DEMYSTIFYING SYRIA
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The Syrian Opposition:
The struggle for unity and relevance, 2003–2008

Joe Pace and Joshua Landis

On 10 June 2000, Hafiz al-Asad died. He had ruled Syria for three decades, bringing stability to a country that had been rocked by military coups and revolving governments. Stability came with a price, however. Al-Asad tightened emergency laws, eliminated political liberties and ruled with an iron fist. One Syrian dissident expressed the mood upon al-Asad’s death by remarking, ‘The strong man is dead. Now we have a chance.’ His son’s ascent to power kindled hope that the leadership would embark on much needed political reform, bringing about what came to be known as the Damascus Spring.

Indeed, the first few months under the new leader were auspicious. In his inaugural speech to parliament, Bashar al-Asad appealed for ‘creative thinking’ and recognised the ‘dire need’ for constructive criticism, reform and modernisation. In a move to patch up relations with Islamist groups and end the bitter war between the regime and fundamentalists, Bashar closed down the notorious Mazzah political prison, which had become a symbol of the regime’s brutality. Human Rights Watch estimated that Syria held some 4,000 political prisoners in 1993. The new president whittled
the number of known political detainees down to between 300 and 1,000 within the first years of his rule.

Almost immediately, Syria’s once catatonic intellectuals began to show signs of life and human rights organisations and discussion forums began proliferating across the country. Encouraged by what seemed to be a real social base for dissent, a number of prominent establishment figures – parliamentarians, businessmen, academics and former opposition leaders – also stepped into the reformist limelight. The Damascus Spring activists produced a manifesto to give direction and a semblance of unity to the flood of reform demands emanating from Syria’s long-suppressed public. More than 1,000 civil society activists signed the Statement of One Thousand in January 2001, calling for comprehensive political reforms. The following week, parliamentarian and vocal regime critic Riad Saif announced the formation of the Movement for Social Peace. These developments, however, proved too much for the regime to bear.

Hardliners, anxious that the criticism was escalating beyond control, inaugurated a crackdown that would become known as the Damascus Winter. The regime unleashed its attack dogs, publicly impugning the opposition’s nationalist credentials and even physically assaulting its critics. Vice President ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam warned that the calls for change had gone too far and claimed that the regime would not tolerate threats that could drive Syria into civil war. By the end of the summer, eight of the most prominent civil society leaders had been imprisoned and all but one of the civil society forums were shut down.

Despite its brevity, the Damascus Spring achieved several lasting, if modest, aims. For the first time since the late 1970s, individuals could vocalise critical views of the regime in public settings. The new-found freedom drew scattered and secretive activists out of the shadows. Even if ideological disputes persisted, dissidents at least became aware of each other’s existence and the language of reform was injected into political discourse.

Notwithstanding these successes, the Damascus Spring failed to produce anything resembling a unified opposition. Almost all of the opposition groupings agreed on a basic set of demands, but even such shared commitments proved tenuous. Trifling ideological disagreements, personality conflicts and interference from state security forces compounded substantive disputes over everything from the question of Kurdish rights to the role
of foreign assistance. These troubles produced a fragmented and ineffectual opposition composed of often competing human rights associations, political parties, civil society forums and committees, independent activists and intellectuals and underground Islamist groups.

**Human Rights Groups**

Approximately ten human rights organisations and two centres for human rights studies, as well as a series of smaller, single-issue associations, such as the Free Political Prisoners Committee, have been operating in Syria during the past five years. Because no agency within the state is receptive to the concerns of these organisations, their main function has been to collect information on human rights violations and issue press releases with condemnations or calls for a detainee’s release. These groups are arguably the most effective parts of the Syrian opposition. The increasing frequency with which families file reports with these organisations is indicative of the trust they have built with vulnerable segments of the population. They have also become more communications savvy, feeding a constant flow of information to international non-governmental organisations, thereby deterring the most egregious abuses.

Unfortunately, these groups are not without their problems. Membership is trifling and of those who formally belong, only a fraction actively participates. For example, all of the Human Rights Association of Syria’s research, reports, correspondence and press releases in 2004 were the products of one woman. The Syrian Organisation for Human Rights splintered: the core group has only ten members and the split-off has one who is widely suspected of being a state security agent. Even organisations that are better staffed run on shoestring budgets, relying on membership dues that rarely surpass a total of a few hundred dollars per month or on the personal wealth of their founders.

The constant financial strain has undermined democratic practices within these organisations. Often, the only organisational real estate is an activist’s personal office, which gives him or her undue influence over internal operations. One activist who severed his relationship with a human rights association lamented that its founder and office owner ‘ran the association like a personal fiefdom’. There is no neutral meeting space;
if a personal conflict flares up between the proprietor and another activist, the latter is forced to capitulate or disaffiliate.

