the people’s self-understanding of their role and involvement:

- What motivates ordinary people and activists, who were rarely involved in civic engagement, to choose to resist non-violently in a context of extreme violence?
- How they translate this motivation into actions? What techniques and methods did they use? What is their repertoire and why?
- Where do these actions take place (in terms of physical, intellectual and virtual space?)

The research attempts to answer the questions of who, how and where to understand the dynamics of nonviolent resistance within violent contexts. The first question about motivation is aimed to examine why people chose to engage in resisting the regime, why they chose nonviolent means and how is that related to their understanding of violence and nonviolence. As will be discussed in the following chapters, literature often answers these questions by looking into external

factors rather than the self-understanding of people themselves. This study aims to look into the motivation from an internal lens, based on how people perceive their role and how they understand violence and nonviolence.

The second question looks into the activities that activists are undertaken to resist. Specifically, the question will look into hidden and public actions taken by activists and how the hidden and public become intertwined when activists are operating in an environment of extreme violence.

The third question examines where these actions take place in terms of physical and nonphysical space (i.e. virtual and intellectual). This line of inquiry was not initially planned. However, the interviews and field notes included overwhelmingly rich information about the space where the power struggle took place. Activists symbolised the power struggle regarding who controls certain space and how to reach that control. Therefore, this was added to the research to support the argument by looking into how effective the hidden and public nonviolent actions can be.

The theoretical framework for the study is derived from literature which engages power as a relationship and which conjoin of power and resistance. Power relations are analysed by studying resistance because the two elements are inseparable. Resistance is the manifestation of power and a tool through which it can be studied (Foucault, 1982, 1990; Abu-Lughod, 1990). As I will demonstrate, power relations can be addressed by studying the techniques that activists and ordinary people use to resist state power. Any assessment of this kind must simultaneously address both subtle forms of resistance (such as bargaining or false compliance with state rules) and explicit/overt acts of resistance against the Regime (e.g. demonstrations).

The thesis advances two arguments that feed into broader debates in social theory. Firstly, it proposes that the choice of forms of resistance derives from the self-understanding that individuals have of their role in the power relations: this choice is not presupposed or determined by the external environment. Secondly, the thesis argues that when nonviolent resistance takes place in an extremely violent context, the categorisation of hidden and public transcripts become less relevant. In violent contexts, subordinates start to mix both hidden actions with public confrontation in a very complex and intertwined manner. Conceivably, subordinates may choose to alternate between public and hidden forms depending on their perception of which form might yield better results. The thesis will contribute to the literature about power and resistance by clarifying how resistance, which is engaged and discussed as a productive form of power, is refracted through the self-understanding of the activists. It will also contribute to wider debates about power and resistance by illustrating how hidden, and public transcripts co-exist in resistance techniques and strategies when the environment is extremely violent.

## **The Research Context**

For decades, Syria has been ruled by the Baath Party which has exerted a very tight grip over society. During this period, civil society organisations had a very limited role, and their activities were largely confined to charitable work, with the consequence that the social sphere was dominated by the social wings of the Baath Party (Hinnebusch, 1976, 1995 and 1980; Bira 1996; Salāmah, 1987). Ideological control of the society sought to maintain a relatively docile population and uphold loyalty to Assad's regime. This control took different forms, which included ideological infiltration of the society (Hinnebusch, 1976) and the creation of a personality cult around Assad – both elements were part of an attempt to control

symbolic space and the culture within the society (Wedeen, 1998; 1999). They sought to entrench ideological hegemony and prevent a broad-based uprising.

When Bashar Assad came to power in 2000, he implemented a nationwide reform agenda in an attempt to address the regime's transparent lack of legitimacy. This entailed an 'upgrading' of authoritarian rule that would be achieved through a modernisation of the Baathist state. (Heydemann, 2007; Perthes, 2004; Hinnebusch, 2012; al-Sayyed, 2004; Aarts and Cavatorta, 2013). This 'upgrade' would establish a hybrid authoritarian system, in which democratic reforms would strengthen the authoritarian system. A new generation of apolitical NGOs embodied and promoted this political vision by improving the regime image.

These changes did not mean that civil society organisations were flourishing. Indeed, they were subject to heavy surveillance and were often, if not always, associated with prominent figures within the regime. (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012; Sawah, 2012; Al-Om, 2016). Their activities were relatively restricted, and were, with the exception of a few NGOs that implemented development projects, confined to arts-related, charitable or environmental work. Advocacy and lobbying were not allowed to form, much less operate. Organisations that retained an interest in both fields did not enjoy legal recognition, and their members were often arrested and prosecuted. Overall, the regime continued to have a tight grip over the society to ensure that it remains docile.

When the Arab Spring began, people were initially reluctant to revolt. However, the Uprising gathered momentum after the notorious Daraa incident, in March 2011, in which children were arrested and tortured after writing political graffiti on their school (Leenders, 2012:420; Gelvin, 2013:103). The demonstrations began with demands for more aggressive reforms (Tripp, 2013:3). However, the regime then responded brutally and began shooting demonstrators (Gelvin

2013:105-106). As a result, the political demands swiftly escalated, and demonstrators began to call for regime change. Demonstrations spread across most of the country and the regime expanded its campaign of violence.

The regime sought to portray the protesters as extremists and traitors, and the military was issued with orders to use any necessary means (Tripp, 2013; Gelvin, 2013). This meant that civilians in many areas were forced to resort to armed resistance to protect themselves (Abbas, 2011:2). The armed resistance took various forms, but it was often carried out by ad-hoc local groups that were formed to protect their neighbourhoods. The conflict escalated and eventually engulfed the whole country.

As the level of violence dramatically increased, nonviolent resistance continued to be the weapon of choice for the majority of activists and ordinary people. At an early stage, activists rejected the violence and committed themselves to overthrow the regime through peaceful means. *Tansīqiyyāt* (Local Coordination Committees) emerged at the beginning of the Uprising and began to organise protests and mobilise people (Tripp, 2013:56). When protests were no longer feasible, members of the *Tansīqiyyāt* continued their nonviolent resistance by organising different types of civic action and documenting atrocities.

The conflict has claimed hundreds of thousands of victims, displaced millions and left half of the population reliant upon humanitarian assistance (Amnesty International, 2014: UNHCR, 2017). As a consequence, the role of civil society has adjusted in accordance with the situation. In regime-controlled areas, NGOs either stopped operating or shifted to the provision of humanitarian aid (which was targeted at internally displaced populations). In areas under the control of the Opposition, civil society has effectively replaced the state (Khalaf, 2015) Alternative structures such as local councils have also emerged. These councils have built

upon the contribution of the *Tansīqiyyāt* and have assumed responsibility for the provision of local services in areas under their control (Khalaf, 2015:46; al-Om, 2016). They have also been endowed with a certain degree of legitimacy by virtue of their local members and, in some instances (such as Rural Idleb), elected representatives. (Bareesh, 2017).

## **Fieldwork and Data Collection**

The data that has been used to answer the research questions can be traced back to various sources: interviews; field notes (ethnographic and virtual ethnographic fieldwork) and personal notes and input. The choice of data collection methods was influenced by the situation in the field and the limitations of the university regulations. What I initially expected to be a very straightforward project gradually became, by virtue of the rapidly changing situation on the ground, extremely complex and convoluted. Personal connections and access to local communities were limited due to the violence in the field. Many individuals who would have been perfect subjects for this study were no longer accessible for various reasons (disappearance, displacement, lack of communication channels or death). Although the collected data was by no means perfect, the variety of methods and sources should at least mitigate the data's shortcomings.

First, field notes from ethnographic and virtual ethnographic fieldwork provide a major source of data for this research. I had the chance to spend a few months in Damascus, Lebanon (Beirut and Tripoli) and Southern Turkey (Gaziantep). During this period, I spent time with ordinary people and activists who were involved in the Uprising. I interviewed people from Aleppo, Damascus, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Hama, Homs, Idleb, Latakia, Rural Damascus and Tartous. I also had the opportunity to work virtually for almost a whole year with activists whom I trained

and mentored. This support was provided to two organisations whose projects support Syrian activists in Syria and the neighbouring countries. The people whom I have met and worked with during the ethnographic fieldwork were activists who were involved from the beginning of the Uprising in organising the activities against the regime (e.g. members of Coordination Committees) and members of the local communities who engaged with the Uprising and participated in its activities.

The issue of access was by some distance the main factor that affected the ethnographic part of the research. I was able to directly access residents in Damascus and Rural Damascus during my fieldwork there, along with people who had moved to both areas after being internally displaced from Daraa, Homs, Latakia and Tartous. My visit to Damascus also provided me with the opportunity to directly observe actions that were taking place in the field. In Lebanon, I met refugees in Beirut and Tripoli, the majority of whom were refugees from Damascus, Daraa, Homs and Rural Damascus. I also volunteered for a few weeks with a charitable organisation which works with refugees in Beirut and Tripoli – this provided me with the opportunity to undertake personal observation while interacting with people during my extended stay in Beirut.

By far the most interesting observations came from working and interacting with people from Northern Syria. The latter were either refugees in Turkey, or residents in Syria but can travel to Turkey. It was also possible to access people from these areas through the virtual training and mentorship program that I volunteered with for 15 months (on site and virtually/off-site). Importantly, this provided an opportunity for sustained interaction with them over a year.

In addition to the ethnographic fieldwork, interviews were another primary source of data for this thesis. Over three rounds of data collection, 78 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from various backgrounds



(ethnic, gender, geographical, personal, and social). A number of the interviewees were former acquaintances while others were engaged for the purpose of this research or were encountered during the ethnography fieldwork. I found snowballing to be the optimal technique through which to access new participants. The shortcomings of snowballing were mitigated when I ensured that I had diverse starting points – this enabled me to extend the selection process and recruit participants from various backgrounds.

My position as an internal member of the studied community also undoubtedly contributed to my research. My positionality as both insider and outsider influenced the data collection and data interpretation. The question of whether insider status is a positive or negative attribute has been explored by numerous researchers with a specific interest in positionality (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Luff, 1999; Puwar, 1997; Ryan et al., 2011). A closer engagement with this literature does not provide a clear answer. Clearly, my previous involvement in the subject and my status as a Syrian facilitated my access to the field. My time away from the country also enabled me to attain a degree of distance when collecting and analysing the data. This was to be expected - autoethnography and the analysis of personal experience will invariably affect the research process and the final product (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography has its own advantages and limitations. One of the main advantages is that it facilitates access to data. In addition, auto-ethnographers are involved in the studied community – their personal interest leads them to spend time in the field and dig deeper for answers. A member of the community who conducts research as an outsider is able to perceive events from a novel vantage point that generates different meanings of collected data. Conversely, while the auto-ethnographer may try to bring an external interpretation to the internal

meanings, s/he cannot play the role of the “professional stranger” role. (Anderson, 2006:389-390)

The insider/outsider conundrum, along with associated advantages and disadvantages is discussed in further detail in Chapter Three. I will now briefly provide some personal background in order to establish the context of the thesis. My status as a Syrian means that I bring my personal history and engagement with ordinary people who contributed to my research. The personal toll that this research has exacted has been considerable. This has been a personal as well as an academic experience: I have lost friends to detention and death, and people that I worked with have disappeared. Compassion fatigue (Figley, 2013), secondary traumatic stress (Wood, 2006) and survivor guilt have all influenced my research. The fact that I used people stories for personal gain (i.e. writing my thesis) also troubled me and contributed to my “re-conceptualisation” of myself (Coffey, 1999:24). While it may be objected that the researching of such a personal subject may raise questions of objectivity, I would respond by arguing that this personal element has been one of the project’s driving forces and even its rationale.

## **Thesis Outline**

The first chapter reviews the literature that addresses power and resistance. It also explores nonviolent resistance and the resistance of ordinary people, thus setting the theoretical background for the research. In acknowledging that dynamics of power and resistance are, in the case of Syria, closely tied into questions of how society relates to the state, this chapter will also engage with the literature on state-society relations.

The second chapter examines the body of literature that focuses on the specific example of Syria. This chapter establishes the historical background against which state-societal relations in modern Syria can be discussed and analysed. This relationship has been a significant influence and consideration since the Uprising first broke out. The chapter also provides a brief narrative of the Uprising, which sets out its conditions of emergence and subsequent evolution. The chapter clarifies that the Uprising was the logical consequence of decades of oppression inflicted by an authoritarian regime. Even when the regime attempted to upgrade its approach, its rule remained extremely oppressive, as its brutal response to peaceful protests clearly attested.

In Chapter Three, I present the research methodology. This includes: challenges and limitations; data analysis and interpretation; data collection and the fieldwork process; details about the conducted interviews; ethical issues; ethnographic and virtual ethnographic fieldwork; my positionality as a researcher; and a snapshot of some of the key research participants. The chapter also discusses the strengths and weaknesses of my approach. While I draw from various sources of data, restrictions within the field clearly limited access to some parts of the society. The Chapter acknowledges that the generalisation of the findings is one of the major obstacles and attempts to address this by focusing on the micro-level and tracing the practices closely in an attempt to address the research argument as rigorously as possible with the available data.

Chapter Four is the first empirical chapter. It addresses the first question which asks what motivates ordinary people and grassroots activists to resist the regime's power non-violently even when the level of violence is increasing rapidly. Discontent had been growing in the society for decades as a result of pervasive corruption, inequality and oppression. Social changes that took place over the 1990s and 2000s which were initiated by regime also made an important

contribution by motivating people to seek wider changes. The ripple effect of the Arab Spring was also an important consideration – people clearly saw a change in motion and came to believe that it could put into effect in their own society. In engaging at each of these points, the Chapter places particular emphasis upon the self-understanding of the participants and the question of how they perceive their role and involvement.

Chapter Five focuses on nonviolent practices and techniques. It addresses the second question of how the motivations explored in the previous chapter translate into actual actions and what the techniques and repertoire are used by the people in their act of resistance of the regime power. The engaged issues include: draining regime sources; humanitarian work as an act of resistance; lying and deception; shaming and embarrassing the regime; the use of cyberspace to resist the regime; and using regime platforms for their advantage. It looks into how these techniques mix the clandestine covert actions with overt public confrontation. It asserts that the choice of hidden or public transcript is very complex decision that people make upon the basis of their beliefs, their perception of the environment they operate within and their means.

Chapter Six, which is the final empirical chapter, examines how these practices are used in the struggle to control the space that ordinary people and the regime operate within. It studies conflict and acts of resistance at the levels of physical space, intellectual space and virtual space. It suggests that the struggle to control these three dimensions of space is the essence of the power-resistance dichotomy in the case of Syria. The chapter argues that even when one party has the power to control the space physically, the resisting actor can manoeuvre while utilising unconventional tools and thus locate points of negotiation and resistance.

This thesis argues that the self-understanding of the individual is ultimately the factor that determines the choice of non-violent practices of resistance. It also reiterates that the relationship between the hidden and the public is not simply a natural progression from one to another but is instead a more complex relationship in which the dividing lines are not clearly defined. It is not the case that people choose one or the other – rather they instead often move back-and-forth and a mixture both. Overall, this thesis seeks to contribute to the broader debate about power and resistance by examining the practice of nonviolent resistance within a violent context. It therefore directly addresses an existing defect in the literature, in which the two components are situated in opposition to each other. Conversely, this thesis seeks to advance the argument that the two should be conceptualised and theorised in their interrelation and interaction.

# Chapter 1 - Power and Resistance in Syria: Literature Review

## Introduction

This chapter aims to establish the theoretical background that frames the research questions. The chapter will examine the literature that seeks to conceptualise power and resistance by focusing on nonviolent and everyday resistance. In order to understand why ordinary people within the Middle East decided to revolt, it is essential to grasp the relationship between state and society. The dysfunctional relationship between state and the society has historically contributed to the emergence of a weak formal civil society that was unable to fulfil its role in the social sphere; this, in turn, led to the emergence of informal structures and networks. This explains why, when the Uprising started, it was ordinary citizens, as opposed to formal movements and organisation, who were foremost in the mobilisation. The general literature on state-societal relations, along with the more specific literature that focuses on state-societal relations within the region, will, therefore, be an essential point of reference.

Scholars frequently assume that the terms 'state' and 'society' are logically distinct and focused upon formal, explicit structures. However, the literature suggests that this confidence is frequently unjustified; more often than not, the borders between state and society are not easily defined. These borders are elusive (Mitchell, 1991) and the state and society are interwoven. Migdal (2001) argues that because the state emerges from society, it is invariably framed and influenced by it. The available literature frequently assumes that the state is the sovereign with ultimate power while society is the subject that is totally submissive and does not even resist. However, power cannot be collapsed into this simplistic model; it is, by

virtue of the fact that no single party constantly acts as sovereign or subject, considerably more complex. From this perspective, the state instead appears as a function of relations between all forms of formal and informal structures (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 1982, 1990, 2000; Rose & Miller, 1992). For this reason, it is essential to examine the dynamics, mechanisms and structures that govern the relation between state and society and shape both elements.

Ordinary people and everyday resistance have become a source of interest to many scholars over the last few decades (e.g. Scott, 1985, 1990; Bayat, 2013; Abu Lughod, 1990). These scholars have engaged the question of resistance at the 'micro-level' – that is, its enactment in small everyday actions. By virtue of the fact that they are 'everyday', these actions are invariably non-violent and conducted by ordinary people. However, this leads in a number of related questions: firstly, *intention*, do the actions have to be intentional in order to be considered as an act of resistance? Secondly, *collectivity*, do they have to operate at the level of the collective or do random individual acts meet the criterion of resistance? Thirdly, *action/nonaction issue*, *do they have to be actions or would nonactions count as a form of resistance if it challenges domination?*

Another issue that often arises within the study of nonviolent resistance is the question of how it relates to violent acts of resistance. Is non-violence a principled moral choice (Gandhi, 1924) or pragmatic decision (Sharp, 1990)?; Alternatively, is it the case that nonviolence inevitably progresses towards violence (Scott, 1985) or it is a more complex relationship in which actors oscillate between these two points or mix them both to reach their goals (Kaplan, 2013; Chabot and Sharifi, 2013)? How do these questions relate to the uprisings across the Middle East and can these uprisings be considered through the lens of the state-society relationship? In addition, how does the state-societal relationship become an active

component of resistance and affected the choices of people and their civic engagement?

Scholars have long expressed an interest in state-society relations within the Middle East. The literature frequently focuses upon both the existence of civil society within the region and the question of precisely how the two elements interact. More recently, scholars have started to assess these questions through the lens of the Arab Spring focusing on how it has affected the relationship between state and civil society. The existence of civil society is frequently engaged with reference to the impact of Islam. Some scholars, for example, have argued that civil society does not exist within the region because Islamic traditions are not conducive to it (Esmail, 2002; E. Gellner, 1995; Mardin, 1995; Turner, 1974). From this perspective, Islamic societies are dominated by primordial structures that do not develop into fully-fledged civil society institutions. Other scholars reject the foundation of this analysis and instead argue that civil society is clearly evidenced, albeit within a different form from the one in the 'West' (Ibrahim, 1995; Ismael & Ismael, 1997; Salam, 2002). The literature on state and civil society in the Middle East focuses upon the existence of civil society and renders it as subject to state domination. Civil society either exists to challenge the power of the state and promote democratisation (Bellin, 2004; Ben Nefissa, 2005; Norton, 1995, 1996; Schwedler, 1995) or acts as a tool that enables the state to exercise its power over citizens and ensure their obedience (Abdel Rahman, 2002; Langohr, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 1999, 2000, 2002).

The Arab Spring has contributed to a heightened interest in these questions of democratisation and mobilisation in the Middle East. Several studies have been published which examine the origins of the uprising, its development, its role in democratisation in the Middle East, its wider political significance and its innovative use of technology and social media (see Tripp, 2013; Gelvin, 2013; Anderson,



2011; Khondker, 2011; Gause, 2011; Stepan and Linz, 2013; Bellin, 2012; Brynen et al., 2012). However, in the case of Syria, as violence broke out across the country, the terms of reference focused in on the violent character of the conflict. This chapter proposes to provide a review of the literature of power and resistance, nonviolent resistance and state and society, with a particular focus on the Middle East.

## **Power and Resistance**

### ***Concept of Power***

‘Power’ is a general concept which varies in accordance with the discipline of study. This research will refract the concept through the lens of state and society relations. In the social sciences, power is alternately as: (a) a capacity, (b) a form of legitimacy and consent; or (c) a relationship (see Brown, 2006; Foucault, 1982; Hindess, 1996). These paradigms evidence a clear variation in their approach, and evidence an apparent predisposition to approach power from the position of the sovereign (capacity), the subjects (legitimacy) or as an interaction between both sides (relationship).

When appraising societies in the Middle East, it is important to understand power as a relationship between different parties. It is not simply a relationship between the dominant and subordinate; rather it is instead a more complicated interaction in which the subjects themselves contribute to their domination. However, it is important not to stop at the overt public level of conflict but to instead delve deeper into dynamics that operate at the micro- level. If power relations within society are to be understood, it is crucial to focus upon the unseen, as opposed to the obvious manifestations of the relationship.

### Power as Capacity

Power in this respect is “a kind of generalized capacity to act” (Hindess, 1996:1). It entails that the sovereign has the capacity and ability to influence and dominate subordinates with or without their consent. Dahl (1957), cited by Lukes (2005), argues that power is basically when one party influences the other to the point where the later would do something they would not otherwise do. This is consistent with Weber’s and Hobbes’s definitions of power, in which ‘power’ is defined as the capacity of the powerful to realise their wishes at the expense of the less powerful (Hindess, 1996:2; Weber, 1947:152). In the context of state-society relationships, this form of power assumes that the state (sovereign) has the ability to exercise its power over subjects (citizens) through violence (e.g. weapons) or through the control of resources (e.g. economy). Hindess (1996) therefore argues that in this case power can be quantified and measured by the stack of resources owned by the sovereign.

This emphasis upon capacity fails to capture the full picture of power relations; firstly, it ignores the subject and denies it agency; secondly, it focuses on the position of the sovereign; finally, it focuses on overt conflicts. It, therefore, analyses what abilities and capacities enable the sovereign to dominate and influence subjects. The capacity approach assumes certain kind of ‘observable conflict’ between the dominant and the subordinates; in addition, it also overlooks the real interests of the subjects which are only considered when they are formally expressed through policy preference and grievance (Lukes, 2005). This is where the weakness of this approach becomes clearest. It ignores the fact that subjects contribute to the power structure and confines them to formal interactions. In reality, subjects do not explicitly express their interests. This could be attributable to a lack

of access to formal channels (that would enable them to express their interests), a lack of resources, a lack of knowledge or even a fear of dominant groups.

### Power as Legitimacy

Power as legitimacy assumes that the consent of the subjects has been granted to the sovereign. Locke emphasises that the consent of subjects is the main source of the sovereign's power (Hindess, 1996:16). He contends that the individual grants his/her trust to government and he/she can remove it if it does not act in accordance with their own interest (Locke, 1988). Arendt (1970) also asserts that the sovereign's power is mainly the legitimacy that has been derived from the consent of subjects. Arendt (1970:44) presents power in the following terms:

“[Power is] never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is “in power” we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name”.

The paradigm of power as legitimacy has two fundamental limitations. First, it oversimplifies the power relations in the society. While it acknowledges the role of the subject in defining power, it still considers power to be a binary relation that conjoins the sovereign and its subjects. Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that the consent of subjects can be created and manipulated (Barker, 1990; Beetham, 1991). Barker (1990) argues that the sovereign often is more concerned with building and strengthening its legitimacy and power than he/she is concerned with those who are governed. Regimes are frequently not content with ruling by force; this is why they seek to claim legitimacy by coercing their subjects and creating a

false sense of legitimacy (Baker, 1990:130). The most effective form of power relations is when the sovereign exercises hidden power. This enables him/her to achieve the desired outcomes by influencing the beliefs and desires of subjects who remain entirely unaware of this influence (Foucault, 1990; Lukes, 2005). The fact that effective forms of power can alter the subjects' wants and create this consent raises clear questions about whether this legitimacy could be genuine.

### Power as Relationship

“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1990:93). Here Foucault clarifies that power is not confined within certain limits; rather it is instead embedded in all aspects of human life. This perspective anticipates the study of power as a relationship in contrast, and clearly sets it apart from its counterparts which render power as capacity or legitimacy. This paradigm does not merely focus on the sovereign or the subject; rather it goes a stage further to analyse all the components of power relations. Foucault (1982) states that he always sought to engage the question of how individuals are made into subjects, along with the various mechanisms that ensure their compliance. He asserts that compliance is often ensured when rationalities are applied by the dominating group. However, Foucault maintains that humans turn themselves into subjects and, to this extent, they are not passive subjects of power but actively engaged in the power relation.

In this sense, Foucault presents power as both repressive and productive (Lukes, 2005:90-91). The repressive aspect of power, which seeks to prohibit and restrain free action, refers to power as capacity. However, power can also produce ‘things’ and subjects that are capable and willing to ‘adhere with norms’. This is compatible with the holistic view of power that Foucault renders, in which power

governs all aspects of life and appears as a dynamic entity that shapes the dominant and the subject, in addition to being shaped by them.

In the Middle East, power as relationship is the most suitable framework that can be applied to the analysis of power. Accordingly, it will be applied to the Syrian case. This course of action is justified on several grounds: firstly, there is no clear-cut dividing line that distinguishes state and society. Power relations are, to this extent, shaped by interaction with all parts of the society. Secondly, power as capacity does not apply to the specific context. The fact that resources are mainly concentrated in the hands of the state could give rise to the impression that the state is sovereign, and the people are powerless – this is transparently not the case. When conceived within the social context, power is considerably more complex and convoluted. Thirdly, it should be noted that linking power to consent and legitimacy is very problematic. Most of the states in the Middle East are rentier states and do not, therefore, rely upon the support of their citizens. To put it differently, the consent of its subjects is not a necessary precondition for the accumulation of state power. It has already been noted that the significance of consent is open to question within states that have all the required resources to shape desires and beliefs.

### ***Concept of Resistance***

The question of how power presents itself does not anticipate a simple answer. Foucault maintains that power and resistance are inseparable. He, therefore, asserts that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1990:95). Foucault suggests that resistance offers a starting point for the analysis of power. He, therefore, argues that “(r)ather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analysing power relations

through the antagonism of strategies” (Foucault, 1982:780). He presents resistance as a ‘catalyst’ that brings power relations into a fuller perspective. Abu-Lughod (1990:42), meanwhile, presents “resistance as a diagnostic of power” – that is, as a tool through which power can be judged.

Hindess (1996), citing Foucault, argues that there is no ultimate freedom – this applies because the choice of individuals is ultimately a function of power. He observes that the process through which individuals become what they are is ultimately reducible to the incremental removal of freedom. However, Foucault (1982:790) is at pains to reiterate that “(p)ower is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free”. Individuals must first become possessed of choice if they are later to become subject to power. There is no power relation unless the subject has the freedom to make a choice – it is only then that s/he becomes part of the power relation. Power and the refusal of freedom to submit cannot be separated; once there is voluntary submission to power, the power relation disappears (Foucault, 1982:791).

Lukes (2005) argues from a different perspective when he presents voluntary submission as a means to ensure compliance with the exercised power. However, in my view, Foucault’s argument is more appropriate because it acknowledges agency. The individual has freedom of choice in the power relation to which s/he is subjected, and this ensures that s/he remains an active participant in this relation. However, this freedom is not unlimited because subjects often do not have the choice to opt out of power relations and live free of any form of power. Accordingly, they engage with power by resisting it internally.

Once it is granted that resistance is a tool to study the manifestation of power, questions invariably arise about what this resistance entails. Lukes (2005:25-28) claims that resistance often takes the form of a grievance. This implies

that resistance does not necessarily exist in instances where power is present. He argues that when subjects' beliefs and desires are influenced to the point of complete compliance, there is no grievance and consequently no resistance. This leads into the debate which Hollander and Einwohner (2004:544) anticipate when they ask whether resistance "must be intended by actors and whether it must be recognised by targets". If it is accepted that power is a relation, resistance does not necessarily have to be overt or intended. It could instead operate at the level of actions or intentions. In addition, it does not have to be recognised by the sovereign as resistance. In some cases, it does not have to be recognised by subjects themselves as resistance. However, it should be noted that power is considered to be more influential when it is not explicit. Foucault observes that power "is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (quoted by Lukes, 2005:90). Resistance is similarly a type of power and can therefore also be said to be more effective when it masks itself.

Scott (1990) outlines two levels of resistance when he distinguishes between 'public transcripts' and 'hidden transcripts'. At the level of public transcripts, subordinates interact with those who attempt to dominate them publicly – that is, in an open and overt manner. However, this form of interaction and resistance is dangerous because it forces the subordinates to adopt a subtler approach in the form of the hidden transcript, in which the discourse is informal and 'off-stage'. Tilly (1991:594) also asks why subordinates do not rebel against domination. He suggests that they might be actually resisting in a covert manner, a course of action which may be necessitated by the costs associated with explicit manners and the lack of required resources. Abu-Lughod (1990) touches upon the same concept when she examines how Bedouin women resist the power and domination of male members of their tribes; this frequently takes the form of implicit and covert

strategies, which include hiding knowledge from men, singing songs with special lyrics, exchanging certain jokes and mocking manhood and masculinity. Tripp (2013:12-18) argues that power and resistance often play interchangeable roles. Resistance movements are faced with the ethical and political dilemma that, in resisting power, they may ultimately come to imitate it, a concern which extends to not only techniques and methods

In summary, it will be noted that resistance is not simply a reaction to the exercise of power. It is instead a diagnostic of power that can generate another level of resistance by the sovereign subject to this resistance. It can take implicit or explicit form and can be conducted through words and actions. Resistance is not necessarily consciously intended and can be said to be an indispensable part of the power dynamic in the social or political sphere. In approaching power as a relation, it is essential to recognise that resistance is one of its key components. This is an essential insight which can substantially contribute to the comprehension of state and society relations. Power relations extend beyond the direct control of the state because power is not only exercised vertically (by the state over society) but also horizontally (via networks that shape society).

### Everyday Resistance

Critical engagements with popular uprisings (and Syria is a good example in this respect) often contend that the actions appeared random, lacked an organisational basis and took place in the absence of a structured political or social agenda (e.g. Acikalin and Bolucek, 2014; De Angelis, 2011). This brings a number of important questions into perspective, which includes the basis of resistance (individual vs collective), the significance of ideology and the focus of action.



Rubin (1996:239) argues that resistance refers to actions that are to some extent intended to counter domination and which are, at least to some extent conducted at the level of the collective. However, this definition is problematic because it assumes action, intent and collective engagement. This brings forth a number of questions that relate to intent. Can inaction be conceived as action when it is intended to counter power? How important is intention? Would an unintended action be considered as action if it affected the power relation? If collective action is to be imposed as a precondition, then how precisely can the 'collective' be conceived and understood? Would simultaneous individual action meet this criterion or they have to be coordinated explicitly? The study of everyday resistance, therefore, brings the question of intent to the forefront. Is intent a precondition for resistance? Does the sovereign need to recognise the action if it is to qualify as resistance (Scott, 1985; Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Vinhagen and Johansson, 2013)?

“Everyday resistance” cannot be blithely dismissed as being less important than its visible counterpart. Tripp (2013:6) argues that the question of whether everyday actions are intended to be part of a larger project of resistance does not significantly detract from its importance. In all instances, the existence of everyday resistance establishes the basis for changes that fall beyond the comprehension of the authorities, and they often fail to detect it. Scott (1985:290) acknowledges the importance of intent, or at the very least, a certain level of consciousness within everyday acts of resistance. He also asserts that the result is irrelevant and that the intention is of the utmost importance whether it yields the desired results or not.

Scott's (1985) model of everyday resistance is built upon subtle and hidden acts carried out by subalterns that enable them to challenge power and progress their own agenda. It encompasses various forms of resistance which include foot-dragging, deception, dissimulation, sabotage, desertion and false compliance.

These forms of resistance require little or no coordination or planning; they are individual in nature and represent a form of individual self-help. In offering these different forms of resistance, subalterns continue to avoid any direct confrontation. Their subtle actions are considered to be resistance irrespective of whether they are acknowledged by the dominant power. It is also irrelevant if the project of resistance is conducted as a part of a long-term plan or simply to survive the day-to-day challenges.

Scott suggests that everyday forms of resistance are more effective than explicit confrontational actions. He also argues that the adoption of more explicit actions derives, in large part, from desperation. Here it should be noted that the progression towards 'on stage' instead of 'off stage' conduct does not result in more successful resistance. It is also significant that this shift only occurs when off-stage resistance fails (Scott, 1985:18-38).

Scott's argument seems to derive from the assumption that there is a linear progression from one form of resistance to another – as this thesis will later demonstrate, this is not always the case. In most instances, individuals will alternate between implicit and explicit actions and will often adopt a pragmatic 'mixture' that is suitably adjusted to the given circumstances. Adnan (2007) therefore argues that the switch from hidden to covert resistance is part of the repertoire through which peasants resist power and domination. They respond to changes within the situation and patterns of domination by adopting more explicit forms of resistance. Both domination and resistance shift their strategies in an interconnected manner, as part of a continuous dynamic.

Bayat (2013:15-21) maintains that "non-movement" is a form of collective action performed by non-collective actors. This non-movement is rooted within action rather than ideology. Actors within non-movements directly practice their

claims, which are not, in contrast to formal movements, derived from and mobilised by leaders. In most instances, non-movements are part of daily life, as opposed to planned actions that are distinct and set apart. By implication, it is not merely a set of practices that are restricted to a particular segment of the population. The power of non-movement derives from the magnitude of participation, even though it does not provide a unifying force. Bayat asserts that the fact that the non-movement is embedded within everyday life gives it a greater resilience than formal movements. The non-movement is often discrete and quiet. However, when the subalterns' gain is threatened, the actions become louder, and the subalterns start working together' gain is threatened, it becomes louder, and the subalterns start working together to protect their position. Hollander and Einwohner (2004:538) provide further qualification when they note that resistance is not a quality or state of being; rather it instead involves active behaviour, whether cognitive, physical or verbal (2004: 538).

In the Middle East, it is often argued, in opposition to international misconception, that nonviolence is one of the core tenets of Islam. Saritoprak, to take one example, argues that Islam encourages peace and submission. He, therefore, notes that Muhammad had defined a Muslim as being one "whose fellow brothers are safe from the harm of his tongue and hands". He also notes that the Qu'ran explicitly states that peace is the preferable option (2005:413-414). Saritoprak further supports his argument by referring to Turkey, where community leaders and thinkers have engaged in nonviolent resistance, with a view to counterbalancing the power of the state

Resilience is one form of resistance that is rarely addressed by the mainstream literature on everyday resistance.<sup>1</sup> *Şumūd* (the closest translation is steadfastness, but the closest meaning corresponds to resilience) is often used to refer to the day-to-day coping mechanisms used by Palestinians living under occupation (Khalili, 2007; Halper 2006; Ryan 2015). It encompasses various actions and strategies, each of which upholds the Palestinian determination to preserve a relatively normal life under occupation and maintain their presence (Ryan, 2015:300). In being applied within this context, *Şumūd* took on a quite different meaning – namely “surviving against all odds”. (Khalili, 2007:748)

*Şumūd* is widely considered to be a resilient tactic of resistance because it is grounded in daily coping (Khalili, 2007; Halper 2006; Ryan 2015). Palestinian women often view themselves as being actively engaged in the act of *Şumūd*. It is the ensemble of tactics and strategies that they use to safeguard their honour, dignity and presence on the land (Ryan 2015:300). Singh (2012) contends that *Şumūd* is passive resistance and then proceeds to argue that passive resistance can directly support and assist its active counterpart. In further illustrating this point, he demonstrates how it actively enhances cohesion at the level of the community which in one way or another influence their active resistance.

Chandler (2012:217) defines resilience as “the capacity to positively or successfully adapt to external problems or threats”. Ryan (2015:302-304) also stresses this external dimension when he attributes resilience to external interventions that seek to improve local capacity, an outcome which in turn significantly reduces the likelihood of violent resistance. However, at this point, it should be clarified that *Şumūd* is endogenous to the communities. Ryan (2015)

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of resilience can be directly related to the nonviolent resistance in Syria. Several Syrian interviewees drew a parallel between their own resistance struggle against Assad and the Palestinian struggle against Israeli colonial power. An article on the *al-Arabiya* (2012a) website also directly draws this parallel., T. The regime was referred to as occupation and the struggle is to liberate the country from it.

provides further clarification when he notes that it has two main tactics: to remain on occupied land and to normalise life under occupation by making it more liveable.

Bayat (2004:2-8) provides insight into the 'non-action', which is a similar form of resistance. This is resistance by 'being present', something which is in many senses an action on itself. This entails that the subalterns resist the state power by holding their position and by simply being there. This action (or non-action) often defies the ultimate power of the sovereign. Scott's (1990) everyday resistance lends further support to the proposition that resilience is a form of resistance. He argues that the actions of the subordinates in resisting domination may not be conceived as an act of resistance, an attribute which may conceivably provide insight into the relative success of this course of (in)action.

*Şumūd* is also manifested in the psychological resilience that is evidenced by Palestinians who have been detained by the Israeli army. Meari (2014) describes how *Şumūd* is frequently evidenced in prison cells and during the course of interrogations. Psychological resilience enables detained Palestinians to defy Israeli colonial power. This form of resilience enables them to virtually escape their prison cell and compartmentalise their situation – this enables them to escape exhaustive and at times violent interrogation techniques. In seeking to block the pain and protect their mind, they refuse to cooperate, disengage and seek to construct an imaginary protective wall around themselves. In these situations, nonaction becomes an act of resistance.

### Compliance, Collaboration and Resistance

Scott (1985:290) stresses that it is not straightforward to identify the point at which compliance ends and resistance begins. He maintains that circumstances

often force the subaltern to hide his/her resistance under a shell of a public language of conformity. Mitchell (1990) disagrees with Scott and maintains that he goes too far in interpreting the subaltern's actions as hidden resistance. He argues that Scott fails to acknowledge that subalterns, in many cases, choose to subordinate themselves because this helps them progress towards their goals. In expanding this line of argument, he contends that Scott fails to address the centrality of hegemony – this is, he notes, not simply passive submission; rather it is instead the active acceptance of power when it is deemed to be beneficial.

Pelzer White (1986) also criticises Scott. She concurs that in some cases peasants do seek to engage with the state power and collaborate, with a view to progressing their own personal agendas. She maintains that peasant collaboration should not just be conceived as an act of resistance. Still, less is it a form of deception or covert resistance; rather it is instead an intended collaboration in which peasants accept their subordination because it serves and furthers their own interests. Ortner (1996:287-288) also criticises the tendency to “romanticise the resistance” – this defect arises when compliance and conformity are over-analysed and (mistakenly) rendered as embodying hidden resistance.

### ***Contentious Politics, Social Movements and Popular Mobilisation***

Any study of power and resistance must necessarily engage with the literature on contentious politics and social movements. “Contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action and politics” (Tilly and Tarrow, 2006:4). While the

contentious politics theory introduces important themes that relate to power and resistance (i.e. making claims, points of contention and collective action), it is grounded within the binary opposition of subject vs sovereign. It also overemphasises the role of government in the contention. It is more suited to contexts where popular mobilisation is advanced against the government. However, it does not help capture the wider exertion against informal networks, structures and other types of power. This is particularly important in Syria, where the struggle is not against the government; rather, it is against the regime and its practices. The claims that are made in the country are to change the structures in the society, they are against practices and values, as opposed to simply changing the government or the ruling regime. Another element of the contentious politics theory which needs to be engaged is the issue of “politics”. Tilly and Tarrow (2006:5-8) make the important point that while most contention occurs outside politics; contentious politics inevitably arise when the government becomes involved. The establishment of a link between ‘politics’ and the involvement of government is potentially reductionist because it underestimates the political dimension in ordinary people lives. Irrespective of government involvement, the public and private spheres overlap and become politicised.

The definition of social movements as “collective challenges to systems or structures of authority” (Snow, 2004:11) has considerable potential because it may be more accommodating to certain types of resistance. Rucht (1996:186) notes, in referencing social movements and contentious politics, that social movements incorporate two types of elements:

“(1) networks of groups and organizations prepared to mobilize for protest actions to promote (or resist) social change”; and “(2) individuals who attend protest activities or

contribute resources without necessarily being attached to movement groups or organizations”.

While this definition engages at an individual level, the social movement is still related to two components which include groups or organisations. It, therefore, begins from the assumption that a certain level of organisation is necessary in order to form a social movement.

The literature on Feminism and Women’s Studies is instructive as it places social movements in a wider perspective. Staggenborg and Taylor (2005) provide a comprehensive critique of the limitations of contentious politics which argues that the narrow approach that contentious politics applies to social movements excludes different types of movements that do not target the state, and which are not conducted in public venues (Staggenborg and Taylor, 2005:39). They also discuss how social movements frequently challenge social and institutional issues via various arenas that are not always public and not always focused upon the state and government.

However, both authors are careful to reiterate that this approach is not intended to undermine contentious politics, and they accordingly stress the importance of the latter within the analysis of social movements (Staggenborg and Taylor, 2005:40-41). It is essential to recognise the variation within the form and operation of these movements; it is similarly essential to recognise the variation in the objects to which they are addressed, which are frequently distinct from the state. The argument is that social movements, especially when it comes to women’s movement, take various shapes and approaches and their action target different structures and cultural aspects that are not always simply presented by the state.



The women's movement is a particularly relevant example in this respect. Feminist culture and identity are key preoccupations for this movement, and both are often approached and engaged through less visible approaches and strategies (Staggenborg and Taylor, 2005). The literature on power and resistance makes an important contribution in this respect by demonstrating how the women's movement draws upon a repertoire that combines hidden and public transcripts when engaging at a cultural, institutional or political level.

The emphasis that Contentious Politics theory places upon opportunity and process is very relevant to the case study of this thesis. Tarrow (2011:6) suggests that:

“contentious politics is triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives to take action for actors who lack resources on their own. People contend through known repertoires of contention and expand them by creating innovations at their margins”.

This was clearly the situation during the Arab Spring uprisings. Participants saw an opportunity for change, seized the initiative and sought to challenge established power relations. Demonstrations and other common repertoires were deployed; however, repertoires were also adjusted in accordance with the operational context (this is a development that empirical chapters will discuss in more detail)

The concept of “framing” is also of interest to this research. This is not a reflection of its application to the case study but rather the absence of a formal framework that mobilises and brings people together. McAdam et al. (1996: 5) argue that opportunities are not sufficient to mobilise the individual. The individual

should gain a clearer comprehension of their own grievance, identify an opportunity and be “optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem”. They should share certain ideas that relate to collective action and advance their claim. Benford and Snow (2000: 624) observe that: “[Framing processes are] deliberative, utilitarian, and goal-directed: Frames are developed and deployed to achieve a specific purpose – to recruit new members, to mobilise adherents, to acquire resources, and so forth.” They proceed to establish that frame processes are “strategic efforts by social movement organisations to link their interests and interpretive frames with those of prospective constituents and actual or prospective resource providers” (Benford and Snow, 2000:624). In this respect, it is instructive to note how mobilisation in Syria continued, even in the absence of formal framing processes to bring them together.

It is debatable whether the Syrian Uprising can be considered or engaged as a social movement. Tilly and Tarrow (2012:113) note, with reference to authoritarian regimes, that even when the contention is prevalent, it is difficult to establish the basis for social movements – this is because the tight control and pervasive violence of the authoritarian regime make mobilisation process very challenging. Social movements can only emerge if the regime first weakens. While the Uprising evidenced a broad base of mobilisation, it did not take on the appearance of a fully consolidated social movement and therefore lacked precisely defined networks and organisations that sought to advance change. As the empirical chapters will later demonstrate, collective action instead more often remained spontaneous in character.

## Non-violent Resistance

The dividing line which separates violence and non-violence is not always easy to establish. Mitchell (1990:445) maintains that studies of power and resistance are all too frequently dominated by the ideational-material dichotomy and “the distinction between persuading and coercion, however, power may operate at the level of ideas, persuading the mind of legitimacy, or it may work as a material force directly coercing the body”. As a consequence, observers are predisposed to view power as an idea or as a material reality. He adapts Foucault to contend that the autonomous subject is an effect of modern forms of power. Mitchell suggests that ‘enframing’ is related to the process through which domination creates a dualistic world. Ultimately, it is power itself that establishes the duality of power/resistance.

Mitchell is, therefore, predisposed to emphasise the essential dichotomy which situates violent and non-violent forms of power and resistance in diametric opposition. However, it should be noted that this distinction is not always easy to uphold, as it is related to the question of how individuals root their actions within moral justifications. However, it should be noted that the decision to adopt nonviolent approaches or strategies is not always an ethical or moral decision. It is just as often a pragmatic decision that is made with reference to the specific context (Gandhi, 1999 [1920]). Contrary to popular misconception, Gandhi’s position did not solely derive from an ethical objection to the use of violence; to at least some extent, his ‘moral’ decision was also influenced by an assessment of the immediate situation. Mantena (2012:455) notes:

“[Gandhi] was attuned to the unintended consequences of political actions, especially the ways in which idealism and moralism, despite the best of intentions, could enable ideological escalation and violence”.

It is also important to acknowledge that Gandhi explicitly considered the possibility of resorting to violence under some circumstances. Indeed, he explicitly stated that “where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence”. (Gandhi, 1999 [1920]: 133). Under certain circumstances, it was clear that violence was to be preferred to passive non-action (Gandhi, 1999 [1924]:49). He clarifies:

“My nonviolence does not admit to running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice. I can no more preach nonviolence to a coward than I can tempt a blind man to enjoy healthy scene.”