Then there are the personal conflicts between organisations, illustrated by the decision of multiple human rights organisations to boycott a demonstration in front of the High National Security Court during activist Aktham Naissah’s trial, no small slight for a community that shows its utmost solidarity when its members are facing sham political trials. These squabbles limit co-operation and information sharing and lead to redundant and inefficient uses of organisational resources.

Civil Society Forums and Committees

Civil society in Syria is a wasteland. Even at the height of Bashar’s reformist fervour, the regime refused to license dissident groups, choosing instead to tolerate their illegal operation until political convenience dictated otherwise. The few civil associations that have been licensed are either pet projects of regime figures, such as the president’s wife’s development associations, or professional syndicates, whose leadership is by law drawn from Ba’th Party loyalists.

Aside from human rights associations, the only civic associations to survive the Damascus Winter were the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society and the Jamal al-‘Atasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue; the latter was shut down in the spring of 2005. The stated goals of these associations were multifaceted. They were supposed to provide a forum to voice critical viewpoints, be a staging ground for cobbled together a united platform and act as a counterweight to sectarianism by facilitating dialogue between different ethnic and religious groups.

Report cards were mixed. The Jamal al-‘Atasi Forum’s monthly meetings regularly attracted hundreds of participants, consistently more than demonstrations, but the meetings never produced tangible results. In the words of one activist, ‘People voice their views, others disagree; and when the forum ends, people go home without ever resolving the argument. Three hours of talk once a month is not going to produce a unified opposition.’

All the same, the al-‘Atasi Forum provided an important venue for opposition figures to be seen and heard in public. It was a signal to the secular left that the public conscience had not been erased. Its existence was also a
useful talking point for a president who tried to project a façade of greater tolerance for free speech.

Political Parties

Political parties have always been the weakest link in the opposition. With the exception of the Kurdish parties, whose members are resoundingly nationalist, none has managed to plant roots in society. The most popular non-sectarian party’s membership is less than 1,000, leaving active members vastly outnumbered by security agents.

Contrary to the popular presumption, Syria does not suffer from a shortage of opposition parties. In fact, the problem is that there is a glut of these parties, despite the fact that all of them are technically illegal. Straw-man parties, consisting of two or three political entrepreneurs, are being formed with such frequency that people have stopped keeping track.11 The combination of security pressures and lack of internal democracy has rendered the parties brittle and prone to splintering. State agents easily infiltrate the organisations, foment internal discord and form breakaway parties with disaffected members.12 There is no better example of Syria’s fissure-prone opposition than the prodigious number of Kurdish parties, whose total changes so frequently that rarely will two opposition watchers report the same number.13

Although other indicators – popular protests, civil society gatherings, dissident presence in the media – indicate that while opposition activity increased from 2002 to 2005, party membership actually decreased. Parties have proven particularly inept at recruiting youth. Riad al-Turk, the opposition’s most highly esteemed party leader, tried to rejuvenate his party with this dilemma in mind: ‘We don’t have a platform suitable to the present conditions this society is facing ... University students, the youth, those from the countryside – none of them are finding anything within [the opposition] that suits them.’14

The Nasirists, who still adhere to former Egyptian President Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir’s platform of pan-Arab nationalism and socialist economics, and leftists – who dominate Syria’s largest opposition party alliance, the Democratic National Gathering (DNG) – are widely viewed as relics of the past, clinging to an ideology that collapsed along with the Soviet Union.
Turk’s party, the second largest in the DNG, has been one of the few success stories. Formerly the Syrian Communist Party, it was refashioned into a liberal party with a renovated platform and newer, younger leadership. By most accounts, before the latest crackdown it was the only party with a steadily rising membership base.

Due to the fragmentation of Syrian political society, the spine of the opposition in the post-Damascus Spring period had become intellectuals and independent activists, who at best had a readership and no following. As activist ‘Ammar Qurabi noted, ‘Really, there is no such thing as “the opposition”. There are [only] individual activists and writers.’

An Islamist Resurgence?

Despite Bashar al-Asad’s pardoning of hundreds of Muslim Brothers during his first three years in office, and repeated, albeit abortive, efforts at reconciliation, there is no indication that the regime is growing more tolerant of Islamist political activity. The memory of the Hama massacre, which crushed the Muslim Brothers’ uprising in February 1982, and Law Number 49, which punishes membership in the Muslim Brothers organisation by death, have inhibited the re-emergence of an organised presence inside Syria.

Although it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the public sympathises with the Muslim Brothers, growing religiosity and a dearth of credible liberal trends would make the organisation a formidable political force if it were allowed to mobilise. None the less, despite alarmist predictions, it is unlikely that it would monopolise Syrian politics. The roughly 30 per cent of Syrians who are Kurds, Christians or ‘Alawis generally oppose the Muslim Brothers by default, as do many upper-middle-class urbanites who are weary of Islamist puritanism.

The only Islamist party inside Syria is the Liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir), which has fewer than 1,000 members, according to its own activists. It has become a cliché for journalists to note the increase in veiled women and bearded men, archetypal signs of a religious awakening. In general, however, the type of Islam that is resurging in Syria is neither fundamentalist nor militant. Rather than fall victim to it, the regime has managed to harness its energy by monopolising the religious establishment and burnishing its
Islamic credentials. The puritanical Salafi and Wahhabi trends are divided, some advocating political silence or even co-operation with the state, others counsel political agitation and their activities are largely limited to tiny, scattered discussion groups. There is no established network.

After Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon, there have been scattered clashes between security forces and what the government claims were Islamist militants. Plausible theories have been proffered that the regime staged at least some of these attacks in order to evoke sympathy from the West and justify its internal crackdown.¹⁸ Even if the attacks were the work of hostile Islamists, their occurrence testifies only to the spread of isolated militant cells. They command very little popular support in a Syrian street that is still wary of the kind of violent clashes between Islamists and the regime that erupted in the early 1980s. Given the regime’s stranglehold on political Islamic trends, it is highly unlikely that Islamists will emerge as a major opposition force inside Syria, regardless of how well the Muslim Brothers fare in exile.

*The Iraq War: Energising or enervating?*

For proponents of the so-called reverse domino theory – that Saddam Hussein’s collapse would send a tidal wave of democratic fervour through the region – the US-led war turned out to be a double-edged sword. Activists amplified their calls for reform in the name of protecting Syria from Iraq’s fate, but the war also shocked the general population into rallying behind the Ba’thi regime, whose chief boast was that it could maintain stability. The Bush administration’s new-found democratisation fervour forced Damascus to adopt the language of reform, but it also facilitated government efforts to label dissidents as lackeys of the West. Saddam’s collapse kindled an awakening among the Kurdish opposition, but in so doing exacerbated tensions between the Kurdish and Arab oppositions.

Even though the vast majority of Syrian dissidents harshly condemned the Iraq war, they coupled their scathing rebukes with calls for domestic reform. In May 2003, a mere month after the fall of Baghdad, civil society activists submitted a petition to the president warning against the ‘aggressive, racist, egotistical and evil policies and ideology’ of the United States and Israel and appealing for reform to strengthen Syria against external
threats. On 8 May 2004, opposition activists staged an unprecedented sit-in in front of the People’s Assembly. At the same time, however, they found themselves increasingly vulnerable to accusations of treachery. For example, the one exception to the media black-out concerning the sit-in was an article by the editor in chief of al-Ba’th newspaper that accused the protesters of trying to ‘reinforce pressures being exercised from outside’.

Arab activists were ambivalent about the Iraq war but the Kurds greeted it with nearly unanimous glee. The fall of Saddam, the figurehead of Kurdish repression, ignited a revival of Kurdish nationalism inside Syria. Kurdish opposition groups began agitating for Kurdish rights, including the return of confiscated lands in the northeast, the right to teach and study the Kurdish language, the redressing of systematic discrimination against the Kurds in the official bureaucracy and the nationalisation of Kurds who had been stripped of Syrian citizenship in 1962. A smaller number of parties began demanding greater political autonomy and a federal government.

Masha’al Temu, spokesman for the recently founded Kurdish Future Trend, observed, ‘The Iraq war liberated us from the culture of fear ... [People] saw a Kurd become president of Iraq and began demanding their culture and political rights in Syria’. In March 2004, a soccer match erupted into clashes between Kurds and Arabs in the northeastern city of al-Qamishli, spawning Kurdish protests throughout Syria’s major cities. The Syrian regime did not hesitate to crush the so-called intifadah, rounding up thousands of activists and flooding the Kurdish-dominated northeast with security forces.

The effect of the rise of the Kurds on the opposition as a whole was again mixed. In some ways, the sudden outburst of Kurdish nationalism in the midst of increasing US and Israeli pressure on Syria – months earlier, Israel had launched an air strike on Syrian soil – played directly into the regime’s hands. While the state-run press accused foreign agents of initiating the riots, the security agencies stoked suspicions that the Kurds constituted a fifth column – secessionist and in favour of US military intervention – thus containing the agitation within Kurdish circles. Even nervous Arab activists, who had once been sympathetic to the Kurdish plight, hesitated to support a movement whose leaders affectionately referred to President George W. Bush as Abu Azaadi (Father of Freedom).