Gandhi’s contribution is significant because it again reiterates that the dividing line between violence and nonviolence is not clearly defined. All political actions, even those that are ostensibly non-violent, can, under certain circumstances, escalate into violence. Non-violence held within itself elements that allow for escalation and violence (Mantena, 2012). Sharp (1973 and 1990) provides further clarification when he explicitly distinguishes nonviolence from apathy and inaction. Sharp (1973:64) defines nonviolence as:

“A generic term covering dozens of specific methods of protest, non-cooperation and intervention, in all of which the actionist conducts the conflict by doing -or refusing to do- certain things without using physical violence. As a consequence, therefore nonviolent action is not passive. It is not inaction. It is action that is nonviolent.”

Sharp (1990:1) maintains that nonviolent resistance originates in relation to power dynamics within the given society. Contrary to popular misconception, nonviolence is not synonymous with powerlessness. In reiterating that it is predominantly a political technique, Sharp (1973, 1990) outlines an exhaustive list which documents almost 200 economic, political, psychological and social methods (which includes economic boycotts, social and political non-cooperation, sit-ins, strikes, symbolic protests and the creation of parallel structures and systems of government) that are used to influence 'power' within the given society or state. Nonviolence can, therefore, be defined as intentional actions that seek to alter fundamental beliefs that underpin the predominant power, and which seeks to induce internal (the power itself) and external (power relations) change. At all points, nonviolent action presents itself as an alternative to overt violence (Sharp: 1973, 1990).

Sharp (1990:2) echoes Gandhi when he notes that the decision to resort to nonviolence is not necessarily a moral choice. It is just as frequently part of a pragmatic strategy – that is, the selection of methods that will enable the individual to achieve desired results in their struggle against power. This, of course, presupposes both the possession of the required skills and the ability to think and act strategically (Nepstad, 2015:417). This position does not presuppose that the individual will not have committed violence in the past or will not do so in the future. The very same people and organisations who choose nonviolence might have been involved in violent actions before or willing to in the future (Nepstad, 2015:417).

Nonviolence is predominantly a weapon through which the ruling power is challenged. In applying different techniques, the subjects withdraw their support to the power, and it ultimately crumbles. Effective nonviolence requires substantial reserves of courage, discipline and patient (especially so given the time that it takes to succeed in comparison with violence). The weapon of nonviolence can be broken

down into three separate categories. The first category is symbolic, non-violent actions that seek to oppose power through protest or to play a persuasive role in challenging the power. The second is non-cooperation which is the deliberate action of defiance and withdrawal of economic, political or social cooperation and it could be planned or spontaneous. Third is acts of intervention that seek to disrupt power (including parallel government, sit-ins and strikes). Gandhi's struggle against colonial power drew upon elements from each of these three categories. (Sharp, 1990:9-10)

Schock (2013:277) suggests that the term "civil resistance" is more appropriate. He defines it as "the sustained use of methods of nonviolent action by civilians engaged in asymmetric conflicts with opponents not averse to using violence to defend their interests". In that sense, nonviolent actions used by the ordinary people are in a less favourable situation compared to the dominant power that is willing to resort to violence to protect its position and privilege. In rejecting the proposition of a continuum of action that extends from formal political action to nonviolent resistance then violent resistance, Schock (2013:282) also rejects the (associated) suggestion that the escalation from nonviolence to violence is a 'natural' development that is intelligible in relation to a changing situation. The relationship between violence and nonviolence is more complex. This clearly recalls Kaplan's (2013) assertion that, even in very violent situations, people manage to use nonviolent tactics to counter the violence. As observed earlier, resistance is simply a variation of productive power (Lukes 2005). Accordingly, nonviolent actions can be conceptualised as a form of wielding power that is directed towards ensuring that the intended objectives of the nonviolent groups are achieved (Sharp, 1990:10-11).

There is a consensus among scholars (including, as we have seen, Gandhi, Scott and Sharp) that nonviolent resistance is more likely to be successful than its

violent counterpart. Chenoweth and Stephan (2011; 2008) examine this argument by using quantitative indicators. They collect information about nonviolent and violent movements around the world with a view to identifying whether violence or nonviolence was more successful. The study concludes that more than half of the nonviolent movements attained their goal in comparison to just 26% of violent movements. In other words, nonviolent resistance is twice more likely to succeed than a violent one. Chabot and Sharifi (2013) offer a different perspective when they argue that Sharp's extremely pragmatic approach to nonviolence fails to acknowledge the instances in which violence would be necessary; furthermore, they note, there are also some elements of violence in nonviolence. In providing case studies of the Iranian Green Revolution and the Arab Spring in Egypt, they observe that both uprisings were textbook examples of Sharp's theory, yet they both culminated in a dominant power that substantially exceeded the one that was initially confronted.

Nepstad (2015:419-420) also describes how a number of movements have been forced to make tactical readjustments in response to violence. This could be a reaction to a heavy-handed government crackdown on the nonviolent movement (Shellman, et al., 2013:333). Alternatively, it could also result from frustrations that arise after key goals and objectives have been postponed indefinitely (Nepstad, 2015:419-420). However, Nepstad (2015:420) also argues that in some cases armed groups may actively choose to readjust and adopt a strategy of non-violent resistance if those tactics are expected to yield better results within some contexts.

These contributions notwithstanding, the precise relationship between violence and nonviolence has largely escaped academic attention. In large part, this is attributable to the fact that most studies within the field tend to exclusively focus upon armed conflicts or upon nonviolent movements with little if any, to the interaction and relationship between both. Chenoweth and Schock (2015) offer an

important corrective in this respect when they engage with the question of how armed and nonviolent resistance interact and how armed resistance affects nonviolent resistance. In engaging with historical data that relates to 106 instances of nonviolent resistance conducted between 1900 and 2006, they conclude that armed and violent resistance impacted negatively by reducing the likelihood that the goals and objectives of nonviolent movements are achieved. At best, the armed campaigns had short-term political benefits that were largely offset by longer-term uncertainties. In the case of Syria, most of the interviewees maintained that had the Uprising remained nonviolent it might have been able to succeed. There was a general consensus that although the armed resistance was in many cases necessary and it might have had some short-term benefits, violence has undoubtedly exacerbated the situation on the long-term.

### ***Resistance Typology***

Scott (1985; 1990) argues that both hidden and public transcripts aim to resist at three levels: material domination; status domination; and ideology domination. In a simplified manner that leads to generally six types of actions and techniques as follows (Scott, 1990:198):

1. Public resistance against material domination, such as demonstrations, boycotts, strikes and revolts.
2. Public resistance against status domination, such as the public assertion of worth and desecration of dominant's status symbols.
3. Public resistance of ideological hegemony, such as public counter-ideologies.
4. Disguised or hidden resistance against material domination, such as everyday acts of resistance (e.g. evasion, foot-dragging)
5. Hidden resistance against status domination, such as gossip, rumours, and tales.



6. Hidden resistance against ideological domination such as the development and adoption of dissident subculture.

This typology seems fairly straightforward, where actions can be easily categorised based on their form (hidden/public) and the domination they are directed at (material, status or ideology). Nonetheless, in the case of nonviolent resistance in the violent context of Syria, the borders seem less clear if not completely blurred in some cases. As will be discussed in the empirical chapters, the acts are often a mixture of both public and hidden transcripts. More importantly, they are not always targeting one type of domination.

### ***Silmiyyah and Nonviolence***

When looking into nonviolence in the Middle East and specifically in the context of the Arab Spring, the term that is often used is “Silmiyyah”. *Silmiyyah* as a literal translation to English means “peaceful”. However, the term in Arabic is multifaceted. Unfortunately, the term is often taken for granted and used in literature without proper definition. Looking into literature produced around the Arab Spring in both Arabic and English or earlier literature does not yield many results in terms of explaining the concept. Even studies that look into Arabic terms and their use during the Arab Spring refers to *Silmiyyah* very quickly and equate it with “peaceful” (Thonthowi, 2018; Garduno, 2012; Filali-Ansary, 2012)

Silmiyyah is a more complex term, that does not merely mean peaceful. The term silmiyyah is often used interchangeably with La ‘unf term (nonviolence). La ‘Unf seems to be the favourite term for scholars, while Silmiyyah is often used in media and in the spoken language in the street. The very limited Arabic literature that looks in al-La ‘Unf (nonviolence) defines it as being an ideology where people

choose to live a peaceful life that does not involve confrontation and violent interactions (Ahmad 2011:238). Nonviolence in that sense is a culture and philosophy of life (Rahim, 2009; Ahmad, 2011). Al-Basari (2001) argues that nonviolence is an approach that rejects violence as a means to achieve changes. Jubran (2011) links the nonviolence as a culture to the core tenants of Islam that order people to be tolerant and to accept peace as the way to live and no to resort to violence unless all other means are exhausted. In contrast to nonviolence term (la 'unf), Silmiyyah seems to be more related to the action rather than ideology or philosophy. It is hard to come across a definition of Silmiyyah in literature, as it is often taken at face value to mean peaceful. However, the term is far more loaded. It is often used with the term Muqawama (resistance), as in Muqawama Silmiyya which translate literally into peaceful (or nonviolent) resistance (Abu Zaydah, 2016). It always comes in the context of taking action to resist certain power without resorting to violence. Silmiyyah is the most common slogan that was used in the protests across all the countries that were affected by Arab Spring.

## **State and Society**

In order to understand how and why ordinary people in the Middle East reached their tipping point regardless of the expected violence and anticipated risks and why revolutions broke out across the region during the Arab Spring, it is essential to engage at the level of the state and society relations. Historically, as weak civil societies and the emergence of informal networks and structures attest, these relations have been dysfunctional. This largely explains why the Arab Street was foremost in resisting the violence of the state when successive uprisings broke out.

General models of state-societal relations have an essential contribution to make to the conceptualisation of power relations and structures that are internal to the given society. For the purposes of the current discussion, 'civil society' will not be used to denote formal organisations; rather, it will instead be understood to invoke the collection of formal and informal structures that operate at the level of the society.

The conceptualisation of civil society generally gives rise to three separate interpretations. In the first instance, civil society is theorised in isolation from the state and its ascribed role is to uphold the rights of citizens by challenging the state; in the second, civil society enables the state to increase its control over society – while the two are still understood to be distinct, they (and here the contrast with the first instance becomes apparent) overlap at particular points. In the third instance, the two components are understood to be the constitutive elements of the public sphere and, as such, are understood to be defined in their interrelation. In the first two instances, the state is sovereign and civil society operates at the level of subjects. The state acts and subjects respond. In the final instance, however, the two are mutually constitutive and are accordingly conceptualised and theorised in their interrelation. Power is an attribute of this relationship and does not stand beyond social relations.

In expanding this insight, this section seeks to demonstrate how the general literature on state-society relations can be related to contemporary developments across the Middle East. In its initial stages, this section analyses the literature on state and society relations and then proceeds to assess the historical context within which established power relations have emerged and developed.

## ***Civil Society as State Antagonist***

While the concept of civil society originally developed within Ancient Greece (Clarke, 2002:66; Kocka, 2004:66-67), it later became synonymous with the public or social sphere. This only began to change during the Enlightenment era, when state and society began to be distinguished (see Cohen & Arato, 1992; Edwards, 2004; Kaviraj & Khilnani, 2001). Enlightenment writers maintained that civil society was a defence mechanism that aimed to limit state intrusion into the private life of citizens but were careful not to present it as being antagonistic to the state (Edwards, 2004:5-10; Fine, 1997:15-17). Locke defines civil society as the sphere in which social activities take place in the absence of state intervention (Dunn, 2001:39-57). Locke maintains that civil society legitimises the state when the latter eradicates resource conflicts and recognises individual property rights (Dunn, 2001:39-57; Hampsher-Monk, 1992:88-97). Hume and Smith also insist upon a clear distinction of 'civil' and 'political' society (Oz-Salzberger, 2001:58-83). When the power structure established by the state fails to meet the expectations of the citizens, individuals have the right to revolt, and it is at this point that civil society steps in to protect individual and social interests. Adam Ferguson argues that the active participation of citizens in the society, as a group rather than as individuals, yields social justice (Oz-Salzberger, 2001:58-83).

The dividing line between civil society and state became clearer when Hegel defined civil society as the space between family and state. While it operates as a sphere in which individual rights are protected from state's control, the state continues to survey civil society in order to ensure that it fulfils its role (Hardt, 1995:28-32; Lewis, 2002:570; Van Rooy, 1998). Hegel, in rejecting the laissez-faire approach, defines civil society as a realm in which individuals have, subject to regulations and rules, the right to earn their living in the way they see fit (Jones, 2001:105-130). Jones (2001) draws attention to Hegel's claim that individuals within

the space of civil society occupy their positions by virtue of chance and subjective choice, both of which are influenced by certain level of inequality. Because of this, a certain level of state intervention is required to safeguard justice. He maintains that when individuals become part of civil society, they join a 'universal family' in which they have both rights and duties. Therefore, Hegel considers the administration of justice that seeks to protect property rights to be an important part of the civil society which empowers the state to intervene in this 'universal family' (Femia, 2001:133-134; Jones, 2001:123).

This paradigm was revived in the 1990s when scholars began to focus on the role of civil society in democratisation (Chandhoke, 2001:2-6; Glasius, Lewis, & Seckinelgin, 2004:3; Schwedler, 1995). From this perspective, civil society is perceived to be antagonistic to the state, and it is accordingly designated a key role in assisting the shift from authoritarianism to democracy. The purpose of civil society is not merely to protect private property rights of citizens; rather it instead challenges the power of the state and thereby promotes democratic practices. Schwedler (1995:6) explains that civil society operates at two levels: in the first instance, it upholds the citizen's right to representative government; and in the second it generates the internal rules of civil society and those that govern its interactions with the state. The proposition that civil society and the state are logically distinct overlooks both the ambiguity of the dividing line and the fact that the two elements are interdependent.

This suggests that while civil society is considered to be separate from the state, it is not independent. Civil society is the source of state legitimacy (Locke); in addition, it also promotes social justice (Ferguson), promotes the rights of citizens (Hegel), enhances participation (Hume) and defends citizens against excesses of state intervention (Locke). However, it is not an independent body that is protected from state intervention. The state is responsible for ensuring that civil society fulfils

its role. This paradigm establishes the state as the sovereign; meanwhile, civil society operates at the level of the subject in order to protect their rights and fulfil their interests. However, it does not engage with power as a relation but rather as an attribute of legitimacy, as Locke's definition of the relationship between Civil Society and the State clearly demonstrates.

### ***Civil Society as a Tool for the State***

In this paradigm, civil society is separate from the state, and they respectively assume the roles of sovereign and subject. However, the state uses civil society to enhance its control over society. In expounding this point, Karl Marx had indicated his agreement with Hegel's claim that there is a difference between 'man as citizen' and 'man as private individual' (Jones, 2001:135). Closer reflection suggests that these roles do not overlap; the private sphere is separate from the public sphere, and state and society are distinct. In reflecting upon the bourgeoisie's domination of civil society, Marx contends that it is merely a tool through which capitalists control is extended over society (Deakin, 2001:5). In advocating the condition of equality and improved representation, he calls for the elimination of social classes. (Parekh, 2004:17-18)

Antonio Gramsci emphasises the 'hegemony' of certain classes over the society through what he calls the 'war of position' (Gupta, 1988). This entails that certain groups exercise hegemony over the society through organisations of civil society. Building on the legacy of Marx, Gramsci considers civil society functions as a means for the state to control and exclude citizens through non-violent means that do not require the use of physical power (Buttigieg, 1995:6; Katz, 2006:335-336; Schwedler, 1995:4). Lukes (2005:7-9) previously suggests that Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' can be approached from both a cultural and noncultural

perspective. In the first respect (cultural perspective), hegemony refers to the domination of a certain ideology and the fact that it is imposed, invariably to the detriment or wholesale exclusion of alternatives. In the second respect (non-cultural interpretation to hegemony), individuals consent to particular actions and then pursue them. Civil society is a tool that enables the middle class to reinforce its control over the society and its resources. However, in some circumstances, it may be used to establish a counterbalance to the power of the intrusive state.

The relationship operates at two levels. In the first instance, the state establishes the regulatory framework that enables civil society to function freely and properly. In the second, civil society helps to sustain the state, even as it promotes accountability by applying pressure to the government. However, the power in this relationship is often asymmetric, and the state remains dominant (see for example Bellin, 2004; Elyachar, 2005; Lewis, 2002; Norton, 1995; Schwedler, 1995; Wiktorowicz, 1999). This means that the emphasis is often placed upon empowering civil society and enabling it to counterbalance state power. The ultimate objective is therefore to create a synergy of state and civil society to prevent the state from dominating the society and to ensure that efforts of both parties yield ultimate results (Evans, 1996:1119-1132; E. Gellner, 1994:5-6). However, such engagements are vulnerable to the criticism that they overemphasise explicit power relations in society and fail to acknowledge the implicit influences that shape power.

### ***Civil Society and State as Cohesive Entity***

To depict civil society as being antagonistic to the state is clearly simplistic as it fails to acknowledge the different attributes and dimensions of this relationship. Cohen and Arato (1992:23) observe that the slogan 'society against the state' often

derives from the assumption that civil society is equivalent to market or bourgeois society – an assumption which clearly limits its application outside North America and Western Europe (also see Haddad, 2011). In addition, the ascription of an antagonistic relationship overlooks the fact that it is often difficult to draw the line that separates the state from society. Mitchell (1991:77) argues the boundaries of the state are not easily defined. He highlights the facts that these borders are rather “elusive, porous and mobile”. In other words, when studying the relationship between state and civil society it is not simply a binary relation between two opposite sides. These two spheres overlap and are interwoven.

Migdal (2001) aligns himself with Mitchell when he asserts that the theorisation of the state should not reduce it to formal institutions or conceive of it in isolation from society. His approach, therefore, confirms that the ‘state’ is synonymous with a multiplicity of formal and informal organisations that might have different agendas, but which are still governed by the state leadership. Migdal (2001) also reiterates that the essential question is not just pre-existent rules but rather the question of how social actors engage with them and seek to accept or subvert them (challenging, ignoring, modifying or rejecting). His analysis goes a stage beyond Mitchell (1991), who contends that state and society cannot be easily separated. Migdal, therefore, stresses that the two elements are defined in their interrelation – society shapes the emergence of the state and plays a crucial role in its development.

In addressing authoritarian contexts, Migdal (2001) strongly emphasises the legitimacy of the state. This concept relates to expectations of respective roles and the question of how these expectations are translated and met (Haddad, 2011:31). However, this question is far from straightforward, largely as a result of the fact that the boundaries are far from transparent and that rights and responsibilities are ambiguous. This general observation gains renewed purchase when it is translated



to the Middle East, a setting in which public/private and formal/informal dichotomies are far from uncomplicated. Theoretical models that begin with a clear distinction of State and Civil Society may well fail to capture important social dynamics.

### ***State and Space***

Scholars have often argued that control of space is an essential aspect of state formation and the assertion of control and power (see Giddens, 1985; Mitchell 1988; Neep, 2012). As Tilly (1975) argues that state formation process is dependent on the battle for territorial control. States wage war in order to extend its territorial control and cement its power (Tilly, 1985). In that sense, territorial control is a key element of power and superiority and state power is often measured in spatial terms. Mann (1988:124) argues that “[t]he state is, indeed, a *place*, both a central place and unified territorial reach”. Therefore, power and resistant are often studied in relation to the space. The space is the ‘place’ where the power manifest and the power struggle takes place.

However, the space should not be simply considered as a physical sphere in which power and conflict happen; rather it instead assumes a central role in shaping the power struggle and defining power relations (Neep, 2012:101-103). Neep (2012:102) argues that the state literature often presents the space as “passive and inert, a mere *place* inhabited by society that the state first penetrates, then conquers and eventually controls”. Howarth (2006:109) also correctly argues that the word ‘space’ is insufficiently conceptualised in the literature; by logical extension, it should not be limited to its geographical/physical application.

Foucault observes that “[s]pace is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (Foucault, in Rabinow (ed.) 1984:252). He maintains that space itself is like power (Foucault, 1984, 2002). It is complex and is shaped by the interaction between the subject and sovereign.

Foucault's concept of governmentality has an essential contribution to make in bringing out this relationship between power and space (Dean, 2010; Huxley, 2008). Governmental rationalities and strategies aim to control the subject, the processes and the spaces that they operate within. In that sense, the space can be said to be dynamic (Lefebvre, 1991) and is not simply the stage upon which battles take place. For Lefebvre (1991) the production of space is not limited to the physical space, but it rather encompasses the more complex aspect of social space. He (1991:26) argues that:

“[S]pace is a (social) product [... it] also serves as a tool of thought and action [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power”.

Space itself is not merely a place; it is rather constructed socially based on the values and perceptions in the society. Anderson (1991) goes a step further to argue that space makes a crucial contribution to the shaping of identities. It is not simply a stage where power battles take place. More importantly, it is not rigid and is instead a system of networks and interactions (Giddens 1991; Howarth, 2006). In further demonstrating this point, this empirical chapters will consider three levels when examining the control and domination of space. That will include, the power struggle to dominate physical space, intellectual space and virtual space.

## **State and Society in the Middle East: Review of Literature**

### ***The Debate about Civil Society in the Middle East***

The literature on civil society in the Middle East broadly breaks down into two separate 'camps'. The first set of scholars claim that the predominance of

Islamic traditions within the region implies and presupposes a hostility to the western models of civil society. This, in turn, leads to the assertion that it is absent from the contemporary region (see Esmail, 2002; E. Gellner, 1995; Mardin, 1995; Turner, 1974). The second set of scholars instead advance the opposing view that civil society does exist in the Middle East (see Ibrahim, 1995; Norton, 1995, 1996; Schwedler, 1995). While they acknowledge clear variations within the form, they contend that it is an active consideration within the region's contemporary political life. They do not agree that Islamic traditions contradict civil society.

Although these two positions clearly lead in two very different directions, they both lend further strength to the proposition that Middle Eastern civil societies are more than a set of formal structures that conflict with the state. At this point, it is essential to note that extensive government repression across the region prevented civil society from realising its full potential. Rather, social energies were instead conveyed through a range of informal networks (Bayat, 1997; Heydmann 2004) that, in their interactions with the state, helped to shape the social sphere.

Scholars who maintain that civil society cannot exist in the Middle East attribute this absence to three reasons: firstly, Islamic traditions that are pervasive within society; secondly, the social nature of Middle Eastern society; and finally, the character of the Middle Eastern state. (Niblock, 2005:487-490; Norton, 1995:9-10; Schwedler, 1995:8-9).

Mardin (1995) advances the first reason when he describes the modular Islamic society as being guided by the leadership of a just leader and the Quran. This society is understood to emphasise collective rather than individual rights, and this restricts the development of civil society in accordance with Western expectations and models. Kedourie also argues that Islamic traditions do not

encourage citizens to organise themselves around particular interests and challenge the state power (Schwedler, 1995:7).

This argument is strongly rejected by many scholars who cite the enabling environment created by Islamic traditions. Ismael and Ismael (1997) maintain that Islamic law, which was adopted under the Islamic state, presupposes a strong judicial body independent from the state. This judicial body upheld the autonomy of civil society from state domination, and there was accordingly no need for civil society to struggle against the state.

Ibrahim (1995) provides further insight when he describes autonomous groups which emerged in pre-modern Islamic societies and which protected the interests of their members against the power of the state. Al-Şubḥī (2001:44) also argues that Islamic political traditions grounded within consultation and are based on participation and consultation (*Shura*) which enable civil society to emerge as a vehicle for participation. This enabling environment allowed the emergence of the two forms of structures in Islamic society: the guilds (*asnaf*) and the trusts (*awqaf*) (Salam, 2002:7).

The assertion that Islam has inhibited or even prevented the emergence of civil society in the Middle East originates within a prior assumption that the society is dominated by primordial associations tied together by kin, religion and tribe. Importantly, these associations are deemed to fall short of the criterion of civil society (Esmail, 2002; Niblock, 2005). E. Gellner (1995) seeks to justify this position by arguing that these associations do not operate in accordance with voluntary membership, individuals cannot join or opt out freely, which he deems to be an essential prerequisite for a Civil Society organisation. These largely formal distinctions invariably lead scholars to overlook the substance of civil society in the Middle East. Mardin (1995:25) inadvertently underlines this point when he suggests

that the 'civil society' and even 'democracy' are 'western dreams' and turning these dreams into reality is specific to 'the West'.

Here it should be acknowledged that the proposition of an 'ideal type' of civil society that operates irrespective of context does not appear to be realistic. To the same extent, the proposition that the broad category of civil society can be limited to the criterion of voluntary membership seems similarly unsustainable. Firstly, this representation appears to imply that individuals are 'locked into' these primordial structures for the entirety of their lives, an assumption which is clearly open to question as individuals can manipulate their terms of association, opt out of association or even create their own separate associations (Ibrahim, 1995). Secondly, this somewhat simplistic rendering implicitly denies the inherent complexity of civil society.

A second approach attributes the absence of civil society in the region to the state itself. Zureik (1981) embodies this approach when he maintains that the dominance and power of the state prevented the emergence of civil society organisations in the region. He maintains that even in those instances in which these organisations emerged, the hostile political environment (created by an over-powerful state) prevented them from establishing networks. Mansfield argues that the state succeeded in taking control of the few organisations that were established, with its control extending to the point where they became useless (Schwedler, 1995:8-9). This clearly recalls Locke's earlier contribution, in which the role of the State in controlling civil society (which nonetheless retained its separate status) was accentuated. By extended implication, countries with dominant states will have weak civil societies. This assumption, by virtue of the fact that it depicts power relations as a 'zero-sum' game is, as I have already noted, deeply problematic.

## ***Society and the State in the Middle East***

The literature on state and society in the region often focuses upon the ontological question of whether civil society exists, along with the related question of how it manifests itself. In comparison, there is relatively little material which addresses the power relations which govern interactions between state and society. In drawing extensively upon the typology of state and civil society, the literature advances two deeply flawed propositions: firstly, that civil society is antagonistic to the state; and that the terms of this antagonism are defined by the effort to promote and consolidate democracy. (Bellin, 2004; Ben Nefissa, 2005; Norton, 1995, 1996; Schwedler, 1995); secondly, that the state uses civil society to exert control over its citizens – by extended implication, it functions as an essential means through which authoritarian regimes maintain their power (Abdel Rahman, 2002; Langohr, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 1999, 2000, 2002). By virtue of the fact that the preponderance of this model within the literature, civil society is all frequently depicted as a passive object that is subject to the domination of the State.

### Civil Society as State Antagonist

The literature that depicts civil society in an antagonistic relation to the state is predominantly focused upon the role that civil society performs within the democratisation process. This paradigm gained popularity amongst scholars during the 1990s, as many countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America began to implement democratic reforms, a development which Huntington's (1991) 'third wave' of democratisation clearly depicted. In attempting to explain why the impact of the 'wave' did not extend to the Middle East, observers emphasised, *inter alia*, weaknesses within the region's civil society and its concomitant inability to proactively lead the democratisation process (Bellin, 2004; Ben Nefissa, 2005;

Norton, 1995, 1996; Schwedler, 1995). In this sense, civil society is considered a prerequisite for democratisation and shoulders the burden of democracy.

This expectation that civil society actors should lead the democratisation process is significant, as Norton (1995:10-25) demonstrates when he implicitly invokes the Hegelian notion of civil society to reaffirm its role in helping to provide a buffer between citizens and the state. However, in questioning whether it is realistic to expect civil society to topple authoritarian regimes, he cites the fact that corruption is a more frequent cause of their collapse. Ibrahim (1995:29-40) emphasises the relationship between civil society and democracy by considering civil society the only means through which citizens can participate in the government. In this context, civil society is used as a means for 'politics by proxy', especially in countries where political parties are prohibited (Ibrahim, 1995:40-41). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, who advanced their political agenda by winning elections at professional syndicates, is perhaps the most prominent example. It is an interesting argument that considers civil society the spearhead of the democratisation process and the key player. However, civil society is not the panacea to ensure democracy; in some cases, it might be merely a by-product of democracy.

Another perspective is offered emphasising that the region's civil society actors may be a product, as opposed to driver, of the democratisation process. These accounts, which are often characterised by a rather superficial understanding of power, tend to emphasise the role of the Middle Eastern state in limiting the influence of society. State and society are situated in opposition and in the context of a power struggle.

To understand why civil society was not able to lead the democratisation process, scholars explore the balance of power with the state. However, power is

approached rather superficially. State and society are situated in opposition and in the context of a power struggle. Sadowski (1993) summarises the key issues of this debate. On the one hand, scholars assume that in the Middle East the state is too strong and does not allow civil society to grow, which is a product of Islamic traditions that do not allow for a strong society and do not welcome democracy (Sadowski, 1993). On the other hand, a more recent approach argues against attributing a strong state to Islam because it has always rejected the domination of the sovereign, still without promoting democracy (Sadowski, 1993). This has led to weak state and fairly strong society that has its unique characteristics which still does not promote democracy. In both arguments, scholars claim that civil society remains too weak. They suggest that to strengthen it the state has to be weakened assuming a 'zero-sum' relationship, which Ibrahim (1995) and Sadowski (1993) reject. The third argument that Ibrahim (1995) and Sadowski (1993) present is that strong state and strong society co-exist. They both support the argument with the example of Western Europe where the civil society is strong, and states are democratic but not weak.

### Civil Society as a Tool for the State

It can be argued that Civil Society is either a creation of the state or is controlled/infiltrated to the point where it becomes ineffective. Instances in which welfare services are provided through civil society in order to achieve a greater degree of compliance would fall under this category. However, in many respects, these representations describe an established situation but do little or nothing to convey the dynamics that create the situation and contribute to shaping civil society as we know it. Furthermore, they also give rise to the impression that civil society is subject to the power exercised by the state as the ultimate sovereign. This representation is invariably inadequate because it overlooks (both formal and



informal) power relations which influence civil society and the state. A closer engagement with the literature will help highlight the missing dimension of power as a relation

Within the region, the emergence of civil society is frequently presented as a product of authoritarian regimes, having arisen as part of a strategy that sought to consolidate their position in response to substantial financial difficulties that were encountered during the 1980s and 90s (Hinnebusch, 1995; Ibrahim, 1995; Niblock, 2005; Norton, 1996; Richard, 1995; Schwedler, 1995; Zubaida, 2001, 2003).

After achieving independence, many states in the region constructed a 'social contract' in which the state provided social welfare and received political quiescence in return. However, with the financial crisis and the increase in demand on social welfare, the state was not able to fulfil its commitment, this has weakened this arrangement and jeopardised state's domination as granted by the social contract with the citizens. In response, states initiated a number of 'soft' reforms which included weakening constraints upon civil society. However, this concession occurred within clear constraints – the state permitted the formation of organisations upon the condition that they were subject to various controls. Importantly, these organisations were also mostly delivery mechanisms (through which social welfare services were provided), and their political significance was in case limited. This was an accurate characterisation of the situation in both Egypt and Jordan (see Elyachar, 2005; Harders, 2003; Hinnebusch, 1993, 1995; Wiktorowicz, 1999).

Regardless of the context that led to the emergence of civil society in the Middle East, civil society continued to be weakened by the state and employed to support the state's agenda. In Jordan, the state realised that civil society provided a means through which control could be rendered through a variety of

administrative, legislative and organisational strategies. The legislative framework established a situation in which civil society organisations were subject to constant surveillance as a means to control potential social movements rather than directly controlling individuals. Each organisation was required to formally register with the competent authority and to work closely with governmental agencies and ministries. In addition, they were also required to act openly and to ensure that their activities remained visible. Additional levels of state oversight were ensured by the creation of governmental and royal NGOs (which dominated civil society) and the establishment of the General Union of Voluntary Society, which was responsible for monitoring and controlling NGOs' activities and funding. (Wiktorowicz, 2000, 2002)

Stringent regulations in the Middle East mean that opposition groups are not able to operate freely; as a consequence, political activists and the opposition tended to use civil society organisations to advance their political agenda. The Egyptian opposition adopted this approach for two reasons (Langohr, 2004). Firstly, restrictions upon political parties rendered civil society as a viable alternative; secondly, international funding provided in support of democratisation tends to be channelled through organisations active in the fields of advocacy and lobbying – little, if any, is committed to political parties. For purposes of political expediency, it is often more convenient to operate under the cover that these organisations provide. This again reiterates that, in the region, the relevant categories (civil society, political realm and the state) are frequently interchangeable.

### Civil Society and State Cohesion: The Missing Dimension

The Literature on civil society in the Middle East evidences three clear weaknesses. Firstly, its focus on civil society occurs at the expense of social networks, which are highly influential in Middle Eastern society. Secondly, it ascribes a high level of independence to civil society and state, doing so even in

instances where the state uses civil society organisations to control citizens or preserve its political position. As has already been noted, this starting assumption is clearly contested by contributions to the Literature (see Migdal, 2001) which define state and society in their essential interrelation. Finally, the Literature also depicts power in a dichotomous form, with the state assuming the role of sovereign and civil society functioning as the subject. As a consequence, power is rarely rendered as a relation. Also, even if we assume that the state is more powerful than civil society, the resistance of the 'subject' is not acknowledged as if it is in absolute submission.

A limited number of contributions to the Literature do however study power relations and seek to transgress beyond formal civil society organisations. Harders (2003) demonstrates how the Egyptian government uses civil society organisations to uphold the social contract which binds the state and citizens and notes that this relationship can broadly be categorised under the heading of clientelism. Individuals excluded from this formalised system adapt by using informal networks to advance their claims upon the state. Harders places particular emphasis upon the informal networks that enable individuals to use non-material capital to increase their material capital. One example is provided by the establishment of saving clubs in response to the lack of access to funding. Members then use these networks to connect informal utilities to their homes. These informal networks grant the members access to government institutions through connections with government employees who are also part of this society.

Bayat's (1997) study of Iranian civil society also considers the role of informal organisations. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, when the state was preoccupied with its internal reordering and the re-establishment of its control over Iranian society, slums within Tehran organised themselves and managed their communities. When the state later sought to interfere, these informal structures,

which were a product of necessity, resisted the power of the state through explicit actions as well as through ignoring the state and its rule (Bayat, 1997). Their aim was not to generate new political gains but rather to protect what had already been achieved (autonomy as a means of redistributing social goods – see Bayat, 1997). This example further reiterates how informal networks can promote empowerment and participation.

## **Conclusion**

While there is established literature that discusses society in the Middle East, a substantial part of it presents society as being subject to the power of the state. Civil society is also defined in isolation from the Middle Eastern state, even though it is frequently a by-product of sustained interactions between state and society. (Niblock, 2005; Norton, 1995) From this perspective, the state exerts power over civil society. This representation, which rests upon a clear-cut separation and simplification, oversimplifies a reality which is considerably more complex and convoluted; furthermore, it insufficiently acknowledges the political salience of informal dynamics, networks and structures or their contribution to power relations.

It has already been noted that the definition of nonviolent resistance relates to the collective character of the action (e.g. whether it is genuinely collective in character or is merely the association of dispersed individual acts), the intention and the question of whether it is covert or overt. The relationship between violence and nonviolence (and here it is essential to reiterate again that they are not mutually opposed categories) is also an important question which has significant implications for the selection of specific tools of resistance along with the question of what precisely constitutes resistance.

# Chapter 2 - State and Society in Syria: Background

## Introduction

The academic literature on Syrian society focuses mainly on civil society, along with two separate stages in its historical development. The contribution of this literature is somewhat diminished by the fact that studies tend from one phase to another and do not sufficiently explore the intervening period. When studying civil society under the Ottoman rule and during initial stages of state formation at the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars tend to focus on Awqāf (sing. Waqf: endowment or trust), faith-based organisations and guilds (Kawtharani, 1992; Isma`il, 1992). Scholars often begin in the 1940s with modern civil society organisations, which are then measured against western models of civil society (Hinnebusch, 1993; Hinnebusch, 1995). All too frequently, scholars fail to explore the historical development of civil society, and therefore fail to document the inheritance bestowed upon modern civil society by its primordial and traditional predecessor. With very few exceptions (see Hydemann, 2004; Pierret and Selvik, 2009), the Literature also fails to capture the operation of informal networks and social structures.

It is frequently suggested that civil society in the Levant did not significantly influence state formation when states emerged in the region at the beginning of the twentieth century. While civil society was weak under the Ottoman Empire, it began to assume more concrete form during the French Mandate. The subsequent emergence of authoritarianism accorded civil society a marginal role in democratisation and state development and democratisation. Contemporary weaknesses in the form and capacities of civil society (e.g. its (in)ability to contribute

to democratisation and development) can, therefore, be traced back to historical events since the nineteenth century (see Daher, 1992; Niblock, 2005; Kawtharani, 1992; Norton, 1995; Norton, 1996). However, this weakness notwithstanding, the Literature suggests that civil society challenged state power on a number of occasions (Niblock, 2005), actively promoted rights, promoted welfare (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012; Allouni, 1959) and contributed to the state building process (Gelvin, 1998).

Now that themes of power, resistance and state-society relations have been expounded in more detail, it will be instructive to engage the literature on civil society in Syria, with a view to engaging and appraising the wider context in which civil society operated. This chapter, which draws upon the contribution of international and regional scholars, reviews the history of civil society and sets out its relations with the state during the period which extended from the end of the Ottoman Empire to the conclusion of the reform period in 2010. It initially examines civil society under the French mandate (1920-1946) and then discusses it with reference to the national governments that followed and the establishment of the Baath Party (1946-1963). It then proceeds, with reference to pre-reform and reform periods, to analyse changes within civil society that occurred under the authoritarian rule of the Baath Party (1963-2010). The chapter also provides insight into the origins of the Syrian Uprising and its development during the studied period (2011-2014).

## State and Society in Pre-Baath Syria: 1890s-1963

Civil society organisations under the Ottoman Empire were predominantly traditional and relied on associations such as guilds<sup>2</sup> and Waqfs<sup>3</sup> (Hinnebusch, 1993; Niblock, 2005; Salam, 2002). It has been suggested that the fragmented and weak character of civil society is attested to by the fact that it failed to play a significant role in the political arena (Daher, 1992; Ruiz de Elvira, 2012). Hinnebusch (1995:214-215), meanwhile, argues that the imbalance between state and society in Syria can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire when the state was dominant and civil society had a limited role. However, here it is important to note that these traditional associations often challenged state power and sought to protect the rights of individuals – the Guilds were particularly prominent in this respect (Niblock, 2005).

While traditional organisations of Guilds and Waqfs were the most immediately noticeable organisations, modern charities had existed in the Levant since the late nineteenth century. The Association of Saint Vincent de Paul, which was the earliest Christian charity, was first established in Damascus in 1863. *Jam`iyyat al-Maqāṣid al-Khayriyya* (Association of Charitable Tenants), its first Islamic counterpart charity in the Levant, which is still active, and which has branches in most cities across Syria, was established in Beirut in 1878. Other faith-based charities that provided charitable services and social welfare were also established in various cities: relevant examples include *Jam`iyyat al-‘Is`āf al-Khayrī*

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<sup>2</sup> Guilds were a form of traditional professional organisation that were established with the intention of regulating a profession and protecting the rights of its members. (Allouni, 1959:64-76; Niblock, 2005; Ismael and Ismael, 1997: 77-87)

<sup>3</sup> “Waqf refers to money that is restricted to specific purposes, so it cannot be redirected by a governmental authority for any other use... Waqf was a major civil society institution in the Arab region. It presents an individual’s donation for public purposes. Islamic Jurisprudence gave this money full civil, legal and political protection.” Waqfs often supported social causes including care for abandoned animals, hospitals, schools, shelters for victims of domestic violence and various services. Islamic courts upheld their independence from the state. (Ghanem, 2005:42) Waqfs were very common in the Levant, functioning both as a charitable institution and a long-term safety net which benefitted their founders. (Doumani, 1998:3-41).

(the Association of Charitable Relief), an orphanage established in 1907 which continues to operate in Damascus, and the Orthodox Association of St. Gregoire, which was established in Damascus in 1912. (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012:8-9)

In addition to undertaking charitable work and providing welfare support, civil society organisations that were active during the period of the Ottoman Empire made an important contribution by resisting state power and protecting individual rights. Traditional structures were foremost in this latter respect and were extensively drawn upon by rural and urban communities. Gelvin (1998:18-25) explains that in the aftermath of the great depression of 1873, the population was subject to the mercy of Ottoman state austerity measures. State power was resisted through a variety of means, which included draft evasion, emigration and open rebellion. Urban (Guilds) and rural (traditional structures) both engaged in acts of resistance. Textile workers, in responding to the immediate impact of austerity measures and the long-term relevance of the Guilds, organised strikes in Damascus. The strike was to protect wages which were threatened by the austerity measures and to protect the power of the guild which was at risk of being weakened. In the Ḥaurān region of southern Syria, peasants withheld taxes and fought Ottoman troops that were deployed to restore order. However, these acts of resistance were spontaneous, and they failed to establish the basis for large-scale or long-term mobilisation. (Gelvin, 1998:18-25)

During the Ottoman Empire period, civil society organisations sought to mobilise popular energies behind the independence movement. NGOs were established which sought to advance the cause of Arab nationalism and achieve independence from the Ottoman Empire. These organisations lobbied for Arab nationalism and led campaigns to raise awareness about the Arab ties of Syria in an attempt to break out of the Ottoman Empire. Activists established NGOs that adopted Arab Nationalism as ideology and aimed at mobilising the Syrians to gain



independence from the Ottoman Empire. These organisations, including al-Fatat Association, the Arab Club (*al-Nādi al-`arabi*) and The Literary Forum (*al-Muntadā al-`adabi*), were strikingly successful in achieving broad-based public mobilisation, with urban-based elites accounting for a considerable proportion of their support. (Gelvin, 1998; Bira, 1996)

During the state formation process at the beginning of the twentieth century, civil society organisations and national committees (which had been established during the transition period that separated Ottoman Empire and the French Mandate) enjoyed considerable success in mobilising public opinion. In the aftermath of the great revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1916, an Arab government under the leadership of the Hashemite King Fayṣal was established to rule the country. This action was however strongly challenged by a broad-based anti-government coalition who established the Higher National Committee (*al-Lajna al-Waṭaniyya al-`ulya*), local committee branches (*al-lijān al- Waṭaniyya al-Far`iyya*) and the National Defence Committees (*lijān al-Difā` al-Waṭani*). These committees successfully mobilised rural and urban areas by providing a basis for active participation. The National Committee conducted elections that resulted in the selection of representatives from different neighbourhoods in Damascus, thus challenging traditional power centres within the neighbourhoods. In instances where the weak central government failed to perform its role, these committees met a clear and ongoing need. (Gelvin, 1998)

While the national committees succeeded in achieving a high level of political mobilisation, the population continued with the spontaneous acts of resistance that were enacted in response to austerity measures and concomitant hardships. Guilds (printing, railroads, textiles) continued to organise strikes in Damascus which advanced members' demands. Traditional networks also organised mass protests

against grain being exported during a time of mass starvation. ( Bira; 1996:72-75; Gelvin, 1998:26-44)

Although the national government sought to draw upon the wide membership of the guilds, national committees and NGOs, these organisations succeeded in maintaining their independence (Gelvin, 1998:79-80, 231). In 1919, the government attempted to use the Arab Club to distract the population from military activities, at a time when increasing numbers of the local population were volunteering to fight the colonising power. The government attempted to convince the Club to increase popular engagement with voluntary civil activities across cities. However, it rejected this proposition and instead expanded its activities in Aleppo with a view to encouraging volunteers to join the troops (Gelvin, 1998:79-80, 231). Separate government attempts to use the guilds to disperse information also proved to be unsuccessful, and the guilds instead intensified their efforts to provide welfare support and extend protection to their members (Gelvin, 1998:79-80, 231). In offering an opposed perspective, Rafeq (1993:16-17) argues that these social groups were an essential accompaniment to the government's attempts to establish the institutions of the first Arab state in Syria.

During the French Mandate (1920-1946), the state lacked the essential components that would enable it to support civil society. Traditional organisations, most notably the guilds, began to collapse and lose their oppositional purpose as capitalist norms and values spread. (Hinnebusch, 1995:215; 1993:243-257). The Western intervention in the Levant altered the traditional organisations and their power to challenge the state power was weakened (Niblock, 2005:486-503). The associations that emerged in their place were mainly labour, political and professional organisations, which clearly lacked the strong community ties that their predecessors had evidenced.