Nevertheless, the size of the uprising forced Arab activists to recognise
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that the Kurds were a force that could no longer be ignored. The Arab opposition struggles to move 300 supporters onto the street while the Kurdish opposition brings out hundreds of thousands. Prior to this event, the Arab opposition had largely ignored the Kurdish issue, being suspicious that Kurdish activism was a cover to pursue an independent Kurdistan. Kurds stood accused of exaggerating their hardship and revising history to establish the Kurdish claim to Syrian lands.

Soon after the uprising, Arab and Kurdish leaders began making contact and engaging in low-level co-ordination. The Arabs hoped to piggyback on the Kurds’ manpower while the Kurds hoped to insert Kurdish rights into the Arab opposition’s agenda. The goals were to surmount the mutual suspicion that had been so carefully cultivated by the regime and create a united front for reform. The increasing importance of Kurdish forces in the opposition was recognised by the Muslim Brothers, which issued a statement of solidarity with the Kurds exactly one year after the uprising. It was the first time the Muslim Brothers had publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of Kurdish grievances.26

Hariri’s Assassination Gives New Life to the Opposition

On 14 February 2005, a massive bomb ripped through former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri’s convoy, killing him and twenty-two others. Washington blamed Damascus and worked closely with both France and Saudi Arabia to ratchet up diplomatic and economic pressure on the Syrian regime in order to hold it responsible before an international investigation and court of law. A popular uprising in Lebanon, quickly dubbed the Cedar Revolution, brought more than a million citizens of the fractured state together to protest the killing of their leader and demand that justice be done.

Bashar al-Asad insisted on Syria’s innocence and warned fellow Syrians against foreign conspiracies and an international witch-hunt. Nevertheless, bowing to overwhelming pressure, he withdrew Syria’s armed forces from Lebanon, ending a thirty-year presence that most Lebanese had come to view as an occupation. Syria’s humiliating expulsion from Lebanon and growing international isolation had a profound psychological effect on the opposition. For the first time, many opposition leaders believed that the
regime might face a truly concerted international effort to bring it down or force it to accept real reforms. The opposition had to step up to the plate and prove to the Syrian people that it could provide an effective substitute for Ba’thi rule. According to Kamal al-Labwani, ‘For the first time, the possibility of regime collapse, even if improbable, was in view, and people began to think more seriously about providing an alternative.’

The opposition spent the spring of 2005 engaged in its first serious effort to unite since the collapse of the Damascus Spring. First, low-level contacts between Arabs and Kurds gave birth to the National Co-ordination Committee for the Defence of Basic Freedoms and Human Rights, the most inclusive opposition alliance to date. In April, the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society, Syria’s largest civil society formation, issued a statement calling for the ‘opening of channels of dialogue’ with all segments of Syrian society, including the Muslim Brothers.

For the first time since the infamous 1982 Hama massacre, an opposition group inside Syria had called for dialogue with the Muslim Brothers. One month later, activist and writer ‘Ali ‘Abdullah, standing up at the al-`Atasi Forum in central Damascus, read aloud a letter from Muslim Brothers Secretary General ‘Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni that encouraged the co-operation of all of Syria’s political movements; even the ruling Ba’th Party. It was the first time the Muslim Brothers had been publicly represented inside Syria since 1982. Soon thereafter, ex-communist leader Riad al-Turk sat next to al-Bayanuni and announced his intention to form an alliance with the Muslim Brothers. The groundwork was being laid for a broad opposition coalition that would unite the many strains of Syria’s opposition, whether ethnic or religious.

The Damascus Declaration

On 18 October 2005, five days before the scheduled release of the United Nations’ first report on the Hariri assassination, the newly invigorated Syrian opposition unveiled the Damascus Declaration, a document establishing a unified platform for democratic change. The declaration grew out of a clandestine trip to Morocco a few months earlier by two leading members of the Damascus-based secular opposition, where they met with the leader of the Muslim Brothers. The Christian journalist and leftist Michel Kilu was
one of the two delegates to meet with al-Bayanuni. They hammered out the rudiments of a compromise unity document. The two sides agreed on four guiding principles: pluralism, non-violence, oppositional unity and democratic change. Al-Bayanuni delegated authority to his secular counterparts to shop the draft copy of their agreement around Damascus to be amended and approved by as many other opposition groups as possible. The result was a broad-based alliance that seemed to bury the hatchet between secular and Islamist factions. The publication of the declaration only days before the first UN findings were released gave a boost to the accomplishments of the opposition, as it was able to ride a wave of press reports on Syria, a country that is seldom discussed in the international news.

Five political parties and civil society organisations, along with nine prominent intellectuals, signed their names to the declaration. Within hours, dozens of additional parties, inside and outside Syria, began to declare their support. For the first time in decades, it seemed that Syria’s bickering political parties, outspoken intellectuals and civil society groupings were finding common ground. Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian nationalists put aside their ethnic squabbling. Socialists, communists, liberals and Islamists were willing to unite over a single platform of democratic change and respect for one another. Civil society activists who had previously turned their noses up at political parties joined forces with them and a deliberate effort was made to ensure that signatories of the declaration hailed from a majority of Syria’s provinces. According to one activist, ‘[Only] with the Damascus Declaration could we speak about a “Syrian opposition”’.

The document sidestepped many of the niggling issues that had dogged opposition groups to that point. It refrained from declaring a state religion. It avoided clear statements about the economy or saying whether Syria should remain socialist or turn to free markets. It proposed no clear solution to the Kurdish problem, other than to insist that it should be dealt with within a democratic and inclusive framework. Another significant feature of the Damascus Declaration was that, unlike previous declarations, it was followed up by the creation of a committee to oversee continued co-ordination among its signatories.

In many ways, the criticisms of the Damascus Declaration were evidence of the pettiness of the divisions that plague the opposition. A clause that stresses Syria’s affiliation to the ‘Arab Order’ drew fire from both Arab and
Kurdish nationalists. Some Arab nationalists disparaged this as a despicable compromise of Syria’s Arab heritage, and some equally extreme Kurds decried the mere reference to Arab identity as evidence of unceasing Arab chauvinism.34 As these criticisms revealed, many dissident efforts failed to gain widespread support because of diction, not content.

The more substantive criticisms of the declaration revolved around the special reference to Islam, which it referred to as the ‘religion and ideology of the majority’ and ‘the more prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people’ and the treatment of Kurdish rights. Some commentators warned that such efforts to court the Muslim Brothers would exacerbate sectarian tensions.35 One argued that the drafters had ‘surrendered, without so much as fluttering an eyelid, [Syria’s] long history of secularism and the separation of church and state’.36 As for the Kurdish issue, three Kurdish groups praised the declaration’s demands for democratic change but ultimately rejected the document on the grounds that it was deficient on the issue of Kurdish rights since it did not explicitly recognise the Kurds as an independent national group with historic ties to the land.

The pact between secular groups and the Muslim Brothers was a tremendous boon for both sides. The Muslim Brothers could project its voice through the conduits of Syrian civil society, while secular elements gained the endorsement of the country’s most prominent Islamist movement. After a disappointing Ba’th Party conference, secular activists hoped that this connection would mitigate popular suspicions that the secular opposition was anti-Muslim, elitist and pro-Western.37

The coalition set off alarm bells for a regime that had struggled for two decades to deny the Muslim Brothers a foothold in Syrian society. The regime counter-attacked through its proxies within intellectual and dissident circles. Rihab al-Bitar of the quasi-opposition Free Democratic Gathering, impugned the motives of the declaration’s signatories, parroting the regime’s logic that amidst the onslaught of international pressures, any challenge to the state endangered the security of the Syrian people.38 The regime cast itself as the guarantor of stability and accused the opposition of disregarding US and Israeli treachery or, worse, facilitating it by seeking to undermine the state.39 Unfortunately, indictments of the opposition’s loyalty still resonated with an anxiety-ridden public.
The Opposition Goes Global

A debate has long raged within the Syrian opposition about the role of foreign forces. At one extreme stands a sizeable group of nationalists that rejects any form of outside assistance, especially from the United States. Their ideology is encapsulated in the slogan, ‘We will not ride to heaven on the back of Satan.’ At the other extreme is a smattering of marginalised liberals who welcome any and all pressure that could weaken the regime. The moderate contingent recognises the need for foreign assistance but rejects anything that influences the opposition’s agenda or takes power out of its own hands.

Two developments empowered advocates of internationalising the reform movement. First, opposition groups in exile began proliferating in 2004, beginning a concerted effort to forge ties between foreign and domestic forces. Secondly, and more importantly, the regime commenced a new clampdown on activists within Syria in March 2005 and has steadily escalated repression since that time, prompting activists to travel abroad and encourage their counterparts in exile to lobby their respective governments.

The regime intensified its repression of activists during the 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon to levels unseen since the Damascus Winter. It began to arrest and harass civil society activists and scrambled to deny them a voice in the media. In mid-March 2005, the Ministry of Information yanked the licences from the US-sponsored channels al-Hurrah and Radio Sawa, because they covered a 10 March protest in front of the Palace of Justice.40 A website featuring frequent articles on the opposition, called Elaph, was blocked along with the critical newsletter All4Syria. This sent a clear message to remaining journalists not to engage with or cover the opposition.