In 1935, the government sought to restrict the functions of the unions, which had replaced the guilds. This was a significant development because it threatened the autonomy that they had developed during the French Mandate. However, unions lobbied for more independent functions, and they were granted that when a governmental decision was issued to regulate the unions while protecting their autonomy (Allouni, 1959:64-76). The unions built on the legacy of the guilds and continued to challenge state power. In 1927, cross-sectoral strikes (including printing, textiles and transportation) broke out in response to low wages. When the financial crisis struck in 1930, more than 50,000 textile workers demonstrated in Aleppo to call for improved protection measures. (Bira, 1996:72-75)

Faith-based charity organisation also flourished during the French mandate. A large number of charitable organisations that currently operate in the country were established during the period. Relevant examples include *Jam`iyat Nuq̄at al-Ḥalib* (Association of Drop of Milk) which targets children from families in need, was established in 1922 and still operates in Damascus. Also, *al-Maytam al-Islāmi* (the Islamic Orphanage), which was established in 1920 in Aleppo, and remains one of the key civil society organisations in the city. Most organisations were apolitical and focused on social welfare. (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012:8-10)

Overall, colonial power sought to discourage civil society organisations that sought to exert pressure on the state or advance political demands. Instead, it sought to encourage charitable organisations focused upon social welfare and upon meeting social needs when the state fell short. Furthermore, the state failed to consolidate the link with civil society which seemed to operate with certain level of autonomy but was still confined to certain types of activities that do not threaten colonial power. (Hinnebusch, 1993:243-257)

Charitable organisations flourished in the 1950s, after independence from French mandate. Between 1952-1954, an enabling environment and flexible legislation meant that the overall number of charities almost trebled (increasing from 73 to 203) (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012:8-10). The modernisation process that was initiated during the decade also gave rise to a greater degree of political pluralism (Hinnebusch, 1993:243-257). This was reflected in the emergence of ideological actors such as the Baath and Communist parties. (Hinnebusch, 1993:243-257). Smaller community-based organisations also emerged – these included an agricultural cooperative (which operated in in Deir `Atiyya in rural Damascus), a youth organisation which sought to defend the Ismaili faith (which operated in Salamiyya in Rural Hama) and al-Shaikh Miḥi al-Dīn faith-based charity (which operated in Damascus) (Hinnebusch, 1993:243-257; Ruiz de Elvira, 2012:8-10). Some of the most prominent organisations had established links to mosques and sought to promote local solidarity in neighbourhoods. The society sought to respond to the fragmentation experienced during the French mandate by creating autonomous bodies and structures that established the basis for collective organisation (Ma'oz, 1972:389-404).

Civil society was fundamentally altered after the United Arab Republic (1958-1961) was established. Nasser's regime dissolved all political parties and prosecuted the opposition (Heydmann, 1999-94). It was during this period that civil society began to be heavily controlled by the state, and this political tendency continued into the period of Baath Party rule. New legislation relating to associations and charity organisations was also passed (the Law of Associations and Foundations, 93/1958) which established strict control over the NGOs. The registration process became more complicated, and the Ministry of Social Affairs assumed a more prominent role in controlling and overseeing CSOs. This legislation is still operative in Syria, and it continues to be used to control the sector.

## **State and Society under Baath Party Rule Pre-Reform: 1963-2000**

The evolution of Syrian civil society can be divided into three stages: Baath Party rule (pre-reform), the reform period and the revolution. The first stage covers the period between 1963 and 2000, the Baath Party rule (pre-reform). It begins with the Baath Party's seizure of power in March 1963. A series of internal coups and purges, both within the leadership of the military and Party then followed, before Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970 (he ruled the country until his death in 2000) (Van Dam, 1996; Seale, 1988; Hinnebusch, 2012; Salāmah, 1987). During this period, the socialist authoritarian state narrowed the scope of civil society and expanded the state (Owen, 2004:23-38). As the state apparatus became increasingly dominant, civil society stagnated.

It is instructive to note that the most prominent organisations continued to be those that were established before 1963. These include the Homs-based *al-Bir w'al-Khadamāt al-Ijtimā'iyya* (Righteousness and Social Services), which provides economic and social support to families in need and vulnerable groups; the Aleppo-based *al-Ta'līm wa Maḥū al-Umiyya* (Education and Literacy), which provides educational services; and the Damascus-based *al-Mabara al-Nisā'iyya*, which works with disadvantaged women.

The emergency law that was activated in 1963 imposed tight measures that subjected civil society activities to heavy controls. More generally, it empowered regime security forces by authorising the use of all required measures to protect the regime and uphold its stability. Between 1963 and 2000, fewer than 50 newly established NGOs were able to obtain the required permissions to register with the

Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The overall number of NGOs also declined during this period (falling from 596 to 513 with many organisations forced to cease operating (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012:6). Activities that took place outside of formally registered organisations were not tolerated.

Activities that were permitted were confined to charitable work and were subject to close surveillance by the state (Hinnebusch, 1993; Hinnebusch, 1995). Far from challenging state power, activities of civil society organisations were subject to the discretion of the state. They were incorporated within the state system to provide welfare services where and when the state allowed. Their activities were limited to providing direct support to people in need, such as food, education and health services. This was attributable to two factors: firstly, most of the civil society organisations were faith-based and were concerned with the collection and distribution of *Zakāt*<sup>4</sup> money; secondly, charitable support was the only activity that the state was willing to approve and tolerate. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour made it clear to all local civil society organisations that any minor diversification of activities would result in the revocation of its license and its ultimate dissolution.

Although faith-based charities were allowed to operate, traditional and religious organisations were prohibited upon the grounds that they potentially threatened the regime. This repression resulted in growing conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime, which culminated with the 1982 Hama Massacre (Khatib, 2013:19-37; 2011, Salāmah, 1987:264-269; Hinnebusch, 2001). In its aftermath, the regime imposed harsher controls on civil society, with particular emphasis upon religious organisations and those that were suspected of being

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<sup>4</sup> Zakāt is a central concept in Islamic social welfare and it is one of the pillars of Muslim faith. Dean and Khan (1997:196-197) define it as “the religious duty imposed on Muslims to give a proportion of their disposable wealth for distribution to members of the [society] who are in need”.

sympathetic to the opposition. During the period 1980-1990, the overall number of NGOs fell from 654 to 504 (Bira, 1996:59) since all the NGOs that were suspected to be affiliated with opposition or that might be successful in mobilising the people were forced to close their offices.

When the Baath Party had seized power, professional (doctors, engineers and lawyers) and labour unions were autonomous and robust. They retained certain level of autonomy until the mid-1970s when the regime first noticed that they had the potential to mobilise the population in large numbers. The regime sought to influence these organisations by supporting Baath Party candidates during board elections. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful as most of the supported candidates were not elected (only one was elected to the twelve-member board of the Damascus-based Engineers' Syndicate in Damascus, and none were elected to the board of the Aleppo-based Pharmacists' Syndicate).

In 1979, both organisations had supported the opposition's call for political reform (which included ending the Emergency Law), and they were subsequently directly targeted by the regime. Their boards were dissolved before the regime directly managed new elections to ensure its supporters are elected. The syndicates also became subject to extensive state interference, to the extent that they were transformed into apolitical quasi-governmental bodies that were responsible for regulating the relevant professions and extending direct support to the regime. (Bira, 1996:70-80; Hinnebusch, 1995; al-Sayyed, 2004:101-112)

The social sphere became dominated by governmental agencies and quasi-governmental organisations. Relevant examples included the Peasants' Union; the Pioneers' Organisation (*al-Ṭala'ī*), which benefitted children younger than 15-years-of-age); the Students' Union; and the Youth Federation (*Itiḥad Shabibat al-Thawra*). In functioning as semi-independence organisations under the umbrella of the Party,

these organisations helped to promote the regime's agenda and produce an acquiescent civilian population. The Party's attempts to legitimise these agencies and organisations as civil society organisations was undermined by the inconvenient facts that they are managed and staffed by civil servants and funded from the state budget.

These organisations had a clear ideological, social and political purpose. These organisations were the tool of the Baath Party to mobilise the people and to penetrate the society (Hinnebusch, 1980:143-174; 1976:1-24). The Youth Federation, to take one example, was the main means through which the regime sought to engage young people and recruit them to the party when their political opinions were still in the process of formation. The Federation assumed particular importance, in arranging cultural and social activities, during the period when Arab nationalism and socialism were in the ascendancy. (Hinnebusch, 1980:143-174; Salāmah, 1987:128-129).

Membership of these organisations later became compulsory, and citizens were often forced to join as part of the Party's efforts to increase its membership base. High school students were required to join the Youth Federation, and farmers had to join the Peasants' Union if they wished to benefit from state subsidies, access agricultural supplies and technical support. Failure to join these organisations would result in extensive interrogation and questioning by national security staff.

These Baathist organisations frequently took on the appearance of NGOs, a feature which became accentuated when they competed against other NGO actors for funding or other forms of support. They enjoyed a number of key advantages in providing education and health services. The scope of their activities was greater



than that of competitors, as evidenced by their rural outreach and activities across separate governorates.

In addition to the role played by the quasi-governmental organisations to control the society, the regime penetrated the local communities, especially in rural areas, to consolidate its power and to neutralise the power of traditional structures. Hinnebusch (1976) examines how the authoritarian regime infiltrated rural communities by referring to four villages. The regime's strategy focused upon empowering prominent figures who were members of the local community but who spent substantial periods in other population centres (usually Damascus or another major city). Having been sufficiently 'prepared' these individuals then returned to their communities with the intention of mobilising support for the regime.

These individuals often had established links with the Baath Party or with quasi-governmental organisations, which had been forged after their ties with traditional local organisations had been broken. Their efforts in this regard were further assisted by the fact that the authority of the traditional leaders within the rural community (*Zu`amā`*) had been broken. However, even these substantial advantages were not sufficient to guarantee success (e.g. the legitimisation of the regime) as a considerable degree of regional variation clearly attested.

The regime sought to enhance its legitimacy by embedding its ideology within Syrian society. During the period 1970-2000, the regime sought to create a cult around Assad by manipulating culture, language and symbolic space. The regime's control extended over educational, judicial, media and religious institutions. Syrians were continually exposed to images, messages and symbols which reiterated Assad's charisma and fatherly concern for the well-being of his subjects. (Wedeen, 1999; 1998). This ideological content, which functioned alongside restrictions on civil society and the penetration of society through quasi-

governmental organisations, emerged as an increasingly important part of the regime's governmentality in the aftermath of the 1979 rebellions.

## **State and Society under Baath Party Rule during the “Reform”: 2000-2010**

Although the Uprising was not the result of only the ten-year rule of Bashar al-Assad between 2000 and 2010, this era is important to understand the direct reason that led people to revolt. The accumulation of grievances from decades under Baath Party rule reached its climax as a result of Bashar Assad's final push that led people to reach their tipping point and revolt.

Bashar al-Assad came with an agenda that focused on internal issues (e.g. socio-economic development of the country) and promises of widespread reform. This might have raised people's hopes that changes might eventually happen in the country. However, the discrepancy between the rhetoric and the actual practices led to anger and disappointment that was a major contributing factor that pushes people over the edge and led them to revolt. Moreover, the policies that aimed to consolidate the regime power did not always yield the intended results. In some cases, the regime lost its connection with its traditional base of supporters (e.g. peasants, workers, rural communities).

When Bashar al-Assad assumed power in 2000, he sent a clear message in his inaugural speech that his focus would be on the development of the country. He believed that Syria had made considerable progress at the international relations and political arena and that it is time for economic and social development to catch up with the political front<sup>5</sup>. He delivered on this promise as he indeed focused on

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<sup>5</sup> Bashar al-Assad inaugural speech on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2000, <https://al-bab.com/documents-section/president-bashar-al-assad-inaugural-address>

national development priorities in comparison with his father who heavily invested in international and regional relations. This manifested with the reform agenda that Bashar al-Assad launched aiming to address mostly socio-economic development in the country.

Bashar al-Assad sought to enhance his legitimacy by announcing a nationwide series of reforms. However, the reform rhetoric felt short in realising actual changes in the society which was a major source of grievance and disappointment. It soon became clear that the 'modernisation' of the Baathist state was synonymous with the 'upgrading' of authoritarian rule (Heydemann, 2007; Perthes, 2004; Hinnebusch, 2012; al-Sayyed, 2004; Aarts and Cavatorta, 2013). As Hinnebusch (2012:95) states, Authoritarianism upgrading is "the techniques by which such regimes tapped new resources, diversified their constituencies and reregulated state-society relations". The ultimate aspiration, it soon became clear, was a 'hybrid' authoritarian system in which the regime would retain a strong grip on the state while permitting limited concessions such as economic liberalisation and relaxed controls on civil society. The accommodation of economic, political and social change would consolidate the regime, enhance its resilience and ensure its long-term sustainability (Hinnebusch, 2012; Hemmer, 2003). This was not unique to the case of Syria. It was the trend in the Middle East. Egypt, Tunisia and to some extent Libya tried to upgrade their authoritarianism by focusing on economic liberalisation (Hinnebusch, 2012:95), which proved to be far from successful, as the Arab spring swept through these countries.

### ***At the Economic Level***

Economic reform was the area where the regime felt most comfortable implementing some new policies empowering Syrian to partake in the economic development of the country. Nonetheless, very quickly, it became clear that economic reform and the rhetoric of economic development were means through

which legitimacy could be promoted, and state power could be enhanced. Economic liberalisation would create 'networks of privilege' in which loyal businesspeople and capitalists would commit their support to the regime. (Heydemann, 2004).

Businesses and economic development focused mostly on the large urban centres (e.g. Damascus, Homs and Aleppo). Significant development took place in Damascus and Aleppo with new businesses mushrooming across the city. Nonetheless, these businesses were for the few elite mostly loyal businesspeople and family members of Assad (Heydemann, 2004; Pearlman, 2016:22-23). Although the rapid business development created new job opportunity for young Syrians, this was again for the few privileged who had access to the right connections and network to access such jobs. Moreover, the level of corruption was rapidly increasing.

The regime adopted the "social market economy" in its rhetoric; however, the reality was much closer to neo-liberalism (Hinnebusch, 2012:101). In that sense, the regime opened the economy, encouraged foreign direct investment, and implemented wide range privatisation without implementing any of the social welfare obligations of the social market economy. The investment in services and social welfare was halted by austerity measures, which reduced the usual role played by the state in providing welfare to the society. Funding to unions of worker and peasant decreased significantly, in an attempt to limit their role in opposing liberalisation. In addition, public sector stopped acting as a source of employment and pension for significant proportion of the population, since recruitment of new civil servant has almost stopped.

The focus was on growth neglecting equality and distribution. This has indeed a major impact on regime's traditional clientele, namely peasants and

workers as well as rural communities. Reduction in agriculture subsidies and the withdrawal of state as the provider of social welfare has affected the relationship between the regime and its traditional base of supporters. (Hinnebusch, 2012:101)

On the other hand, the focus on urban centres empowered capitalists, businessmen and bourgeoisie, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. The increase in elitism (Azmeah, 2016) and the focus on the middle class contributed to the alienation of the traditional supporters of the regime and the empowerment of bourgeoisie and corrupt businessmen in the main urban centres. The bourgeoisie in the largest two cities in the country has indeed remained loyal to the regime after the Uprising and years of conflict.

These changes in the economic landscape of the country, the empowerment and preference of the middle class and bourgeoisie in the urban centres, were aimed to consolidate the power of the regime. Nonetheless, these measures have weakened the regime as it lost its traditional clientele and social base in rural areas. The regime was accused of abandoning the poor for the sake of the rich (Hinnebusch 2012, 103). This was exacerbated by reform measures at the social and political level. It is indeed argued that the Uprising was a movement against the elite rule that resulted in socio-economic decline in large parts of the country, mostly rural areas that used to benefit from earlier policies of Baath Party (Azmeah, 2018:501).

### ***At the Political Level***

While economic reforms were extensive and far-reaching, their political counterparts were considerably more limited and contradictory. The reform process at this level was ambiguous, and no progress at all was achieved. There

was an attempt in 2001 to enable political environment in the country, with the short-lived “Damascus Spring” (Hinnebusch, 2012; Khatib, 2013:28-35; George, 2003; Sawah, 2012; Pearlman, 2016:25). During Damascus Spring, debate forums were allowed to operate, and people started to organise themselves in an attempt to start new political parties and participate in political life. However, the regime, which felt threatened by a hitherto unprecedented level of free political debate and mobilisation, arrested a number of activists and banned the political organisation. Even as it imposed various political constraints, the state sought to mobilise the ‘civil society’ discourse for its own ends and purposes. The term was used for the first time in the tenth national development plan (which covered the years 2006-10). The government committed to increase the overall number of NGOs and to promote NGO participation in the national development process. It was quite clear however that the envisaged ‘empowerment’ did not extend beyond the socio-economic arena. A depoliticised civil society was to remain focused on economic and social development.

Lobbying and advocacy organisations were not welcomed by the state. Those who sought to promote human rights were also dissuaded from registering and operating. As in other countries in the region, the regime did not trust these organisations and sought to weaken their link with wider society (Ben Nefissa, 2005:9). These organisations lacked legal recognition and their founders, and members were frequently arrested and prosecuted. The regime also systematically sought to destroy the reputation of these organisations by highlighting their international links and questioning their patriotism. Organisations focused upon children’s, and women’s rights were nonetheless often tolerated, as their activities were not deemed to be threatening to the stability of the regime. However, this tolerance did not translate into the approval of their registration, and two organisations engaged with women’s rights and empowerment had their licences

revoked after their activities came into conflict with those of the Women's Union (a Baath Party organisation that enjoys a monopoly upon issues pertaining to women)<sup>6</sup>. When the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour suspended their registration, they had to stop operating officially, although their informal activities were tolerated.

State policies and techniques which broadly corresponded to a strategy of clientelism engaged the unrepresented majority in the community and thus enabled the regime to consolidate its power over potential activists. An intricate set of bargains and compromises rested upon a set of norms and reciprocal expectations that arose in regime-activist interactions. In an effort to sustain their activities, were frequently obliged to assume official positions – this entailed maintaining formal relations with state elites, state institutions and influential individuals – and thus help to sustain the system they were ostensibly seeking to change. By virtue of the fact that these interactions provided limited opportunity limited for leverage, they invariably enhanced the power of the state at the expense of civil society. (Donker, 2010)

### ***At the Social Level***

To understand the changes that happened during Bashar al-Assad's rule at the social level, it is essential to look into two levels: the informal level where changes were subtle but arguably powerful and effective in terms of changing the social dynamics in the country; and the formal level where NGOs are active and social dynamics are related to formal organisations and formal interactions.

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<sup>6</sup> The Union was dissolved in 2017 with a special presidential decree. Staff members were transferred to other governmental agencies and the Ministry of Social Affairs took over the union's activities ('Enab Baladi, 2017). It is not clear why it was dissolved. However, rumours in the Syrian street linked the decision to pressure from the First Lady and to personality clashes between the Union's senior staff members and the officials at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

At the informal level, as discussed earlier, under Hafez al-Assad, Baath Party was used as a tool to penetrate the society and consolidate regime power, especially in rural areas. When Bashar al-Assad assumed power, his first move was to eliminate resistance to his economic liberalisation agenda. This meant that he had to get rid of “old guards” in Baath Party and consolidate his power. He implemented a number of reforms within the party and dissolved certain branches. This has subsequently led to weakening the link between the regime and its base of supporters in rural areas. The vacuum created by the decreased role of the Baath Party was filled by an increased influence of security services, who are traditionally more corrupt. This has weakened the relationship between the regime and rural communities. Local communities started to rely on their traditional leaders to address their issues, whereas before they used to reach out to the Party in their area to address their grievances. In other words, which traditionally used to be a solid link between the wide clientele of the regime and the regime itself, was severed and replaced with a new dynamics where local communities started to rely more on their traditional structures and leadership. (Hinnebusch, 2012:99).

Another informal area of social co-optation that Hafez al-Assad used to rely on was the penetration of “modern” Islamist milieu. Hafez al-Assad, built strong ties with the moderate Sufi Islam in Damascus, by appointing Ahmed Kftaro as Grand Mufti and allowing his institute (Al-Nur) to become a major educational institution in the region, attracting students from across the Islamic World. Bashar a-Assad tried to build on this and to continue taming the Islamist through alliances. Therefore, Islamic schools spread in the country and Qubayyyat were allowed to operate openly among Damascene middle-class women to the point that they became a very powerful informal organisation in the city. (Hinnabusch, 2012; Khatib, 2013)

However, Bashar al-Assad moves that aimed to increase the control over Islamist milieu and reduce potential risks of dissent, where not as successful as his



father's policies. His alliance with Islamic groups in Damascus and Aleppo created certain level of elitism in the religion sector, which in turn widened the gap between the regime and the general population.

At the formal level, the national rhetoric was all about empowering civil society and establishing new NGOs, provided the focus remain apolitical. The empowerment of apolitical NGOs would also significantly enhance the regime's image, without incurring significant political costs. Civil society was at the core of the social market economy. Economic reforms were undertaken that sought to remove state controls and establish the basis for a social market economy. As the state resource base decreased, welfare commitments remained constant (Thanawala, 2002), with the consequence that NGOs were forced to assume an increasingly prominent role in the distribution of social welfare. The ending of the Baath Party social contract that provided social welfare to the population and the reliance on charities and NGOs who often failed to deliver were among the reasons that led to increasing dissatisfaction among the population and ultimately fueled the Uprising (Ruiz de Elvira, and Zintl, 2014:329).

During the reform period, the number of registered organisations tripled. According to the records of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, which is responsible for regulating and managing NGOs, 555 civil society organisations were registered by December 2000, when the reform process started (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2001). However, the majority of these organisations were established before the Baath Party's seizure of power in 1963 (Hijazi, 2005:164; Ruiz de Elvira, 2012:5). By 2010, when the reform process concluded, this number had increased to around 1500 organisations (a figure which excludes state-controlled cooperatives, professional syndicates and trade unions).

The Ministry began delegating social welfare tasks to NGOs. Partnership agreements between the State and charities established the basis upon which the Ministry could outsource the management of many institutions (for example, the *al-Rajā'* Fund began to manage the Dar Zayd orphanage in Damascus, and the *al-Shahāma* Association assumed responsibility for an Aleppo juvenile centre).

A new generation of development organisations ('Development NGOs'), which had close links to prominent figures aligned with the regime (wealthy businessmen and wives of government officials), also emerged and began to promote cultural, community, economic and social development (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012; Sawah, 2012; Al-Om, 2016). The state viewed development NGOs as superior to the charity and faith-based organisations, and they accordingly received more attention and support from the state. Media campaigns promoted their work, and other forms of government support were provided (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012). However, it is still open to question if they enjoyed more freedom than other organisations (Kawakibi, 2013) or if any freedom was attributable to a state policy of empowerment or high-level support.

While the regime evidenced clear favouritism towards Development NGOs, it also sought to encourage the traditional faith-based charities (the number of religious NGOs sharply increased during the reform period) as long as they maintained apolitical approach. This appeared however to be part of a 'divide-and-rule' strategy which set religious and secular NGOs against each other. (Ruiz de Elvira, 2012; Zintl, 2012). In responding to state influence (although in some instances, changing internal priorities may have been a factor), many faith-based charities began to focus on sustainable development. Development NGOs were however clearly advantaged by the fact that their activities made it possible for them to access international funding and attract educated youth. (Zintl, 2012).

While a number of these trends were potentially promising, they did not necessarily translate into the proposition of flourishing civil society. In reality, the state continued to influence civil society across different levels. The cultivation of civil society organisations ultimately enabled the state to legitimise itself while enhancing its control – in this respect, there was an apparent discrepancy between rhetoric and practice.

The registration process for new organisations remained lengthy and heavily controlled. The Law of Associations and Foundations (93/1958), which was still in place during the reform, established that organisations had to seek approval from the competent authority (the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour) and formally register under the Ministry. The Ministry was responsible for monitoring and controlling the activities of these organisations, and it also retained the right to reject any application. The registration and approval process was ambiguous and lengthy (it could sometimes take up to two years to obtain the required approval), and this enabled the Ministry to make essentially arbitrary decisions. Registration entailed numerous security checks and required approval by different government and security agencies.

Continued regime influence was ensured by the stipulation which required that the board of directors of all organisations should include a permanent non-elected member appointed by the Ministry (who was usually a civil servant at the Ministry). The Ministry also retained the right to dissolve the elected board and appoint a new board for an unspecified period of time. The Ministry could also seek dissolution upon the grounds that the organisation had expanded beyond its terms of establishment, received funding from unauthorised sources, presented a threat to national security or no longer served a clear purpose. In implementing the relevant law, the Ministry closely scrutinised fundraising activities and international

funding sources (which required special approval) and also tightly controlled and regulated the activities of all organisations.

It is also worthwhile to examine the inconsistency between the national rhetoric and the actual situation on the ground. The implementation of the law also excluded a large part of the population. The process of legal registration required a minimum level of education and skills, and this functioned to exclude a large number of those who might be interested in launching community-based initiatives. Newly registered NGOs also had to submit the profiles of founding members to the authorities – this encouraged the elite to monopolise civil society and opened the door to a selection process based on prominent individuals.

The fact that the regime successfully used NGOs to enhance its legitimacy did not necessarily imply that these organisations were completely submissive to the regime policies or that the regime's upgrading endeavours were ultimately successful. A number of faith-based charities therefore successfully challenged the regime, who were assisted in this respect by the fact that their wide base of supporters included a number of wealthy businessmen. The regime clearly identified the danger that this presented and sought to incorporate religious leaders into the state in order to offset the danger of future rebellions.

Pierret and Selvik (2009) maintain that the regime lacked the power to manipulate the society and further contend that local centres of power limited the upgrading of the authoritarian regime. They both place particular emphasis upon the Zayd Movement, which was led by Sheikh Sariya al-Rifa'i, a prominent Damascus-based religious leader who spent years in exile after the 1979-1982 rebellion. In helping to provide welfare services to those in need, the movement was sustained by the Zakāt of businessmen and tradesmen in Damascus. This collaboration of two traditional centres of power in Damascus (middle-class

religious leaders and tradesmen) aroused particular concern among regime officials. Regime observers noted its widespread popularity amongst middle-class Damascenes and. Its leaders won the board election of the Union of Charitable Organisations in Damascus. The regime sought to co-opt the movement through a variety of means. Initially, they adopted a 'soft' approach when the President visited the movement's leaders. When this approach failed, more coercive means were adopted, which included dismissing religious leaders from charity's boards and directors and impeding the activities through which they sought to mobilise support. However, these measures did not weaken the movement or affect its popularity.

Closer assessment reveals that the regime's targeted empowerment of civil society was ultimately unsuccessful, and, in some cases, it even backfired. The Zayd Movement case (Pierret and Selvik, 2009) suggest that the regime did indeed empower the Movement, although not in the way that it had intended – the fact that the President had to approach the Movement clearly attests to this. In the absence of this reform, it is unlikely that faith-based organisations or religious groups would have been as prominent, or that such a substantial Islamic civil society would have emerged (Khatib, 2013).

Unintended consequences were also evidenced in relation to the secular development NGOs that were created and supported by the regime – over time, their work facilitated the emergence of nation-wide activism (Kawakibi, 2013). While these organisations are frequently perceived negatively by virtue of their association with the state and prominent figures within the regime, their work initiated semi-autonomous dynamics that resulted in the mobilisation of educated youth (Kawakibi, 2013; Zintl, 2012). From personal observations from the field, people who worked with NGOs during this period believed that they were resisting the power exerted by the state especially the power represented by the state old-fashioned organisations such as the Baath Party and the quasi-governmental

organisations. NGOs staff and even government officials repeatedly referred to the latter as “dinosaurs”. In direct opposition to the regime’s vision, they viewed these NGOs as a means through social change could be put into effect and citizens could be empowered and enabled to participate in the development process.

## **State and Society during the Initial Stages of the Syrian Uprising: 2011-2014**

When the Uprising started in March 2011, the reform process ended with the regime brutally oppressing demonstrations that were inspired by Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt and triggered by the incident when children were arrested and tortured in Daraa City after scrawling anti-regime graffiti at a school (Leenders, 2012:420; Gelvin, 2013:103). For two weeks, the families of the children and community leaders in Daraa sought to resolve the issue peacefully. When these efforts failed, protests broke out in Daraa and across the country (Gelvin, 2013: 103). The situation was further inflamed when the regime mishandled a similar situation in Duma (in rural Damascus). (Ismail, 2011:539). The demonstrations were initially focused upon popular discontent with the reform process; calls were made for the release of the children, dealing with corruption, ending of the emergency law<sup>7</sup> and the initiation of an official enquiry into the Daraa incident and the subsequent killing of protesters (Tripp, 2013:3; Ismail, 2011:539).

However, the brutal response of the regime quickly shifted the terms of these demands and protestors expressed themselves in increasingly confrontational terms demanding the overthrow of the regime. Gelvin (2013:105-106) describes

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<sup>7</sup> Syria has been subject to a State of Emergency Law since 1963. This Law limits civil liberties and provides ultimate power to “state security courts” which lack clear jurisdiction, and which operate in the absence of effective oversight. (Gelvin, 2012:6)

one of the regime's 'security operations' in Daraa during the early stages of the Uprising. He states:

“[The regime] surrounded the rebellious city with tanks, cut off water and electricity, and prevented anyone from entering or leaving. Security personnel and the army deployed snipers, shelled parts of the city with artillery and tanks, used live fire against unarmed protesters, and engaged in mass arrests. Throughout Syria, the government refused to hand over the bodies of those killed during protests or forced families to bury their dead in private to prevent protesters from gathering at funeral processions”.

The regime inflicted acts of terror against the population, including infants and children. (Galvin, 2013:106) From the initial stages of the Uprising, the regime went to great efforts to portray the protestors as extremist Salafis who had been armed by foreign countries (Tripp, 2013:55; Galvin, 2013:105). The military was given orders to shoot to kill, and *al-Shabiha* (regime thugs) shot soldiers who refused to shoot protestors (Tripp, 2013:55; Abbas, 2011:5). Defectors who refused to follow the regime's orders established the basis of the Syrian Free Army (Nepstad, 2011:487). In the face of extensive violence, many felt the need to resort to armed resistance to protect themselves against the forces of the regime (Abbas, 2011:2). The resistance was broad-based and extended from well-organised militias led by defected military officers to ad-hoc local groups that were formed as a reaction to protect their neighbourhoods. As a result of continuous brutality, the level of violence increased and spread across most of the country.

As the violence escalated, activists and opponents of the regime continued to engage in peaceful acts of civil resistance. From the outset, their opposition to

foreign intervention, sectarianism and violence were clearly established and articulated (Abbas, 2011:10)<sup>8</sup>. *Tansiqiyyāt* (Local Coordination Committees) emerged and began to organise civic actions and protests. These activities were more of a concern to the regime than formal structures such as the National Council (Tripp, 2013:56). They advanced demands that focused on ending the imprisonment and torture of demonstrators and which called for the revision of the constitution (Galvin, 2013:113). In addition, they also worked to document atrocities and mobilise protests.

In 2014, Amnesty International (2014) observed that the conflict has killed around 190,000 victims and left hundreds of thousands injured or unaccounted for (missing or detained). It has caused four million refugees to flee to neighbouring countries and internally displaced around seven million; around half of the population (11 million) are also dependent humanitarian assistance. The conflict has also profoundly impacted relations within society, with groups (some of whom have co-existed for centuries) dividing along the Regime/Opposition Faultline. Civil society has been forced to adapt to this new working context.

Existing organisations have had to change their approach and activities in order to tackle new priorities, both at the humanitarian and political/conflict levels. Civil Society became involved in the governance process as a result of the State's failure in many instances (Khalaf, 2015). A number of established organisations became redundant, in particular those which focused on socio-economic development and failed to adapt to the new situation. By virtue of the nature of their activities and their relationship with government officials, development NGOs were most affected by the situation. As the humanitarian situation deteriorated, development projects became redundant. The response of these NGOs was both

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<sup>8</sup> This stance was later superseded by the force of events, as the conflict became increasingly internationalised, sectarian and violent.



slow and inconsistent – some ceased to operate, others switched to humanitarian support and others continued to implement their ongoing activities if possible. In each instance, the response varied in accordance with activities, affiliation and available resources.

Traditional charities adapted to the rapidly changing situation with the greatest degree of success. The networks and systems they have in place enabled them to provide assistance to thousands of displaced families while responding to dramatic increases in the demand for basic support. While charitable organisations have sought to provide the support that is needed, they are increasingly confronted by the challenge of resource mobilisation. However, it is worthwhile to note that the reaction of these organisations varies in accordance with many factors, which include the affiliations of board members, the field of work and the geographical coverage of the organisation. Some organisations continued to provide support to existing beneficiaries and did not solicit new ones. For example, a charitable organisation, that sponsors orphans, has continued to provide support to the beneficiaries it has already been sponsoring and did not extend the support to new children. This was often attributable either to a lack of resources or to a fear of directly confronting the regime. A number of organisations, many of which were based in areas most impacted by the conflict, began to shift their priorities to respond to the humanitarian crisis since the regime denied services to victims in areas that are taking part in the Uprising as part of a policy of collective punishment.

Elsewhere, new initiatives (*mubādarāt*), small organisations and structures have emerged in response to the humanitarian situation – their work extends across conflict resolution, human rights advocacy, lobbying, regime change and even the coordination of the Uprising (Khalaf, 2015; Khalaf et al., 2014). In addition, there are also the armed initiatives that emerged to fight against the regime and protect civilians in the affected areas. These armed groups are often involved in social work

and provide humanitarian support in their areas, both through direct implementation and coordination with local initiatives. Regime supporters have also undertaken similar initiatives, although in these instances the emphasis is either upon lobbying or advocating for the regime. In addition, some grassroots initiatives try to maintain neutral or ambiguous positions in the expectation that this will ensure the sustainability of their activities while upholding access to both sides.

Advocacy and lobbying organisations (whose activities encompass human rights advocacy, peaceful demonstrations and political reform) expanded rapidly after 2011. As a result of the Uprising, both established and newly formed organisations began to operate openly, even when there was a clear risk of arrest and/or prosecution. This applied in the case of the coordination bodies (*tansīqiyyāt*) that were directly involved in organising demonstrations and coordinating the revolutionary activities. However, it is important to note that not all of the organisations and initiatives are part of the Uprising against the regime. Here it should be noted that a new generation of lobbying initiatives have emerged to advocate for the regime in a relatively peaceful manner. They are also not formally registered, and they seek to attain the support of local communities. These supporting initiatives are not only tolerated but are actively encouraged by the regime (in comparison, other initiatives have been forced to develop their own tools and techniques).

Civil society has also increasingly replaced the state in areas where it has failed to deliver. Alternative structures, which include local councils, have emerged in opposition-held areas which include Al-Raqqa, Idleb, Rural Aleppo and Rural Damascus. These local councils were initiated by young activists and leaders and consciously sought to build on the legacy of the local coordination committees (*tansīqiyyāt*). These Local Councils have substituted for the state in the areas they operate in. Their provision of local services (Khalaf, 2015:46; al-Om, 2016), in

addition to the fact they were formed by local residents, has proved them with a substantial amount of substantive legitimacy; procedural legitimacy was later established when they put in place a proper election process to appoint the members (e.g. in Rural Idleb) (Bareesh, 2017).

The focus on the period 2011-2014 stems from the fact that starting from 2014 ISIS became more powerful and dominant. In addition, the international and national intervention of Iran, Russia and Hezbollah escalated. These new actors might have affected the situation in the ground. From the follow-up data collection in 2016, it is observed that nonviolent grassroots resistance was more or less the same. Activists and ordinary people often used the same tools and techniques to resist the power of ISIS. However, because there was no sufficient data to back this observation, the research limits its findings to the period 2011-2014. When the data allow, comparisons are drawn in the empirical chapters.

## **Conclusion**

The literature on Syria's civil society frequently makes the important point that social actors were infiltrated and controlled by the authoritarian regimes that have ruled the country. Subsequent to the short-lived enabling environment that followed independence, civil society was subject to various degrees of control and oppression by the authoritarian regime. NGOs were only allowed to operate insofar as they functioned in accordance with the state agenda – this mainly took the form of interventions that sought to fill the welfare gap. These restrictions upon civil society were an essential part of the Baath regime's ongoing attempt to neutralise potential opposition. When the reform was initially implemented, the regime sought to co-opt civil society into its project to upgrade its authoritarian rule. While it

ostensibly appeared to be successful in this respect, social actors succeeded in finding various points of resistance and subversion. This is shown by the fact that the regime's interpretation of 'empowerment' was transformed and aligned with social goals and priorities. The changes that occurred in the social sphere after the Uprising and the growing role of civil society further reiterate the regime was not entirely successful in achieving its initial objectives.

# Chapter 3 – Methodology, Data Collection and Fieldwork

## Introduction

This thesis assesses nonviolence resistance through the perception of those who are involved in the act of resistance. It attempts to answer why ordinary people and activists risk their lives by resisting non-violently in very violent situations. It specifically seeks to understand how these motives translate into actions and seeks to identify how actions are deployed to resist the dominant power. The key argument is that the transition from hidden to public actions resistance is not linear, especially in contexts of violence. Instead, the relationship between each of these points is considerably more complex, where subalterns and activists mix both and often the same action would involve hidden and public components.

This point is clearly reiterated by the fact that, even in the most violent contexts, ordinary people and activists choose to resist the power of the oppressor through nonviolent means. In order to gain a fuller grasp of this complexity, this chapter proposes to engage through the perception and self-understanding of the people themselves. This is reflected in the fact that the research methodology draws both upon data collected directly (through interviews with selected participants) or indirectly (through the researcher's observation of participants observation during the research project).

The nature of the conflict and the situation has significantly limited access to the field. It has also given rise to a number of ethical challenges, which arose during interactions with the participants. However, this was mitigated by applying different strategies to data collection and working with different sources. Interviews were

conducted with activists both inside and outside Syria, and direct observations were made while working with various organisations in the field. In addition, certain measures were applied to address ethical issues and ensure the safety of the participants both during the data collection process and subsequent to the publication of the thesis.

The data collection process was lengthy, and it was conducted in three rounds, which were accompanied by continuous interaction with the participants. 78 interviews were conducted during the three rounds. I also volunteered with an organisation in Lebanon which granted me access to refugees in Beirut and Tripoli and with an organisation in Southern Turkey, which provided me with the opportunity to work alongside activists from Northern Syria. In addition, I also provided virtual training and mentoring to activists on issues relating to fundraising and project management – this experience was valuable because it provided a wealth of information that relates to my research question.

My status as a Syrian national was simultaneously an advantage and disadvantage. Local researchers benefit from a number of advantages that are denied to their international counterparts. However, it also makes some areas inaccessible due to the risk that is posed by the fact that I am a Syrian Citizen. This chapter will further explore and develop this theme of 'positionality', thus bringing its different attributes and dimensions out in fuller perspective.

The chapter begins by explaining the data interpretation and methodology process. It then provides a detailed account of the data collection process which touches upon the interviews and virtual ethnography carried out during the fieldwork phase of this research. Difficulties which affected at the level of data collection and at a personal level are then explored in more detail. The advantages and disadvantages of positionality are then set out before the discussion turns to the

data analysis process and its associated ethical implications. In concluding, the chapter sets out the most influential participants in this research and their stories – this then establishes the basis for the empirical chapters that follow.

## **Methodology and Data Interpretation**

By virtue of the fact that the study attempts to analyse nonviolence and power relations by engaging through the self-understanding of people actively involved in grassroots work, the interpretive research design presents itself as the best basis upon which the research questions can be engaged. Interpretive research focuses on human beings not as subjects but rather as agents and – its search for meanings is grounded within a prior recognition that they are context-specific and cannot be abstracted from their particular context (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012:22-53). The participants in the research project are not merely a source of information but are instead an indispensable element in the interpretation of this information – the focus is not only on what they know or say but rather on how they perceive the information they are sharing from within their contextual situation. In addition, interpretive research design acknowledges the fact that the relation between research design and fieldwork is circular – the two elements continue to affect each other during the research project's life cycle (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012:22-53).

The research was initially designed with reference to personal knowledge of the field that derived from previous experience; however, after the first round of data collection, the research question evolved and led to a more focused study. The second data collection round contributed to the development of the more focused questions that were later formulated. This circular relationship provided the flexibility that was required to understand the situation in the field and to address

the research question. It also enabled interpretations of observations from the field to be engaged within their context rather than as isolated phenomena.

The research seeks to assess self-understanding and the individual perception of nonviolence resistance. Its focus is therefore upon individuals rather than institutions. Interviewees are selected from various backgrounds:

- Individuals who were active before the Uprising and those who mobilised at a later stage
- Individuals who support the Uprising, support the regime or maintain an ambiguous position.
- Individuals who mobilised independently, are part of grassroots initiatives or organised through a former institution/organisation.
- Individuals from different geographic areas (Aleppo, Damascus, Deir Ezzor, Homes, Idleb and Rural Damascus).
- Individuals who are internally displaced, refugees or still resident in their cities.

This study focuses on peaceful activists and ordinary people and does not refer to the armed initiatives and groups, irrespective of which side they are fighting for – this was one of the conditions of the University’s ethical approval. This is a reflection of the nature of these groups, the nature of their activities and the fact that areas under their control are not accessible to outsiders. Any Syrian national who comes into contact with these groups is also at risk of being arrested and even persecuted by the regime, which would have imposed serious risks for the participants and myself.

Data were collected from semi-structured open-ended interviews and participant observation that was conducted in the field. Data collection was conducted over three rounds of interviews, one field visit and virtual work with



participants. The following sections will examine ethnography, interviews and virtual ethnography in more depth and detail.

## **Interviews**

Qualitative data was collected directly via interviews, which sought to examine how people understand their role, along with the question of how this understanding changed after the revolution. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Devine, 2002). Open-ended questions enabled me to gather different narratives, which adjusted in accordance with the interviewees' background, organisational background and role in society. These in-depth interviews, which were based upon informal questioning based on a pre-prepared interview plan and checklist, stimulated discussion and enabled the interviewees to narrate their own stories and experiences in a familiar language (Devine, 2002:198-199). These narratives enabled a more sustained engagement with the research questions and were consistent with an approach that sought to engage with people's perspectives and self-understanding, as opposed to an organisation's official rhetoric perspective.

The interview plan was first subject to a 'test run' with selected interviewees before it was then revised. In order to enable the conversation to flow naturally, there was no question and answer format. The conversation was guided towards key themes and interviewees were encouraged to elaborate whenever this was required. The research question and the outcomes of the preliminary fieldwork suggested the following themes as productive points of engagement.

- The Individual Level: Personal reflections and their reflections on their own role. Why did they join their organisations/groups/initiatives? Has

their reasoning changed after the Revolution? How do they see their role evolving? What are the challenges they face? Moreover, how can these challenges be overcome?)

- The level of the organisation (if applicable): the initiative/organisation they work with (e.g. activities, challenges, establishment, funding, operations)
- Interaction with the rebels, interaction with the regime, interactions with the State. How were associated challenges overcome?
- The relationship with space: perception of the space and accessing the intellectual, physical and virtual space.

Interviews were informal because formal interviews would have been unlikely to give rise to the insider understandings that are the focus of the project – furthermore, it is also likely that this format would dissuade interviewees from cooperating with the study. This feature can be traced back to two key issues: (a) *social norms*. Participants feel more comfortable in informal settings and trust the researcher when the relationship is friendly and relaxed – this would not be the case if the interaction was formalised; (b) *safety and security factors*. The situation in the country would most likely make participants wary of being involved in formal data collection activities. The regime remains suspicious of any research project that is conducted in the country, and both the participant and the researcher could potentially be at risk if the process was formalised. Relationships built before the study and during the fieldwork helped to build trust, and in turn, facilitated the second round of collecting more in-depth information.

The focus was on how people express and perceive the information that they provide. It is important to focus on how both elements emerge in language and action. Discourse Analysis is being used to interpret the data collected by studying the language of the participants. Discourse analysis goes beyond the semiotics of

the analysed language and links it to its context, the social system, knowledge and power relations within the society (see Foucault, 1981; Derek, 2001; Rogers, 2004; Weiss and Wodak, 2003). It also enables the analysis of both what is said and what could have been said had exclusionary and restrictive mechanisms not imposed themselves upon the range of discursive possibilities. Discourse Analysis, therefore, reproduces the central underpinning conviction of this study – namely that the analysis of meaning cannot be separated from the wider societal context.

## **Ethnography and Virtual Ethnography**

In the initial stages of my research, I planned to conduct a comprehensive ethnographic study of power relations after the Syrian Uprising. Interpretive research presumes active participation in the field as a precondition for building up an enhanced contextual understanding of the studied issue. However, this has proven to be impossible by virtue of the in-country situation, University regulations and other safety and security limitations. The study, therefore, evolved to become a mixture of interviews and ethnographic components. This provided a diverse range of information which should hopefully help to overcome some of the shortcomings related to access to the field and various sources.

Ethnography, by definition, entails that the researcher should be involved in the studied phenomenon by living and working closely with the targeted community; he/she should attempt to obtain a clear sense of daily life and the impact of the studied phenomenon upon the day-to-day actions of the community (Emerson *et al.* 1995:2-5; Schatz, 2009: 5-6; Soss 2006; Wedeen, 2010).

Emerson *et al.* (1995:3) assert that the ethnographer cannot be totally neutral and detached from the field – this is because, in living the experience they

are trying to understand, they themselves become part of it. In this sense, my status as somebody who has previously been active in the field does not necessarily culminate in the conclusion that my research will be less objective than that conducted by external ethnographers – after all, the latter also try to become part of the society.

Although ethnography cannot be completely objective, it provides a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon which extends beyond the spoken language. To this extent, it helps to explain what language truly means within certain community (Schatz, 2009:5-6). It has already been noted that the researcher's status as a member of the same society might impede him/her from realising some of the dynamics within the society, by virtue of the fact that relevant phenomena may be taken-for-granted. However, the fact that I have not been deeply involved in the field for the last six years should enable me to obtain a more objective stance. In addition, I also possess extensive experience and knowledge of the field, having lived and worked there for several years.