In May 2005, security forces arrested the entire administrative committee of the Jamal al-‘Atasi Forum for reading aloud a message from the Muslim Brothers. All of its members were subsequently released except one, and the forum – the last association to survive the Damascus Winter crackdown – was closed indefinitely. The number of arbitrary arrests and security summons skyrocketed. By mid-summer, all oppositional gatherings had been banned, and those trying to skirt the ban found their houses and offices besieged by security forces. One activist explained the impact on the opposition: ‘It [was] becoming almost impossible for us to do anything
inside of Syria. So people [had] two choices: they [could] regress and revert to secretive work like what they did in the 1980s and 1990s or they [could] travel and organise abroad.’

Meanwhile, Farid Ghadri, a Syrian businessman and founder of the Washington-based Reform Party of Syria, began touting himself as the leader of the opposition in exile. Although Ghadri had no discernible following inside Syria, he managed to ingratiate himself with neo-conservative officials like Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz. Describing himself as ‘the Syrian Ahmad Chalabi’, he called for the overthrow of the Ba’thi regime. Associations with the United States destroyed his credibility within Syria’s domestic opposition, but they may have stoked the regime’s anxiety.

After several abortive conferences, the internal and external opposition – minus Ghadri – successfully linked up in Washington in January 2006. The conference did not create a new coalition but its attendees from inside Syria all attested to its singular accomplishment: it marked an important first step in breaking down the walls of mistrust between activists inside Syria and expatriates residing in the United States.

**Khaddam’s Bombshell Reinvigorates the Opposition**

On 30 December 2005, former Vice President Khaddam, once a staunch critic of the opposition, stunned regime and opposition alike by lashing out at the authorities on the al-‘Arabiyyah news network. It had been an open secret that he opposed Bashar al-Asad’s inheritance of the presidency, and was posturing to assume the position himself. After Bashar came to power, Khaddam found himself increasingly marginalised until he resigned from – or was forced out of – the vice presidency.

After the interview, he relocated to Paris, where he announced an alliance with the Muslim Brothers. In March 2006, a conference in Brussels ended with the announcement of a new opposition coalition known as the National Salvation Front (NSF). It stressed liberal values: religious, ethnic, political and intellectual pluralism, rotation of power and an end to discrimination against the Kurds, whom it described as ‘partners in the homeland’.

Khaddam’s defection and the formation of the NSF were bigger blows to the regime’s confidence than the Damascus Declaration. At best, the
declaration heralded greater unity within the opposition. By itself, it did not enhance the opposition’s standing within Syrian society. Whereas dissidents struggled to network internationally and were consistently starved for funds, Khaddam possessed a personal fortune, a wealth of important connections and an intimate knowledge of the inner workings of a notoriously opaque regime.

The alliance bolstered the positions of Khaddam and the Muslim Brothers alike. By linking up with the secular Khaddam, the Muslim Brothers showcased an eagerness to prioritise political pragmatism over narrow ideology. It may have alleviated the anxieties of ‘Alawis and military leaders who believed that the Muslim Brothers’ first move in power would be to purge regime loyalists. Khaddam could appeal to Ba’thists in a way that al-Bayanuni never could. The former vice president issued an open letter to regime Ba’thists, appealing to them to reject the small family clique ruling Syria and give their loyalty instead to the fatherland, represented by the NSF. The Muslim Brothers also benefit from Khaddam’s international and internal connections. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brothers gave Khaddam an Islamic imprimatur, so he could now piggyback on whatever support it enjoyed inside Syria.

The NSF reopened some fissures within the domestic opposition, however, that the Damascus Declaration had hoped to seal. No activists within Syria openly declared their support for the NSF – doing so would have assuredly carried a stiff prison sentence – but most dissidents divided into two camps. One camp strenuously objected in principle to dealing with Khaddam, an icon of the oppressive Ba’thi regime and an architect of the Damascus Winter. Some in this first camp condemned the shift in the opposition’s centre of gravity from Damascus to Europe, given that Khaddam had fled to Paris. Some criticised the gall of the participants in the NSF conference for not including any activists from inside Syria. Other critics bemoaned the Muslim Brothers’ failure to consult their new Damascus Declaration allies. Some on the declaration’s temporary committee in fact flirted with the idea of officially expelling the Muslim Brothers from the declaration’s ranks.45

The second camp, while cautiously optimistic about the NSF as a political formation, and elated about the emergence of a new opposition alliance, remained wary of Khaddam’s character. This contingent was dominated by