It was not possible to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Damascus, a regime-held area, because of the regime's hostility to any data collection and the absence of University ethical approval (in large part, the latter can be traced back to the former). At the current point in time, political tensions are so severe that the regime even regards non-sensitive subjects as potential instances of subversion. This factor should also be taken into account in relation to Lebanon, which has been deeply infiltrated by the regime and its various security forces. For this reason, interviews (which are easier to conduct without raising suspicion) were the only form of data collection that was conducted in Damascus and Lebanon, with the exception of minor involvement (3 weeks) with an NGO in Lebanon which provided access to refugees in Tripoli and Beirut. However, this remained limited due to the risks mentioned above. My visits to both countries (which took place in summer

2012 and summer 2016 respectively) also provided extensive interactions and field notes which fed into the current thesis.

The major ethnographic fieldwork took place in Southern Turkey in winter 2012 and winter 2013. I worked with an organisation that provides technical support and training to activists and grassroots initiatives in Northern Syria. The work was conducted in Southern Turkey because it was the only place that could be accessed by Syrians from the opposition-held areas in the north of the country. They would travel to Turkey and, over several days or weeks, apply for funding, attend workshops and receive training. In addition, some organisations in northern Syria are managed by offices in Gaziantep, which is in the south of Turkey. This facilitates their interactions with international donors and partners. My role was to train and mentor activists and to facilitate workshops, an opportunity which enabled me to engage with a wide range of participants from opposition-held areas.

In addition to working with activists in the south of Turkey, I continued to work with the activists online. This work took the form of mentoring and training that was provided to NGO employees and those who were engaged in grassroots initiatives. The mentoring and training engaged with issues pertaining to fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, project management and project proposal writing. This support was provided during the period September 2012 - December 2014. Participants were mostly based in Northern Syria, in the opposition-held areas. This was an opportunity to gain access to areas and participants that safety and security issues would otherwise render inaccessible. If I had entered northern Syria, I would no longer be able to travel to Damascus to visit my family – this was a risk that I could not afford under any circumstance. This use of Information Technology simultaneously overcame access issues and enriched the data set.

In this instance, virtual ethnography entails working with the participants online and engaging in virtual, as opposed to physical, communication. It does not entail the examination of online sources that are undertaken with a view to understanding a certain community and their online presence (Darwin, 2017). Dong (2017) observes that online spaces are increasingly becoming part of lived reality, and draws attention to the fact that ethnographers are increasingly using online spaces to enrich their understanding of offline contexts. Although virtual places are not “geographically bound”, they are still real (Crichton and Kinash, 2003:2).

While this thesis uses Facebook posts, YouTube videos and Tweets are used to support the findings from the collected data, they are not a main information source for the thesis and should not be mistaken for virtual ethnography. ‘Virtual’, in the context of this thesis, is understood to denote the use of online platforms to overcome limits upon physical access. Virtual ethnography is therefore understood to refer to “a method in which one actively engages with people in online spaces in order to write the story of their situated context, informed by social interaction” (Crichton and Kinash, 2003:2).

## **Fieldwork**

My return to Damascus was a very challenging experience. I had left Syria to begin my PhD studies a few months before the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia. It was late July 2011, and it coincided with the first stirrings of armed insurgency were beginning to emerge, following on from six months of peaceful demonstrations that had been met with characteristic heavy-handedness by the Assad regime. The few months that I had been away felt like decades: I felt disconnected from the new reality, and I had to learn how to find my way in this fundamentally altered social context.

My initial plan was to interview 48 civil society and grassroots activists. Participants had been selected upon the basis of my previous experience in the field, and I approached my initial engagements with a considerable degree of confidence. However, this soon evaporated, as I realised that my initial plan might no longer be workable. During my first data collection round in summer 2012, I began to contact individuals from the list (a number of whom were former acquaintances). Initial responses varied between overenthusiasm to an outright rejection of any form of engagement with an 'international institution'. People whom I had known and worked with for years now refused even to share a coffee: their concerns ranged from a concern not to elicit the suspicions of the security services to a principled rejection of 'international influence' and all its associated evils. In a short period of time, more than a third of my 'planned' participants had indicated their unwillingness to contribute to my research.

After revising my plan, I then proposed to engage with eight activists from various backgrounds. I anticipated that their referrals would then direct me to other interview subjects. Snowball interviewing is an approach well-suited to a situation in which building trust is challenging and gaining access is not straightforward (Romano, 2006:441). The limitation of this approach is that it would have led me in the direction of like-minded people. While this was to some extent the case (each activist referred me to people he/she knows and trusts), the negative impact was largely offset by ensuring that the eight activists were from different backgrounds and held different positions upon the regime/revolution. This approach resulted in a total of 39 interviews being conducted during the first round of data collection. The interviewees were from various geographical locations, different backgrounds, and they varied between those who were pro-regime, pro-revolution and neutral. However, interviewees were mainly activists who were still resident in Syria.

During the second round of interviews, I adopted a different strategy, and it resulted in a wider range of participants. This second round engaged with activists who were refugees in Lebanon and Turkey. Interviewee access arose from three sources: (a) personal connections and acquaintances who were either participants themselves or who referred other participants; (b) organisations that support activists and refugees; (c) direct contact with activists in the diaspora. The second round of data collection included interviews with 31 activists. Activists in Lebanon were refugees who had no access to Syrian territories. Some of the participants in Southern Turkey were refugees, and the others were residents in Northern Syria who were in Turkey for short visits (mainly workshops and training conducted by international organisations). A third round took place during summer 2016 when I interviewed 8 participants in Lebanon to follow up on findings from previous interviews.

Overall, I conducted a total of 78 semi-structured open-ended interviews over three rounds of data collection (39 interviews in summer 2012, 31 interviews November to December 2013 and 8 interviews in summer 2016). Of these interviewees, 24 were former acquaintances whom I had either worked with or who were friends. The remaining 54 interviews engaged with people I met during the course of my fieldwork. These 54 interviews with new acquaintances divide into the following sub-categories: 22 participants had either worked with me, been trained by me or mentored during the course of my ethnography study; 32 participants had no working relationship with me and were selected through referrals from other participants or organisations. The participants were both men and women (41 men and 37 women), and their ages ranged between 21-56.

Of the 78 interviews, 62 were conducted in person, and 16 interviews were conducted via phone or Skype. Six interviewees, who had been referred by two other participants, remained anonymous throughout the process. They preferred to



remain anonymous and to not disclose their true identity out of fear. They either provided me with a fake identity or preferred not to share any names. Two were interviewed in person in Lebanon, and four were interviewed via Skype. Their consent was obtained beforehand, and they clearly indicated their willingness to contribute to my research. Whether the participants shared their personal details or not, the recordings and the notes did not include the actual personal details to protect their identities and ensure their anonymity. In all interviews, personal details were not included, and coded names and number were given to each interviewee. All my notes were encrypted and included no personal data. In the aftermath of each interview, I had to immediately type my notes or scan my papers and upload them via Exeter VPN network to my storage on the university server before destroying any physical notes. There was a clear risk that I could be stopped at checkpoints and that the papers would incriminate either my participants and myself.

The length of the interviews varied between two and eight hours (one interview lasted 11 hours), and the majority took between 3 to 4 hours. The majority of participants were not comfortable with the interviews being recorded (only 19 were recorded). I, therefore, depended heavily upon note-taking and script-writing while talking. In general, the interviews took the format of the participants sharing their own experiences and stories and then expecting me to share mine in turn.

The involvement of human subjects in the research project raised clear ethical implications. While these implications may be unavoidable, they should be addressed, and their undesirable results should be mitigated. The study will follow the basic codes of ethics for qualitative research (Blaikie, 2000:20; Christians, 2005:144-145; Neuman, 2006:129-146). This includes accuracy, confidentiality, informed consent, no harm, privacy and voluntary participation.

Verbal informed consent was best-suited to the working context for two reasons. Firstly, the Uprising and the internal conflict in the country meant that participants would have been reluctant to put anything in writing. Verbal consent is more valued by the interviewee, and it also helps to build a better relationship with the interviewer. In Syria, verbal communication also tends to be more trusted than its written counterpart. From the point of view of both interviewees and the researcher, it is also best to avoid as much written documentation as possible. Written consent would have included all the information about the interviewees and the researcher, and it is difficult to ensure that documents are kept in a safe place which would prevent them from being seized by the Syrian authorities. Participants were thoroughly debriefed about the research purpose and methods and any expected implication of the study.

The ethnographic part of the study, which took place in Southern Turkey, was straightforward. During my assignment with the organisation, I met different people. I socialised with the beneficiaries of the organisations and with the large community of Syrians who are based in Gaziantep. Some of the interviewees were met during the fieldwork. In Southern Turkey, safety and security were not an issue. Indeed, at that time, Syrians were welcomed by the Turkish government who sought to facilitate their work.

In addition to the 78 interviews, my fieldnotes are a key source of data for this study. During my fieldwork, I kept a diary to record my daily observation and the stories of people who were not formally interviewed. The narrative of the interviewees and other participants was used, in addition to my notes, to answer the research questions. After concluding each round of data collection and beginning the analysis of the interviews scripts and fieldnotes, I went through periods of self-reflection where I revisited my research questions and revised my own understanding of the situation in the field. I, therefore, believe that the most

important aspect of my fieldwork was not the number of interviews or the size of notes taken but rather the cycle of data collection itself. Three rounds of data collection also enabled me to cultivate my research and answer my questions more thoroughly.

## **Sampling Limitations**

As mentioned earlier, the data collection took place in different stages. The limitations in the field and the difficulties accessing participants and build trust has undoubtedly affected the sampling process. It is important to clarify that this research does not claim that the selected sample is representative by any means. It was not randomised, and it does not cover all groups and backgrounds. This limitation should be considered when reading the document. Nonetheless, the large number of interviews and the variety of interviewees contribute to the validity of the findings.

It is worth mentioning that the sample is skewed as I had the chance to talk more to anti-regime activists who are involved in non-violent resistance than any other group. This can be attributed to a number of reasons. First, they were intentionally selected because they are highly relevant to the study. Second, they were the ones who are more willing to participate and share their experience. Third, they were the safer to reach, as talking to regime-supporters and disclosing the research subject would have put me as a researcher in great danger. Finally, it was not possible to reach out to those who are involved in violent resistance, since the ethical approval of the university did not allow for such interaction.

The fact that the sample is skewed towards anti-regime activists who are involved in non-violent resistance does not mean that they were the only

participants in this study. Out of the 78 interviews, 8 were conducted with regime supporters in Damascus and abroad. Those were mostly former acquaintances who were relatively trusted. In addition, 3 interviews were conducted with anti-regime activists who are involved in both violent and non-violent resistance (e.g. Zaher who is presented later in this chapter). These interviews helped broadening the findings and the understanding of certain aspects of the study.

It is worth mentioning that even the interviewed anti-regime activists who are involved in non-violent resistance were not all the same. The interviewees varied as they included individuals who were active before the Uprising and those who mobilised at a later stage, as well as individuals who were mobilised independently, or are part of grassroots initiatives. They also came from different geographic areas (Aleppo, Damascus, Deir Ezzor, Homes, Idleb and Rural Damascus). Finally, their status varied as some were internally displaced, refugees or still resident in their cities.

## **Data Analysis - From Cases to Practices**

By virtue of the fact that the research questions are answered through a case study, the analysis will apply the process (more specifically practice) tracing method. Bennett and Checkel (2015b:6) have previously defined process tracing. They state:

“[Process tracing is] “the examination of intermediate steps in a process to make inferences about hypotheses on how that process took place and whether and how it generated the outcome of interest.”.

The process tracing method is one of the methods that is most commonly deployed during case study analysis (Bennett and Checkel, 2015a, Collier, 2011; Vennesson, 2008). Vennesson (2008:226) defines 'case study' in the following terms. She states:

[A Case study is] “a research strategy based on the in-depth empirical investigation of one, or small number, of phenomena in order to explore the configuration of each case, and to elucidate features of a larger class of (similar) phenomena, by developing and evaluating theoretical explanation.”

Vennesson (2008:227-230) observes that the case study is closely interwoven with storytelling and, as such, is inherently descriptive. This is a reflection of the fact that it frequently explores subjects and phenomenon about which little (if anything) is known – it is this feature that reiterates and reasserts the narrative component invaluable. Process tracing increases the validity of inferences made in case studies and strengthens the interpretation (Schimmelfenning, 2015:102).

In the case study, the studied population is itself the working hypothesis that is revised over the course of the research (Ragin, 2000:43-55). The case study can be conceptualised as a working hypothesis that is being examined throughout the process. The initial selection is then followed by an attempt to understand, and this understanding is then subject to revision for the duration of the process. Each stage can be conceived as an active attempt to engage the case, which is undertaken with the intention of examining and understanding the hypothesis (Vennesson, 2008:230).

This active engagement, which occurs through the selection of the case study and its narrative aspect, calls for process tracing analysis. Process analysis includes a major narrative component where the process is described as part of the whole analysis. However, the process tracing helps the storytelling aspect in the case study by enabling it to focus upon the selection of the components relevant to the phenomena that are being studied. In addition, the goal is now to provide a narrative explanation of the processes and practices that lead to specific outcomes; this now overrides the proposition that all the details of the story should be told. (Vennesson, 2008:235)

With regard to case studies, process tracing is very relevant because, as Jervis (2006:641-663) argues, it can be used to examine the behaviours of subjects and the reasons they give for their actions. It helps to investigate their behaviours, beliefs and understanding of what they want and know (Simon, 1985:295). Vennesson (2008:233) states:

“[P]rocess tracing is a fundamental element of empirical case study research because it provides a way to learn and to evaluate empirically the preferences and perceptions of actors, their purpose, their goals, their values and their specification of the situations that face them”.

The process tracing method also alternates between deduction and induction. In instances where little is known about the cases or population, the process tracing begins with the hypothesis, and then the information from the case study informs the hypothesis building and so on (Bennett and Checkel, 2015b: 17-18). This was undoubtedly the case in my research - the first round of data collection significantly influenced the structuring of my research questions and argument.

The data analysis and interpretation apply practice tracing (Pouliot, 2015). The practice tracing goes a step further than process analysis because, in engaging with practice, it moves beyond static structures. Pouliot (2015:241) has previously suggested that “anything that people do in a contextually typical and minimally recognisable way counts as practice”. Practices in this understanding are habitual and performative. Practice tracing methods will help to make sense of the actions of those who deploy nonviolent resistance in a violent context; furthermore, it will also provide insight into how their practices changed over the course of the Uprising. The practice tracing should increase the level of validity of the analysis – this will, in turn, make it possible for the findings to be applied beyond the limited context of the case study.

## **Data Analysis - Practice Tracing and Content Analysis**

The discourse analysis in this research focused mostly on the content of the interviews. Therefore, it was mostly about the content analysis of the transcript of the interview. Content analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005:1278).

The process of content analysis can be simplified with the following steps. First, it starts with reading the whole set data to get a general sense of it. Second, while reading, concepts and thoughts start to emerge, and the researcher starts to make first impressions of patterns. As the process continues, patterns and themes start to become more identifiable. Consequently, the researcher starts developing labels and codes that are in-line with the identified patterns and theme. This facilitates the

process of understanding and identifying the key findings in the data. (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Morgan, 1993; and Patton, 2002)

Since the data collected throughout the fieldwork was massive. This was not possible without the use of technology. I used NVivo to facilitate the analysis. The process started with transcribing all the interviews on the same day they were conducted. The process was different for recorded interviews and those who were not recorded. For recorded interviews, I listened to the recording and transcribed the interview word by word to ensure that everything was reflected. For interviews that were not recorded, the notes taken through the interview were typed and cleaned. I have the gift of writing very fast in my native language. Therefore, I was able to capture almost every word said during the interviews even when they were not recorded.

Once all the interviews were available as text, they were imported to NVivo to start the analysis. At first, I had all the text in Arabic, as I did not want the translation to change the content. Unfortunately, that NVivo does not provide the best tool for analysis using a foreign script. Therefore, I had to transliterate all the interviews and write the Arabic text using the English alphabet. The process was lengthy and daunting, but it was worth it. Analysing the text in Arabic was very useful and informative. It maintained the original concepts and helped to identify patterns.

In NVivo, codes and nodes helped in identifying key patterns and pulling the key findings that are presented in this thesis. Once the findings become available, they were translated into English. The translation took into consideration not only the literal meaning of words but also the actual notion behind the words. This is reflected in the text when possible, with a note explaining the meaning behind the word if the English translation does not reflect that.



Although I had some pre-set issues that I wanted to examine in the data, I was fascinated by the richness of the information that drove the research to a new level. Most of the findings that are presented in the thesis emerged during the analysis and were not anticipated prior to starting the data analysis process. This has indeed led to revisiting the research questions, and it reshaped the whole study.

A legitimate question that comes to mind is if content analysis is the main data analysis methodology, then what does “practice tracing” bring to the research that content analysis could not do. As Pouliot (2015:241) suggested practice tracing looks beyond words, and it examines the ways things are being done. In that sense, although content analysis is the key tool that helped to analyse the data and to pull the findings, the practice tracing helped to make sense of the actions help to make sense of the actions of the participants not only their words. It is true that I mostly depend on the data from interviews, which limits the direct observations of actions. However, during my ethnographic and virtual ethnographic work, I was working closely with the participants, and I had the chance to observe their actions and behaviours. In addition, participants often described their actions in their interviews. This can also be partially examined by the practice tracing.

The practice tracing helped to complement the content analysis and provided additional checks and balances to the analysis. It helped me going beyond the spoken words to look into people actions and how practices have changed over the course of the Uprising. In practical terms, in addition to the conventional content analysis, looking into the data from the lens of practice tracing made it possible to see the patterns of actions and behaviours and how this varied or evolved over time. To describe the process in a simpler manner, practice tracing lens led to two additional levels of data collection and analysis. First, during fieldwork and interviews, additional notes were taken describing actions, scenes, behaviours etc. This can be demonstrated with the description of events that were observed at first

hands during the empirical chapters (e.g. table tennis ball events). Second, during the data analysis, the second round of interviews reading focused not on the words that people used or what they were saying but rather on their actions. The actions they were describing were the main focus. This provided a different vantage point that has enriched the analysis.

## **Challenges and Limitations**

Research in conflict areas inevitably gives rise to a series of challenges and shortcomings. The challenges that I faced included: building trust and establishing rapport; mental and emotional challenges, e.g. guilt; physical challenges (e.g. physical access and logistics); positionality and managing relations in the field; and safety and security challenges (e.g. risk of detention). These challenges have produced a range of positive (conscious effort to elicit the most out of the participants; ease of building trust in some cases) and negative (inability to distance myself from the subject, limited access in some cases...etc.) impacts.

The first challenge that I encountered, which I was not fully prepared for, was learning how to physically access various places in the country. Managing checkpoints and roadblock was something I had to learn quickly and on the spot during my visit to Damascus in 2010. Upon driving through a checkpoint, I would only be asked to show my national ID if the 'officers' at checkpoint perceived something significant in my appearance or manner. As has been noted in other parts of the world, background and ethnic identity can affect an individual's ability to negotiate their ways through roadblocks, and their background brings advantages and disadvantages depending on who is operating the roadblock (Pottier, 2006: 151). While the final decision is dependent upon the person

undertaking the check, there are a number of steps that the interviewee can take to enhance their chances.

In my case, I quickly learned how to emphasise my “assets” at the checkpoint. As a woman driving an SUV with a Damascus number-plate, I already had a number of clear advantages. My self-confidence and heavy Damascene accent (which I learned to emphasise at the checkpoints) also usually ensured that officers at the checkpoints become less hostile and I was not detained for too long at any of the checkpoints that I passed through. My accent was particularly important because it gave rise to the impression that I am a member of the Damascene middle class, a class which the regime has actively courted since the outbreak of the Uprising and which accounts for a considerable part of its contemporary support. I cultivated this appearance to the extent that the only individuals who usually asked me for my ID were novice officers who were then usually upbraided for their temerity by higher-ranking officers. This has undoubtedly facilitated my movement around and reduced the chances of being stopped and potentially arrested for the work I am doing. Even so, passing through the checkpoints was usually a nerve-wracking experience – I was fully aware of the stories of those who had been harassed or who had been detained because their names were on the wanted lists.

Although this preferential treatment in the field has indeed facilitated my access, it was not always a smooth process. On two occasions, my residence abroad gave rise to considerable suspicion. When I arrived at the airport, the immigration officer engaged me in extended conversation, during the course of which he sought to extract the names of ‘suspicious’ individuals whom I may have encountered during my time abroad. The second interrogation was more formal. It occurred when I was summoned to the office of the security forces while doing some paperwork in a government office. The security officer had called me after

checking my ID and discovering that I live abroad. My background saved me in this instance. The officer did not want to alarm or offend me. He was well aware of the fact that I might have connections and that any offence on my part could produce considerable consequences. However, this did not stop him from being intrusive in his questioning or from seeking out incriminating information relating to friends or acquaintances abroad. I was also asked to provide my Facebook username and password (like many Syrians, I had prepared for this occasion by preparing two Facebook accounts). Throughout the conversation, I was fully aware that the situation would have been very different if I were from Daraa or Homs. Had this been the case, the friendly conversation in an air-conditioned room with orange juice and cold water would have turned into actual detention and more aggressive interrogation.

The literature on ethnography in conflict areas frequently discusses issues pertaining to physical access. (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995); in comparison, the literature engages with mental and psychological issues to a much lesser extent. Avruch (2013) argues that even though there is no shortage of conflict around the world, the amount of ethnographic research that seeks to understand conflict or which is conducted in conflict zones remains relatively limited. While some contributions do address the difficulties of conducting fieldwork in conflict zone, they often focus upon external factors, such as health risk and violence and potential difficulties that ethnographer might face (see Howell, 1990; Lee, 1995; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995). In comparison, little, if anything, has been written about the personal aspect and the psychological impact of conducting ethnographic studies in conflict zone. This is an unfortunate oversight precisely because working with victims of torture and war ultimately takes its toll on the researcher (Fujii, 2010; Wood, 2006). The emotional challenges that result from hearing and observing

violence and human rights violation contribute to “secondary trauma” (Wood, 2006:384).

This trauma is exacerbated by the “guilt” that I experienced in the field. I experienced “guilt” at two levels. Firstly, as a Syrian living abroad and leading a relatively normal life, I suffered (and still do) from survivor guilt, something that has been further reinforced by watching and hearing what my fellow citizens have had to endure. Aside from the psychological issues that derive from working with victims, I had to address the guilt stemming from the fact that I was using their stories and life experiences for personal gain. It felt wrong to benefit from their pain to conduct my research, which I questioned how useful it was to start with. Rather than being engaged in essential humanitarian activities, I was instead often engaged in abstract debates whose relation to, and implication for, the conflict was often open to question.

During the data analysis and writing-up phases, I was also confronted by a number of obstacles which further exacerbated and complicated the guilt that I was already experiencing. Firstly, I found it difficult to clearly identify what to include in the thesis (and, by implication, what to omit). As Barton (2011) notes, this question is often accompanied by a sense that participants have been betrayed if their personal life stories and experiences are omitted. All of my interviewees have shared personal and often painful life experiences. It is not possible to include everything in the thesis. Deciding what is relevant and what is not seemed like betraying those who will not be mentioned. It is like their stories are less important.

In addition to the guilt and sense of betrayal, there is the problem that interview subjects have not been given an opportunity to reflect upon their portrayal or to comment on their stories. Rupp and Taylor (2011) shared their experience where they went back to the field and gave their informants the opportunity to

amend their stories. They noted that this had a significant impact on their research. In the context of PhD thesis, this would not be practical or possible. This would not be possible as a number of participants are not available any more, whether because of death, disappearance, migration or a lack of contact details. This lost opportunity further compounded my (already strong) sense of guilt.

In addition to my background, my gender also impacted the perception of the participants and my physical and social access. Gurney (1985:42-48) argues that gender does matter in the field and that females are often marginalised or not taken seriously. In my experience, the exact opposite was true – my status as a female researcher actually facilitated my access. I was perceived as less threatening, and interviewees were more willing to engage with me and share their experiences and perspectives. Activists whom I had never met before were, in contrast to a male counterpart, less reluctant to talk to me (this may have been because the possibility of me being a mole or presenting a risk was lower). In addition, my gender facilitated my physical movement and made it relatively safe for me to move around. Secret police and security forces are less likely to stop a woman than a man, especially if she is originally from Damascus. However, my status as a woman did have its downsides on a few occasions. During three of the interviews, participants decided to “spare me the gruesome details” when they were speaking about their detention and justified their omission upon the grounds that they were not suitable for a “fragile woman” to hear.

The inherent complexity of fieldwork is further exacerbated by the researcher’s positionality and the fact that s/he is simultaneously an insider and outsider, a theme that has been extensively discussed by a variety of scholars (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Luff, 1999; Puwar, 1997; Ryan et al., 2011). There is no simple answer to the question of which position provides more rigorous data, mainly

because each one has its own particular advantages and disadvantages (Ryan & Golden, 2006; Brownlie, 2009; Ryan et al., 2011).

My positionality was, however, one of the issues that undoubtedly influenced the collection of the data. While my status as an “insider” may have helped to build a rapport with the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 80-87; Ryan et al., 2011:51), it also affected their responses to my questions and may even have resulted in a certain level of “self-censorship” (Lundy and McGoven; 2006:58). Being interviewed by someone from the same community may lead to concerns about potential impact on their image in the community, fear of being judged, and worries about issues of confidentiality and privacy, no matter how much the researcher tries to offer reassurance (Ryan et al., 2011:51). There was also the concern that I might project my own background onto their responses (Price and Hawkins, 2002: 1333). Karra and Phillips (2008) summarise the essential point when they observe that this situation presents both a number of clear advantages (including ease of access, establishing trust and building rapport and overcoming language barriers) and potential challenges (lack of critical distance and role conflict – insider/outsider dichotomy).

My status as an insider did not mean that the participants always perceived me in these terms – on many occasions, I was considered to be an outsider. My status as an outsider meant that I also sometimes felt like I was witnessing my own research from outside. In some respects, this was also positive as it enabled me to achieve critical distance (Wax, 1979; Lofland and Lofland, 1984). In some cases, it is also easier to speak to an ‘outsider’ – it is far from coincidental that researchers in some situations seek to emphasize their institutional affiliation. (Song and Parker, 1995). However, this is not always an option, as the researcher will be unable to anticipate in advance how s/he will be perceived by participants (Brownlie, 2009; Ryan et al. 2011). I found that this was the case – some potential participants

refused to take part in the research because I was considered to be – by virtue of my affiliation with an international institute – an outsider. The converse also applied – participants were unwilling to share information with an ‘insider’ who might potentially be an informant. Some participants considered me an outsider, and they assumed I was not familiar with the situation or the context in Syria before or after the Uprising. Others assumed that as an insider, I should know some issues and they often skipped parts when telling their stories, with the consequence that I had to seek further clarification.

The ambiguity of my positionality was not only an issue for the participants. I myself bounced between both positions as insider and outsider. I frequently had to stop and reflect upon the ambiguity of my positionality as an insider or outsider. In a similar manner to Ochieng (2010), who conducted research into black families, I found it difficult to maintain a clear identity in the field and to differentiate my personal life and professional role. This overlap significantly exacerbated the challenges that I confronted while conducting this research. It was not easy to distance myself, and I often struggled to maintain my objectivity when examining a topic that I was emotionally attached to. Moreover, interviews with acquaintances frequently became a two-way exchange instead of a simple data collection process; in the words of Garton and Copland (2013: 535) “reality is jointly constructed”, instead of being built on the input of the informant.

Upon recognising my background, participants in the study invariably progressed to make assumptions about my political stance. Interviewees frequently assumed that I shared their position. Those who were pro-regime assumed that my middle-class Damascene background must indicate that I was pro-regime. Alternatively, activists and refugees frequently assumed, upon the basis that I was interviewing them, that I was positively predisposed towards the Revolution. Former acquaintances also believed that our shared past experience would culminate in a



similar analysis of contemporary events. Irrespective of what the participants' interpretation of my position, they almost all wished to discuss my experience. This often made it difficult to focus upon the topic of the interview, and I often had to share personal information (which was entirely fair as I was asking the interviewees to do precisely the same) – however, this exacerbated the difficulties that I encountered in separating the personal and political.

The literature on qualitative research recognises how the personal experience and positionality of the researcher affect his/her ethnographic fieldwork and other qualitative research (Coffey, 1999; Phoenix 2001; Oriola and Haggerty 2006; Bhopal, 2009; Ryan et al., 2011; Court and Abbas, 2013). However, the question of how to address the complexity that is intrinsic to the relationship that conjoins the researcher and the examined subjects and participants. Abu-Lughod (1991) observes that insiders or 'halfies' are often accused of being biased and lacking in required objectivity. In clarifying this point, she notes that there is not actually an outside position - ethnographers are always, in one way or another, implicated in the community they are studying. While it is not possible to overcome all the shortcomings that derived from my positionality, I sought to mitigate their negative influence by acknowledging their potential impact while interpreting the data, interviewing participants or taking notes from the field.

Establishing relationships with the participants, whether they were past or new acquaintances, frequently complicated the research project. Participant experiences often included detention, displacement, exile, physical (and mental) injury, the loss of family members and innumerable other traumatic experiences. When faces became acquainted with these stories, their impact upon me was substantially exacerbated, and it became difficult to engage interviewees from within an objective frame of mind. The research exacted a strong personal and professional price. My knowledge that some of the interviewees had been detained,

disappeared or killed further increased my sense of responsibility to them and, in some cases, their memory. Partial mitigation was provided by positive news about participants who were granted asylum in Canada or Europe, or who were reunited with their families. However, the whole process was emotionally draining, and I undoubtedly changed as a consequence. This is consistent with Coffey's (1999:24) observation that ethnographic research "force[s] a re-conceptualisation of the self, which goes beyond the narrow confines of the fieldwork". Over the course of the thesis, I sought to maintain my objectivity as a researcher, as I felt I owed it to the participants to tell their stories without personal prejudice.

## **Ethical Challenges**

The involvement of human subjects in any research project raises a number of ethical implications. However, an additional layer of complexity is added when the research is conducted in conflict zones and participants could potentially be subject to physical harm. At every stage of the research (data collection, data analysis and the writing of the thesis), the safety of the participants was taken into account. This research is consistent with the basic codes of ethics for qualitative research (Blaikie, 2000:20; Christians, 2005:144-145; Neuman, 2006:129-146; Wood, 2006:373-386) which include anonymity, 'do no harm, informed consent and voluntary participation.

Informed consent was obtained prior to each formal interview. Participants were fully informed about the research purpose and methods, along with the expected implications of the study. Any questions were also fully answered. I opted against written consent for two reasons. Firstly, due to the security situation in the country, participants were reluctant to put anything into writing. Written consent would also have imposed an additional obligation on me. I would have been obliged

to keep any sensitive documents in a safe place in order to prevent them from being seized by the Syrian authorities. Secondly, verbal consent was more consistent with cultural norms in Syria, where verbal communication is more trusted than its written counterpart.

Interviewees participated in the study on a voluntary basis and were not pressured to speak on uncomfortable subjects. The place and timing of each interview were adjusted in accordance with individual preference. The identities of interviewees were kept anonymous in order to protect them from potential risks. Interviewees had the option to refuse to answer any question or even to terminate the interview at any point. Interviews conducted in Syria were not recorded, as considerable risks were associated with computers, mobiles and any recording devices that could be potentially be confiscated by the regime. Interviews outside Syria were sometimes recorded, but this was subject to the decision of the individual interviewee.

The “do no harm” principle was undoubtedly the most difficult ethical commitment to maintain. The safety of participants resident in regime-held areas was potentially threatened by even the briefest of associations with a researcher affiliated with an international institution. Participants were fully informed about the research, and they chose the meeting place, as they were best-placed to identify the safest location. Both the meeting place and time were always organised at the interviewees’ discretion. While this had the aforementioned benefits, it did potentially expose me to danger; here it should be stated that I did not always trust my interviewees. In organising the interviews, I was frequently careful to balance the risks, and I was careful to retain the ability to cancel the meetings when this was required. These considerations did not arise outside Syria. In all the interviews, participants were always informed that the information was saved anonymously and that they should not share information if it made them uncomfortable.

Anonymity was central to the 'no harm' and to ensure that the identities of the interviewees were protected at all times. Every participant was given a pseudonym, and pseudonyms/real name lists were kept encrypted in a separate location. No written document included information pertaining to the interviewees. Encrypted notes were taken during the interviews. On the same day, the notes were translated into a full transcript of the interview before they were then uploaded to the University hard-drive via the secured VPN (participant details were not included, and no hard copies were kept). No copies were kept on the laptop, in case it was confiscated at a checkpoint or the airport. These measures were mainly taken in regime-held areas; when I was outside Syria, the process was less stressful as I could take proper notes.

An additional ethical challenge also arose in relation to my field visits. The University had granted ethical approval for interviews and fieldwork in Lebanon and Turkey. However, no ethical approval was forthcoming for Syria, due to the situation on the ground and the associated level of risk. I initially planned to possibly conduct the interviews via Skype. However, when the Home Office rejected my visa extension application and insisted that I renew my visa from within Syria, I was forced to travel to my home country and spend a few months waiting while the British Embassy in Beirut processed my application.<sup>9</sup> While this was a source of considerable frustration, it nonetheless offered a research opportunity. The time that I spent in the field provided the opportunity to conduct some of the most valuable interviews which considerably helped to shape my research and enriched the collected data.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2012, British Embassy in Syria was closed and the special concession for Syrians was not in place yet. Therefore, I had to travel back home and apply for visa renewal from Beirut. While waiting for my visa, I had to stay in Damascus as I had no other place to go.

Overall, all the information obtained during the fieldwork and interviews was accurately recorded and reported. In addition, I also took care to ensure that the interpretation that I applied to the data did not misrepresent the participants' intended meaning. In those instances when participants are quoted, I took care to ensure that their quotes are accurately reported and are not truncated or removed from their original context. I conducted the interviews in Arabic, which is my native language. While this substantially mitigated the risk of misunderstanding, there was a clear danger that the meaning could be altered when the data was translated into English. I addressed this danger by ensuring that the original text was translated as accurately as possible. Furthermore, in those instances when it was required, I explained the meaning of the phrases (rather than leaving the translation to speak for itself).

## **Participants**

The participants in this study are those who were formally interviewed for the purpose of the research and those who were observed and interacted with rather than being formally interviewed. The two participants groups also overlap, as a number of those who I worked and interacted with during the ethnography part of the study were also interviewed extensively. Participants were broken down into the following three categories:

- Participants based in regime-held areas in Syria (activists who supported and opposed the regime).
- Participants based in opposition-held areas in Syria (activists who supported and opposed the regime).
- Participants who are refugees in Lebanon and Turkey.

This thesis is committed to telling the story of the 78 interviewed participants and tens of contributors whom I engaged during my fieldwork. However, it is not possible to convey each individual story. The empirical chapters explore their voices and provide background. I found it important to highlight the stories of a few key participants who had a particular influence upon the data collection and writing up of this thesis. This does not mean that the contribution of other participants is of less value. The following few paragraphs will outline the background and role of these participants, who have been given pseudonyms (certain details have also been withheld to ensure their anonymity and protection).

### ***Ahed***

I met Ahed in a refugee camp near Tripoli in Lebanon. Ahed is a 42-year-old widow from Homs who has three children. I was put in touch with Ahed through Reda, another refugee who I had previously met in Lebanon. Ahed welcomed me with a very warm smile and a hug in her one-room 'flat', which was originally a store in the shopping 'mall' (that was in the middle of nowhere and which was never used as a mall) that became a refugee camp. When Syrian refugees started to arrive to Lebanon, an organisation rented the place and turned it into a refugee camp – each store became a flat for a family and in some cases several families. Some of the 'flats' were equipped with a small bathroom and a make-shift kitchen, while others shared bathrooms in the hallway. Ahed was one of the very few educated residents in the camp (she had a high school certificate) – this is why she was recruited by the NGO to conduct work in the camp. In this role, she liaised with the NGO, raised awareness and provided support to the women in the camp. During my time with her, I formed the impression that Ahed was a very dedicated worker who was well-respected in the camp. Many camp residents came by during my visit to ask her questions, seek advice or report various issues.

Ahed was very happy and proud to share her experience. Her bubbly personality and positive attitude did not prepare me for what I was about to hear. Ahed was living with her children and parents in Homs, and she was working as a manager of one of the largest furniture stores in the city. She owned a flat in Damascus that she and her children had inherited from her late husband, and she rented it out. She lived comfortably with her good salary, and her children attended good schools in Homs. When the revolution started in Homs, she was among the first people who participated in the demonstrations. She took part in the infamous clock tower demonstration which eventually became the Clock tower Massacre. She lost a brother and two cousins that day. She was not intimidated and continued to demonstrate until she had to leave Homs when the situation became very dangerous there. Her mother, who had also fled Lebanon, used to provide food and shelter to the demonstrators.

She moved with her children to Damascus when the siege of Homs began and left her property and other valuables behind in Homs. She survived on her savings in Damascus until her youngest son was severely injured by a bomb attack (Barzeh bombing). At that stage, she decided to seek refuge in Lebanon. She tried to leave the country but was turned down at the border three times because her national ID shows that she is from Homs. Eventually, she had to pay a smuggler to get her and her children into Lebanon. She then moved from one camp to another before ultimately settling in her current location.

In total, she lost three siblings and most of her cousins and extended family. One of her brothers, who had diabetes and who required dialysis, had remained in Homs. He used to call her every few weeks whenever he managed to get access to phone or internet. When I spoke to her, she had not heard from him for almost two months, and she suspected that he was dead already. However, she did not want to tell her mother, who retained hope he was still alive.

Ahed provided me with various stories that related to events in Homs between 2011 and 2012 (which were crucial to the wider conflict), her participation in demonstrations, life under siege and her current existence in a refugee camp. In working through her organisation, she also helped me to access other refugee camps in Lebanon and other interviewees who contributed to the current research.

I last heard from Ahed in 2014. The camp she was in was about to close because funding had run out. After her older daughter was married and moved to Saudi Arabia with her husband, she was trying to find a new place for herself, her two children and her mother.

### ***Dr. Reda***

Dr. Reda is a 43-year-old dentist who was a refugee in Lebanon. While he was a refugee, he did not live in one of the country's camps. I originally met him at the offices of an international organisation that was based in Beirut. A friend of mine worked for the organisation, and she arranged the meeting with Dr. Reda, who had initially been reluctant to meet me. He eventually agreed to meet with me, upon the understanding that the meeting would be conducted at the organisation's office, that I would not learn his real name and that I would not use any electronic device to record the interview. After Reda met me in person, his trust seemed to grow. He then shared his personal information and told many stories that extended beyond the immediate research topic. The interview lasted for 7 hours, and it was followed by a second four-hour meeting and a field trip to a refugee camp the next week. He also referred me to three other participants, including Ahed.

Dr Reda was formerly a member of the Syrian Communist Party. He joined the party when he was young, and he swiftly progressed through its ranks. When he attained a higher level in the party, he became disillusioned and decided to quit.



However, he was still labelled as a communist and was therefore always subject to the close surveillance of the security forces (he is also originally from a Kurdish background, which provided additional grounds for the regime's suspicion).

Reda practised as a dentist in Damascus. When the revolution first began, he was very sceptical. As a disillusioned former communist, he did not expect much from revolutions. He also believed that this particular revolution lacked a clear ideology. He maintained that position until Assad gave his famous speech in January 2012 at Damascus University. The speech was widely considered to be a declaration of war against the people. When Reda heard the speech, he decided to become actively involved in the Revolution.

He closed his practice in Damascus and travelled to Zamalka in Rural Damascus. Zamalka was held by the Opposition and was subject to a partial siege<sup>10</sup>. Reda was aware that there was a shortage of medical practitioners in Zamalka, and he offered his services to the community leaders and the leaders of the Free Syrian Army brigade in Zamalka. In addition to working as a dentist, he also began to provide first aid and emergency medical help to civilians and fighters. He also used to smuggle medicines to Zamalka in his car.

He continued to work in Zamalka until the Nusra Front (an al-Qaeda Affiliate group) established a presence in Zamalka and issued threats against him. He was later attacked in his clinic after rumours about his sexuality were spread. He then fled to Lebanon, where he registered as a refugee with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). When I spoke to him, he was still awaiting the papers that would enable him to travel to Europe.

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<sup>10</sup> While Zamalka was officially besieged, it was possible to gain access by paying bribes.

Reda provided considerable insight into life in areas under siege (particularly his experience of negotiating access into and out of areas under siege) and into the relationship between civilians and armed groups. When I last heard from him, he was beginning a new life in Germany after his papers came through.

## ***Dania***

Dania is an old friend and work colleague, and I conducted my first interview with her in Damascus. Dania is a 31-year-old lawyer, who is originally from Lattakia but who now lives in Damascus. I first met Dania when she applied for a position in an NGO that I worked for. My first impression was of a shy, sweet young woman who was very qualified but who lacked confidence in her own abilities. After joining my team, she established herself as a highly capable individual who had the ability to get along with everyone she met.

I had not seen her for two years before the interview. When we met her, I could barely recognise the woman in front of me. Dania had transformed into a confident lady with a very strong personality. She had adopted a strong political position since the Revolution began. However, she showed a clear intelligence in positioning herself against the killing (she has mostly participated in the 'Stop the Killing' campaign, which has commanded considerable media attention and coverage). This position acted in her favour when she was arrested three times between 2011 and 2015.

Dania had an established history of challenging the system. When she was a student, she had attempted to launch a campaign which protested against corrupt lecturers who were known to sell exam questions. She worked with the Red Cross

and other NGOs, thus gaining considerable experience in community mobilisation and development projects

Before the Revolution, she attended community mobilisation training and later, through the *Nuwwāb Shabāb* project, became established as a trainer herself. *Nuwwāb Shabāb* (which translates as ‘Young MPs’) was a project that operated under the office of the First Lady that sought to engage young people, with a view to enabling their participation in political life, with the ultimate aspiration that they would become community leaders and MPs in the future. The project provided very advanced training in community mobilisation techniques, and many participants later became members of the local coordination committees (*Tansiqiyyāt*). *Tansiqiyyāt* were the clandestine networks that emerged during the first few months of the Revolution to organise demonstrations and peaceful initiatives whose activities only lost momentum when the regime cracked down and arrested key administrators and members.

Dania provided considerable assistance by sharing the experience of peaceful activists who managed to operate in regime-controlled areas. While she was arrested more than once, she showed great courage and initiative by continuing to survive in a very hostile environment. She was essentially unemployable, as no organisation was interested in recruiting a “troublemaker”. After 2015, it was almost impossible to escape the regime’s surveillance in Damascus. Dania is still trying to work at the grassroots level but with limited success. She later started a humane society that provides shelter to animals affected by the conflict. Whether she is still active in resisting the regime is not clear, as she is either became too careful and conducting her activities in a clandestine manner or she indeed ceased her activities in favour of safety and survival.

## **Ola**

I met Ola in Gaziantep in Turkey when I was doing my fieldwork. Ola is a 26-year-old woman from rural Idleb. She has a BA in English literature, and she was elected as a member of the local council in her village. She worked (mainly as a liaison officer and community mobiliser) with various international organisations who were implementing projects in rural Idleb, having been appointed by virtue of her connections with the community and her ability to speak English. I mentored Ola for a few months and helped her to write a couple of project proposals and seek out funding for different community projects.

Ola comes from a very conservative community, where women are often confined to the home or work on their family farms. She is a very strong and vocal woman whose work focuses upon sensitive issues such as reproductive health and sexual harassment. By virtue of the sensitivities of her work, Ola used to move between Idleb and Northern Syria.

Ola's experience was fascinating, and it made a considerable contribution to my thesis. Ola participated in the demonstrations against Assad's regime until Idleb was "liberated" by the opposition. She was very active in her community and established a number of community-based initiatives. She was elected onto the Local Council, a significant event in a community where the participation of young women rarely extends beyond the family sphere. When the Free Syrian Army was defeated by ISIS in Rural Idleb, she continued to work with refugee groups and to resist ISIS's control in Idleb. Her work continued until the Free Syrian Army helped to re-establish the control of the civil councils. When I last spoke to Ola, she was living in Denmark, having managed to escape there with her fiancée.

## ***Adham***

Adham was a 26-year-old accountant, originally from Daraa, who lived in Damascus and who volunteered with the Red Crescent and other local NGOs. I initially met Adham in summer 2012 after a friend referred me to him. He struck me as a very committed and dedicated young man who was always eager to help others. When the Revolution began, Adham was actively engaged with the Coordination Networks (*Tansiqiyyāt*) and also, at some point, received community mobilisation training from the *Nuwwāb Shabāb* project. He used the knowledge that he gained to advance the work of many coordination networks and he also trained other members.

In working in Damascus, he conducted his anti-regime activities in areas that remained under regime control. Adham provided important insights into the work of the *Tansiqiyyāt*, along with their strengths and limitations. Adham was keen to share his story and experience regardless of the risks, as this was an important extension of his work with the *Tansiqiyyāt*. The regime was fully aware of the threat of peaceful grassroots mobilisation, and he was arrested in early 2013. His parents and fiancée then received conflicting information on his location. In 2015, it was reported that he had been executed after being charged with treason.

## ***Adel***

Adel, a 47-year-old journalist, was a particularly insightful and instructive interviewee, who is renowned in Syria because of his website, which had previously shone a light onto corruption and nepotism in Syria. When he openly criticised Hafez Assad in the 1990s, he was sentenced to several years in Saidnaya prison (a notorious detention centre). Before the Uprising broke out, he also openly criticised Assad, the First Lady charities and the Government. He benefitted from

the limited freedoms that the regime granted to some journalists in an effort to improve its image.

I initially met Adel in 2009, when I was working with a local NGO in Syria. I decided to meet him because I thought it would be insightful to see how this long-standing opponent of the regime had aligned himself with the opposition. However, when I met with him in his Damascus office, I was shocked to discover that he had become a strong supporter of the regime. He openly voiced his strong opposition to the Revolution and reproduced the 'conspiracy theory' which holds that it had been engineered by the international community in response to the regime's unflinching hostility to Israel and its status as the only 'enlightened' regime in the region. I soon discovered why – Adel is a radical atheist. The fact the first demonstrations began after Friday prayers provided, for him, justifiable grounds for regarding the Revolution with suspicion.

He was willing to support the regime that had imprisoned him for years because the revolutionary alternative was 'tainted' by its association with religion. Even so, it was surprising to learn that he had actively supported the regime. Spending four hours with Adel provided interesting insights about regime supporters, especially that he became actively engaged in regime supporting initiatives. It was also a surprise to see this shift clearly reproduced on his website which no longer criticises the regime but instead focuses upon minor issues in small Government offices. He began contributing to newspapers that are sympathetic to the regime and also engaged in awareness-raising activities that sought to alert youths to the risks of the 'so-called' Revolution.

## **Zaher**

I met Zaher in a workshop I facilitated in Gaziantep in Southern Turkey. He is in his mid-thirties, and he travelled to Turkey from Idleb in Northern Syria. He was in the workshop representing a community-based organisation that is working on reporting and documentation of human rights abuses in the area.

Zaher does not have a formal education, but he was self-taught on issues related to human rights, and he was very well-spoken. Before the Uprising, he worked as a builder. He also considers himself a singer as he used to sing in parties and weddings. When the Uprising started, he was among the first who demonstrated in the street. His motive was that it is time to live in dignity. He also recorded revolutionary songs that he was so proud to share with the workshop participants via YouTube on his mobile.

The most interesting thing about Zaher is how he introduced himself: “Zaher, from Idleb, a singer, an activist and a fighter [ar. Muqatel]”, and that indeed summed up his role in the Uprising. He was an activist who was heavily involved in documenting human rights violations; he was a singer who records both love and revolutionary songs, and he was a fighter in the Syrian Free Army. He was involved in these three roles since 2011.

Zaher is not unique. It was fascinating to learn about the young men who were involved in both violent and nonviolent resistance. According to Zaher, many young men in Idleb are involved in both. His logic was that both are necessary to ensure the success of the Uprising. He was very proud that he fought against Assad’s forces and against ISIS. He spoke about the “two liberations”, when Idleb was liberated from Assad, and when it was liberated from ISIS.

When asked whether the line between violence and non-violence blurred because he was on both side of it, he was adamant that it did not. He believed that his involvement in documenting human rights violations made him a better fighter. It gave him the motive to fight to ensure that human rights are protected. He seemed moving very comfortably from one role to another. He would be involved in the fighting. Then the day after, he would be taking pictures, uploading movies to YouTube and publishing human rights violation, while writing the lyrics of his new song against Assad.

Unfortunately, Zaher had to leave Syria eventually, when Al-Nusra Front took over his village and the Free Syrian Army brigade there was dissolved. He left for Turkey, and I lost contact with him after that.

These participants are only a snapshot of the many interviewees who generously gave their time and shared their stories and life experiences. These stories were not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the different interviews but were instead engaged with a view to demonstrating the diversity of the different participants. The empirical chapters provide further clarification in this respect by referring to the background whenever a participant in mentioned.

While there is a clear variation in the participants that are engaged, they each made an equally important contribution by providing insight into the life circumstances and situations of those who are involved in nonviolent resistance. Having originated at different points, the life trajectories of these 78 individuals took then in very different directions, and this is reflected in their individual contribution to the research puzzle.



## Conclusion

Data collection for this thesis took a number of different forms: a mixture of ethnography, interviews and virtual ethnography were used to address and overcome data collection challenges that arise within the specific context of Syria. While the conflict has prevented a fully-fledged ethnographic study, this shortcoming has been addressed by the intertwining and deployment of these mixed methods.

As a researcher, I confronted a number of personal challenges during the fieldwork, of which my positionality in the field was the main one. My status as an insider had a number of advantages which including building trust, constructing rapport and enabling ease of access. However, it also imposed a number of difficulties, of which critical distance was foremost. I was an insider to the extent that I was familiar with the country's culture, history and politics; however, I was an outsider for the reason that I was absent from the country when the Revolution gathered momentum: as such, the foundation of shared experience was clearly absent. However, the fact that I was aware of these limitations substantially limited their impact upon my research and enabled me to make adjustments in response, thus substantially mitigating their impact and even leverage them to my advantage. Throughout the research, I found it necessary to take many breaks. This has helped me to deal with all the formerly discussed circumstances at the personal and professional level. Although this might have contributed to the "messiness" of the research, it has also ensured that I can maintain a certain distance from the subject and the participants.

# Chapter 4 - Grassroots Mobilisation and Civic Engagement: Motivation and Development

## Introduction

In taking the first step towards analysing the process of nonviolent resistance in a violent context, this first empirical chapter seeks to identify the factors that motivated ordinary people and activists, many of whom lacked previous involvement in civic engagement, to engage in non-violent protest in a context of extreme violence. It is essential to assess how they perceive their role along with why they chose to resist in the full expectation of a brutal response. This chapter aims to analyse motivation not to explain actions. The issue of “opportunity” and its impact on taking actions is not the point of interest in this chapter. It instead focuses on the self-understanding of the activists and how they perceive their own motivations instead of studying external opportunities and their impact on action/nonaction.

It has already been observed that civic engagement in Syria was very limited until 2011, the year when the Uprising started. While the early years of Bashar al-Assad’s rule had resulted in an increase in the number of NGOs, these organisations remained limited, both in terms of overall number and scope. NGOs were elitist, associated with prominent figures in society and mainly active in major cities. They lacked any power, and any inclination, to challenge the regime and they were often accordingly perceived as an extension of the state. Grassroots initiatives did not exist: even had they existed, they would have been prevented from formally registering and thus operating. However, after the Uprising broke out in 2011, a wave of contention and grassroots civic engagement emerged across the country.

During my first visit to Syria in May 2012, 14 months after the Uprising started, I could clearly sense that significant social changes had occurred during the 18 months that I had been away. This was true even of Damascus, which ostensibly remained under the control of the regime. In an environment of pervasive violence and economic hardship, people seemed more open and willing to discuss the events that had convulsed the country.

While Assad's regime of control and surveillance was stronger than before, and dissent was likely to arouse a brutal response, people seem to be more relaxed and less intimidated by the security forces. Those who had previously been reluctant to criticise the regime or the government were now willing to express themselves openly and engage in political debate. These changes in Damascus were reflected in changes within wider Syrian society.

It was challenging to find any activists to interview. The obvious point of engagement was people who had worked and volunteered with NGOs before the Uprising. However, the more interesting interviewees were those who had been politically apathetic and never been involved in any social work or civic actions and became engaged once the Uprising began. Ordinary people from outside the elite circles of Aleppo and Damascus provided an intriguing insight into the transformations that had taken place in Syrian society since March 2011. This chapter will attempt to answer this question of why ordinary people who have never been involved in civic engagement and who always seemed to be docile and acquiescent mobilised and engaged with the Uprising.

When I engaged with the interviewees, they were all keen to tell the story of how they had come to join the Uprising. They often did not need any encouragement to discuss their motivations. All the participants chose to engage with this part of their story, irrespective of their current form or level of political

engagement. Invariably they all discussed the start in a euphoric, reminiscing tone and felt drawn to compare it directly with their current situation.

While the motivation of the activists varied in accordance with their individual life history and interactions with the regime, it is nonetheless possible to identify a number of anticipating factors which preceded the emergence of a new generation of activists who are willing to directly challenge and confront Assad's regime, irrespective of the price that they have to pay. While the events of the Arab Spring and the outcomes in Tunisia and Egypt inspired young Syrians, it is clear that the events would not have taken the direction that they did if it had not been for the grievances accumulated over decades of authoritarian rule, when corruption, inequality and oppression negatively impacted large sections of the society. The relaxation of internal controls during the 1990s and 2000s and the changes in the society also enhanced the likelihood that young people would eventually push for freedom.

Although activists made several attempts to organise collective action against the regime in the initial months of 2011, large-scale mobilisation did not begin to be evidenced until after the Daraa incident, when children were arrested and tortured. This incident was cited by many ordinary people who chose to join the Uprising. The way the revolution unfolded and the brutal response of the regime was also cited as a factor which turned a number of interviewees into highly engaged activists. The transformation impact of the Uprising and its effect upon their own futures was also cited by a number of interviewees. To this extent, the self-understanding of the activists and the transformational effect of the Uprising on their own future have shaped their civic engagement. They have developed a personal stake in political and social change.

The motivations that encourage people to continue to support the regime were also touched upon during the course of my interviews. Motivations varied between ethnic, sectarianism, a fear of the future and a preference for maintaining the status quo (supporters of the Uprising who remained politically disengaged also cited uncertainty as a reason for their failure to make a fuller political investment),

## **Motivation and development**

### ***Oppression, Corruption and Inequality***

Syria has been a one-party state since 1963. The authoritarian rule of the Assad family and the Baath Party entrenched inequality in the society and oppressed the people (George, 2003; Heydemann, 1999). Corruption became a deeply-rooted feature of Syria's political culture, and the absence of equal opportunity became a pervasive complaint. The society operated within limited margins of freedom and the regime imposed heavy controls and surveillance upon it. Several activists identified this as the main reason for the Uprising – in the words of Adham, a 26-year-old accountant from Damascus, “people could not take it anymore, and it is time to change the situation” (Adham, a 26-year-old accountant from Damascus).

Ali, a 27-year-old from Hama, said: “Sooner or later the revolution would have started. People were fed up of the corruption and nepotism.” I met Ali in Damascus after being referred to him by a shared acquaintance. Ali was an employee in the Ministry of Education in Damascus until he was fired after participating in demonstrations. Ali had to pay a bribe to get his job in the government after waiting for four years and failing to pass any of the recruitment competitions that the State occasionally announced. He maintains that his lack of

connections was the main impediment that prevented him from progressing at an earlier stage. In paying a bribe, he got a job upon the basis of his high school qualification (although he holds a Masters' Degree in Education, it was cheaper to get a lower-level job). His initial aspiration was to progress later, but this hope was frustrated by personal differences with his supervisor. Ali states: "People do not care who the president is, they only care about their living conditions... People at first revolted against the corruption and the oppression not against Assad".

At the beginning of the Uprising, the demands centred upon "dignity", "freedom" and "reform". "Justice" was also demanded for the victims of the Daraa incidents. The initial demonstrations called for major reform and for political and social freedom. However, after the regime's brutal crackdown on protesters resulted in hundreds of victims and casualties in just a few weeks, the terms of these demands suddenly altered. Ali participated in the "yellow card demonstration" in his home location of Duma, in Rural Damascus, where he lived. This was an early peaceful demonstration in which protestors called for more substantive reform while holding up yellow cards, a symbolic act derived from football (NBC news reported on this in 2011). The demonstration provided a clear warning to Assad to not underestimate the people and their demands. In the words of Ali, people "went in the street holding yellow card to give Assad a warning that something needs to be done or the people will have to use the red card, and he should leave". Duma would later emerge as one of the centres of both armed and peaceful resistance.

Bana, a 25-year-old female from Rural Damascus who works as an assistant in a dental practice in Damascus, agreed that the people had been worn down by the discrimination and inequality. She states:

"No one can start a project without bribing or going through a coercive partnership with a powerful figure or security forces

officer. They swallowed the country. Rami [Assad's cousin] was not the only one; there were many Ramis<sup>11</sup>. No one can start a project without them. When the Arab Spring started, the ground was ready for it. [People were] sick of how they have been treated. They are not a second-class citizen. It is their country, and they have the right for equal opportunity.”

Akram, an unemployed 32-year-old from Aleppo who holds a degree in business and economics from Aleppo University, observes that “corruption is the mother of all evil”. Akram was the highest ranked student on his course when he graduated, but this was not sufficient to earn him a scholarship to study abroad. The scholarship instead went to another student who eventually obtained a master's degree and a PhD from a British university. Akram attributes this to favouritism and notes that the student who received the scholarship was an Alawi who graduated with average grades. Akram suggests that this is not an exception and maintains that students who receive scholarships to study abroad are either Alawi or close to the regime and scholarships are not awarded based on merit. Alawi students get scholarships to study in Britain, France and Germany while non-Alawi students, if they get any chance, receive scholarships to study in Egypt, India or Russia. The same applies to jobs. He observes: “Government jobs are a dream to the fresh graduate, you can only get one if you are Alawi or close to the regime. Ordinary people do not stand a chance in the society”.

Frustration from favouritism and corruption, therefore, fuelled the anger which ultimately boiled over into Uprising. Akram observes:

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<sup>11</sup> Here Bana is referring to Rami Makhluf, Assad's cousin, who is the most prominent businessman in Syria. His various business interests include construction companies, hotels and mobile phone companies.

“When the pain gets worse people will scream, this has nothing to do with Daraa children. If you remember the first demonstration was in al-Hariqa<sup>12</sup> [in Damascus]. People could not take the humiliation anymore. It was a major incident. To see the businessmen in al-Hariqa closing their shops and demonstrate because a police officer humiliated a young man was great. This was before Daraa”.

Akram refers to an incident in which a traffic police officer insulted a young man in Hariqa Damascus. Traffic policemen are well-known for being corrupt and are a frequent source of grievance for Syrians.

While activists in Aleppo and Damascus focused upon corruption and oppression, the situation in Homs was more intense, in large part because, with regard to ethnic, social and sectarian composition, Homs is the governorate where the tension between Alawi and Sunnis is at its highest (this is partially a reflection of the high concentration of Alawis in rural Homs). Interviewees from Homs frequently drew attention to historical tensions, which they contended arose from Alawi monopolisation of businesses, jobs and services. Discrimination was a general theme that was apparent in the interviews. Ahed is a 42-year-old woman from Homs who is now a refugee in Tripoli in Lebanon, where she lives with her three children in a refugee camp. Ahed has never been involved in any activity in the civil society. She never volunteered or worked with NGOs, and she was not a

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<sup>12</sup> The demonstration in al-Hariqa in old Damascus was the first protest in Syria. It took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2011 (before the Daraa incident). After a traffic policeman insulted a young man, shop owners in al-Hariqa began chanting “Syrian People will not be humiliated – al-Sha’b al-Sūrī mā b Yindhall”. In an effort to defuse the situation, the Minister of Interior attended immediately and apologised for the policeman’s behaviour. (Syria Untold, 2013).



member of any political parties. She joined the Clock Tower sit-in<sup>13</sup> when it took place in Homs. She explains that discrimination, injustice and oppression were her main motivations. She observes:

“In Homs, the situation was miserable. Injustice was apparent. All good jobs go to Alawis. People do not get good treatment at hospitals if they are not from the sect [i.e. Alawi]. Our educated sons are unemployed while uneducated Alawis get all the jobs they want. It was time to fight this injustice”.

While corruption and injustice were frequently identified as influencing the collective decision to revolt, activists were keen to reiterate that it is “a revolution for dignity and freedom” not “a hunger revolution”. Both terms were used by at least 32 interviewees from all over the country. Saeb, a 22-year-old student from Daraa, asserts that the people in Daraa revolted because they do not accept humiliation. In this regard, it was significant that the first slogan that appeared during the demonstrations was “*al-Sha‘b al-Sūrī mā b Yindhall*” (“Syrian people will not be humiliated”).

The regime went to great lengths to give the appearance that it was confronted by a “hunger revolution”. When Buthaina Shaaban, the Presidential Spokeswoman, announced that reform measures would be implemented, and the first act would be a salary increase<sup>14</sup>, people in Daraa demonstrated the following

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<sup>13</sup> The Clock Tower Square sit-in took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2011). It was a peaceful sit-in until regime forces opened fire on the participants. The number of people who were killed is unknown, as Regime forces collected the bodies and arrested a large number of protesters, some of them remained missing. Human Rights Watch (2011) claims that at least 150 participants were missing after the event, with possibility of higher figure.

<sup>14</sup> On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, subsequent to the Daraa incident, Buthaina Shaaban, the Presidential Spokeswoman, delivered a speech that was then followed by a press conference. This unveiled a number of reform measures that would be implemented in response to popular demands. She outlined an increase

day saying “*Yā Buthaiyyna Yā Sha‘bān, al-Sha‘b al-Sūrī mū Jū‘ān!*” (“Oh Buthaina Shaaban, Syrian people are not hungry!”). The regime tried to make it look like a hunger revolution so that they can respond with economic reform, but “people were not going to be silent anymore. It is not about bread it is about freedom”.

## ***Social Changes***

A separate motivation, which substantially predated the Arab Spring and the Daraa incident, was the social changes that Syrian society had experienced since the 1990s. Sharif is a 28-year-old man from Rural Damascus who currently resides in Lebanon because he is wanted by the regime. Sharif was an active participant from the very start of the Uprising. He had previously volunteered with charities and NGOs but became disillusioned when he saw their limited role, which in large part derived from the various controls and limits the regime placed upon them.

Sharif maintains that while the Arab Spring may have provided the proximate cause, there were a number of underpinning factors that were already leading Syrian society towards this point. Sharif is from a conservative family that was originally from Arbin in Rural Damascus. We met in a coffee shop in Beirut 2014, where he had been living for the last two years. Sharif had been arrested and detained for a few weeks in 2011, although he was never informed of the actual reason. Along with a number of other detainees, he was released after a presidential amnesty was issued. He quickly resumed his non-violent activities as he expected the regime to fall quickly. In June 2012, when he was in Beirut to attend a training session provided by an international organisation to local activists, he

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in civil servants’ wages, the repeal of the Emergency Law (which had been in place since 1963) and the trial of those who were responsible for the Daraa events (BBC, 2011; al-Jazeera, 2011). However, the people reacted to that by mass protests with the slogan of “Oh Buthaina Shaaban, Syrian people are not hungry”.

was informed by his family that the security forces were looking for him. He decided to remain in Beirut as he was afraid of being arrested at the borders. He was still based in Beirut in late 2014, as he had founded a number of initiatives that sought to provide assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. He was also part of an informal network that worked across the border to provide assistance to Syrians in the Homs and Rural Damascus governorates. He was also working with a local NGO within Syria to facilitating the procurement of medical supplies and the collection of blood donations in Lebanon – these supplies would later be smuggled to Syrian towns near the Lebanese Syrian border, where the regime continues to enforce a siege that denies, amongst other things, medical supplies.

Sharif maintains that the cultural and social changes that the regime was trying to force upon Syrian society were the main factors that contributed to the Uprising. He asserts that:

“With or without Daraa, people would have revolted, the society was angry. The people were not happy that the regime banned the Niqab [(full face cover)] at schools and universities or gave permission for a casino to open in Damascus <sup>15</sup>”.

Sharif presents these measures as part of the regime’s attempt to change Syrian society, a project which met with considerable public resistance. Significantly, the regime itself concurred with this analysis. In April 2011, as part of

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<sup>15</sup> In 2010, the Ministry of Higher Education in Syria banned women from wearing the Niqab at universities, while citing a mixture of educational (cheating during exams) and security-related pretexts (Al-Jazeera 2010). During the same year, a new Casino opened in Damascus. Both measures met with a mixed response.

a range of reform measures, it closed the casino and permitted the Niqab to be worn in universities in an attempt to defuse the Uprising. (al-Sharq al-Awsat, 2011)

Jenna, a 31-year-old woman from Rural Damascus, agrees with Sharif that the regime's changes would have resulted in an uprising, even if the Arab Spring had not occurred. However, Jenna offers a more positive appraisal. She believes that the Uprising was the inevitable consequence of relaxation of policies and regulations. Unlike Sharif, Jenna believes that the NGOs and charities played a significant role within the Syrian society. Since she was a student at the university, she had been actively engaged with different local NGOs. She maintains that as young people in society began to experience more freedom, they inevitably pushed for greater freedom. She observes:

“Young Syrians finally had the space to do something... JCI, SYEA, the scout allowed the young people to feel that they can do something they can develop the country... People believed that Bashar wanted the change himself, but he was not powerful enough. Old guards did not allow him... sooner or later the young people would have done something about it”.

She maintains that young people viewed Assad as being sympathetic to change, but as lacking the political resources that would bring this change about. She initially believed that bottom-up pressure would bring about change; however, like many other Syrians, she was shocked by the brutality of Assad's regime.

Jenna's position was reaffirmed by a number of young people who participated in an initiative called *Nuwwāb Shabāb* (Young MPs)<sup>16</sup>, which was implemented by the regime as part of its First Lady-led Youth Agenda which started in March 2010. Youth Agenda, in its own words, sought:

[To help] youth realise their own agency through the emergence of a new public discourse... Supporting youth-led projects and initiatives for improving their own lives and their communities... moreover, catalysing a broader movement across Syrian society that places youth at the centre and eliminates the barriers for your led action" (Unpublished Youth Agenda Project Document).

A number of activists I interviewed were part of the *Nuwwāb Shabāb* initiative, which took place between September 2010 and June 2011. The initiative aimed to increase youth participation in Parliament. Young people who participated in the project received training from experts which enhanced their ability to engage with campaigning and social mobilisation. This initiative continued under the umbrella of the state even after the Uprising began.

A number of activists who directly engaged with the initiative maintained that this training proved to be very useful when they began to organise their protests and other activities. Many members of *Tansīqiyyāt* (coordination committees) benefited from the training. Some participants persevered with the project even after it was suspended by the regime. One participant who became a trainer later estimated that the total number of nationwide beneficiaries exceeded 800

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<sup>16</sup> The *Nuwwāb Shabāb* initiative will be further discussed in Chapter 5, where it will be engaged and discussed as one among a number of different tools and techniques that activists use to translate individual initiatives into collective actions.

participants. Sharif, Hamzeh (a 26-year-old man from Sweida) and Dalia (a 32-year-old female from Latakia), who participated in the initiative, maintain that the initiative provided the tools and inspiration for collective action. Any such conclusion should, however, be considered alongside the developments within Syrian society that engaged and motivated young people.

Hussam is a middle-aged activist who was arrested more than once by the regime in his youth. He had lived in Beirut since 2012 when he was forced to flee the regime. He is actively engaged with raising awareness and promoting citizenship. He agrees that Syria was a ticking bomb waiting to explode and he contends that popular grievances, which centred upon corruption, inequality and unemployment, would have ultimately spilled over into collective action against the regime. However, he also contends that the social changes that the society experienced played a stronger role in inspiring people to revolt. Hussam suggests that during the immediate years that preceded the Uprising, Syria became more secular. He observes:

“When we see a woman with cover [(Hijab)], wearing fashionable clothes, and smoking water-pipe in al-Naufara<sup>17</sup>, this is an indicator that the society has changed. This social change was the prerequisite for a more radical change at the political level. Social and cultural freedom would have eventually led to political freedom too. The society was ready to embrace a change at all levels.”

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Naufara is a coffee shop in old Damascus which was traditionally only open to men; however, since the 1990s it has become popular among both men and women. Before the 1990s, women smoking in the streets was a widely recognised taboo.

According to Hussam, Syria was ready for the uprising. In the few years that preceded the Uprising, a number of major events took place. These included the 2000 Suweida incident<sup>18</sup> when conflict erupted between Druze peasants and Sunni Bedouins and developed into an uprising against the state representative in Suweida governorate. The regime's crackdown produced hundreds of victims; the 2004 al-Qameshli, when the regime massacred Kurds in Northwest Syria, after a fight broke out between Arab and Kurds after a football game claiming that the victims were hooligans<sup>19</sup>; and the 2005 incident in Misyaf (in Hama) when a fight between truck drivers developed into a sectarian conflict between Ismailis and Alawis which only ended when the regime intervened and brutally crushed the Ismailis<sup>20</sup>. These incidents, along with their seriousness and scope, lent further credence to the proposition that the Arab Spring would have had limited impact if the internal governance situation had been better.

### ***Arab Spring, Spark and Ripple Effect***

The outcomes of the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt no doubt inspired activists across the Middle East. People in Syria who had seen Assad, Bin

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<sup>18</sup> The Suweida incident took place in November 2000. The immediate conflict was between Druze and Sunni – however this swiftly escalated into a small-scale uprising against the corrupt regime figures in the area, who were deemed to be responsible for the conflict. The Suweida people refer to this incident as the Suweida Uprising and maintain that it represented the first attempt to challenge the regime and its deeply embedded corruption. The regime successfully contained the incident and very little has been published on this subject. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsp1\\_elSzhY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsp1_elSzhY))

<sup>19</sup> At least 30 people were killed when regime forces opened fire on civilians. Human Rights Watch (2004) condemned the regime's brutality and use of excessive force.

<sup>20</sup> There is no reference to support the story of the conflict in Misyaf, as the regime successfully contained the story. However, it is widely known in Syria that unrest occurred in 2005 and that the regime cracked down on the Ismailis. A statement by the Ministry of Interior which was published in Al-Thawra, a state-owned newspaper, was the State's only acknowledgement of the events. The statement explained that the incident was merely a fight between truck drivers and claimed it had been successfully controlled by the state (al-Ali, 2005). Ismailis, for their part, claim that it was a challenge to the power of the Assad regime which came at the cost of an estimated 300 lives.

Ali, Gaddafi and Mubarak hold power for generations, could scarcely have imagined that it would be possible for protestors to overthrow their power. However, the demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia helped to instil a 'can-do' attitude. The society was ready to revolt, but it needed the momentum to do so.

Karam, a 23-year-old male from Homs, who worked as a paralegal before he was displaced to Damascus, explains how revolution had seemed like an unobtainable dream before these momentous events. He observes:

"I learned at school that the French revolted against the monarchy, freed prisoners and executed the king and queen. That seemed mythical to me. No one can do that... I see the same faces on TV [in the news] since I was born. I wouldn't have even dared to think about revolution. We learned at school that the only revolution is that of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March<sup>21</sup> which supposedly empowered peasants and workers.... However, when I saw people in Tunisia demonstrating in the street.... I thought to myself if they can do it why we can't!"

Karam participated in demonstrations in Homs from the early days of the Uprising. He lost two friends in the infamous Clock Tower Square protest. When the fighting intensified in Homs, he fled to Damascus with his sister's family. Being from Homs was sufficient to limit his movement around the city. At checkpoints he was always at risk of being arrested, being a young man with heavy Homs accent, well-known Homs family name, and a national ID that clearly states he is from Homs city. Therefore, we had to meet at the house of a shared acquaintance. Karam was also reluctant to meet in public due to the associated risks. Karam was

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<sup>21</sup> The interviewee is referring to the coup of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1963, during which the Baath Party seized power in Syria (see Van Dam:1996; Seale:1998)



moved by how the Uprising unfolded in Tunisia and believed that he could be part of a similar change in Syria.

Basem, a 22-year-old student from Rural Damascus, clearly recalls Karam, when he states how Egyptian Uprising changed him:

“When I watched on TV millions of Egyptians in Tahrir Square, I cried. I really cried. I felt that I could be one of them. I felt that people are not powerless. We can change things.... Bashar is young and less powerful than Mubarak, it should be possible to force him to leave.”

Basem was in his third year at the university when the Uprising began. He participated in a number of demonstrations in Rural Damascus in 2011 but managed to escape arrest by covering his face during the demonstrations. In early 2012, his level of involvement decreased as his hopes of a quick change faded away. While he retains considerable sympathy for the Uprising, he is no longer involved to a significant extent.

Inspired by these rapidly changing circumstances, young people began to question the power of these dictators, having never before believed that they had the power to challenge them. Having witnessed the overthrow of Bin Ali and Mubarak, they believed Assad would follow in turn. They also mistakenly believed that he would be more open to reform. Salma, a 25-year-old female journalist from Hama, observes: “We thought that he [Bashar al-Assad] is young and educated and he will respond quickly, he is not Gaddafi.” For the first time, people believed that they had the power to bring about lasting and meaningful change.

This 'ripple effect' is not entirely new to the region. The anti-colonial movements of the first half of the twentieth century spread across the Middle East and North Africa with similar rapidity. The ideology of Pan-Arabism quickly pervaded the newly independent states and established the basis for various revolutions and popular movements across the region.

When large-scale popular uprisings erupted in Tunisia and then in Egypt, Syrians saw a clear opportunity and attempted to overthrow the Assad regime. Tarrow (2011, 6-8) argues that contentions are triggered when changes in the political environment create opportunities and incentives for the people to act. When the Syrian people saw that uprisings had succeeded in challenging the long-standing status quo in neighbouring countries, they sought to engage in similar contention.

The 'can-do' attitude that emerged after the Arab Spring uprisings provided the spark that lit the fire when the security forces tortured the children in Daraa, humiliated their families and opened fire during one of their funerals. When news of the events in Daraa circulated around the country, the 'can-do' attitude transformed into demonstrations which convulsed many cities. The situation further escalated when the regime brutally attacked the demonstrators and the funerals of those that they had killed. Protests in Daraa rapidly spread to many villages, towns and cities. Other demonstrations spontaneously erupted in other cities with the largest in Homs at the Clock Tower where the regime forces opened fire on the protesters in what was known later as the Clock Tower massacre.

Mahmud, a 22-year-old shopkeeper from Rural Daraa, spoke of how a strong sense of solidarity led him to join the protests alongside other community members. He recalls:

“When we heard about what happened [in Daraa], we [youth in the village] couldn’t help it. We thought we should show solidarity and organise demonstrations because those are our children and cousins who were attacked. We were sure that he [Bashar al-Assad] would intervene to solve the issue, but he did not. We had to voice our grievance. Syrian people will not be humiliated.”

Mahmud had never participated in any political or societal activity. However, he was actively engaged from the start of the Uprising. He participated in demonstrations and provided medical assistance. In November 2012 he was executed by regime forces in a field hospital he was working in.

Ahmad, a 19-year-old student from Homs, believes that Syria owes a debt of gratitude to those who started the Uprising in Daraa. In his view, they are the heroes who should be praised. Their sacrifice inspired Ahmad to participate in the Clock Tower Square sit-in in Homs. He personally experienced the massacre and now advocates for the victims of Daraa and Clock Tower Massacre to become national icons. In his words: “Maybe we should thank our brothers in Daraa because they pushed us to act. Once the revolution succeeds, we should honour them. They reminded everyone that Syrian people could not be humiliated.”

Syrians seized the opportunity that had been provided by waves of contention in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, mobilising in the expectation that they could transform their society. The brevity of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt further fuelled the Syrian belief that change was possible. Bouazizi, Wael Ghoneim and other prominent figures from Tunisia and Egypt were an inspiration to the Syrian activists, and they were often elevated, in words of celebration and

commemoration, alongside prominent Syrian activists (such as Ghiath Matar and Ibrahim Qashoush) who had been killed by the regime.

### ***Awareness and Fear***

In the aftermath of the incident in Daraa, demonstrations rapidly spread across the country. The event, along with the regime's brutal actions, helped Syrians to realise that the regime needed to be challenged and confronted. Davenport and Trivedi (2013) observe that when an issue or phenomenon is challenged, it is possible that the issue will be more noticeable to the public: addressing an issue is likely to raise more awareness about it, with the consequence that more activists will mobilise to challenge it. This was the case for many activists who were interviewed.

Yara is a 28-year-old teacher who is originally from Rural Damascus but who now resides in the al-Midan neighbourhood in Damascus. Yara works as a teacher in a public school. She did not join the Uprising at the beginning, but she decided to actively engage when protests were organised in the al-Midan neighbourhood she joined. She is still active in documenting and reporting regime practices online. She is also a part of a number of initiatives that assist those that have been displaced in Damascus and Rural Damascus. Yara describes the fundamental transformation in her worldview which enabled her to understand the nature of the regime better:

“Before the revolution, I have never thought of changing anything. I always thought that Syria is not Switzerland, but it was alright, I know we don't have enough resources to be like Switzerland. Also, I felt that we were slowly developing.... Nepotism and corruption have always bothered me, but it

never came to my mind that I can do anything about it. When the revolution started, I was excited, but I didn't know what to do. The confusion was soon replaced by shock and anger..... Seeing people being killed just because they were demonstrating or attending a funeral filled me with anger. I didn't believe how naive I was. I was deceived like many others. I didn't believe that we tolerated these monsters all these years. I know now what I want to do. I want the regime to fall. I want to build my country and my future. If I am killed, it is totally worth it... "We will continue with whoever survive"<sup>22</sup>

While Yara initially had concerns, she did not think that they needed to be translated into actions. She was aware that the situation under the regime was some distance from being ideal. Like others, she was deceived by the regime's 'reform' discourse. However, this changed when she saw the human consequences of the regime's brutal actions. She speaks passionately about how the events "opened her eyes" and made her more "aware of the nature of the regime and how it treated people". She notes that young people in major cities lived in bubbles and observed how her own bubble burst when she saw footage from other governorates.

Yara was not alone in registering the significance of this fundamental transformation in her worldview – a large proportion of the activists that I interviewed discussed how their awareness had fundamentally altered in the aftermath of the Uprising. Jameel is a 27-year-old journalist from Daraa who is currently resident in

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<sup>22</sup> This is a verse from a song by the Lebanese singer Feiruz who is influential in the Middle East. The song is from one of her musicals where she plays the role of the leader of the revolution. In challenging a tyrant who ruled the country for decades, she mobilises the people to revolt. The verse translates as 'no matter how many of us are killed we will continue to resist with whomever survive'.

Beirut. He relocated there after the regime detained him for several weeks (upon the basis that he was from Daraa). Jameel was not actively engaged at the beginning of the Uprising. However, he later made a significant contribution by documenting and reporting demonstrations and regime brutality. Jameel was reluctant to join the revolution at the beginning because he was afraid and was in a state of shock. Before the Uprising, he had never supported the regime - its corruption and nepotism had always militated against this possibility. However, his personal views on the regime had never translated into explicit criticism or action.

When the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, Jameel and his friend watched events unfold with a clear sense of anticipation. However, they largely confined themselves to wondering whether anything would happen and did not dare to take any action. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, Jameel travelled to watch and film the demonstration in al-Marjeh in Damascus<sup>23</sup>. He did not plan to participate, and his initial intention was only to watch events unfold. However, he describes the event as a ‘turning point’. He recalls:

“I watched how people were beaten. Men, women and even children were beaten so aggressively. Security forces lost their patience so quickly. It lasted for few minutes before they unleashed their anger on the protestors. This was a shock, a turning point for me. I could not stand and watch anymore”.

After witnessing these events, Jameel participated in a number of demonstrations in Daraa. He documented the protests and sent his reports to media outlets such as BBC, al-Jazeera and France 24. He was once arrested at a

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<sup>23</sup> The *Al-Marjeh* sit-in was organised on the 16 March 2011 by families of detainees and missing people. It took place in front of the HQ of the Ministry of Interior. Families including children participated. Also, prominent figures such as the writer al-Tayeb al-Tizini participated in the sit-in. The Regime’s response was brutal. (Syria Untold, 2013)

checkpoint on the road between Daraa and Damascus. Fortunately, he was arrested because he is from Daraa and not because of his involvement in the documentation. This meant that it was possible for his parents to ensure his release by bribing the security branch that was holding him. Had they known that he was actively documenting the actions of the regime, he would not have been released. The documentation, filming and photography of sensitive activities are considered to be a 'major crime' and 'act of treason'.

Reda is a 46-year-old dentist and former communist of Kurdish origin who resides in the al-Mukhayyam neighbourhood in Damascus. He initially regarded the Uprising with scepticism. While he has always been critical of the regime (he has been arrested more than once), he viewed the Uprising as premature. In his view, the Syrian people were not ready, and society was not sufficiently prepared to confront a regime that has evidenced its ability for brutality on more than one occasion. He clearly recalls that when the Arab Spring broke out, he hoped that it would not reach Syria. His expectation was that mass movements would be confronted by a brutal response and the end result would be chaos and anarchy. At the inception of the Uprising, he, therefore, engaged young people, with a view to raising their awareness of citizenship, revolution and theories of change. He successfully mobilised a number of young volunteers, who contributed to his awareness-raising activities. Even though the young volunteers were not encouraging revolt, they were harassed by the regime. For this reason, after reflecting on his own experience when he was arrested several years previously for his political activism, he decided to suspend the activities.

Although he remained sceptical about the ultimate contribution of an uprising, Bashar al-Assad's speech<sup>24</sup> on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2012 led him to commit to the Uprising. Reda describes this speech in the following terms:

“Bashar declared war against his people. It was a total shock. That speech changed me. I am not a young man, I do not make impulsive decisions, but when I heard what he said, I knew that he would not stop until he kills everyone who dares to disagree with him let alone raise against him”.

Reda then contacted the Homs-based *al-Farouq* Brigade to offer his services as a doctor. The Brigade told him to stay in Damascus, as his skills would be required there when the fighting reached Syria's capital city. Reda would later work as a doctor in Zamalka when the regime's siege of Rural Damascus began. While Reda was not directly involved in the fighting, he worked in areas affected by the conflict. He worked as a doctor in field hospitals and as a dentist serving communities under siege. When he was attacked by unknown masked men in his workplace, he decided to flee the country.

Young people, especially those from the large cities, had high expectations of Assad and the regime when the Uprising broke out. They expected Assad to

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<sup>24</sup> On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, 10 months after the revolution began, Assad delivered his 3<sup>rd</sup> speech at Damascus University. The tone of the speech was threatening and decisive, which was perceived by the people as a declaration of war. In that speech he reiterated that he will continue fighting “terrorists”. He said that “... Our utmost priority now, which is unparalleled by any other priority, is the restoration of the security we have enjoyed for decades.... This will only happen by striking these murderous terrorists hard. There is no compromise with terrorism, no compromise with those who use arms to cause chaos and division, no compromise with those who terrorize civilians, no compromise with those who conspire with foreigners against their country and against their people. The battle against terrorism will not be the battle of the state or state institutions alone. It is the battle of all of us. It is a national battle; and it is everyone's duty to take part in it.” Bashar al-Assad speech on 10 January 2012.



implement more aggressive reform measures. The brutality of his crackdown came as a shock to many. Hala a 24-year-old from Rural Damascus, who works as an admin assistant in a private company, began to participate in protests when she saw the acts that Assad's regime committed. She recalls:

“He [Bashar al-Assad] surprised me, surprised us [Syrians] all. It is a crazy situation. Shabbīḥa are slaughtering people everywhere. I cannot stand and watch. They have to be stopped”.

The Clock Tower Massacre in Homs was a particular turning point for her. She remembers:

“The footage from that day was appalling. People were doing nothing. They were standing peacefully. They did not deserve to die. They were singing when the regime shot them”.

Salem, a 32-year-old government employee from Damascus, always subscribed to Assad's reform propaganda and believed that Syria had changed under Bashar al-Assad. However, his faith was shaken by the revolution. He states:

“I always heard my parents speaking about our neighbour Abu Samir who was arrested in 1982 because someone wrote a report<sup>25</sup> about him although he was a decent guy. I always saw his family and I know that nobody would dare to ask them about him. I don't know whether he was still alive or not. That

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<sup>25</sup> Here the interviewee conveys the fact that an informant reported him to the security forces for being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which Syrian law considers to be an act of treason. Thousands of people were falsely accused of being affiliated with Muslim Brotherhood during the 1980s and they were detained without trial for decades.

is not a question to be asked.... I knew that Hafez [al-Assad] was a brutal dictator, but I thought that similar things did not happen during Bashar's rule. I believed that he was different.... When my friends were arrested and tortured just because they organised silent candle vigil in memory of the victims, I knew that nothing has changed and like father like son! I knew that if we don't all do something, it will soon be our turn. We will all be my neighbour Abu Samir."

Rula is a 38-year-old store manager from Homs, who first joined the clock tower sit-in in Homs. She was excited when she joined this civic action with her brother and cousins, and it took on the appearance of a social event as everybody she knew was there. She left before the shooting began, as her children were at home by themselves. She lost two cousins that night and another cousin on the following day when the regime fired on mourners during a burial ceremony at Tall al-Nasr. She then decided to leave her comfortable life behind her and committed to work to overthrow the Regime. She helped internally displaced refugees, participated in demonstrations and volunteered in field hospitals. She eventually fled Homs in 2013 after her husband went missing. She paid for a smuggler to take her and her children to Lebanon where she is currently staying with a member of her extended family in the Lebanese city of Tripoli.

The fact that many Syrians believed the regime does not imply that they passively accepted its propaganda; rather it instead affirms that these events have shaken their false compliance. The regime had previously exerted its ideological hegemony with a view to ensuring popular consent and compliance. However, as Wedeen (1999) notes, the people did not unquestioningly accept the regime's rhetoric. They often evidenced scepticism and even mocked it. For the past four decades, the people had often challenged the regime through false compliance.

They continued to resist its power subtly, deploying what Scott (1985) defines as a hidden transcript – this is when acts of resistance are embedded in everyday interactions and discourse. People were fully aware that they were subject to the hegemony of the authoritarian regime; however, they chose to consent to this power in order to offset the regime’s violent response. Mitchell (1990) therefore, notes that Gramsci’s discussion of cultural hegemony did not evoke consensus but rather a technique to avoid violence. In the aftermath of the failed rebellion of 1979-1982, there was a general feeling of helplessness. The Assad regime succeeded in entrenching widespread fear that a rebellion would be violently crushed. There existed a widespread fear that contestation would not succeed and that the situation would deteriorate, as it had done before during the 1980s.

When people saw that contention had been successful elsewhere and that false compliance and consent no longer protected them from the regime’s violence, they sought to engage in contention. At this stage, people dismissed their fears and took matters into their own hands. The most obvious positive outcome of the Uprising was that it toppled the “walls of fear” that had previously prevented people from acting. Activists who were interviewed spoke of being “liberated from their fear” and referred to “wall of fears that crumbled”.

The young activists felt for the first time that they have a voice and that this voice could make a difference. Dima, a 24 -year-old unemployed engineer from Aleppo, notes how the Syrian people had “always lowered [their] voices when speaking about the president or the government, even when [they are] at home..... But now the walls of fear have crumbled. [They] are free and no one can change that”. Salim, a 22-year-old shopkeeper from Rural Damascus, felt that the Uprising had liberated him from his fear. His father has always warned him and his brothers from getting into trouble. When he was a teenager, he was “very disciplined and compliant” as he did not want to cause any trouble to his family. He noted that

informants were everywhere and that this created a culture of mistrust. However, those days had now ended – as he notes, “our voices frighten them, that is why they killed al-Qashoush and Ghiyath”<sup>26</sup>.

The events raised people’s awareness of the regime’s brutality and also freed them from the fear which their false compliance had inculcated for years. This general sensation of liberation and a renewed dignity encouraged ordinary people to revolt even when there was a clear risk of being arrested, tortured and killed. No matter what the cost, many clearly state that they will never be controlled by fear again. The regime’s brutality may have deterred many people from participating in the Uprising; however, it also encouraged large numbers of ordinary people to resist the regime’s power.

## **Self-understanding and the Impact of the Uprising**

It is instructive to engage with the internal factors that did more than raise awareness and open eyes to the realities of ongoing events. It is particularly intriguing, for example, to examine how individuals changed their perspective of their role within the society and to ask how this created new power dynamics. During the reform, activists often discussed the contribution that they could personally make to wider society. Activists spoke of “developing the country”, “empowering communities”, “fighting poverty”, “helping others” and “providing support”. Their perception was that their personal situation had improved and that

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<sup>26</sup> He was referring to Ibrahim al-Qashoush, a singer from Hama who sang the famous song “Oh Bashar, it is time to leave (*Yalla Irhal Yā Bashar*). Protestors sang the song across the country. Regime forces killed him, ripped his vocal cords out and then dumped his body in the Orontes River (Shadid, 2011). Ghiyath Matar was a peaceful activist from Daraya (Rural Damascus) who was brutally tortured and killed because he was prominent in many protests. He was famous for distributing roses to Regime forces (Sly, 2011).

this implied an obligation to help the disadvantaged. They believed that they were empowered and that this enhanced capacity should be used to empower others.

Ola is a 25-year-old woman from Idleb who has been very active in providing support to women in the liberated areas of Idleb. She is engaged with various initiatives; however, she primarily works with women in Idleb's camps to provide psychosocial support to victims of sexual abuse. She also helps to transport aids and support to various groups in Idleb. Her work in this respect is made easier by the fact that women encounter fewer difficulties when crossing checkpoints. She was arrested once by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) because of her activism. Ola is a Muslim from a conservative family who wears the Hijab – despite this, ISIS still accused her of being an infidel. Her case was referred to court but was later dismissed because of a lack of evidence. Ola led a good life prior to the Uprising. She was a tutor at the university until she was fired after her involvement in demonstrations and protests was brought to the attention of the university authorities. While Ola lost her job, is wanted by the regime and is again at risk of being arrested by ISIS, she is determined to continue her work. Her commitment derives from the long-term impact of her work on her own personal future. She observes:

“I lost my job, I am at risk, but I have never been more alive... I had a job, but I did not have a future. Now, I might not have a job, but I know that I am building my future... For the first time, I feel that Syria is really my country. I am not a member of the local council. I was elected by the people in my village. Before the liberation, I did not even think of becoming involved in my community, but now I feel that it is my duty.... Now, I can be active in building my future and my country future.”

Ola notes that her work resonates at a very personal level. She does not consider her work to be altruistic because she is not doing it for others. Her primary focus is upon herself and her country. Ola's language is very self-centred and is focused on her personal future rather than the people she is helping.