The repression that began in 2005 and grew in intensity following Khaddam’s defection became draconian following the Beirut–Damascus Declaration of May 2006. Several developments emboldened the regime to intensify the crackdown. First, the Ba’thi regime felt that it had dodged a bullet when the UN investigation into the Hariri murder began to run into serious difficulties following the first and most dramatic report issued during the fall of 2005,
which squarely accused Syria of masterminding the assassination. A number of key witnesses either recanted, claiming they had been paid by Hariri’s allies to give false testimony, or turned out to be unreliable. Secondly, Israel signalled during the last months of 2005 that it would not support regime change in Damascus. The third, and perhaps the most reassuring, development for Syria was the weakness of the anti-Syrian coalition in Lebanon. The parliamentary elections of 2005 revealed deep divisions among Lebanon’s Christian community, half of which allied itself with Lebanon’s Shi’ah rather than the country’s pro-American Sunni leadership.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 2006 further emboldened Syria. Israel failed to destroy Hizbullah, which quickly rearmed with Syrian help and proved that it could protect Syrian interests in Lebanon. Another factor that convinced Bashar al-Asad that he could move against the opposition without provoking serious opposition inside or outside Syria was the failure of President Bush’s Middle East plans. Iraq had turned into a disaster and democratic elections in the Middle East brought to power Islamists hostile to the US wherever they were held. The January 2006 elections in Palestine that brought HAMAS to power with a sweeping victory gave Bashar al-Asad an important political boost. After all, HAMAS’s leader Khalid Mash’al lived in Damascus. President Bush’s freedom agenda had clearly backfired.

In March 2006, no doubt anxious about the build-up of opposition forces abroad, the regime amplified its persecution of dissidents by outlawing contact with foreign elements. Al-Labwani was immediately arrested, as previously described, following his return after meetings with European and US officials in Washington; he was initially charged with belonging to a banned organisation, inciting sectarian strife, and ‘damaging the nation’s image’, the worst-case scenario being a ten-year prison term.49 The regime later levelled a new charge against al-Labwani: ‘communicating with a foreign country and prompting it to direct confrontation,’ which carries a sentence of life imprisonment or death.50 Since the summer of 2006, virtually no Syrian dissident has been allowed to leave the country.
On 12 May 2006, 300 Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals signed the Beirut–Damascus Declaration, calling for a normalisation of relations between Lebanon and Syria. At first glance innocuous, the regime interpreted this document as evidence that the Syrian opposition was teaming up with the anti-Syrian government in Lebanon.51 The fact that a delegation that included Khaddam and several Muslim Brothers met with Walid Jumblatt – Lebanon’s most vociferous anti-Syrian politician, who had called both for US military intervention in Syria and the assassination of Bashar al-Asad – lent credence to this interpretation. Many Syrians were piqued at what they perceived to be Lebanese ingratitude for Syria’s sacrifices to maintain Lebanese security. The regime played on this upsurge in anti-Lebanese sentiment to paint opposition figures as treacherous agents of pro-Western intervention in Lebanon.

The regime went for the opposition’s jugular vein and has had its teeth implanted therein ever since. An editorial in the state newspaper Tishrin accused the signatories of ‘[forgetting] all Syria’s victims and sacrifices for the sake of Lebanon and [joining] the evil and open attack led by the Bush administration against Syria’.52 Two days after its release, secret police called Kilu, the declaration’s main author, to come in for questioning. He was held for a year, and then sentenced to three more years for ‘weakening national sentiment, spreading false news and inciting sectarian strife’.53 Kilu’s arrest sent shockwaves through the opposition and prefigured a broader campaign to target every element of the dissident community – human rights advocates, Arab nationalists, Kurds, leftists and liberals alike. The state was intent on warning the opposition that no one would be exempt from retribution if they forged alliances with outside governments. Activists began to speak of the ‘final liquidation’ of the opposition.54

Throughout 2007, the regime dispensed with almost every significant opposition figure, starting with the signatories of the Beirut–Damascus Declaration. Michel Kilu, Mahmud ‘Isa, Sulaiman Shummar and Khalil Husain each received three years.55 Prominent human rights attorney Anwar al-Bunni received five. The wave of repression prompted statements of condemnation from the presidency of the European Union and the US State Department, but nothing more.56 Throughout this period, state
security forces prevented Damascus Declaration members from meeting. In early December, the regime signalled a new zero-tolerance policy for such gatherings. After breaking up a National Council of the Damascus Declaration meeting, security forces fanned out across the country and arrested more than a dozen people who had been in attendance, including Akram al-Bunni, Fida al-Hurani and ‘Ali ‘Abdullah.57 Shortly thereafter, secret police stormed the house of former Member of Parliament and Damascus Spring luminary Riad Saif, and hauled him away.58

Not only has Syrian security jailed the opposition’s leaders, but it has also taken steps to ensure that a new leadership does not emerge. Arrests of part-time activists and those who criticise the regime are not unusual. The virtual world, once the refuge for expressions of dissent, is monitored and restricted. The crackdown on the Internet includes the blocking of such domain names as ‘Blogspot’, ‘YouTube’ and ‘Facebook’. Some 160 websites have been blocked, including many news outlets and social networking sites.59 In 2007 a new regulation requiring website operators to list the name and email address of anyone who posted on the site was issued.60 Internet cafes have been ordered to register the identification numbers and names of users.