Ola was not active before the Uprising, and it is not therefore possible to see how her perception developed. In this respect, she clearly contrasts with Rana, who was active before the Uprising. Rana is a 23-year-old accountant from Damascus who works in a private company. Since her days as a student, Rana has volunteered with a number of charities that assist families in need. Rana and her friends used to raise money for orphans, visit low-income families and extend other forms of assistance. As a civil society activist, she believes that she is responsible for helping other citizens to improve their living conditions. Rana's approach to her charity work focuses on her duty to help other because she is fully aware of the fact that she is better off than those she is helping. She states:

“Thank God, my parents raised us well, and it is our duty to help others. I know that we cannot change people life, but it is very fulfilling and rewarding to know that I could make a small difference or draw a smile on their faces.”

Rana does not participate in protests, but she does actively help to provide humanitarian support, even in dangerous areas. Rana had “smuggled” medicines to besieged areas such as Daraya, Mu'adamiyyeh and Zamalka. In this respect, she was a clear beneficiary (as was I) of the special treatment that middle-class Damascene women receive at checkpoints. She is above suspicion, and she used this to help people in need. What had previously been charitable work that had been conducted with well-established NGOs later transformed into hands-on engagement with at-risk communities. Rana clearly conveys the difficulties that

arise during the provision of humanitarian support. She does not know when the security forces will raid a school she is working at, or if somebody will accuse her of helping terrorists. However, these challenges do not discourage her from doing the job. She no longer looks at the work that she does as a duty, but rather as herself. She sees herself reflected in the work that she does. It defines who she is. In her words, “If everyone took their part in the current event, the regime will fall, and we will be able to rebuild our country and our future faster”.

Mazen is a 29-year-old from Rural Damascus who worked as an engineer with a major construction company until the company stopped operating and he lost his job. He was actively involved in documenting demonstrations and regime brutality until he was killed in Zamalka in 2013. He had volunteered with the Red Crescent since he was a student at Damascus University. He was involved with the organisation’s work during the second Iraq war and the 2006 war in Lebanon. Mazen enjoyed this “amazing experience”, and he continually worked with his colleagues to help improve the desperate situation of the refugees. During the Iraq conflict, he frequently had to travel to other governorates to help. Despite the hardship and the demands of the work, he greatly enjoyed this experience. In his words: “Refugees were in miserable conditions, and they needed our help. Nothing is better than playing with the kids when they were staying at the schools. Red Crescent is the best experience I could ever have.”

When Mazen spoke about his experience and the work he did as a civil society activist, he focused upon the work he did to help ‘others’. This changed when he started talking about his activities after the Uprising. Mazen was initially a first aid responder in his work with the Red Crescent. However, after witnessing a number of violent, he decided to start filming and documenting the events. He explained:

The regime does not allow media to cover the demonstration because they don't want the world to see how they are killing us. I am filming. I know it is very dangerous, but nothing can stop me. I never sign my photos or stamp my documentaries because it is safer but also, I don't care whether people know who did it or not. I am not filming [and taking photos] to show off. I am filming to show the world what is happening. I know I will be killed one day while filming like many of my friends. That doesn't stop me. In their memory, I continue doing it, and I know someone will continue doing it after I am gone. We should document it, so our children will know that we paid with our blood to build a bright future.

Here Mazen clearly brings out the position of many activists, who view their engagement as a means through which they can build their own future. This feature became increasingly apparent in the aftermath of the Uprising. Activists now talk about achieving self-realisation, becoming better citizens, building a better future for themselves and their families, empowering themselves and practising their civil rights. In this regard, they came to register the fact that the activities could have a transformational impact on their own lives. This shift continues to sustain their efforts to resist the Assad regime, even in the face of formidable risks.

Mazen, Rana and Ola, in common with other activists, appear to be more focused on themselves and the future of the country for them and their children than on helping others. Their clear awareness of the impact of their work upon their own lives encourages them to continue to resist, no matter what risks and personal costs they incur. Activists do not wish to become "heroes" or to be remembered by names. They are not risking their lives for fame or political prominence. They want



their actions to alter the future and to enable their children to lead a normal, ordinary life.

## **Scepticism, Hesitation and Regime Support**

Those who did not join the Uprising tend to take one of three positions. Firstly, there are the regime supporters, whose support can be traced back to ethnic (e.g. being Alawi) sources or the belief that the regime is still susceptible to reform. Support for the regime is also frequently defined in opposition to the Uprising. Those who view the Uprising as part of an international conspiracy therefore simultaneously support and criticise the regime. There are also those who offer indirect support. This includes the so-called 'silent majority' (who do not support either the regime or the opposition) and those whose support for the Uprising does not translate into concrete political action.

While some of those who support the regime for ethnic reasons try to rationalise their position by celebrating its various 'achievements', a considerable number are more forthcoming in voicing their sectarian views. They accordingly use aggressive language to support the regime's actions and to attack other ethnicities and sects. Haidar, a 26-year-old man who is from rural Tartous, but who was born and raised in Damascus, speaks openly of his support for the regime and his belief in the inherent superiority of the Alawis. Haidar is a university graduate with a degree in economics from Damascus University who works for a private bank in Damascus. He believes that Alawis are better suited to rule the country because they have run the country for four decades. In his view, Alawis are also better placed than Sunnis (who in his view are 'very conservative') to manage a diverse society.

Haidar proudly informed me how he had reported two of his colleagues at the bank to the security forces because they participated in the protest at Mazzeh (which is in Damascus). He is not a formal security agent, but he volunteers as an informant. He has complete faith that Assad's regime will "win the war on terror and will smash those insects". He is not afraid to show his support: the back window of his car displays a massive poster of Bashar al-Assad, his Father Hafez and his brother Maher (who has played a leading role in helping to fight the Uprising). The background of Haidar's mobile features a picture of Assad in his military uniform, and his ringtone invokes a speech by Hafez al-Assad. Haidar even criticises the regime and maintains that it should have been even stronger in ending the fight. He believes that "barrels<sup>27</sup> should continue to be used to wipe the terrorists out" as "missiles should not be wasted on them". As an active member of the Syrian Electronic Army, he reports Facebook pages, web pages and YouTube channels to the regime.

While Haidar's views might seem extreme, they are consistent with those held by a large number of the regime's supporters. However, it is noticeable that a number of these supporters are more willing to criticise the regime and are more receptive to gradual, as opposed to radical, reform. Samah is a 29-year-old female who works for an NGO in Damascus, who is originally from Sweida. Samah suggests that the regime made an error when it tried to use violence to stop the Uprising. However, she blames the Uprising for the destruction of the country, instead of the regime. She states:

"Reform is still the best option. There is no one who is qualified more than Bashar to rule the country now.... The

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<sup>27</sup> Here he refers to the barrels bombs which the regime has used to attack opposition-held areas. This is a very primitive weapon that has been developed locally. Although it is not possible to define a specific target to drop the barrel-bomb, it is the main shelling tool which is resulting in a high toll among civilians. See Human Rights Watch reports (2013a, 2013b, 2014a).

fighting should stop so we can rebuild the country and continue the reform”.

In its rhetoric, the regime has sought to present the Uprising as a calculated attempt to destroy Syria (an ‘international conspiracy’), largely in retribution for its continued resistance to Israel. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the ‘West’ are blamed for supporting “terrorists” in Syria. Those who believe this view of events maintain that participants in the Uprising are gullible collaborators, terrorists and traitors who bear primary responsibility for the destruction of the country. While those who accept this version of events (e.g. Sima, a 23-year-old female student from Aleppo) do not always support the regime, they generally argue that Syria is engaged in an ongoing war with international powers and that now is not the time to fight over internal issues.

Sima asserts that Syrians must now unite in order to confront the ‘conspiracy’ against Syria. She does not fully support the blanket bombing of cities as she believes that the violence should be better targeted. She openly discusses that the regime had no option but to fight and steadfastly refuses to equate the ‘interference of the West’ with the intervention of Hezbollah, Iran and Russia. For her, the latter is helping to sustain and protect Syrian sovereignty. This is in clear contrast to the West, which is predominantly preoccupied with ‘meddling’ in the country’s ‘internal affairs’. Sima, who is a Christian, maintains that the ‘conspiracy’ is also directed against Syria’s status as a secular state in which people from different faiths co-exist. Sima believes that the regime, as ‘the devil we know’ is a preferable alternative to ISIS or Jabhet al-Nusra with their radical agenda to build an Islamic state in Syria.

“The devil we know” argument is also deployed by the “silent majority”<sup>28</sup> to justify why they decided to stand and watch people being massacred every day. This group, who are mainly resident in the major cities of Aleppo and Damascus, long for the days that preceded the conflict. In general. They tend to reside in areas that have not been directly impacted by the violence. While they may not always support the bombing and shelling of civilians, they do not view the Uprising in positive terms. Lama, a 27-year-old housewife from Damascus, misses her life before the Uprising when she was “able to go out with her friends at night and drive back home at 2 am without being afraid of kidnapping and without having to go through checkpoints”. She wishes that the Uprising had never happened. She does not care who rules the country. Her main priority is instead much more immediate, being able to send her “son to school without being afraid that a mortar bomb might blow up his school”.

Both regime supporters and the “silent majority” tend to be reluctant to acknowledge the victims of the regime and often appear to be uncomfortable when they are mentioned. Haider, in contrast, maintains that they are “terrorists” and the killing is justifiable. Other supporters, such as Samah and Sima, instead view these victims as “collateral damage” or a “mistake that should be dealt with after the conflict is resolved”. The “silent majority” still appears to be at the stage of denial and, like Lama, fail to grasp the magnitude of destruction outside their immediate neighbourhood. However, even when they are confronted by this reality, they are predisposed to dismiss it as ‘media exaggeration’.

While regime brutality was frequently a motivating factor for those who became activists, it also functioned as one of the main deterrents to political action. Many people were reluctant to share their experiences, let alone participate in direct

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<sup>28</sup> Those who have not taken a stand are known in the media as the “silent Majority”. See Aronson (2013), the Damascus Bureau (2011) and Marsh (2011).

action. Others directed scepticism towards the 'revolutionaries'. Omar, a 35-year-old senior manager in a company in Damascus, strongly supports the principles which originally animated the Uprising. He expresses great sympathy when discussing civilian victims and he believes that Assad is a war criminal whose regime should be overthrown. However, he is strongly critical of the Uprising's timing (he viewed it as premature) and its content (he maintains that it lacks a proper agenda or political ideology). For this reason, he believes that the Uprising will not be able to build the "new Syria" that he "dreams about". Therefore, he was not motivated to join.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored why ordinary people who have never been involved in politics or contestations before 2011 decided to participate in the Uprising and challenge the regime power, despite pervasive regime violence. A new generation of activists emerged to challenge regime power, and activists even emerged in communities that lacked any established tradition of civic engagement.

Assad's rule had established the basis of the Uprising. Grievances on a range of issues, including corruption, discrimination and inequality, grew and consolidated. However, activists continued to insist that the Uprising was not guided by economic motivations but instead reiterated a deeply-rooted desire for dignity and freedom. The Uprising could also be conceived as a natural consequence of political and social changes that had been in process since the 1990s. While activists disagree on the question of whether these changes were positive, and also upon the question of whether the preservation of culture and tradition was an additional motivation, they generally agree that these changes established the basis for a large-scale Uprising

Activists were undoubtedly inspired by the events of the Arab Spring, although it should be recognised that this was not the only driving force. When the spark flew in Daraa, the society was ready to draw upon this wider source of inspiration. While the brutal response of the Regime could conceivably have crushed opposition, in some instances it actually initiated, or at the very least reinforced, a commitment to fight and oppose regime oppression. The Uprising also significantly impacted the self-understanding of activists, who came to comprehend how it could empower them and shape their future.

A number of the supporters of the Uprising continued to voice scepticism that the Uprising would be able to achieve the desired change or contribute to state building. Its lack of an agenda and a clear ideology were both often cited as key obstacles in this respect, which sufficiently dissuaded them from joining the social movements. However, they remained sympathetic to the Uprising and continued to believe that the regime should be overthrown.

Regime supporters and the silent majority had clear reasons for lending support and tacit acquiescence to the regime. Regime supporters invoked ethnic and sectarian justifications, lack of trust in the Uprising, preference of the 'devil they know' and the international conspiracy against Syria. Conversely, the silent majority appeared to be fixated upon their past life and apportioned blame equally between the regime and the revolutionaries, who are disrupting normal life and destroying the country.

This chapter examined the motivation of people who have adopted a particular position in relation to the Syrian Uprising. The next chapter will study how individual engagement with the society translated into collective actions. It will examine the non-violent techniques that activists used to contest the regime's

power, and it will also explore the interaction (competition, cooperation and coordination) between various groups.

# Chapter 5 - Non-Violent Practices and Techniques

## Introduction

Now that the motivations of ordinary people have been set out in more detail, this chapter will now examine how these motivations translate into actions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the aim is not to explain opportunities and their impact on actions. It is rather on the activists themselves and their understanding of their motivations and actions. The chapter examines the methods and techniques that ordinary people deploy. It will, therefore, seek to identify how nonviolent resistance is conducted within a violent context and will identify how people continue to resist non-violently when common nonviolent techniques (e.g. demonstrations and lobbying) are not possible as a result of a high level of violence. It will explore the practices and repertoires used by people in their attempts to remain peaceful while resisting the power of the regime and how ordinary people and activists operate and survive in an extremely violent environment. The chapter will also touch upon the question of how people perceive their action – that is, how they define nonviolence.

The chapter will examine how the nonviolent resistant techniques vary between hidden, public and a mixture of both. Operating within a context of extreme violence means that transition between hidden actions and public confrontation is not straightforward and that people often have to mix both (even within the same action) to ensure that they achieve the desired results and that they remain relatively safe. The typology of an action is ultimately a question of how the people involved in the action perceive it. The activists alternate between hidden and public. If their actions are to be understood in their full significance, then it is essential first



to ask how they interpret their own actions. In addition, it is also important to recognise from the outset that the tools they use to realise their nonviolent agenda will vary in accordance with the context they operate within, their skills, their assessment of the optimal technique and their creativity.

The activists in Syria had no experience of confronting the regime prior to the Uprising. However, there was a long tradition of challenging the regime power via subtle and hidden techniques that could be traced back to the early days of Hafez Assad's rule. While the Uprising originally anticipated open confrontation, the brutality of the regime forced the activists to mix overt resistance with hidden actions. Activists had to adopt creative options to fight the regime's power and avoid being victimised. The chapter will examine these approaches which include draining regime sources and keeping its agents on their feet; humanitarian work as an act of resistance; lying to the regime; shaming and embarrassing regime officials; using regime platforms for their advantage; and using cyberspace to counteract the regime's power. Acts of nonviolent resistance were not only intended to counter the regime's power; on many occasions, activists sought to destabilise societal power structures.

As Scott (1990:198) argues, hidden and public acts of resistance work at three levels: material domination; status domination; and ideology domination. The leads to six types of actions, where public and hidden transcripts are used to resist the three levels of domination. This fairly straightforward typology does not readily apply to the case of nonviolent resistance in the violent context of Syria. As will be discussed in this chapter, the borders between techniques and which domination they aim to address are not easily defined and often blurred. The actions often mix public and hidden transcripts and may target more than one type of domination at once.

This chapter discusses some of the key techniques used by activists in Syria. Each technique is examined based on Scott's typology to demonstrate how the interaction between the hidden and the public is slightly more complex when activists operate in an environment that is extremely violent.

## **“Keeping Them Busy”**

It was a normal afternoon in the busy market of al-Muhājirīn in Damascus in May 2012. People were minding their own business, doing their shopping and running their errands when hundreds of small tennis table balls started rolling everywhere. Al-Muhājirīn is a hilly neighbourhood that gets steeper as it goes up Qāsiyyūn Mountain. Table tennis balls came rolling down the hill<sup>29</sup>. They appeared everywhere. All of them had only one word written on them: “*ḥurriyya*” (freedom). The people in the street were baffled and did not know how to react. The curiosity of some led them to check the balls before throwing them away. A mother took balls from the hand of her child and threw them away quickly as if she had balls of fire in her hands. Some people pretended not to see the balls while others simply kicked them away. The few seconds of confusion faded when undercover security agents jumped from their cars, kiosks and shops and began collecting the balls. It was a grotesque scene as the panicking agents ran around, following the balls in the hilly landscape. Reinforcements later arrived to assist this great mission of collecting balls plagued with the word freedom from the al-Muhājirīn neighbourhood before they roll down the hill to the more prestigious neighbourhood of al-Mālkī, the location of the presidential residence. Hours were spent looking for every ball: under cars, in the gutters and the cracks of the old pavement. Shopkeepers and passers-by were interrogated in case they had seen anything suspicious. The

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<sup>29</sup> Wedeen (2013:846) mentions the incident which involved ping-pong balls.

security forces combed the whole neighbourhood looking for the culprits. *Kurāt Al-Ḥurriyya* (Freedom Balls) were used on various occasions in Damascus, Hama, Rural Damascus and probably other governorates between 2011 and 2013.

When I met Sharif a year later in Beirut, I came across the same event. Sharif was one of the organisers of the “table tennis balls event”. The May event was not the first. It happened before in July 2011 (a few months after the beginning of the Uprising) and was repeated later in al-Tal in Rural Damascus (the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2011), Hama (July 2012) and again in al-Muhājirīn in Damascus (on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2013)<sup>30</sup>. Sharif and a number of friends collected 2000 table tennis ball, decorated them with the word ‘freedom’ and threw them into the upper side of al-Muhājirīn neighbourhood (al-Jāddāt) and then watched as they rolled down the hill to create a brief chaotic moment that overwhelmed the security forces in one of the city’s most heavily-controlled neighbourhood.

Non-violent activists initially sought to drain the regime’s human resources by “keeping them busy” and running on their feet all day. Sharif summarises it well when he observes that “the security forces of the regime [*Mukhābarāt*] are civil servants. They are lazy. They are not used to work 24 hours, seven days a week”. Sharif and other activists aimed at engaging the security forces all day long. They wanted to exhaust state operatives and increase the level of stress they were subjected to. If the agents in the neighbourhood had failed to collect all the balls, they would have been subject to the rage of their superiors and the aggressive reaction of higher-ranking officials. At that moment, Sharif and his friends were not the most threatened group. Their action created a moment where the security

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<sup>30</sup> The “Balls of Freedom in al-Muhājirīn” video was uploaded on YouTube., where the following events can be witnessed: 28<sup>th</sup> of July 2010 2010/7/28 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBnnCibJJY>); the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2011 in al-Tal in Rural Damascus (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iA2ezDDx4A>); al-Muhajreen in Damascus on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pteAta-vo4>); and Hama in July 2012 (Khoury, 2012).

agents who seemed to have the upper hand in the neighbourhood were stripped of their power, and themselves became subject to the fear of punishment if they fail to deliver. The attention of the security services was, at that moment, focused upon the threat of the tiny balls rather than the person who was responsible. It was as if the agents in the area just wanted to wipe out the balls and cover up what happened.

In 2011 and 2012, activists found that increasing the pressure on the security forces and keeping them busy seemed to be an effective practice. For months, the activists managed to keep the security forces confused and overwhelmed with small actions that mushroomed all over the city of Damascus. These techniques proved to be effective in the case of Damascus where the regime had a stronghold, and any confrontational act of resistance would have been crushed immediately, and activists would have been arrested. The aim, as many participants clearly stated, was to drain the regime's human resources. There are a limited number of security forces agents and regime supporters: by creating small spots of chaos around Damascus, activists would ensure that the agents were always on their feet; furthermore, these agents would be retained in Damascus rather than being sent to the "hotspots" in Rural Damascus, where activists resorted to more overt means of resistance.

Almost every activist from Damascus and Rural Damascus referred to this technique. Although there seem to be little if any coordination between different participants in these events, people often participated collectively in these spontaneous actions. One famous example was the "Freedom Balloons"<sup>31</sup>. On

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<sup>31</sup> Freedom Balloons were used on more than one occasion and they flew across different areas and neighbourhoods. See Saqba in Rural Damascus on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2011 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHOsOAcXjF4>); Al-Mazzeah neighbourhood in Damascus on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2011 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zv3HI6njFfk>); Darayya in Rural Damascus on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2011 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jZhmrQCotw>); Al-Sinaah neighbourhood in Damascus in June 2012 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1AMhwReUgl>).

more than one occasion, “freedom balloons” events were organised. The idea was to send hundreds of balloons into the air which included small messages calling for freedom and slogans of the Uprising (e.g. the People Demand the Regime to Fall – *al-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ al-niḏām*). On more than one occasion between 2010 and 2012, balloons came close to the presidential residence in the area that is heavily controlled by security forces. These events enjoyed considerable success in attracting the attention of national and international media, and this was reflected when one freedom balloon event was virtually organised by the Syrian Expatriates Coordination Unit (*Tansiqiyyat al-Mughtaribīn al-Sūriyyīn l Da‘m al Dākhil*) - balloons were released in al-Hasaka, al-Raqqā, Damascus, Rural Damascus and a number of cities around the world<sup>32</sup>.

It was often difficult to trace the organisation of these events. Those who participated in the event struggled to explain how it started and spread. Some heard about it from friends and decided to take part by buying a few balloons, writing the notes and sending both into the air on the same day. Others read about it on Facebook. On some occasions, members of various Local Coordination Committees (*Tansiqiyyāt*) claimed to be behind the idea. In general, it appeared that the idea began somewhere and spread very quickly through social media and word-of-mouth. By virtue of the nature of the activity, it attracted a large number of participants. The risk was relatively low, as it only took a few seconds to send the balloons and it was impossible to track where they came from.

Yara’s, a 28-year-old teacher from Rural Damascus, presented the freedom balloons in the following terms:

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<sup>32</sup> Freedom Balloons next to the Syrian Embassy in Amman in November 2011 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODjpX-bSnmg> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usKUzkBdjb0>)

“[T]hrough the regime is controlling the ground, the sky is ours. The security agents were standing everywhere helpless. They cannot reach the balloons. They can only watch them as they fly higher and higher. The balloons were free and out of the reach of these savages”.

In contrast with Yara’s idealistic representation, Sharif offered a more pragmatic presentation. He emphasises the fact that the balloons, just like the balls, added to the pressure that was exerted upon the security forces. These balloons emerged from everywhere, including areas (al-Mālkī, al-Mazzeḥ and Abu Rummāneh) where the security forces exert strong control, and this served to reiterate that this control could be challenged and contested. This made them feel “trapped and surrounded by a not so friendly environment after all”<sup>33</sup> These balloons challenged an established positionality and, even if just for a moment, regime forces would have experienced the sense of fear and helplessness that they were more used to inflict upon others.

The “Noise Campaign”, which was a similar campaign, took place in Homs in January 2012. Aḥed, a 42-year-old lady from Homs, describes it in the following terms. Every day at dusk, in the neighbourhoods subject to siege (e.g. Khāliḍiyya), families in each house would leave their windows open and start making a loud noise using kitchen utensils, pans and pots. They would sustain this noise, which could be heard from afar, for hours. While this action was not organised, it was collectively implemented by a large number of residents. When the noise began, regime forces cut the power and started shooting in the air in an attempt to make the people stop. However, Aḥed maintains that this was precisely the point: while the noise symbolised protest, it also irritated regime forces and kept them on edge.

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<sup>33</sup> The neighbourhoods of al-Mālkī, Mazzeḥ and Abu Rummaneh are where the Damascene upper class and regime officials are concentrated. It is considered to be the main non-Alawi centre of regime supporters.

The fact that the noise can be heard for several blocks clearly illustrated the level of participation and further reiterated that the majority of the people in these neighbourhoods were opposed to the regime. Ahed described the image she had in mind during the noise campaign, which was rather a comic one, she imagined the “security forces agents irritated and trying to close their ears, so they can stop hearing the noise, while their superiors were asking them to go and confiscate all the pans and pots in the city”.

The “flash demonstrations – *Masīrāt Tayyāra*”, a small quick demonstration that starts suddenly in one place and ends in a few minutes, is a final example. Flash demonstrations took place between late 2011 and early 2013, mainly in cities that remained under the control of the regime, such as Aleppo (before conflict intensified in the city) and Damascus. While the flash demonstrations require, in comparison to the aforementioned campaigns, a relatively higher level of organisation, it remained decentralised and involved certain level of spontaneity. The people I interviewed did not know (or were not willing to share) who helped to organise flash demonstrations. However, there was a consensus that a number of Local Coordination Committees must have been involved, because the flash demonstrations could not be organised by few individuals. All the interviewees who participated in the flash demonstrations received the information through a friend, who told them that there would be a demonstration in a certain neighbourhood at a certain time and they then proceeded there. By virtue of the nature of the activity and the fact that participants would be at risk of arrest, the use of social media was deliberately limited in order to avoid leaking the information to the regime forces. Word-of-mouth and Facebook encrypted messages remained the most effective and most secretive tools.

Basem, a 22-year-old paralegal from Rural Damascus, participated in a number of flash demonstrations around Damascus. He noted that the idea of flash

demonstrations was to organise one small sudden demonstration every fifteen minutes or so in different neighbourhoods with the intention of “driving the security forces crazy”. For example, one protest would begin at 6 pm in al-Maysāt (northeastern Damascus) and would then be followed by further protests at 6.15pm Mashru‘ Dummar, (far west of Damascus) and 6.30 in al-Barāmkeh, (central Damascus) and so on. They would initially make an anonymous call to the security forces to report a demonstration in a certain neighbourhood, and the forces would head there; meanwhile, a flash demonstration would start in an entirely different neighbourhood. The security forces would then be notified of this second protest because a third demonstration broke out, and so on. Regime forces would be driven to the point of distraction as they moved from one place to another.

Basem, in recalling Sharif’s earlier point, notes that the regime forces are both lazy and disorganised. This additional effort would have exhausted them and kept their stress levels high. Basem was amused by the impact of the regime forces struggling to deal with the various reports while being subject to the consternation of their superiors. The demonstrations were recorded and posted on YouTube and Facebook to show that there are acts of resistance everywhere and that they even occur in Damascus, a regime stronghold.

It is worth noting that their activities were not highly organised. An idea began somewhere, and then snowballed very quickly. People joined without being invited. Most of them either saw the campaign and then told others about it; otherwise, they were informed through their friends or social media. While these campaigns lacked any structured organisation, participants were able to agree upon general goals that revolved around irritating regime forces and keeping them preoccupied. Equally significantly, in each of these instances, participants felt that they had turned the tables on the regime forces. The power dynamics have changed and even inverted, in each of these actions. The regime forces were threatened by these minor actions



despite the considerable reserves of physical power that they possessed. These small practices threatened the regime forces and (albeit momentarily) stripped them of their power.

A number of general features can be extracted from these non-violent acts of resistance. Firstly, they are a mixture of hidden actions and public confrontation. The activists used a very clandestine manner to conduct a public action that confronted the regime forces in a very visual and loudly audible sense. Classifying the technique as hidden or public is undoubtedly challenging. At the surface, it looks like a simple public confrontation. Nonetheless, it is based on a more complex hidden transcript, where activists and ordinary people carried out their normal life pretending not to be involved in these actions, while they were actively involved in the confrontation with the regime. Regarding what type of dominations, the acts aimed to resist, the distinction became even more complicated. This technique aimed to address material domination. Activists wanted to drain the regime resources. They wanted to counterbalance the superiority of regime forces. In addition, the acts take a direct hit at the status domination of the regime. Conducting the acts in areas under regime's heavy control aimed to make a dent in the image of the regime as the ultimate dominant power in areas such as Damascus. Therefore, this technique is indeed a mixture of four categories public and hidden resistance against material and status domination.

## **Shaming and Embarrassing**

An unusual and shocking scene presented itself in the middle of Damascus on the 8th of April 2012 when a young woman, wearing a white outfit smeared with blood, stood on her own the busy neighbourhood of Sālihiyya next to the parliament building. She held a red sign which conveyed a stark and abrasive message: "Stop

the killing; we want to build a homeland for all Syrians” (Al-Arabiya, 2012c). This was Rima, a young activist whose commitment to the Uprising can be traced back to its very inception. On that day, she decided that she cannot take it anymore and that something had to happen to shake everyone’s position. She prepared her outfit and improvised a sign and went to the street to express her grievance. She consciously wanted to shock a broad section of opinion, the average person in the street, the opposition, the regime and the silent majority. For her, it was essential to make this statement at a time when the violence was escalating, and nonviolent actions were becoming scarcer.



Stop the killing; we want to build a homeland for all Syrians (News Center, 2012)

Rima describes her experience while standing in the street carrying her sign. She could see the police officer next to the Parliament looking at her with an expression of shock and confusion. She watched him try and fail to make the ‘call’

on more than one occasion. As if he was hoping that she will leave on her own and would avoid being arrested. Eventually, he had to make the ‘call’ to report the incident and ask for reinforcement. However, he called the police, not the security forces. The police arrived to arrest her, and when the security forces requested to take her, the police refused, before taking her to the nearest police station where she was detained for three days and asked to sign a pledge that she would not do it again. She was helped by the fact that the police officer who interrogated her noted that her message was addressed to “both sides”. Rima remembers that the officers in the police station seemed very sympathetic. She believes that she made the police uncomfortable and unsure of how to handle the “woman in the bloody outfit”. Some made jokes about the ‘bloody outfit’ while others attempted to ignore it. She could sense that the situation was different from the other times she was arrested.

The ‘Stop the Killing’ campaign attracted the attention of the national and international media. When Rima and two friends (who had tried to intervene when the police arrived) were arrested, the campaign went viral. Facebook pages endorsed her message and called for the release of Rima and her friends<sup>34</sup>, and her slogan was reproduced in demonstrations held in many towns and cities across the country (Al-Manshur, 2012). People started to identify with the campaign. Nonviolent activists were even labelled ‘Stop the Killing People’, especially by those who remained sceptical of the nonviolent resistance

Rima’s actions embarrassed the regime forces and made it clear that they had no idea of how to deal with her. However, her intention was also to engage the

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<sup>34</sup> Examples of Facebook pages that posted the slogan and joined the campaign: Secular Syria (<https://www.facebook.com/SyriaSecular/posts/304492379619830>); Armenians of Syria ([https://www.facebook.com/armenians.of.syria/posts/272499789505038?stream\\_ref=5](https://www.facebook.com/armenians.of.syria/posts/272499789505038?stream_ref=5)); Idrab al-Karama (Dignity Strike) (<https://www.facebook.com/karamah.Dignity.Strike/posts/266288796797986>); and Tansiqiyat Jamia’at Dimashq (Damascus University Coordination Committee (<https://www.facebook.com/damascus.university1/>)).

silent majority, who activists often blame for the perpetuation of the conflict. While her message was directly aimed at the regime and the armed groups, Rima also wanted to engage a passive society. She was fully aware that her action would not stop the killing in itself; however, she also knew that the image of a young woman standing in a bloody outfit would impact the society and would even shame them for not participating in stopping the killing. In her words, her intention was to “awaken the humane side of all the involved parties”.

This public protest was followed a few months later (in December 2012) by the “Freedom Brides” campaign. (*‘ara’es al-Ḥurriyya*) (Syria Untold, 2012). Rima and two friends dressed up in wedding gowns and carried a large sign with the same slogan before standing in al-Ḥamīdiyya Market in old Damascus. Again, the aim was not only to protest against killing but also to shame those present in Al-Ḥamīdiyya Market, which is one of the busiest spots in the heart of old Damascus. The first demonstration broke out here in February 2011<sup>35</sup> (Al-Jazeera, 2012), when a police officer assaulted a young man there, and people protested. The Minister of Interior attended and apologised to the demonstrators in an effort to contain the situation. However, Damascus was largely absent from the wider national uprising, and observers often clarify it as being either silent or sympathetic to the regime. Al-Ḥamīdiyya Market was an effective place to conduct this protest because it is the spiritual home of the Damascene bourgeoisie which has chosen to privilege its own interests over those of the Uprising. Again, the brides sought to convey a message both to the regime and to the general public. They wanted to shame them for being silent. They stood in place for around 15 minutes before being arrested. During their vigil, the brides could clearly sense the discomfort in the surrounding atmosphere.

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<sup>35</sup> Hareeqa Market protest on 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2011 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrBELWvFhU>).



Freedom Brides (Ara'es al-Hurriyyah) in Midhat Basha Market in Damascus (Zaman al-Wasel, 2013)<sup>36</sup>

Whereas it is usually necessary for shoppers to elbow their way around the busy market, this was not necessary as the crowds flowed around the girls. They had a whole space to themselves as people were keen to avoid getting too close to them. The girls were aware they inspired different reactions: some people stared at them curiously while others just ignored them and carried on with their activities, apparently under the impression that the merest glance would be misinterpreted as a sign of approval, which they could not afford to show out of fear. Nobody dared to interact with them. When the security forces arrived to arrest them, nobody dared to intervene or even to watch. A second after they were arrested, things rapidly returned to normal, as if the vigil had never happened. It felt like there was an unconscious attempt by merchant and shoppers to wipe out the moment. The same reaction occurred when a few university students visited Chaam City Centre, the

<sup>36</sup> Signs translates from left to right: “you and we are tired... we want another solution (100% Syrian)”, “For the Syrian human, the civil society announces: suspension of all military action in Syria (100% Syrian)”, “Syria is for all of us (100% Syrian)”.

largest mall in Damascus, and lay down at the floor pretending to be dead, with the intention of reminding the people of the victims of the conflict (Aks al-Ser, 2012). Shoppers avoided even looking at them laying on the floor. This act was also directed towards the society in Damascus who seemed to be oblivious to what was happening around them.

Rana, a 32-year-old bank worker, is a Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in Damascus. She lived in the al-Yarmūk neighbourhood (which was formerly a refugee camp) until she moved to Amman in 2012. She observes that “the crisis altered the relation with the society not only with the state”. She believed that the events in Syria did not only change the power relation with the regime. It has affected the dynamics in the society. This view was also echoed by a number of other activists who were interviewed. While the question of whether this was indeed the case extends beyond the remit of the current research, it is interesting to see how the activists perceived their role, and how that was reflected in their discourse.

Stop the killing, the freedom brides and the mall incident are indeed public activities that aimed to use an open and overt method to reach out to the general public. Even that they were extremely risky moves that might have led the participating activists to spend years in detention if not being killed, the activists choose to take the risk and to publicise their action to the max. For them, the impact of a shocking public act was worth the risk. They chose a public confrontation without any hidden aspects to protect themselves. This technique is undoubtedly aimed to resist status domination. By dressing up and acting publicly, the activists aimed for the regime’s image as the dominant power.

Although this technique can be considered a straightforward case of public resistance against status domination, it is worth noting some hidden ideological dimensions. Since the beginning of the Uprising, the regime’s ideology was about

“us versus them”. The regime systematically disseminated messages that demonised protestors and anti-regime activists. In one of his speeches, Bashar Assad<sup>37</sup> explicitly mentioned that the homeland is not for the citizens but for those who protect it. A statement that was widely criticised as it deprived Syrians of their right to belong to the country and gave a direct indication that Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese militias that are fighting on the regime side have earned the privileges of living in Syria. This divisive strategy aimed to treat anti-Assad Syrians as being “strangers” and “foreigners”. Therefore, the message sent by stop the killing and freedom brides that refer to build a country for all the Syrians is indeed an act of resistance against this ideological domination too. It provided a slogan that rejected the regime propaganda and ideology that Syrians are not equal, and their patriotism is measured by which side they stand on. In that sense, this shaming and embarrassing technique was not merely against status domination but also ideological domination.

## Using the Regime Platforms

Since the initial stages of the Uprising, the regime has not tolerated any act of resistance. This meant that activists had to improvise and develop creative solutions in response to the problems that they faced. Organisation and coordination were particularly challenging because the use of conventional methods of communication was often very dangerous. For this reason, activists had to seek out for alternative spaces and platforms. Ironically, one of the channels that

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<sup>37</sup> Bashar Assad Speech on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2015.

<http://mubasher.aljazeera.net/news/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%83%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%87>

were particularly prominent during the first 18 months of the Uprising was created by the regime.

Before the Uprising began, the First Lady's social work was largely focused upon Syrian youth. The Youth Agenda is a national project that seeks to empower Syrian youth. A former senior staff member in the First Lady's office informed that this project had been strongly influenced by Youth agendas in other countries. The plan was to organise national campaigns that would raise awareness and empower youth, change the mind-set of policymakers and support youth-led projects that would improve local communities. The agenda was supposed to be led by young men and women from across the country. It was initiated and overseen by the Office of the First Lady, and the First Lady was supposed to follow up on its progress personally. Youth Agenda was managed by the Youth Council for Volunteering Work which is part of *Itihād Shabībat al-Thaūra* (Revolutionary Youth, which is the youth wing of the Baath Party). It was implemented in partnership with a number of governmental agencies (including The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs), national NGOs (SHABAB, to take one example) and international organisation (including UNFPA). The agenda started in 2010, and in 2014, it was supposedly still being implemented in Syria. (Youth Agenda, unpublished)

As part of the activities implemented under the umbrella of the Youth Agenda, a training on community organising was provided to a number of young Syrians. Marshal Ganz, a senior lecturer at Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and International Expert in Community Organising Work, was recruited as an international consultant to provide the training to a core team of Syrian youth on issues related to community organising and leadership. This training was undertaken in the expectation that they would later become leaders in their communities and work as local trainers responsible for training Syrian Youth from across the country. The first round of training took place in June 2010, when



Ganz trained seven people on leadership and community organising. In December of the same year, 30 people were trained by the core team (trained by Ganz) and by *Āhl*, a Jordanian NGO, on advocacy and community organisations. These 30 trainees were from different governorates and were supposed to become trainers in their local areas: they would, therefore, disseminate their knowledge of advocacy and community organisation. They would work as local leaders in their communities and would help to empower youth, thus promoting their involvement in Syria's decision-making process. As a result of bureaucratic inertia and a lack of organisation in *Itihād Shabībat al-Thawra*, the project did not proceed in the way it was intended to. While the trainees were provided with the skills and tools they need to start organising local initiatives, there was no mechanism that would help them to proceed or implement local projects. The results varied from one place to another in accordance with the individual initiative that was operative in the area.

*Nuwwāb Shabāb* (Young MPs) was the main initiative that emerged from the community organising training component of Youth Agenda. Six out of the thirty trainees worked together on the initiative. The goal was to help young men and women from different governorates to be elected to Parliament, with the ultimate intention that at least 25 of the 250 MPs would be less than 30-years-old. The election was planned for August 2011, and the community organising team began working with young candidates in order to enhance their chances. Adham, a 28-year-old man from Suweida, was one of six people who started the initiative. He initially engaged during the second wave of advocacy and community organising training. He was a Red Crescent volunteer, and he had previous experience of working with local communities. Adham and his colleagues managed to mobilise and recruit a number of trainees and volunteers in seven governorates, with a view to enabling their participation in the *Nuwwāb Shabāb* initiative, which took place between June and August 2011, a period when the uprising was still nonviolent

across the country. However, in August 2011 (a date which coincides with Ramadan), armed resistance began to spread across the country. During this period, they organised training sessions across the country that introduced the initiative and used the Marshal Ganz approach to train teams on community organising.

While the team worked under the Youth Agenda heading, it was not actually a Youth Agenda project. It was instead an initiative that these six individuals started, benefiting from the national blessing of the Youth Agenda. During this period, the Youth Council was suffering from internal issues that led to it being dissolved and merged under another entity that was jointly created by the Office of the First lady and *Itihād Shabībat al-Thawra*. Adham and his colleagues could sense at the time that the *Nuwwāb Shabāb* initiative was not going to work as the situation in the country was deteriorating very rapidly – this was shown by the fact that the planned parliamentary election had been postponed indefinitely at the time. The team sought to benefit from the situation and therefore continued to operate under the Youth Agenda - they, therefore, continued to organise training across the country. The plan was to provide young people with the tools that would help them to organise their efforts to resist the regime.

Adham notes that the main problem at the beginning of the uprising was that the majority of people who participated in demonstrations and other activities lacked the needed skills to organise their work and translate their personal motivation into working plans. The *Nuwwāb Shabāb* team, therefore, decided to seize the opportunity and train as many people as they could before the initiative was suspended or terminated. They managed to train 700 people from all across Syria, 50 of whom were ready to become trainers themselves. Logistical impediments meant that the training was restricted to seven governorates (Aleppo, Damascus, Deir Ezzor, Latakia, Rural Damascus, Suweida and Tartous). The trainees came

from a diverse range of backgrounds and included members of Local Coordination Committees, members of different initiatives (e.g. Stop the Killing Campaign), NGO staff members, students and young professionals. However, the majority, if not all of the trainees, were opposed to the regime and were actively engaged, in one way or another, in the Uprising. A number of participants who benefited from the training are among the most prominent non-violent resistance activists in the country. They include bloggers, citizen journalists, members of Local Coordination Committees and nonviolent initiatives organisers. Trainees were recruited via the snowballing method starting with the first group they engaged. They avoided obtaining the trainees' names as this helped to ensure their safety. Eight workshops were organised, which had a particular focus on effectiveness, were organised for members of Local Coordination Committees.

The training sessions took places in premises that were controlled by the regime. For example, the training in Damascus were held in Massar (a GONGO headed by the First Lady), and the Syrian Computer Society (a GONGO that was established by Bassel Assad, the President's late brother, and which is now chaired by the President himself). In Aleppo and Deir Ezzor, the training took place in the Student Union, which is part of the Baath Party. On more than one occasion, regime forces barged into the training rooms. However, when they found out that the training was being conducted by Youth Agenda, they then allowed the meetings to continue. In order to ensure the continuity of the training, they tended to focus on the technical aspects of community organising, and consciously steered clear of real-world reference. However, when the election was postponed, the training was finally brought to a halt. However, Adham maintained that a number of the trainees continued to organise sessions in secret.

Adham believed that the regime did not suspect anything. The events were organised and held in government venues, and the name and logo of the Youth

Agenda continued to adorn promotional material and other publications, which helped them to operate for few months without raising suspicion. “We used their tools and platforms to serve our goals,” says Adham. Training used regime funding, were held in regime premises and even used the name of the Youth Agenda. Official permission to conduct the training was provided at the same time as Syrian troops were firing on demonstrators in the street.

The use of the regime platform also proved to be partially effective in another instance. Sharif, who participated in the table tennis balls campaign, sought the help of his friends as he attempted to target undercover security agents in the streets around the Damascus Governor’s Office. In Syria, it is common knowledge that security agents pretend to be cab drivers and street vendors. Street vendors are banned by law, and it is therefore rare to find a genuine one on the streets. Subsequent to the Uprising, the number of security agents on the street increased dramatically. That was clearly demonstrated by the large number of street vendors and makeshift stalls that mushroomed around Damascus. Sharif and two other friends made an appointment to visit Damascus Governor. During the meeting, they handed him a petition signed by a number of people which asked the Governorate to enforce the law that bans street vendors. Sharif was very amused by the Governor’s evident discomfort, along with his desperate appeals to the sensitivity of the issue, claiming that the current situation forced many people to turn to the street to make a living. Sharif and his friends pushed the issue by arguing that vendors were not desperate people who are making a living but rather merchants who were abusing the system. The Governor eventually promised to address the problem and issued a warning to the vendors, which threatened consequences if they did not remove their makeshift stalls. Sharif acknowledged the fact that nothing happened and that the agents simply ignored the Governor. Although this warning

had no concrete consequences, Sharif viewed the mere issuance of the warning as a victory.

Other activists enjoyed greater success in using the regime platform. Shabāb al-Khaīr<sup>38</sup>, an NGO that emerged in the aftermath of the Uprising and which expanded very quickly in Homs, managed to distribute large-scale humanitarian relief, in large part due to the support of the city's incumbent Governor. Nisreen, a 22-year-old university student and founding member of Shabāb al-Khaīr, explained how the many regime checkpoints made it difficult to move food and medical supplies around Homs. Checkpoints used to stop cars, confiscate supplies and arrest drivers. Shabāb al-Khaīr managed to overcome this problem by persuading Homs's Governor to issue them with special permission that would enable them to move supplies around Homs. During the initial stages of the Uprising, there was clear confusion with regard to respective roles and responsibilities within the country. During 2011 and 2012, the volunteers experienced few problems when they sought to use the Governor's permission. However, this began to change during the later stages of the conflict when the checkpoints became increasingly autonomous, to the point where they saw fit to ignore the Governor or any other Government official/s.

It is fascinating to see how activists used a public platform to conduct hidden actions. Nuwwab Shabab program was implemented in an overt manner, and it was

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<sup>38</sup> *Shabāb al-Khaīr* is an NGO that was registered in 2011. It is a spin-off of *al-Birr wa al-Khadamāt* Organisation, the largest NGO in Homs. *Shabāb al-Khaīr* was established by the younger generation at *al-Birr wa al-Khadamāt*, who felt it was not possible to make a difference in al-Berr and decided to start a new organisation. They initially focused on education (scholarships) and financial assistance to young couples struggling with marriage expenses. Between 2007-2010, their application was rejected six times before finally being approved in early 2011. The situation on the ground made it necessary to shift their focus to humanitarian relief and by 2014 they had become established as the largest humanitarian relief provider in Homs. Their projects vary in accordance with the needs of those impacted by the ongoing conflict. Past project focus areas include aid distribution, capacity-building, daycare, education medical support, pharmaceutical support, and training.

publicised by the regime as part of its efforts to “empower” and “modernise” Syrian youth. Activists have bravely used that extremely public platform to advance their hidden agenda/actions to train and organise youth to carry out anti-regime resistance acts. In other words, activists were engaged in a public activity that was used as a cover for a dangerous hidden activity. The borders between public and hidden are blurred in this technique. More importantly, it is not an easy task to decide whether this was aimed to address material, status or ideological domination. The use of the platform to train and organise activists was a means to an end; it was not the final goal. The goal was that once the activists are organised, they can resist the regime more effectively. The *Tansiqqiyat* and other groups that emerged from this initiative conducted a wide variety of actions. It is safe to assume that their actions varied between public and hidden and aimed to address all sort of domination.