**The End of Containment**

Syria broke out of its diplomatic and political isolation during the last half of 2008. The reasons for this are several. First, Bashar al-Asad turned out to be a more astute adversary and capable ruler than most analysts gave him credit for. Secondly, the Syrian opposition was never able to rally more than a few hundred followers for public protests. This failure was due to the pervasive fear of Syria’s security forces that has created a generation of apathetic and depoliticised Syrians, but it is also due to the opposition parties’ ineffectiveness at recruiting adherents. Even in exile, few Syrians would turn out when summoned. Thirdly, the Bush administration failed to convince Middle Easterners that democracy could solve their problems. The importance of sectarianism, tribalism and ethnic divisions undermined efforts at national unity and reform. As a consequence, authoritarianism was bolstered rather than weakened by America’s experiment in Iraq. Syria, which has opened its doors to an influx of some 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, has
been traumatised by the civil war that ripped apart its neighbour. Far from being a spur to Syrians to rise up and demand freedom, the Iraq example taught a new generation of Syrians to appreciate the stability and security of rule by a strong man. Authoritarianism throughout the Middle East is being refurbished and modernised.

Recognition of Syria’s status as a major regional player and the resulting engagement has not redounded to the benefit of the opposition. The West’s diplomatic blockade of Syria concluded with a visit by EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, to Damascus. Despite public pleas for Solana to broach Syria’s abysmal human rights record, Solana was explicit that the three areas of concern were noninterference in Lebanese affairs, shutting down Palestinian terrorist organisations in Damascus and securing the border with Iraq.\(^6\) Shortly thereafter, a delegation of Republican Congressmen broke ranks with the Bush White House and visited President al-Asad in Damascus. This was a prelude to the much-publicised visit by US Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. Once again, discussions revolved around Lebanon, Iraq and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Conspicuously absent was discussion about the dozens of activists imprisoned and awaiting trial. Three months later, in reward for Syria’s constructive role in resolving Lebanon’s political crisis, French President Nicolas Sarkozy resumed ties with Syria by announcing his plans to send two senior envoys to Damascus. This preceded Sarkozy’s visit to Damascus in September 2008.\(^6\) Syrian–French relations had officially recovered from the Hariri assassination fall-out.

Even Syria’s enemies are reaching out to it. In May 2008, Israel and Syria announced that they were pursuing comprehensive negotiations.\(^6\) As for the United States, its policy of refusing to deal with Syria will most likely expire with the Bush administration.\(^6\)

\textit{Conclusion}

The combination of international engagement and regime crackdowns has ended all significant opposition activity inside Syria. Ayman ‘Abd al-Nur, who produces the web-based newsletter \textit{All4Syria} and who now lives in exile, explains that Syria’s improved relations with the West provided the regime ‘shelter to use force against its militant enemies, and even against
civil society, without generating a global outcry'. Yasin Hajj Salih, perhaps the government’s most articulate leftist critic who has not been jailed, wrote in *al-Hayat* in October 2008 lamenting the complete fragmentation and debasement of the opposition by the government. He argued that ‘the opposition must change itself first in order to be an example of change to society’. He continued, ‘Neither communism nor Arab nationalism can solve the problem. The democratic opposition ... needs new ideas about Syrian patriotism and about the current economic and social transformation taking place in Syria ... It must be independent from the outside.’ Salih concludes, ‘The only way to exit this crisis of failure is to focus on rebuilding the self and developing knowledge of Syrian society which the opposition in all its different branches lacks completely.’

Such scathing self-criticism is prevalent within the ranks of Syria’s opposition. The opposition is busy trying to explain why the ordinary Syrian citizen did not rally to its call while devising a plan for rebuilding itself.

Notes

2. ‘President Bashar al-Asad’s Address to the People’s Council’, Damascus Online, 17 July 2000.
7. ‘Syrian Activists Boycott Demonstration because of Disagreement of Naisse’s Accusation that Some Sit at the Table with Security Agencies’, al-Rai al-‘Am, 25 April 2005.
16. Qurabi interview.
17. Zaitunah, unpublished manuscript.
33. Syrian activist, interview with author, Beirut, 1 July 2006.
34. Syrian activists, interviews with author, Beirut, 1 July 2006 and Syrian activist, email message to author, 7 July 2006.
41. Syrian activist, email message to author, 5 February 2006.
54. Syrian activists, interviews with author, Beirut, 1 July 2006.
60. 25 July 2007 Regulation.