## **Humanitarian Work as an Act of Resistance**

As part of the collective punishment policy, the regime denied humanitarian aids to areas that revolted. Siege was used as a weapon to discourage participation in the Uprising and to encourage fighters to surrender. The Regime considers the smuggling of food and medicines into besieged areas to be a major crime. In the event of being found guilty of this ‘offence’, individuals should expect a substantial sentence to be rendered under the new anti-terrorism law (which replaced Syria’s Emergency Law). The regime considers all citizens, who are mainly civilians, in the besieged areas to be terrorists and the provision of health services or other forms of medical support is frequently punished by execution. Those working in makeshift field hospitals are executed on the spot, and pharmacist found to be selling

medicines are arrested and tortured<sup>39</sup>. By virtue of the Regime's depraved actions, what had previously been the most basic of human obligations now became an act of resistance.

Accessing the areas under siege and smuggling in aid (food and medical) was a significant challenge that confronted those involved in humanitarian work. Activists involved in humanitarian work had to ensure that the checkpoints they would be passing were ready for them before they arrived. Reda, a 45-year-old dentist, had an instructive experience when he sought to smuggle medicine to Zamalka in Rural Damascus. Reda is a cautious and careful activist. When I first met him after being put in contact by a friend in Beirut, he refused to share his name, chose where we met and refused to allow the conversation to be recorded. He agreed to be interviewed as a favour to a shared friend.

After the first hour of what became a seven-hour interview, he warmed to me and began to share personal details. His cautious nature stemmed from his past experience as a former member of the Syrian Communist Party who had been arrested in the 90s for political activism (his Kurdish background undoubtedly did not help him in this respect). When the Uprising began, he was reluctant to become engaged, until the escalation of regime violence compelled his involvement. He was involved in getting medical supplies into Zamalka, where he had an established practice (this was an advantage at the checkpoints). He initially carried small supplies in order to avoid being caught at the checkpoints. However, he was caught when a search of his car revealed medicines and basic first aid supplies. Fortunately, he knew most of the officers there, and they gave him the opportunity to explain. He understood the system well, and he knew that if he mentioned his

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<sup>39</sup> Many activists were able to discuss precise incidents in detail, along with dates, places and the names of those who had been executed when regime forces entered field hospitals.

humanitarian motive, he would be immediately arrested. He, therefore, told the officer that was selling the supplies in Zamalka and making good money from it: the officer acquiesced, as long as he received a share of the profits, thus establishing the basis for a working relationship between Reda and the officer that would continue for weeks.

With regard to the food supply, there seemed to be a clear tariff that was dependent upon the type of food and its quantity. Ali, who was involved in getting food supply to Duma, showed me a price list: a truck of flour costs 53,000 Syrian Pounds to be let in on the checkpoint; a water truck costs 7,000 Syrian Pounds and so on. There was even a tariff for allowing people in and out, which varied in accordance with age, gender, occupation and origin. However, the list did not include medical supply, as this was a particular item that was rarely tolerated. Ali thanked the corruption for keeping many people alive for months.

However, this did not last long. The regime noticed at some point that the policy of collective punishment was not working due to the corruption on the checkpoints. As a consequence, Hezbollah members, the Lebanese party, were introduced to many checkpoints, especially in Rural Damascus. Ali, Reda and other activists pointed out that bribery was no longer a proposition when Hezbollah was involved. Hezbollah members were rarely, if ever, corrupt. They viewed themselves as being engaged in an ideological and religious war in which there was no room for any compromise. Ali observed that after Hezbollah became involved, the incidence of severe hunger and malnutrition, along with related deaths, substantially increased as breaking the siege became very difficult.

The bribing of corrupt officers was nonetheless a source of considerable controversy amongst the activists. While the avoidance of arrest is clearly one way of defying the regime's power; from another perspective, bribery appears as an act



of submission in which the activist accepts the regime's rules of the game. This issue also arose during discussions with several of the activists that I interviewed. During a casual discussion with Sharif about bribes and corruption, he claimed that he had never had to pay officers money in order to avoid arrest. He insisted that he would not make any concession to the corrupt system, although he seemed to relax this position when discussing the smuggling of food and medical supplies. His act of rebellion derives from his determination to reject the system rather than to become part of it. However, given contemporary circumstances in Syria, it is entirely comprehensible that activists would go to any length to avoid being arrested. The reports of torture that have emerged from the regime's detention centres virtually counsel this course of action.

Bribing regime officers is clearly a hidden action that activists resort to, to avoid public confrontation. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see multi-layers of hidden actions to advance certain agenda. Lying about the motive for bringing supplies and bribing checkpoints to access areas under siege were used to hide the actual motive of providing humanitarian aid. Activists used hidden action to disguise an ordinary daily life action of providing food and medicine to those in need. The technique aims to resist both material and status domination. In terms of material domination, by smuggling food and medical supply, the activists undermined the control of the regime over materials. They broke the siege and distributed materials that were otherwise forbidden by the regime. Moreover, the actions undermined the status domination of the regime as the ultimate power that controls areas under siege.

## Lying, Deception and False Pretence

While Ahed was telling her story and reminiscing about demonstrations in Homs, her mother Um Rabi' sat and listened quietly. I met Ahed and Um Rabi' in a camp in Northern Lebanon, a few miles outside of Tripoli. Um Rabi' is a 78-year-old lady from Homs who had never travelled outside of Syria until she was forced to flee the country in 2013. Ahed spoke with great detail about one of the demonstrations that followed the notorious Clock Tower Massacre, when she saw unarmed men and women shot in the street. She recited the names of those who had been killed that night: "Mohamed, the son of our neighbour he was 18, Hadi my third cousin...., Sabi' the son of Um Ahmad...., Jawad a shopkeeper in our neighbourhood...".

Um Rabi' suddenly interrupted: "No, Jawad was not dead. They took him to al-Birr hospital. I saw him there. I stayed with him for three days before he died". She then returned to her silence. Ahed suddenly stopped reciting the long list of names and began to elaborate on her mother's comment.

After the Clock Tower Massacre, the regime forces went to hospitals where they arrested the survivors. Those who had been critically injured were shot in their hospital beds. Survivors without family members by their side accounted for a substantial proportion of these deaths. I had heard similar stories in other governorates. As a consequence, older women in Homs worked out a rota among themselves to go to hospitals and pretend to be the family members of injured people. This helped to protect them from random shooting and arrest by regime forces. Um Rabi' visited Jawad at the hospital. She knew that he was from Rural Homs and that he had no family in Homs city to keep an eye on him. When she heard he was injured, she went to the hospital pretending to be his mother. This was not an exceptional practice, particularly in Homs.

Scott (1985) suggests that lying and pretending are very common techniques of hidden resistance. Activists frequently resorted to it in order to avoid arrest and prosecution. During almost every interview and conversation, the social media presence of activists appeared as a variation of this theme. Alaa, a young woman from Rural Idleb, was very excited when she showed me her different Facebook accounts – her ISIS account, friends account and regime account. Alaa is from a small town in Rural Idleb, and her town came under opposition control in 2012. However, in 2014 ISIS took over her town, until the Free Syrian Army then forced ISIS to retreat. Alaa was part of the resistance against the regime and later against ISIS.

Alaa is from a very conservative small community. She holds a college degree, speaks some English and works with an international organisation in Rural Idleb. Her Regime Facebook account presented her as a simple girl from a rural community. Her page was filled with photos of babies, cooking recipes, fashion and kittens. Her friends (who also had more than one Facebook page) shared her interests in each of these subjects. Alaa maintained this account saved her more than once at checkpoints. It is very common for officers to look over people's smartphones and mobiles. Alaa stopped maintaining this page when the regime lost control of her town; however, she keeps it as a "souvenir" from this time. In contrast, her ISIS Facebook account, which she created when ISIS became the ruling authority, is tailored to emphasise her religious piety. It accordingly contains links to religious internet sites, pictures of nature and verses from the Quran and flowers. She has never had to use this account but has kept it as a precaution, as ISIS agents were often unpredictable.

Lying, deception and false pretence are indeed typical actions of the hidden transcript that Scott spoke about. Activists and ordinary people, having spent their lives dominated by the regime power, they knew well how to manipulate the

situation to their own advantage. They knew what lies to tell and how to tell these lies to advance their agenda and protect themselves. It is indeed a straightforward example of hidden resistance against status domination.

## **Documentation and Virtual Resistance**

From the beginning of the Uprising, Assad's regime blocked international and national media in an attempt to contain political dissent. In response, activists drew upon social media in order to document and report ongoing events. Facebook pages were created to share information and facilitate protest and hashtags were created to spread key messages. YouTube videos were also broadcast on a daily basis, Journalists and media outlets were denied access to the country, and they had to rely heavily on citizen journalists and grassroots activists. This is why Lynch et al. (2014:5) argue that the Syrian Uprising is "the most socially mediated civil conflict in history". However, it was not only opposition activists that drew upon this resource. Regime supporters also used social media and the Syrian Electronic Army monitored and reported activists' pages, hacked opposition websites and spread Regime propaganda. (O'Callaghan et al., 2014),

The virtual cyber war assumed an important role in the conflict, especially during its early stages. Local Coordination Committees relied heavily on Facebook to build their networks and organise activities and demonstrations. Sharif, Adham, Jenna and Saeb spoke extensively about the "virtual revolution". Activists used their Facebook to network and organise their activities. For them, it was easier to carry these activities out online, as here, they can use aliases, and this reduces the risk of them being caught. VPNs were also essential as they prevented the activists from being tracked by regime forces. Sharif used to wait to receive an encrypted Facebook message from a friend of his to tell him when and where to join a

demonstration. SMS and phones were out of the question since they are easily monitored. Sharif would wait to get the message, and he would pass it to a couple of his friends, who they would pass it on to other people. Word-of-mouth, who was the most effective tools of communication, was occasionally replaced by virtual messages.

Activists considered their online presence to be an essential resource in their efforts to resist the Regime attempts. During each day, hundreds of videos and photos are uploaded online to report the situation on the ground. International news channels depended on the work of citizen journalists to cover the developments in Syria, since the conventional media was not allowed access to the country. Activists worked hard to document and broadcast demonstrations, grassroots activities and regime atrocities. Jenna states:

“We wanted to break the siege on Syria; we wanted to show the world what is happening. It was our voice, and we won’t allow Bashar to steal it or silence it. The people spoke, and the world should hear it.”

In November 2012, *Hunā Dimashq*<sup>40</sup> (Here is Damascus) was launched in order to focus international attention upon Damascus, after the regime cut off all communication channels (internet, mobiles and phones) for a few days (al-Arabiya, 2012b). This coincided with widespread rumours that the regime was planning to launch a massive military operation in Damascus. When the blackout started, the campaign was launched online. Facebook statuses, tweets and YouTube videos

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<sup>40</sup> Huna Dimashq spread across Facebook pages and was mentioned by some media outlets. Some examples from Facebook: Souriatna Newspaper Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/souriatna/posts/50515664951820>) ; Tansiqyyat Deir Ezzor (<https://www.facebook.com/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%82%DF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82-540711255958097/>)

were used to show solidarity, and the slogan of “Here is Damascus from [the city where the person lives]” (e.g. Here is Damascus from Dubai, here is Damascus from London). The Source of the campaign remained anonymous, but the campaign was inspired by the famous incident in 1956 when Radio Cairo was bombed during the Suez Canal Crisis and the Tripartite Aggression on Egypt. ). On this day, the Syrian National Radio began its broadcasting with the statement “Here is Cairo from Damascus”<sup>41</sup>. This is how it later became a symbol of solidarity and support. Activists often celebrated the “Here is Damascus” campaign as a way of resisting the regime’s attempts to silence them. Sharif states:

” He [Bashar] thought that he could hold the whole city hostage by silencing the people voices, but we fought back. The whole world fought back with us”.

In addition to using social media to fill the vacuum created by a lack of formal media at the ground, civilians also used social media to provide security and protection against regime aggression, along with the newly-formed state in northern Syria. Megret (2014:3-5) maintains that grassroots journalism is an essential means of self-protection which operates through documentation and sharing of events. Grassroots journalism also enables the sharing of atrocities – to this extent, it enables justice by providing the necessary evidence. Social media can also be used to limit the power of the state-like structures that have emerged in opposition-held areas. Tammam, a media activist from Saraqeb (Rural Idlib), which fell under opposition control in 2012, emphasised how social media makes a vital contribution by deterring people from breaking the law. He maintains that, in a context where formal law enforcement structures in newly liberated areas were absent, the reporting offences via social media outlets proved to be effective. He believes that

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<sup>41</sup> National Radios in the Middle East often begin their broadcasting by stating ‘Here is Damascus’ or ‘Here is Amman.’

abuses of power and corruption were particularly responsive to this reporting mechanism. He explains:

“Local council members always check Facebook pages to see what people say about them. They ask [him] whether anyone wrote anything about them, and they say they just don’t want to be criticised on Facebook. They cannot handle it.”

Documentation and reporting of regime atrocities is a hidden act of resistance that manifests in a public manner. People who are involved in the documentation conduct their actions in a clandestine manner for their safety. Nonetheless, their end product is indeed a public action, where their captured videos and photos go publicly. They measure their success by how public they can go. Therefore, it is not possible to simply classify the act as hidden or public. In terms of what type of domination this is aimed for, it is slightly less complicated. The technique works mostly on the level of status domination. Activists want to counter the rhetoric of the regime. The regime propaganda portrayed the conflict as being between the “moderate” and “legitimate” government of Syria against “terrorists”. The documentation shows that the victims are indeed ordinary people who are often not involved in the conflict. However, similar to the “shaming and embarrassing”, the technique also works at the ideology level. It aims to provide a counterargument to the regime propaganda that casualties are indeed terrorists and fighters. It shows that on the “other side” people who are being killed are mostly ordinary people including children. It is not simply a fight between the “government” and “terrorist”.

## Conclusion

Scott (1985) argues that people resort to hidden techniques of resistance when there is fear; once this fear has been absented, they then return to overt public transcripts, as there is no longer a need to use the hidden means any more. However, the contributions of the key informants suggest a very different conclusion: they suggest, by virtue of the fact that people continue to mix both, that it is not a case of a linear transition from the hidden to the public. It is equally important to note that there is no clear-cut dividing line that separates hidden and public acts of resistance. The line, which separates each component, can, at best, be said to be blurred. In addition, borders between dominations that actions are aimed to address are equally hard to define. Activists aim their actions, whether public or hidden, toward a different type of dominations, often simultaneously. The environment of extreme violence leads the activists to follow a less straightforward approach to resist the regime power. They adopt a sophisticated approach that mixes hidden and public and that targets different level of dominations at once.

Scott (1985) maintains that while hidden practices are more effective than explicit actions and confrontations, it is conceivable that people may, in an act of desperation, abandon them. Tellingly, a number of informants suggest that the movement from hidden to the public has not always been informed by desperation. Rather in some instances, it has instead arisen as part of a calculated action in which individuals weigh their options and decide which might be more effective at a certain stage. As a result, they tend to alternate their approach.

In addressing themselves to authoritarian power, ordinary people and activists have adopted an impressive range of different practices and techniques. These include adapting regime platforms for their own benefit, documentation of atrocities, keeping regime forces preoccupied, lying and deception, resisting



through humanitarian activities and shaming and embarrassing regime officials. In many instances, activist resistance encompasses society as a whole and is not therefore solely focused upon the regime.

The choice of hidden actions or public confrontation is far from being straightforward as it is not only a product of the context in which people operate. It is not reducible to a preference or a rational decision that is focused upon the techniques that would yield an optimal result. It is instead an inherently complex decision that touches upon a constellation of different reference points: the activists' system of beliefs; the individual's emotional investment in the issue; their means; and their assessment of the situation. People regularly mix hidden and public, and it is often difficult to draw the line between when hidden actions end and public confrontation starts.

# Chapter 6 – Control and Domination of Space: Physical, Intellectual and Virtual

## Introduction

This chapter progresses to the last stage in tracing the process of non-violent resistance. The last two chapters considered the motivations of activists along with the question of how these motivations translated into action during the first few years of the Uprising. This chapter progresses from these two points to demonstrate how these actions were deployed in the effort to control and dominate the space in which activists operate. The chapter will examine how different techniques and strategies were used to assert control over the space and to resist the regime's interventions.

Scholars have often argued that control of space is an essential aspect of the assertion of control and power (Giddens, 1985; Mitchell 1988; Neep, 2012). As Foucault (1984) argues, space itself is a complex context. It is not simply a stage for physical battle (Lefebvre, 1991). In that sense, space should not be limited to its geographical/physical application. In further demonstrating this point, this chapter will consider three levels when examining the control and domination of space. The first section examines the power struggle to dominate physical space and seeks to identify how grassroots actors and the regime deploy different techniques and tactics in their efforts to control; streets and cities. The second part explores the intellectual battle between the two antagonists and how the regime and the resistance try to dominate at an intellectual level. Finally, the third section seeks to engage the notion of virtual space; the use of social media and the role of citizen journalism are analysed.

Space is where domination takes place and manifests. Therefore, it is important to examine where acts of resistance whether hidden or public take place and how that affects the various level of dominations. Although the relationship with space and type of domination is far from been straightforward, in order to make the study more manageable it is assumed that a certain type of domination is the most prominent in certain space. For example, material domination often takes place at in the physical space. Intellectual and virtual spaces provide a platform for both intellectual and status domination. This does not mean that certain domination manifests solely in a certain sphere. This classification is for the sake of simplification to facilitate the analysis.

## **Physical Space**

### ***Free Spaces***

The lack of free spaces was the first space-related issue that confronted the people when the Uprising began. Free spaces are the safe havens within the community that enable mobilisation to occur (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Polletta, 1999). They are the places in which grassroots actors and social movements can establish a foundation for the mobilisation process and launch their activities. The lack of these spaces obstructs the mobilisation process, or at best renders it highly challenging. These safe havens, which include churches, clubs and community centres, provide the safe havens that “insulate the challenging group from the rationalising ideologies normally disseminated by the society’s dominated group” (Hirsch, 1993:161).

The regime fully registered the importance of the free spaces. This is why all possible spaces were subject to heavy controls during the 50 years in which Hafez

and Bashar Assad reign. As part of the control and surveillance culture, people did not have the opportunity to gather in any public, or even private, space without the risk of being spied on or even arrested. The emergency law that was in place until 2011 prohibited any gathering and people were subject to arrest. The security forces (*Mukhābarāt*) were always present in churches, mosques, schools, universities or any other public place<sup>42</sup>. The regime's success in infiltrating the society at all levels created a culture of fear that extended beyond public spaces and entered the private sphere, a situation which was clearly embodied in the saying "the walls have ears". People were even afraid to express their opinions behind closed doors, as they could not trust even close friends and relatives.

This historic control over space was the first challenge that confronted the people during the mobilisation phase. Most of the activists who participated in the demonstrations during the first year of the Uprising told similar stories about the lack of free spaces to meet and organise. Rala (a 36-year-old female from Homs who is an office manager) and Khadija (a 38-year-old woman from Zamalka who is a teacher) were arrested in 2012 in a Damascus café when they were discussing how they would distribute clothes and chocolates to the children of Rural Damascus during the *Eid* holiday. Rala is Christian, and Khadija is Muslim - they were two friends who had identified that children in rural Damascus were among those who had been most affected by the conflict; with the *Eid* holiday approaching, they had come together to discuss how they would organise a campaign to collect donation of clothing and sweets to deliver to the children in Khadija's Zamalka neighbourhood. They did not think that their conversation would be considered "an act of organisation to undermine the state and overthrow the regime". They were

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<sup>42</sup> The regime's various restrictions of freedom and extensive apparatus of surveillance have been explored in considerable depth by Heydmann (1999, 2004), Hinnebusch (1976, 1980, 1993) and Wedeen (1998, 1999).

arrested on the spot after security force staff members overheard their conversation.

Rala was detained for 67 days before her parents managed to use their connections to get her out of jail and then out of the country. Khadija's family did not have similar privileges, and she is still detained (without trial) in 2018. Their story was by no means unique. Various activists that I spoke to mentioned how difficult it was to organise anything in public.

Yazan is a 33-year-old male from Duma in Rural Damascus who works as an accountant in a company in Damascus. He was participating in the demonstrations by as early as March 2011. He was born into a working-class family, and his parents were "model citizens" who had never challenged the regime. They had also always encouraged their four sons to be careful and to avoid getting into troubles, which meant to remain docile and avoid challenging the regime. In contrast to Rala, Yazan's family had no money or connections that they could use to protest their sons if anything went wrong. Yazan explains:

"[H]aving four sons meant that they were constantly worried that they might lose them if they mingled with the wrong people or dared to express their discontent. We had no money to fix a problem and no connections to help in case one of us was arrested or something".

Yazan, therefore, grew up in an atmosphere of fear. His parents always reminded him and his three younger brothers that "walls have ears". Even at home, if for any reason they want to talk about the president or any related matters, they would lower their voices and avoid mentioning names to make sure that nobody will hear them, and they will not get into troubles. When the Uprising started, Yazan felt

that it was his opportunity. He was determined to no longer live in a culture and fear and decided to participate in the demonstrations. Although he was brought up in a Muslim family, Yazan now defines himself as an atheist. He has not been to the mosque since he became an adult. However, when he wanted to join demonstrations, he found that his only choice was to go the Friday prayers in the neighbouring mosque. He observes:

The last time, I went to the mosque was in the 90s. I was still a child, and I had to go with my father. Since I started university, I have never been there. I don't believe in God even.... I remember when I went the first time as an adult. It was Friday the 1<sup>st</sup> of April [2011]. I remember it well because my friend thought it was an April fool when I told him I am going to the mosque..... I wanted to go to the demonstration, but that was the only way to join.... I couldn't meet with friends in cafes or in the street. The Mukhābarāt eyes are everywhere (the security forces). I had to go to the mosque to join.

Yazan explains how difficult it was to gather all the people together in one place to launch the demonstrations during the first few months of the Uprising in early 2011. In the aftermath of the Daraa events, state surveillance increased, and it was not possible to bring people together without raising suspicion. The only option was for demonstrations to break out in the aftermath of Friday prayers. The prayers would not include any activities related to the Uprising. Friday prayer has always been subject to heavy state control. The Imam is employed by the government, security forces attend the prayers to report any suspicious messages or activities, and the sermon topic is decided by the government and distributed to mosques in advance. The mosque was simply a physical place to meet - people would leave the mosque at the end of the prayer and immediately join the

demonstration. Atheists, Christians and non-religious youth would sometimes join the prayer in order to participate in the demonstration afterwards Tarek (25-years-old and from Daraa), and Mazen (27-years-old and from Homs) are both Christians who would attend the prayer and participate in the demonstration afterwards.

Another technique that was used to overcome the lack of free spaces was to organise demonstrations that could be implemented virtually and in a stealthy manner. The “Flying demonstration” (*Muzāharāt Ṭayyāra*) is a technique that is commonly used in Damascus, where the Regime’s control is strong and pervasive. Flying demonstrations were particularly common in 2011 and early 2012. However, they stopped in late 2012 when almost all other demonstrations in Damascus became very difficult to organise as a consequence of growing numbers of checkpoints and the mounting level of regime aggression. The activists would use words of mouth, encrypted text messages and calls to agree on a time and place for the demonstration. They would then meet to begin the demonstration before running for their lives when the security forces arrived. In an effort to confuse the forces and buy some time, they would spread false messages about the location. In addition, they would also organise a number of small flying demonstrations in various locations in the hope that they would stretch security force resources and enable them to escape arrest successfully. It is interesting to see how a public action such as demonstration incorporated such a hidden component when it comes to the organisation of the action.

In addition, activists relied on virtual and cyber spaces (Gamson, 1996; Polletta, 1999) to deal with the lack of free physical spaces. Using text messages, chat and social media, activists managed to organise and launch their activities on many occasions. This brought them into direct conflict with the regime, and they were forced to implement different tactics in order to resist regime power through virtual means. This theme will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

## ***Roadblocks and Checkpoints***

Syrians are used to the lack of free spaces, having dealt with this for decades. However, the Uprising and the conflict introduced checkpoints and roadblocks, which had hitherto been unprecedented in Syrian social life, especially for younger generations. Soon after March 2011, the regime began to install checkpoints in the cities, on the highways and on the main roads that lead into towns and villages. The checkpoints had two main roles: (a) to help the Regime control the space and limit the movement of the civilians; (b) to lend further credence to the regime's claim that it still controlled the country (Schon, 2016). Checkpoints also became a source of income (Abboud, 2017:101), and a place where substantial sums of money exchanged hands in the form of bribes. During a later stage, checkpoints came to function as one of the main ways in which the regime enforced sieges and prevented people and goods from crossing in or out. At the checkpoints, citizens were expected to show their IDs, and this enabled the regime to arrest wanted activists. As a consequence, activists effectively became subject to home arrest.

In seeking to engage with this new reality, activists and ordinary people began to find ways to navigate the checkpoints as smoothly as possible. Bribes, false pretence and lies were the most frequently deployed techniques. Those hidden techniques were very effective in challenging the status domination of the regime. Reda<sup>43</sup> used to smuggle medicine into the besieged city of Zamalka. Had he been caught, then he could potentially have faced a lengthy jail sentence. It is considered to be an offence to provide medicine and medical services to residents

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<sup>43</sup> Reda was introduced in Chapter 3 (methodology). He is an activist who provided medical services in Zamalka. Additional details are provided in chapters 3 and 4.



of areas that are controlled by the opposition. A number of pharmacists across the country were detained for selling medicine to so-called “enemies of the state”<sup>44</sup>. Reda managed to gain access through the checkpoint by pretending to be a smuggler who is selling the medicine. He regularly paid bribes as he travelled to and from the town. If they had suspected that he was providing medical health services, he would have been arrested or even killed on the spot. Ultimately, it was the bribe and the false pretence that facilitated his access to the city and rendered the checkpoint useless.

It was common practice to pay bribes at checkpoints. Interviewees from across the country (from Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Rural Damascus) all shared stories of how they had regularly bribed the officers at the checkpoints to pass through. The size of the bribe varied in accordance with the person. For example, Reda is from a Kurdish background – during the conflict, some Kurdish groups had aligned with the regime. As a result, the checkpoint officers were less hostile to him, and they were even friendly, in no small part because his passage through the checkpoint was to their mutual benefit. His tariff was even adjusted to reflect the fact that he was viewed as being sympathetic to the regime. Had he been from Homs or Daraa, he believes he would have paid considerably more.

Had he been a young man from an unfavourable background (e.g. from Homs or Rural Damascus) or at the age of military service, it would have been considerably more difficult and riskier for him to cross checkpoints. In these instances, age and background would provoke a higher level of violence and hostility at the checkpoint, and the bribe would be considerably higher. Akram, Ali, Basem and Yazan all explained how terrifying it was to proceed through

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<sup>44</sup> Amr Khalaf was detained in March 2012 (Violations Documentation Center in Syria, 2013) and Wael Al-Lukkud and Yaser al-Fashtaki, his fellow pharmacists, were arrested in September 2012 (Thulatha’a Ahrar Suriyya, 2012), on the grounds that they had supposedly sold medicines. In May 2012, a massive campaign called for their release. (Al-Arabiya, 2012d)

checkpoints. They were always required to carry their military service booklet, which demonstrated that they had exempted, postponed or served their military service. If they had not presented the booklet, they would have been subject to arrest, with the end consequence of a bribe or detention. Even if they were able to present the booklet, they would typically have to pay a bribe – in justification, they would invariably be informed that “the country is in a state of war” (*fi halet harb*).

Individuals in the country began to share information about the checkpoints, and this enabled them to deal with some of the related uncertainties (the location of the checkpoints, the identity of those who controlled the checkpoint and what would happen when individuals attempted to cross). In addition, information was shared about which checkpoints were willing to take bribes, along with those that had computers with updated information on those who were wanted. This information was often shared verbally between residents in different parts of the country. In planning their routes and movements, both activists and average citizens would take this accumulated knowledge into account. In an effort to counter these adaptations, the regime began to establish “flying checkpoints” (*Hawājez Tayyāra*) in an effort to take citizens by surprise. In this manner, the regime sought to retain the element of surprise and to establish additional opportunities to capture wanted activists or collect bribes.

The regime later used checkpoints to tighten sieges around areas and cities. In Duma, Homs, Madaya and Zamalka, the checkpoints made an essential contribution by enabling the regime to control the movement of goods. Food and medicine were denied in an effort to force the opposition to surrender in the besieged areas and to inflict collective punishment upon those who supported the Uprising.<sup>45</sup> Up until late 2012 and early 2013, it was possible to pay bribes.

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<sup>45</sup> Further information about siege situations in Syria can be found on the Siege Watch website.

However, the Regime noted that the checkpoints maintained by corrupt army officers, security forces and shabiha were not serving their intended purpose. The subsequent installation of Hezbollah fighters at the checkpoints then removed the possibility of obtaining access by paying bribes. Basem, Karam and Reda all referred to the essential difference that this made. Hezbollah fighters are motivated by their religious beliefs and ideology. They were different from the corrupt officers. They did not accept bribes, and they were there fighting their own holy war. Reda starkly sets out the implications for the community he served:

“The people did not feel hunger until *Ze‘rān Hezbollah* [(Hezbollah thugs)] took over the checkpoint. *Ze‘rān Hezbollah lā byenḥelbu w lā byenjelbu* [(they are stubborn, and there is no way to negotiate with them)]...They don’t accept bribes, it is Ḥaram [(a forbidden sin)], and they are there to fight the Sunnis, their historical enemy, they want them all to starve to death, children, women, sick, elderly, it does not matter.... People survived until *Ze‘rān Hezbollah* [(Hezbollah thugs)] showed up and killed their last chance.”

Checkpoints and roadblocks were not only used by regime forces. In many parts of the country, the people had no idea of who is controlling the checkpoint. In remote areas and on the highways, thugs and bandits would create checkpoints and use them to steal money. ISIS also established checkpoints in areas under its control. Checkpoints were used to assert power over the area and to control population movements. It was at these points that ISIS arrested many ‘infidels’. Techniques that were used at regime checkpoints were not always an option at their ISIS counterparts. Bribes, for example, were regarded as a major sin that would incur severe punishment. At ISIS checkpoints, false pretence remained the most popular technique in this case.

Ola's, a young woman from Idleb, story at the checkpoint is a typical example of how people dealt with ISIS checkpoints to maintain their freedom of movement and avoid the violence they would be subjected to at the checkpoints. Ola encountered two main challenges at ISIS checkpoints. Firstly, being a woman commuting to work was an issue. Women are expected to be docile subordinates and to fulfil their role in the society as wives and mothers. Commuting to work every day is not viewed favourably. Secondly, Ola worked with women in refugee camps, and she was employed by an international organisation. In her work, she provided support to women who were victims of violence (both conflict-related and domestic). In her day-to-day work, she engaged with a variety of topics – education, reproductive health and women's rights – that are taboos for ISIS.

Ola found that false pretence was the optimal technique. She had been raised in a Muslim family, and wore a simple hijab (only head cover with casual clothes, no full niqab) and was very moderate in her religious views. However, on her way to work every day she would wear a black Abaya and semi-niqab. When she presented herself at the checkpoint, she would often pass without substantial impediment as she fits the desired profile. It was well-established that ISIS fighters would test people with a view to establishing if they were "infidels" Because Ola had been raised in a Muslim family, she was ready to answer most of the Islam-related questions she would be asked. She would also hide her work ID in a hidden compartment in her handbag. When she was asked where she was heading, she would tell an elaborate story about her sick grandmother in a neighbouring village whom she had to tend to. She was very successful in projecting a public image of herself that is based on a hidden transcript of lie and deception to counter the status and ideological domination of ISIS fighters on the checkpoint. In her own words:

When they ask me anything, I use very low voice and pretend to be very shy to talk to strangers. I would use simple

language that does not show that I am educated<sup>46</sup>. I never make eye contact to emphasise how uncomfortable speaking to men makes me feel.... I say I am going to clean my grandmother house and cook her lunch. When he asks me why my grandmother is not living with us. I would answer that because my paternal grandfather lives with us and she is my maternal grandmother, so she cannot live in a house where there is a strange man. He would be impressed with how religious my family is. The truth is, I don't have grandparents, they all passed away. (She laughs), and honestly, my paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother used to live both with us before they passed away.

Activists often seek to exploit their positionality when they present themselves at checkpoints (Pottier, 2006). Ola used the same techniques when Assad's regime still controlled Rural Idleb. Here too, she altered her appearance, language and story to create a favourable character that would facilitate her movement. However, in this instance, she would wear colourful clothes and makeup and accessorise to show that she is a moderate woman whose *Hijab* was merely an acknowledgement of a social habit that is common in rural areas. She would act very confidently and would maintain steady eye contact with the officers at the checkpoint. Her mobile phone background was of the Syrian flag with two green stars (which Syrians frequently used to highlight their loyalty to the regime and her mobile ringtone was the national anthem). These innovations, in addition to the fact that she was a woman, often enabled her to pass through the checkpoint with no significant problems.

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<sup>46</sup> Ola holds a BA in English Literature

Checkpoints have helped the regime and ISIS to arrest activists, control space, limit the movements of citizens and lend further credence to their respective propaganda campaigns. However, activists and ordinary people have shown significant creativity and ingenuity in finding ways to navigate the checkpoints and roadblocks.

## **Daily Life under Siege**

Checkpoints were however not the most difficult challenge that Syrians confronted as they sought to struggle with restrictions to physical space. Persevering with normal everyday life under conditions of bombardment, siege and surveillance was instead the preponderant challenge. When the Uprising began, people on both sides of the divide were very optimistic that it would end soon and that they would be in a position to continue with their lives. Regime supporters expected a repetition of Hama, in 1982. The regime would regain full control and end the Uprising very quickly. Some activists expressed the expectation that Assad would be forced to adapt to change or hand over power, having become hostage to the reform initiatives he himself had introduced. Even activists who remained sceptical of Assad's reformist credentials expected a resolution that resembled Tunisia and Egypt or, in the worst-case scenario, Libya. Virtually nobody was prepared for what later came.

People had to learn how to live with sustained bombardment and siege. In regime-held areas, people had to deal with checkpoints, which was covered earlier. In opposition-held areas, people had to deal with regime violence and with the siege. The story of Homs under siege demonstrates how ordinary people managed to resist the regime's attempts to exert spatial control using heavy bombardment, snipers and siege. Ahed, Heba, Majd and Samar lived with their families in the city.

Even prior to the siege, there was limited movement into and out of the opposition-held neighbourhood as many checkpoints surrounded the area. Snipers were also deployed to almost every corner of the targeted areas – their role was to enforce the curfew by shooting any moving object – this included children and even street cats. During that phase, interviewed activists from Homs, Ahed, Heba, Majd and Samar described three techniques the people used to counter the power of the regime and claim space. This includes “Noise, bedsheets and tunnels”.

When the curfew began, the people of Homs did not have a strategy that was addressed to the situation. They began by using the food in their storage and expected that the situation would soon be resolved. The snipers dotted around most of the buildings made it impossible to move around. The snipers would toy with the residents by shooting into the air every now and then. They would also leave their posts, and this led people to mistakenly believe that it was safe to walk around and relax. However, the sniper would then reappear and begin shooting. Heba lost her 17-year-old brother to a sniper bullet. The sniper seemed to be gone for a day, people started to relax and go out to run some errands. Suddenly, one sniper started shooting, wounding a few and killing four including her brother who was on his way back home after visiting his friend. The level of fear increased, and people were locked in. One day, people were encouraged to participate in a “Noise Campaign” (*Ḥamlet al-ḡajīj*), Ahed, Heba, Majd and Samar were not able to identify precisely how it began.

The “Noise Campaign” enlists residents in the areas, who open their windows after sunset (mainly after Maghreb prayer) and then use their utensils or any other noise-making tools to start making the loudest possible noise. The noise coming from all the houses across all the area was loud and was deliberately intended to scare the snipers by the sheer amount of participation. This hidden technique resulted in a public act (noise), the challenged the material and status

domination of regime forces over the sieged neighbourhoods. It was meant as an act of resistance that would demonstrate that people could still organise themselves even when they are locked in, and snipers are enforcing the curfew. The deafening noise would last for one hour. All families would try to make the loudest possible noise. Majd observes:

“It was amazing; we knew that it would not scare them, and they will not leave, they are not idiots. They will figure out it is simply utensils and not bombs. But we want them to be scared of how many we are. To be scared of how we organised this when they cut communication and prevented us from walking in the street..... We did it every night.... At first, they started shooting in the air. Then we thought it is even better; now we are forcing them to waste their bullets in the air. We would beat our pots even stronger to make a louder noise. Eventually, they would stop shooting. But we did not stop the noise.... We will do it every night for as long as we could.

If the noise campaign served to remind the regime of the people’s creativity, the “bedsheets” instead reiterated that the people on the ground still owned the city. The population deployed the bedsheet technique when the siege and curfew persevered for longer than expected. The people attempted to identify a solution that would allow them to move around and avoid the snipers. The residents on first floors began to dangle bedsheets from their balconies. Neighbours then started to link the sheets and create makeshift covers for the sidewalks. Ahed recalled the bedsheet technique first began when two neighbouring buildings spread a sheet between the balconies, thus enabling people to move freely between the two



buildings. Then almost every building did the same. People began walking freely behind the sheets.

The regime had no control on the ground. Regime troops and fighters could not access the area as local fighters had a better knowledge of local conditions and regime forces were reluctant to become engaged in street fights. This simple public action challenged the regime domination and rendered snipers on surrounding tall buildings useless. Ahed recalls that the snipers occasionally fired on the sheets, meaning that it was sometimes necessary to change them. The regime forces also sought to burn the sheets but enjoyed limited success as the snipers were some distance away. Samar recalls:

We laughed a lot. Everyone laughs at Homsis<sup>47</sup> but who was laughing now? It must be humiliating that Homsis were smarter than them.... We visited each other, we bought groceries, took the garbage out, we did all that we want to do.... We even made jokes about meeting under the sheets.

Local people's knowledge of the area also enabled them to counteract the regime by using tunnels. Ahed told me the story while proudly drawing an elaborate map of her neighbourhood, which depicted the buildings, drains, sniper locations, streets and tunnels. After using sheets to move around, people started to use old tunnels in the area to access wider ground. No one knows who built these tunnels, as they are very old and most probably was the old drainage system in the city. Regime forces were not aware of these tunnels. Local residents learned to calculate the line of sight and the range that the snipers covered – this then enabled them to identify blind spots that can be accessed safely. Some tunnels were very dangerous

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<sup>47</sup> All the jokes in Syria are about Homs people; a pervasive stereotype holds that they are naïve simpletons.

whereas others were accessible. People would use the tunnels to gain access, hide and smuggle food.

The regime spread massive propaganda about how fighters were digging tunnels in Homs, Rural Damascus and other opposition-held areas. They would spread stories about very sophisticated tunnels that were built to smuggle weapons<sup>48</sup>. However, these were very different from the tunnels that people were using on a small scale in Homs neighbourhoods. The people did not dig these tunnels. Those tunnels were always there, children used to play around them, and people would use them as a shortcut when necessary.

Strong local knowledge has enabled people to re-establish control over their space despite in open defiance of aircrafts and snipers. People in Homs managed to manoeuvre the tight measures implemented by the regime, and they found their way around regardless of bombardment and snipers. People's hidden acts helped them to challenge the regime's status and material domination, as tunnels meant that the siege was not fully effective. People were partially free to move around and to bring goods and supplies into their neighbourhoods. This was the main reason

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<sup>48</sup> Refer to the news on *al-Alam* Channel:

- Discovery of tunnels in Ghouta  
(<http://www.alalam.ir/news/1933850/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88---%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%AF%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9>)
- War of tunnels:  
<http://www.alalam.ir/news/1547774/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5----%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82---%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>

why Homs persevered under siege for years and only yielded in 2015, when fighters were forced to surrender and leave the city's ruins.

## **Intellectual Space**

The power struggle in the Uprising was not limited to physical space and physical conflict. The regime has always sought to control intellectual space in Syria and assert its status and ideological domination, even before the Uprising (see Wedeen, 1998, 1999). When the Uprising started, the nonviolence resistance also engaged at the intellectual level. Intellectual level was the place for nonviolent action to happen. The nature of intellectual space enabled nonviolent resistance to assume different forms. Drawing on interviews with activists who were involved in activities in the intellectual sphere, this section focuses on two issues: firstly, the appropriation of symbols and their use to (re) claim the intellectual space; secondly, the use of humour to both spread and fight regime propaganda.

### ***Symbols***

For four decades, the regime had sought to invade and dominate Syrian intellectual space. Pictures and statues of Hafez Assad were dispersed around the country, and were present in churches, hospitals, mosques, parks, schools, streets and universities. While his physical presence was ubiquitous, Hafez Assad's image varied in accordance with the context. He could be the first father, the first farmer, the first pharmacist, the first teacher or any other figure. While the Regime's rhetoric frequently aroused strong scepticism and people did not fully subscribe to it, it was considerably more successful in creating a personality cult around Hafez Assad. In mainly operating through fear, the cult enforced compliance and obedience. The

rhetoric in the country was entirely controlled by Assad and by Baath party. (Wedeen: 1998, 1999)

When Bashar Assad became President, he continued to exert control over the intellectual sphere. However, his policy and rhetoric needed to be upgraded (Wedeen, 2013), as the Hafez Assad personality cult had clearly become outdated. The regime dispensed with the notion of the father figure and instead sought to construct Bashar Assad as the embodiment of modernity in the country. Assad and his picture-perfect family were now depicted as the benign emissaries of political and social transformation. The First Family image of a young couple with international education and perfect children replaced the dated image of Hafez Assad as a father figure. Foreign companies, mobiles telecommunications and private banks (all of which had been banned under Hafez Assad) now became pervasive. Bashar Assad and his family went for meals at local restaurants, shopped at local malls and tried to depict themselves as a normal family. In other respects, he was more reticent – there are, for example, considerably fewer pictures of Bashar than his father or Bassel, his dead brother. The notion of a cult based on fear was dispensed with, and a cult grounded within ‘love’ took its place. Assad’s slogan for his second election round was *Menḥebbak*, (which translates as ‘we love you’); this was accompanied by his logo, which intertwined Assad’s image with the Syrian flag and map.<sup>49</sup> Both the logo and slogan became ubiquitous, and were adorned on billboards, car windows, mugs, posters and t-shirts.

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<sup>49</sup> Assad’s *Menḥebbak* campaign was openly mocked when Syrians began a ‘We Love You Merkel’ after Germany allowed hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees to enter its territory. The campaign, which attracted international media attention, actively sought to juxtapose Merkel’s humanitarian gesture and Assad’s continued brutality. (see Taylor, 2015).



*We Love You (Arabic Press, 2011)*

When the Uprising began, activists sought to use intellectual space to counteract the regime's hegemony and create a new narrative. They aimed to resist the ideological and status domination using any means, whether via hidden subtle actions such as jokes and humour or via public confrontation such as destroying statues and pictures and displaying counter-images in the media and during protests. This is why symbols of controls – pictures, slogans and statues – were among the first targets of demonstrations and protests. In images, which clearly



*We Love You, (Taylor 2015)*

recalled post-2003 Iraq, protestors tore down pictures and statues and disfigured them, thus taking revenge for years of humiliation<sup>50</sup> and oppression. One story from Hama provides an insight into the battle over symbols using the statues. It is the incident of the statues of Hafez Assad and the statues of a donkey.

Adib was a 23-year-old engineer from Hama who was serving his compulsory military service when the Uprising started (he eventually defected from the Army). He recalled how there was previously a massive statue of Hafez Assad in the main square which was hated by almost everybody. It was widely viewed as a symbol of humiliation and defeat that was imposed after the 1982 Hama massacres. One day, in summer 2011, the regime began to remove the statue. It was believed that this attributable to fears that protests would break out and the statue would eventually be vandalised. To the amusement of the people in Hama, this action inspired some people to humour Assad and to erect a statue of a donkey instead in its place.<sup>51</sup> When the regime regained control of Hama in February 2017, the regime restored Hafez Assad's statue. This was a vivid symbolic reminder of the regime's reassertion of control over the city. (Aks Alser, 2017)

In addition to the statues and pictures, the Syrian flag and national anthem became sources and embodiments of opposition, a situation quite clearly opposed to normal circumstances in which anthems, emblems and flags embody identity, independence and sovereignty (Podeh, 2011:419). In Syria, the flag has come to function as a symbolic dividing line, which clearly distinguishes supporters and opponents of the regime.

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<sup>50</sup> There are various videos on YouTube which clearly depict protestors removing pictures and statues. Examples include: Removing Bashar Assad's mural from Daraa's main square in March 2011 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9\\_BOjkD2wY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9_BOjkD2wY)); removing Bashar's picture from various places (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBe1Z4SBBqk>); removing Bashar's pictures from Al-Hajar in July 2012 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewui8IMCs0o>).

<sup>51</sup> Donkey is used as an insult word when someone is considered stupid, inept and stubborn.

The Syrian Anthem (*Ḥumāt al-Diyyār* or 'Homeland Protectors') is mainly dedicated to the Army. Significantly, the word 'Syria' is not mentioned once in the anthem, and it focuses mainly on the Syrian army and the Syrian flag. The Anthem's celebration of the Army is starkly opposed to its reputation within Syrian society, where its corruption, favouritism and nepotism have contributed to a more negative appraisal. When the Army shifted from its ostensible role of external defence to internal repression (Albrecht and Ohl, 2016), people began to reject both the Army and, by logical extension, the National Anthem.

At least eight interviewees observed that they no longer consider the anthem to be a national symbol and noted that they do not stand in respect when they hear it. The anthem was part of everyday life, as schoolchildren had to listen to it every morning at school and the rest of the population had to listen to it twice per day when the national TV broadcasting begins and ends. While no alternative anthem has been suggested, the National Anthem is no longer played in many opposition-held areas. People were no longer ready to pay respect to an army that is killing rather than protecting them. Conversely, regime supporters have become much more attached to the Army and the Anthem. When walking through Damascus, it is very common to hear the National Anthem ring out when a mobile phone activates. This is considered a direct declaration that the person is a strong supporter of the regime. Supporters also salute the "homeland protectors" on their Facebook pages in order to show solidarity with the Army and Regime.

The flag provides a visual embodiment of the divide. There are two flags that represent Syria. The "official" flag of Syria consists of three horizontal lines (top to bottom: red, white and black) with two green stars on the white stripe. The opposition flag consists of three horizontal lines (top to bottom: green, white and black), with three red stars on the white stripe. The national flag helps to distinguish the nation and to identify groups and countries against others from others (Firth,

1973:77) or can symbolise power and dissent (Podeh, 2011:423). In Syria, flags have frequently served this second function. The flag of the regime was raised on all official and public buildings, and it became even more common after the Uprising, when it appeared across regime-controlled areas. People would raise the flag on their balconies, on their cars or post it on their Facebook page in order to indicate their support for the regime. The current national flag was the flag of the United Arab Republic (UAR) during the short-lived unification with Egypt (1958-1961). When Hafez Assad became president, he reinstalled the UAR flag to emphasise his alignment with Arab Nations (Podeh, 2011:426).

The Uprising flag was the flag of Syria during the state formation. It was adopted in June 1932, when the first Syrian President in Syria was elected. It symbolises Syrian independence from the Hashemite Kingdom. The flag remained in place until the UAR was established (Podeh, 2011:426). When the UAR broke down, it was reinstalled, and remained in place until the Baath Party seized power in Syria in the 60s. The flag was adopted by the opposition as a symbol of independence and to reject the power of Assad's regime. People started to hold the flag, wear it and display it on their Facebook pages cover to declare their stance against the regime. The flag became an identification symbol to show political stance and distinguish between both sides.

## ***Humour***

Humour has always been associated with nonviolence resistance to oppressive power. Humour against oppressors serves several different purposes. Firstly, humour can be used as a coping mechanism to make the brutality and oppression more tolerable (Wedeen, 2013). It can be considered a "safety-valve" that helps citizens to release pressure and reduce the level of frustration (Abu



Hatab, 2016; Billig, 2005). However, it can be an act of resistance against the oppressor's power (Camps-Faber, 2012). It operates, to this extent, as part of the hidden transcripts that resist dominant power (Scott, 1989, 1990). In the case of Syria, humour was part of the hidden transcript both before and during the Uprising. However, during the Uprising it has assumed particular importance as a form of public and nonviolent confrontation to challenge the regime ideological and status domination.

Humour was used during the Hafez Assad era to cope with the Regime's continual intrusions upon personal and social life. Both Hafez and Bashar Assad allowed political satire by prominent actors (Wedeen, 2013; Della Ratta, 2012). Examples include the work of the Dureid Lahham, which has been presented in theatres and on TV. Syrian television has also broadcast shows such as Spotlight. Caricatures also appeared in newspapers. However, caricatures, comedy shows, and political satire were heavily censored and did not cross carefully set "red line". The "red line" was not fixed but would vary in accordance with the political environment of the time. However, it was widely known that material pertaining to the President was the one key exception in this respect. Mocking the president was a line that cannot be crossed under any circumstances. As a result, the humour targeted government practices or members of Parliament, who were always deemed invalid and were ridiculed. TV shows and newspaper articles also had to be approved by the Ministry of Communication which acted as a censorship bureau to ensure that everything published is under control.

Lubna, was a 29-year-old journalist from Damascus who worked for *Baladna Newspaper*<sup>52</sup>. She was still working there when the Ministry of Communication

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<sup>52</sup> *Baladna* was one of two private newspaper which were allowed to be printed and circulated in Syria. It was owned by Majd Suleiman, the son of Bahjat Suleiman who held a senior position in the security forces and was prominent regime figure.

expressed consternation at a caricature, which featured in one issue, which had unfortunately already been put into circulation. The issues had to be pulled from the market, and the newspaper was suspended.

The caricature, which is shown below, depicts the parliamentary members puppet-like) voting unanimously to something which is not shown in the picture. Lubna personally witnessed the chaos and confusion, which ensued when the issue was banned. Under normal circumstances, the caricature would be considered acceptable as MPs were always mocked. However, the caricature was published at a time when the Parliament had unanimously voted to nominate Bashar Assad for a second term in office. This is why the caricature was interpreted to be directly targeting the President himself, something that was clearly not to be tolerated. The newspaper was suspended for a few months. It was rumoured that the affair was a pretext, which had been undertaken after the newspaper stopped paying the monthly bribe to the censorship team at the Ministry of Communication. The caricature was, at least in this rendering, conceived as a means through which the newspaper could be forced to pay.



Image from Arab Cartoon House (2007).

When the Uprising began, humour rapidly transgressed over these established 'red lines'. The situation inverted and Bashar Assad, who had previously been immune from mockery, was now established as its pre-eminent object. The mockery of Bashar Assad is a recurring theme evidenced in cartoons, demonstrations, podcasts, radio programmes, slogans, songs and YouTube videos. Some activists were amused by the chance to belittle, humiliate and mock Bashar. Some activists made their mission to mock and humiliate Bashar. They felt that the mocking and belittling Assad is one of very few acts that would directly hurt him. Since it was physically impossible to reach Assad, the mockery was their alternative tool to cause him harm. Although it is a nonviolent act, the intention and hope were in some cases to cause him emotional harm since the perception was that Assad has self-confidence issues.

Mohanad, a 26-year-old teacher from rural Idleb, was directly involved in many initiatives that targeted Assad with mockery. He participated in the famous "Duck" demonstration, which took place in Sarmin in Idleb. The story of the "Duck" began when the leaked emails of the President and his wife inadvertently revealed her pet name for him (Baṭṭa that means Duck). This led to a deluge of mockery. Mohanad participated in a demonstration in which demonstrators chanted 'Damn your soul Baṭṭa' instead of Bashar, while elevating large inflated yellow ducks in the air. This innovation swiftly caught on and spread to other demonstrations, some of which involved actual ducks. 'Baṭṭa' increasingly came to displace 'Giraffe' (which had previously been bestowed upon Assad in acknowledgement of his height and long neck) as the activists' insult-of-choice. This is, it should be noted, not coincidental – in the region, it is extremely insulting to depict a person as an animal.



Demonstration in Al-Qameshli in March 2012 (Al-Riyadh Newspaper, 2012)



Duck shaped banners for a demonstration in Idleb in March 2012 (Tamimi, 2012)

For a generation that had grown up in an environment where it had been impossible to mock the political authorities, this was a hugely significant development. Cartoon, radio talk shows and slogans began to target Assad personally. YouTube videos also spread very quickly. There are a number of

famous online political satires in which Assad is the main protagonist. The most famous two shows are *Qaṣr al-Sha‘b* (which is named after the presidential palace) and Top Goon. *Qaṣr al-Sha‘b* is a cartoon series that revolves around Assad and the leading figures in the regime. It focuses on issues such as Assad’s speeches, the political relationship with Iran, the killing of protestors and other events throughout the first two years of the Uprising. Top Goon is a puppet show that features a grotesque Assad puppet as the main character. In a similar manner to *Qaṣr al-Sha‘b*, Top Goon, which remained active for several years, focuses on Assad himself, his policies, his army and other regime figures. These series, in addition to other videos and podcasts such as *The Chronicles of The Pressure Cooker*,<sup>53</sup> caused much excitement and amusement among Syrians. Significantly, many of the activists referred to the sense of satisfaction they felt when mocking Assad. Mockery was, for them, a tool that became available when others fell short. It was a confrontational tool. In some cases, the laugh helped them to cope with the brutality. However, targeting Assad as a person was motivated by the desire to hurt him not only to help people feel better.

## Virtual Space

The availability of internet and the lack of free physical space meant that activists increasingly sought to draw upon virtual spaces. The potential contribution of social media and internet communication had in many senses been foreshadowed and anticipated by the events of the Arab Spring. A substantial literature has emerged around this topic since the Arab Spring first broke out in Tunisia in late 2010 (see for example Al-Qudsi- Ghabra, 2012; el-Tantawi, 2012;

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<sup>53</sup> The Chronicles of the Pressure Cookers is a series of podcast by Siin Jiim (pseudonym means Q&A) that mocks the regime (<http://pressure-cooker-sy.blogspot.ca/>).

Newson and Lengel, 2012; Zlitni and Touati, 2012; Lynch et al., 2014; Al-Hayek, 2016). This section is not an attempt to arrive at an assessment of the contribution of social media and the internet to the Uprising. Rather, it instead seeks to identify how activists sought to reclaim virtual space by using it as a tool to document and report atrocities. This section will examine how the regime fought back through the Syrian Electronic Army and intensive deployment of propaganda.

### ***Social Media***

The role played by social media in the Arab Spring has occasioned intense scholarly debate. On one hand, some scholars maintain that social media played an essential role in both enabling and sustaining popular uprisings in a range of different contexts (see Al-Qudsi-Ghabra, (2012), Newson and Lengel (2012), Zlitni and Touati (2012), El-Tantawi, (2013), Lurch et al. (2014), Gohdes, (2015)). An alternative viewpoint instead argues that its importance has been overemphasised and inflated. Al-Hibri (2014:836). This viewpoint is further strengthened by the observation that there is no correlation between internet penetration rate and the strength of protest movements – see Hibri (2014:837). Parshad (2012:22) attempts to balance both perspectives by noting that while social media made an important organisation contribution, this impact was marginal since it was largely restricted to those with access to technology. This suggests that it is mistaken to maintain that the social media was a driving force within the Uprisings. (Bruns, et al., 2013:871-873)

Lynch et al. (2014:5) argue that “Syria has the most socially mediated civil conflict in history”. This may be true in terms of the sheer amount of social media material that has been uploaded and shared since the beginning of the Uprising. However, it is open to question whether social media was an essential tool in the

organisation and launch of the Uprising activities is debatable. In this regard, it is perhaps important to note that activists who were engaged at an early stage of the Uprisings frequently referred to social media.

In 2010, Facebook and other social media networks were blocked in Syria. Syrians had to go through illegal VPNs and other means to access Facebook. That meant that the social media user needed a high degree of technical proficiency in order to update the VPNs, as the regime continually discovered and blocked access. After the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, there was a Facebook campaign that sought to initiate the Uprising on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2011. Facebook groups began inviting and mobilising people. However, it was not clear who was behind the groups. Most of the interviewees believed that they were most probably initiated abroad because access to Facebook was limited. I was in Syria at that time, and I still remember the tension that week as people waited to see whether protests would break out. When the invitations did not translate into actual protests, there were mixed feelings of relief and disappointment in the street. As a result of the campaign's failure, the regime lifted the ban on Facebook and spread the rumour that this action was to reward the loyalty that had been shown. One month later, the Uprising spontaneously erupted after the incident in Daraa.

Even when access to Facebook was restored, young people who were engaged in online activities did not trust the network, as they believed there was constant surveillance. They kept using various informal VPNs in the hope that this would reduce the risk of being spied on. The virtual space seemed slightly safer than the physical space in the country. However, people knew not to trust the regime. There had been numerous incidents since the internet had been introduced in which individuals had been arrested for emails that they had sent and were spotted by the regime forces spying on people's emails. When the *Tansiqiyyāt* (coordination network) emerged, they partially relied on Facebook pages and

groups. They sought to create accounts with pseudonyms to spread the messages and invite people to take part in demonstrations. However, all the interviewees involved with the *Tansiqiyyāt* downplayed the role of their Facebook pages. The pages contained the minimum possible information, and they were not actually used for the organisational purpose; more often, they were used to share information and upload footages after the demonstration. The risk of being caught for sharing and posting on these pages was extremely high. People who used their actual Facebook profiles were often arrested. Eventually, people depended on fake profiles and avoided sharing large amounts of information when online.

Activists used social media to share false information, with the intention of confusing the regime and diverting their attention. This had also been the case in Egypt, where activists deliberately disseminated false information in order to delay the response of the police and security forces (Al-Hibri, 2014:842). The *Tansiqiyyāt* in Syria would post false information about when and where the protest would take place. They would communicate face-to-face or via phone or SMS, using encrypted messages. Word-of-mouth was the most common way to communicate. Yazan, a 33-year-old accountant from Rural Damascus, explained how the organisation process works in his area. The *Tansiqiyyāt* administrative team agrees on the time and place. Each member was then responsible for sharing the information with a number of people, who would then share it with others and so on. The information will trickle down through this network, thus ensuring that everyone in the area will get actual details about when and where to meet. The Facebook page of the *Tansiqiyya* would show false details. In the initial stages of the Uprising, this helped to delay the response of the security forces as they used to surround the false location, before being diverted to the actual one after the protest starts. In that sense, activists were using public forums such as social media sites to implement hidden action of deception to resist regime's material (i.e. powerful forces and



control over the physical space) and status (i.e. being the ultimate controlling power) domination.

Closer analysis suggests that the role of social media, particularly its contribution to the organisation and launching of activities, was overstated. The extent of online surveillance and censorship and the lack of trust between strangers limited the role of the online organisation. Despite this, social media still made an essential contribution by enabling the reporting and uploading of footage from protests and documenting Regime atrocities.

### ***Reporting, Citizen Journalism and the Syrian Electronic Army***

The battle to claim the virtual space manifests in the struggle of the opposition and activists to document and report the reality on the ground using social media in the absence of mainstream media and the counter attacks of the regime via the Syrian Electronic Army. One aspect of social media and virtual space that every single interviewed activist tried to emphasise is using it for reporting and documenting the atrocities of the regime.

In light of the absence of mainstream media, citizen journalism took centre stage and became the primary source of information about ongoing events in Syria. Because of a lack of access, most media outlets depend on citizen journalists and witnesses (Smit et al., 2017:290; and Johnston, 2017:195). Citizen Journalism is the use of digital media by “ordinary individuals (who) temporarily adopt the role of a journalist in order to participate in news-making, often spontaneously during the time of crisis, accident, tragedy or disaster when they happen to be present on the scene” (Allan, 2013:9).

Ordinary people began to take photos and shoot videos during protests and assaults by regime forces. Photos and videos are uploaded on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and repeatedly shared. In these instances, the principal aim was to document the events and share them with the world. The lack of foreign reporting from the ground limited the level of international awareness of the conflict and the regime's brutality. As a consequence, activists felt it was their duty to report.

Activists from different backgrounds and parts of Syria reaffirmed and reiterated the same message, namely that they felt a responsibility to document and report via social media and online resources. Adib said:

“The world should hear and see what happens here, what we have to go through every single day.... They should see the hell we go through everyday.... We are dying, and nobody is watching. Our children are dying, and nobody is watching, nobody cares. It is our role to make them care. They should see what is going on. We should open their eyes. It is our duty”.

This sense of responsibility to mobilise the international community and report events on the ground drove many people to risk their life taking footage, uploading them and communicating with an international news outlet. The Regime does not tolerate journalists (individuals often used pseudonyms when reporting), and those who are caught filming or taking photos are arrested and detained without trial. In the event that their case comes to trial, they will usually be charged with treason and espionage, a crime punishable by death. Even in opposition-held areas, citizen and professional journalists are often suspected by armed factions of being intelligence agents. Adib had to continue reporting using the false name because factions were not keen on journalists and they often confused their

journalism work with intelligence. Ordinary people and activists alike had to resort to hidden techniques to document human right abuses and atrocities and publish them publicly. This mixture of hidden and public actions have challenged the regime and the armed factions and aimed to resist their status and ideological domination.

The effort of activists, ordinary people and opposition to claim the virtual space by issuing a massive number of video footage and photos from the field, was met by the organised and coordinated response of the Syrian Electronic Army. The Syrian Electronic Army was created by the regime in around May 2011 (Gohdes, 2015:352; Al-Rawi, 2014a:420). It is not a “hacktivist” group but is instead a group of “cyber warriors” who are connected to the regime. It contributes by improving the regime’s public relations and to counter the impact of online opposition activists (Al-Rawi 2014a:420). Its website was hosted by the Syrian Computer Society (established by Bassel, Bashar’s late brother), before it was blocked by the US (Al-Rawi 2014a:420). It later operated from Russia, but the website was again blocked.

It is not clear how many members the Electronic Army has, and its structure is similarly unclear. It spreads regime propaganda and messages online by posting blogs, news (often fake) and videos. The members also target the comments sections of mainstream news outlines, where they post comments that praise Assad and denigrate the Opposition. The Army also reports upon the online activities of Opposition activists and engages in hacking. Any information received is then handed over to the Syrian security forces.

The Army’s website claims that it is independent of the regime, which it nonetheless sympathises with because it believes to be the victim of an international conspiracy. The Army had hacked various international news websites, enjoying particular success during the period 2011-2013, when they infiltrated the Associated Press, Cable News Network (CNN), the New York Times

and the Washington Post websites. A number of the Army's leading hackers currently feature on the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) wanted lists. (BBC, 2016) When this occurred, the Army began to adopt a more discrete approach. It may well be the case that those responsible for these attacks are no longer active, as there have not been any major recent hacking incidents.

The Syrian Electronic Army also benefits from the contribution of a large number of volunteers who identify with its goals. Seba, a 27-year-old housewife who lives in Montreal, describes herself as "an active and dedicated member of the Syrian Electronic Army". She presents her role in the following term:

"Every night after my son goes to bed, I sit on my computer and starts my attacks... I have four different Facebook profiles. Two of them are men, and two are women. Two of them hold Arab names and two are English names. I use fake photos of Arab-looking people and white people, so people would believe they are real.... I would check the news about Syria and start posting comments supporting the Syrian Government and the President and saying that the news is not true.... It is my duty as a Syrian citizen to defend my president against the conspiracy. Everyone wants to attack him because he is against Israel..... I use English names to show that even foreigners are supporting Assad and that the so-called opposition is lying."

Seba also spends time reporting the Facebook pages of activists and YouTube videos, in the hope they will eventually be taken down. She is not paid for her work. She is not formally recognised as a member of the Army, but she commits between 10-20 hours per week to her cyber-attacks and trolling. She has a number

of friends who do the same at both the national and international levels. Her contribution reiterates the intensity and commitment of those who are engaged in the struggle for virtual space. She sounds like a person on a mission working to claim the virtual space for the regime against the attempts of the opposition to spread photos and videos. After the hackers of the Syrian Electronic Army appeared on the FBI wanted lists, the army adopted a less overt approach. It might seem that the army is no longer active, since there have been no major hacking incidents recently. However, the subtle activities carried by people like Seba continues to take place and the battle between the regime and the opposition over the virtual space continue as fiercely as the fight over the physical space.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how the techniques used by activists were deployed in the battle for space. This space was not only physical in character. From the early stages of the Uprising, activists were impeded by the extension of the regime's influence, which was embodied in an expanded network of checkpoints and roadblocks. In seeking to reopen space, activists resorted to a number of separate devices, which included bribery and false pretence. Under conditions of siege, both activists and the general population evidenced an impressive capacity for adaptation and innovation.

Intellectual space was a battlefield even before the Uprising started. The Syrian Regime had historically sought to consolidate its position by consolidating its power at an intellectual level. Personality cults were established, propaganda was circulated, and symbols were appropriated, with a specific view to achieving this end. Humour was also regulated and made to function in accordance with the Regime's prerogatives. However, when the Uprising began these points of

repression were essentially inverted. New symbols were deployed, and humour enabled the Regime to be challenged and confronted.

Virtual space assumed increased importance as social media expanded. In responding to the absence of international or national news coverage, activists assumed the role of citizen journalists, and attempted to document and report from the ground, while mobilising international opinion behind the Syrian people's struggle for freedom. The regime counterattacked, and the Syrian Electronic Army sought to attack activists, spread Regime propaganda and reclaim virtual space.

# Conclusion

## Research Overview

This research has sought to explore why and how ordinary people in Syria, who had no prior history of civic experience, chose to participate in nonviolent resistance against the regime amidst an atmosphere of sharply increasing violence. The study placed particular emphasis upon examining this question through the eyes of these people themselves. Their self-understanding of their situation and perception of their role when being involved in the act of resistance are the key aspects that shaped this research as a process and final product.

This question was examined by engaging with a case study of Syria during the period 2011-14. In order to study the case thoroughly, I adopted the practice tracing methodology. This methodology entails the examination of the intermediate steps in the process: this enables the researcher to understand the whole process, test the hypotheses and extract inferences (Bennett, and Checkel, 2015). The practice process, therefore, puts the small pieces of the puzzle together in order to build the whole picture. This established the foundation for the three components that were examined by the empirical chapters. Initially, the study examined what motivates ordinary people, who had no history of civic engagement, to act and resist the regime power non-violently, even when the regime resorted to extreme violence. Secondly, it then sought to identify how these motivations translated into actions and what techniques were used. Finally, the study sought to examine how these techniques are deployed in the struggle to control and dominate the space in which they operate; in doing so, it proposed to traverse physical, intellectual and virtual space.

The study is based on: (a) ethnographic work in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey; (b) virtual ethnography, working with activists online; (c) autoethnography as I was myself an internal member of the studied community; and (d) semi-structured interviews with 78 ordinary people and activists who are/were involved in nonviolent resistance. The fieldwork took place between 2012 and 2014, and an additional round of data collection was conducted in 2016. The massive amount of data generated during the fieldwork and data collection process focused upon the stories of the individuals and their understanding of their role in the resistance. The concluding note aims to summarise the key findings of the research and highlight how this study contributes to the broader debate about nonviolent resistance.

## **Key Findings**

Prior to the Uprising of 2011, the civil society in Syria was used by the regime to upgrade its authoritarian status (Hydemann, 2007). The level of civic engagement by ordinary people was extremely limited if not entirely absent. Local communities in rural areas were apathetic and did not respond to mobilisation efforts. People were not willing to address the issues that they faced as a community or to engage with interventions by national or international organisations that sought to address these issues. This situation dramatically transformed when the Uprising began in 2011. Chapter Four examined why people chose to participate in the popular mobilisation and revolt against the regime and why they continued to do so when the regime reacted violently.

The motivations that gave rise to the Arab Spring can be clearly distinguished between internal grievances that have accumulated over five decades of Baath Party rule (and four decades of rule by the Assad family) and external drivers that are derived from the Arab Spring. Decades of corruption,



inequality and oppression created grievances among the people. Because they were always controlled by the fear of the regime's security forces and the surveillance of the State, people turned their grievances and frustrations inward. When the Uprising began, many people saw an opportunity to revolt against the oppression and inequality they have experienced for decades and the corruption that state and society were entangled within. Almost every person I met during the fieldwork and the interviews were able to tell personal stories of corruption, inequality and oppression. Furthermore, many were able to clearly convey how these experiences personally shaped them and directly contributed to their decision to join the Uprising and resisting the regime power.

The second motive derived from recent social changes that had been put in effect the decade which preceded the Uprising. After three decades of limited changes implemented by Hafez Assad, Bashar Assad devised an extensive agenda of social and economic changes. While the latter was to some extent welcomed, the former proved to be considerably more controversial (e.g. banning the niqab, opening casinos). Conservative communities were not enthusiastic about what they perceived to be a deliberate attempt to alter the 'Islamic' nature of the society. This added to the frustration of people, and when the spark happened, they immediately joined the action. However, others viewed the social changes from a different perspective and maintained that they gave people the impression that social pressure could bring about real and significant change. Hence, they were keen on joining the Uprising.

In addition to these internal factors, the Arab Spring has undoubtedly inspired many of the people who were met during this study. Young people who were born and raised seeing Arab countries ruled by the same people for decades, suddenly saw these very same figures losing their power and status. The young people saw their peers in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya removing long-standing dictators

with minimal losses. This has encouraged people to follow the same route, in the hope that they will be able to bring about a similar change in Syria. When the spark happened with the children being tortured in Daraa and the violent reaction of the regime when people protested the injustice they experienced, people across the country reached their tipping point and took the matter to the street. When the Uprisings broke out, the culture of fear was no longer the dominant factor in the community. People for the first time overcame their fear of the regime and revolted. Even as regime violence increased, people persisted and continued to resist. The existence of opportunities for resistance was not the key factor; rather, it was instead the perception of opportunities for resistance.

Activists and ordinary people perceived resistance to be a very personal matter. They enjoyed the experience of feeling free and dignified irrespective of the risks. The language used by activists and ordinary people alike was very self-centred. When activists spoke of their commitment, they frequently referred to the benefits that they themselves had gained. For the first time, people felt that they belong to something and that they own it. While the majority of the people revolted in solidarity with their fellow citizens in Daraa and later in Homs, they all felt that they had a personal stake. Their engagement with the act of resistance became a tool through which they could change their lives and build their future. They came to focus on “empowering themselves” instead of “helping others”.

This desire to resist the Regime translated into a number of techniques that formed the repertoire of the ordinary people’s nonviolent resistance. As violence increased, traditional techniques such as protests lost their utility. The people therefore resorted to more creative and sometimes subtler techniques in order to pressurise the Regime and resist its power with the ultimate intention of overthrowing it. The first technique was to drain the Regime’s sources and to keep its agents “busy” all the time. The people knew that the regime’s agents did little, if

any, work during the day. The activists, therefore, decided to keep them preoccupied with using freedom balls, freedom balloons, flying demonstrations and noise campaigns among other techniques. This intended to pressurise the Regime forces and relieve the pressure on areas subject to extensive Regime violence.

Shaming and embarrassing the regime and its forces was another technique that was used, especially in Damascus where some media outlets and foreign missions were still operating. The most famous examples were the “Stop the Killing” and “Freedom Brides” campaigns, both of which took place in the heart of Damascus and attracted considerable media attention, with the consequence that the Regime was forced to tread more carefully. The organisers and participants were arrested, but they were treated fairly well compared to other activists subject to arbitrary arrest, torture and even execution without trial.

The activists also used Regime platforms to implement their acts of resistance. One key example was *Nuwwāb Shabāb* (Young MPs), a project of the First Lady, which sought to train activists and organise demonstrations without arousing the suspicions of the security forces. In Homs, young people used existing NGOs to distribute humanitarian aid when this was prohibited by the regime. The regime considered the provision of humanitarian aid and other relief work to be a crime that should be subject to severe punishment. Therefore, many people chose to resist the regime power by defying his orders and providing humanitarian relief to the affected neighbourhood regardless of the threats of the regime and the possibilities of being caught.

As violence increased, the regime went to great lengths to conceal evidence of its brutality. As a consequence, activists intensified their efforts to document the regime’s ongoing violations of human rights and other atrocities. They attempted to capture everything on cameras and then upload it online whenever possible. The

regime forces went to great lengths to capture those who filmed demonstrations and those who posted online. However, this did not deter people from continuing to document and post their news. Most of those interviewed considered this to be one of the key techniques through which the regime could be resisted and exposed to the international community.

The choice of hidden actions versus public confrontation was not a question of black and white. Activists and ordinary people involved in the resistance were aware that the relationship between hidden and public transcripts is considerably more complex. They often weighed their options in relation to the given context and chose the course of action which they believed would yield better results. The question of whether hidden action and public confrontation were separate categories, or which one came first, cannot be answered. The relationship between both is complex. They are intertwined, used interchangeably and often simultaneously. Similarly, it is not always a straightforward exercise to define which domination they aimed to target (e.g. material, status or ideological). Often techniques addressed more than one type of domination.

The power-resistance dichotomy manifested mainly in the struggle to control and dominate the space within which both the Regime and the people operate. Both the regime and the people understood the importance of this space. The study examined this struggle, with reference to three different dimensions – physical, intellectual and virtual space. The struggle to control physical space derives from the lack of free spaces for people to organise and implement their activities while resisting the regime. The regime attempted to control physical space by limiting the interaction and movement of the people. People were forced to resort to unorthodox options, such as beginning demonstrations in mosques, since this was one of the few places in which people could gather without attracting the attention of the regime forces. Checkpoints, and roadblocks became part of everyday life (both later

became tools through which populations were starved into submission. Eventually, people learned how to find their way around or even through the checkpoints. When under siege, people frequently evidenced considerable creativity, ingenuity and resourcefulness.

The struggle over intellectual space can be traced back to the days of Hafez Assad. The regime had always sought to control the intellectual sphere by creating a cult around the leading figure, and this feature persevered into Bashar Assad's reign (Wedeen, 1999, 2013). Assad himself had always represented a red line that cannot be crossed. The government can be criticised, but Assad was untouchable. When the Uprising started, the first act of resistance at the intellectual level was to attack Assad himself through the use of humour and mockery. He was mocked online and during demonstrations. He was mocked in arts events, cartoons and comedy sketches. The struggle for intellectual space has also been waged at the level of the symbol – both the Flag and National Anthem have now become symbols of division, which distinguish those who support the regime and those who oppose it.

Social media and virtual spaces have featured prominently in the Syrian Uprising. Because of the lack of access to free physical space, activists have been forced to resort to virtual space. In the aftermath of Assad's media crackdown, social media has also come to function as an important component of citizen journalism and has increasingly served as a means through which the regime's crimes can be documented and exposed to the world. The regime has recognised this and has, at particular points, sought to limit people's access to the internet. Nonetheless, people felt responsible to document and report online what is happening on the ground. They continued to upload a massive amount of films and photos via any means. This included physically smuggling them to Lebanon and Turkey and then uploading them online. The regime has also sought to use this

resource for its own purposes. The Syrian Electronic Army was created to attack the Opposition, spread regime propaganda and question the credibility of information provided by opposition activists.

## **Contribution to the Literature of Nonviolent Resistance**

In providing a detailed account of the experience of ordinary people and activists in their efforts to resist the power of the regime using nonviolent means when possible, this thesis seeks to contribute to a wider debate about power/resistance and hidden/public nonviolent resistance. This thesis advances two arguments that feed into this debate. Firstly, it argues that the choice participating in resistance derives from the self-understanding of individuals of their role in the power relations and from the value they ascribe to their actions, as opposed to what the external environment dictates. Secondly, the thesis consistently argues that the transition of resistance from hidden actions to public confrontation is not a linear progression from one type to another. The hidden and public are frequently intertwined. It is not simply a matter of when the subordinates decide to shift from subtle clandestine resistance to overt public resistance. Conceivably, people might choose to alternate between both forms. People also sometimes choose to operate in the grey area where hidden and public are difficult to separate. Ordinary people resort to hidden or public actions based on their perception of which form might, under certain circumstances, yield better results. The thesis contributes to the literature on power and resistance by demonstrating how resistance, when conceived as a productive form of power, is affected by the self-understanding of the activists.

The first argument about the choice of the form of resistance and self-understanding assumes that ordinary people resort to nonviolent resistance for

various reasons that stems from their understanding of available opportunities, the environment around them and their role. The literature often argues that people revolt, and social movements emerge, when people recognise an opportunity to act (Tilly and Tarrow, 2006, 2012; Tarrow, 2011; Snow 2004). It is also often argued that people chose nonviolence for a reason (Gandhi, 1999[1920], 1999[1924]; Mantena, 2012) or as the consequence of a calculated rational choice which is made when ordinary people realise that nonviolence will help them progress towards achieving their goals (Nepstad, 2015; Oberschall, 1994; Felson, 2004). However, this thesis asserts that the decision to participate in the contention does not only result from people identifying an opportunity and seizing it to implement changes. In some cases, it is clear that even when it is not transparently obvious the opportunity is there, people are still willing to take the risk and revolt. Reasons might vary from desperation to the requirement to take action and adopt a moral stance, even when the results are not promising. In addition, the decision of whether to maintain a nonviolent approach or resort to violence derives mainly from the question of how people perceive their role in the power relation. It is not a result or product of the environment.

The second argument engages with the abrupt juxtaposition of hidden and public transcripts and instead counsels that there is no clear-cut dividing line which distinguishes the two. In some instances, this dividing line blurs, and people fluctuate between the two. The Literature ignores this essential point when it attempts to identify which form of resistance is more successful (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, 2008). It, therefore, proceeds from a profound misconception when it offers highly formalised distinctions that separate the hidden from the public (e.g. Scott 1985, 1990; Schmidt and Schroder, 2001; Pedersen, 2002). To put it more succinctly, this either/or approach is insufficiently adjusted to the purposes of a

discussion that proposes to engage with the enactment of nonviolent resistance in violent contexts.

It is open to question whether the literature can fully adjust to the full implications of this observation. On the contrary, it appears to evidence a profound reluctance to engage with the interaction between both sides or the bold proposition that hidden and public transcripts are intertwined. This serves to reiterate that this thesis makes an important contribution to the power/resistance literature by clearly conveying and insisting upon the close intertwining of hidden and public actions in nonviolence resistance. In violent contexts, it is hard enough to remain nonviolent, therefore ordinary people and activists alike often resort to creative methods that mix public and hidden actions and that aim to resist different forms of domination at once.

In the context of the Middle East, the Arab Spring has captured the attention of a large number of scholars, and substantial literature has been produced since 2011, in an attempt to dissect the uprisings, explain why they happened and how they evolved. These contributions are frequently predisposed to engage from a macro-level, with the intention of explaining how decades of authoritarian rule pushed the people to the limits of endurance and inadvertently established the foundations of popular revolt (see Gause, 2011; Bellin, 2012; Campante and Chor; 2012). In engaging from a top-down perspective, it is predisposed to ask how the Uprising varied from one country another. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria consequently appear as variations of a general theme (see Anderson, 2011; Tripp, 2013; Gelvin, 2013; Hinnebusch, 2014).

The literature also evidences a keen interest – and is true for both academics and the mainstream media – in the various ways that social media contributed to the Uprising. Books, journal articles and news reports have all extensively engaged



with this component of the Arab Spring (see Howard et al. 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Khondker, 2011). In the case of Syria, and here the faint echo of the macro-approach can be clearly identified, the literature evidences an abiding preoccupation with ISIS and 'radicalised' fighters (Cockburn, 2015; Weiss and Hassan, 2015; Stern and Berger, 2015; Hashim, 2014) and the sectarian (Kerr and Larkin, 2015; Phillips, 2015) and ethnic (Gunter, 2014; Allsopp, 2015) dimensions of the conflict. This thesis therefore simultaneously contributes to the literature on the Arab Spring and Syria by providing an insight into the micro-dimensions of the conflict and examining how ordinary people took part in the Uprising. The theme of nonviolence also offers an important variation, as so much of the contemporary discussion of the region is fixated upon the theme of violence. Contemporary observers approach and engage the region through the prism of violence, whether this is through a somewhat prurient obsession with the excesses of extremist groups or the considerably more benign imperative of 'peace'. While in both instances, the approach differs, the object and terminology of engagement (conflict) are essentially the same. In happy contrast, non-violence offers a novel and potentially productive framework of engagement that can be applied to the region.

## **Thesis Limitations and Future Research**

Although a considerable amount of work has gone into the different components of this project – data analysis, data collection, fieldwork, research design and writing – this thesis has a number of limitations and shortcomings. These can mostly be traced back to difficulties of access and continual changes on the ground. The reader should take the following limitations into account when reading through the thesis:

## ***Coverage – Fieldwork and Data Collection***

The key limitation of the thesis relates to the coverage of the data collection and the fieldwork. My initial plan, which was outlined during the design phase, was to spend a single year doing ethnographic work in the field and to complement the ethnographic study with interviews with participants from all the Syrian Governorates. It was intended that these interviews would reflect the many variations (age, education, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, religion) of Syria's cultural and social mosaic. However, the fluidity of the situation in Syria, in addition to the lack of required approval from the University, limited my ability to conduct the research to the field. Ironically, the fact that I had to travel to my war-torn country to renew my UK visa was perhaps a blessing in disguise as it enabled me to spend few months in the field and collect crucial data. While interviews were conducted with a wide range of people from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, geographical areas and religious persuasions, it is important to note that most participants engaged upon an ad-hoc basis. This complemented the virtual ethnography and the time I spent working with Syrians in Turkey and Lebanon

I also attempted to mitigate this issue by diversifying the pool of participants in and interviewing more people than was initially planned. Although it would be inaccurate to assert that the selected sample was representative, I can state with clear confidence that the participants in this study came from a variety of ethnic groups, geographical locations and occupational backgrounds. This variation extended to the conflict – interviewees held different responsibilities within the Uprising, held different political persuasions and were dispersed (both internally and externally) across different locations. Even while the sampling may not approximate to the standards required for scientific inference and generalisation, it is still sufficient to provide an insight into the discourses, perceptions and practices

and the activists and ordinary people who were either involved in the Uprising or impacted by it.

It is worth noting that although there was certain level of variance in the pool of participants, the majority of the interviewees were anti-regime activists. This has undoubtedly skewed the results. Still, some of the participants in the study were regime supporters and people who preferred to remain in a neutral position. Although such participation remained limited, it was a good opportunity to hear from these people and reflect their views as much as possible.

### ***The Tribal Dimension***

Syrian society is very diverse, and there are a number of questions that were not engaged by this thesis that would be instructive to explore during further research. The tribal dimension is perhaps the most obvious example in this respect. This dimension is a particularly important part of the politics in Southern and Eastern Syria, and the ongoing conflict has arguably enhanced its significance even further (Dukhan, 2014). While many tribes became sedentary over the twentieth century, they maintained their social structures including unique forms of solidarity and an “ideology of common lineage” (Dukhan, 2014). In Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Eastern Hama and Eastern Homs, tribes help to define communal outlines. It is particularly instructive to reflect upon the question of how power and resistance are manifested in these tribal settings.

One example of the political influence of the tribes was provided when tribes applied pressure on both sides of the Iraqi border to facilitate the movement of Syrian refugees into Iraq at a time when the Iraqi government was not keen to welcome them. (Ruhayem, 2012). The tribal dimension has been important since

the start of the Uprising. The events in Daraa, which is a predominantly tribal governorate, arguably assumed a wider significance by virtue of the tribal dimension. When children were tortured, and their families and tribal delegate to the governor were humiliated, tribal bonds were triggered. Tribal solidarity was also believed to be an undertone of the protests in Deir Ezzor, Hama and Homs (Dukhan, 2014:7-20). Tribes have historically conflicted with the State in these areas, and the conflict further exacerbated these pre-existing tensions.

Unfortunately, the information obtained during the data collection process did not enable an analysis of tribal dynamics. While some of the participants were from Daraa, Homs and Deir Ezzor, none of them had strong ties with the tribes in their hometowns. It would, however, be beneficial for a future study to engage with tribal dynamics at the micro-level and to ask how they influenced the participation of activists and ordinary people alike.

### ***The Gender Dimension***

Whenever there is a debate about nonviolent resistance or conflict, gender invariably interjects itself as an important reference point. In the context of the current study, nonviolent women's movements and activism (see Eschle and Maignaschca, 2007; Molyneux, 1998) are an important reference point. This engagement could conceivably extend to the impact of conflict upon women (e.g. Meintjes et al., 2001) or the question of how women non-violently resist existing social norms and structures (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1990, 2016). The Literature on the Arab Spring has also contributed a number of important gender-related insights, although most of it focuses on Egypt, Libya and Yemen and little attention has been given to Syria (e.g. Khalil, 2014; al-Ali, 2012; al-Rawi, 2014b).

Women from across Syria have actively participated in the Uprising since the very beginning. Material collected during the course of this study affirms that women participated in protests and organised different activities. As is always the case in armed conflicts, women and children have been most deeply impacted, and they account for the majority of the refugee camp population in Syria and neighbouring countries. In the context of the ongoing conflict, women are targeted and subjected to violence physical, sexual and verbal) by the regime (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2016), their rights are limited by extremists (Human Rights Watch, 2014b), and they suffer from difficult living conditions and limited opportunities in the camps (Hunt et al., 2017; Samari, n.d.). If they manage to escape, then it is likely they will be exploited during their journey to seek refuge in Europe (Amnesty International, 2016; Stotler, 2014).

Unfortunately, gender dimension was not taken into consideration during the design phase of this research and gender-related issues were not therefore engaged. However, during the analysis phase, I frequently reflected upon the fact that the language of women clearly differed from their male counterparts. However, this was merely an observation, and there was not sufficient data to provide the basis for gender analysis. I came across some interesting observations, that will undoubtedly inspire any future research I will conduct in this area. Some of the observations are highlighted below.

Women seemed positively predisposed towards the Uprising, despite incurring substantial costs. For example, Ahed was displaced more than once, lost family members, lost her home and job and saw one of her children suffer an injury. Despite this, she continually reminisced about the positive aspects of her experience protesting against the regime. She placed particular emphasis upon the "noise campaign" and helping young men in her neighbourhood hide from the regime forces. Dania was a further example in this regard – even though she was

arrested and assaulted, she continually returned to the enjoyable parts of her experience. When she referred to negative experiences, she adopted a dismissive attitude, which suggested that they were irrelevancies to be immediately disposed of.

Women have also enjoyed a margin of freedom that has been denied to men. During my own fieldwork, I saw how women could move more freely. The experience of Ola clearly illustrates how women were able to manipulate both the regime forces and ISIS fighters. She knew that as a woman she was less suspicious, and consciously built upon this by adjusting her false image in accordance with the person she was interacting with. It is certainly true that during the first few months of the Uprising, the regime focused its attention upon men - Women were undoubtedly less likely to be stopped and arrested at the checkpoints. However, it is important to recognise that women had suffered severe sexual, physical and verbal abuse when they were/are detained by regime forces.

The bodies of Syrian women have become an important part of the struggle arena between the different parties in the conflict. This indeed has been the case for a long time in Syria, both during war and peace (Kastrinou, 2012; Kastrinou et al., 2013). The public image of women has always been an issue. During the 1980s, as a conflict between the regime and Islamic opposition intensified, the regime fought what it considered an Islamic identity, by banning headscarves in schools. After the 1982 massacre, the Regime's paramilitary groups forced women to remove their headscarves in the street (Ardito, 2010:80). This act is one of a number which reiterates how the bodies of Syrian women have become a battleground.

The violation of human bodies became more prominent after the Uprising. Women are frequently arrested subjected to sexual violence and rape and tortured

(Human Rights Watch, 2013c). The regime also uses them as a bargaining chip in the negotiation with the opposition and as a tool to force wanted family members to surrender (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 2015). Even when they were not arrested and violated, women were targeted by the regime in a sexualised manner. State media would denounce women who opposed the regime as “terrorists” and “sex slaves” (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 2015:1) who practised “sex *Jihad*” (*jihād al-nikāḥ*) (Kastrinou et al., 2013).

In resisting the regime power, women recognised that their bodies are metaphorically, physically and symbolically used and abused by the regime. In recognising this, they have fought back on each of these levels. It remains to be clarified if this was an intentional or rational choice or merely a reaction to the instrumentalisation of their bodies. Women’s bodies are an ever-present feature of the struggle, as the “Freedom Brides” campaign clearly demonstrates. The young women who chose to wear wedding dresses and stand silently in the busiest market in town dedicated their bodies to the symbolical fight. It was as if they sought to reclaim their bodies and to reconstruct them in the image that they chose for themselves. The white dresses, which symbolised purity, were diametrically opposed to the regime’s vulgar depiction of women as “sex slaves”.

The study was not in a position to examine the gender dimension of the struggle in any great depth or detail. Had this been taken into account at an earlier stage of the research, then it could conceivably have influenced the data collection process, with the consequence that it would have been factored into the overall analysis. In general, women in Syria who spend their whole lives resisting various dominant powers in a male-dominated society, seemed to be generally comfortable in their role. While they resisted in a hidden manner, they were eager to shift their struggle into the public arena. In the event that I undertake future research into Syria, this will undoubtedly be part of my project.

## Final Note

I would like to end this thesis on a personal note. When I began this research, my intention was to examine why ordinary people, many of whom I knew well and had worked with before, were willing to risk their lives and revolt against the regime, even in the face of sustained violence and brutality. At the start of the research, I was determined to adopt an objective position and to distance myself from the people and the material that I was studying. However, as the thesis developed, I became increasingly engaged with the topic and the people that I spoke to. Over time, I became increasingly possessed of the belief that I had a responsibility, and even obligation, to tell these people's stories and to communicate their experiences to the outside world. While I may have achieved this to some extent, I am fully aware of the fact that I have barely scratched the surface. I am aware of this, along with the fact that I will probably return to this material at some stage in the future. In the beginning, I had mistakenly assumed that once the thesis was finished, I would move on to lighter topics. Now I see that the material is closely wrapped up with me and my sense of myself. Working in this project was emotionally exhaustive and at some point, even draining and depressing. I have always thought that once I finish this thesis, I will be moving on to lighter topics. However, if I learned anything during this research, is that in spite of my best efforts to distance myself, I am still an insider.



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