

# Discourses of a Revolution: Framing the Syrian uprising

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## Abstract

This article compares how the Syrian uprising was framed by the Syrian regime as well as some of the major oppositional organizations between March and November 2011. As expected in conflict the versions told differ. The regime stresses that Syria is the victim of a foreign conspiracy where armed terrorists are killing civilians and security personnel alike. The opposition, on the other hand, argues that the uprising is a domestic affair, initiated by ordinary people. The article further seeks to give an overview of the regime's and the opposition's views of the post-uprising Syria and their respective ideas of the best way to get there. The article argues that the Syrian opposition has, by and large, maintained a unified position. The major division is not, as could perhaps be expected, between the internal and the external opposition but between the "older" internal opposition and the rest. The article also argues that minority questions are not substantially dealt with by either the opposition or the regime. Both sides focus on the Kurds but effectively avoid other minorities.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Discourse, Syrian National Council, Uprising, Opposition, Bashar al-Asad.

## Bir Devrim Üzerine Söylemler: Suriye Ayaklanmasının Çerçevesini Çizmek

### Özet

Bu makale, Mart ile Kasım 2011 tarihleri arasında Suriye ayaklanmasının, bazı ana muhalefet örgütlerinin yanısıra Suriye rejimi tarafından da nasıl görüldüğünü ve çerçeveselendirildiğini karşılaştırmaktadır. Çatışmalarda bekleneceği üzere yorumlarda farklılıklar söz konusudur. Rejim, Suriye'nin, silahlı teröristlerin sivil halkı ve benzer şekilde güvenlik personelinin öldürdüğü bir dış kaynaklı komplo kurbanı olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Öte yandan muhalefet ise, bunun sıradan insanlar tarafından başlatılmış ülke içi bir ayaklanma olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bunun

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dışında, makale, rejimin ve muhalefetin ayaklanma sonrası Suriye'ye ilişkin görüşlerine; ve en iyi biçimde çözüme ulaşmak adına her iki tarafın kendi fikirlerine dair genel bir bakış sunmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu makale, Suriye muhalefetinin genel anlamda birleşik bir tutum izlediğini savunmaktadır. Belki de beklenebileceği üzere, temel fikir ayrılığı iç ve dış muhalefet arasında değil, "daha eski" iç muhalefet ile geri kalan kesim arasında yaşanmıştır. Aynı zamanda makale, ne muhalefetin ne de rejimin, azınlık meseleleriyle ciddi anlamda ilgilenmediğini ileri sürmektedir. Her iki taraf da Kürtlere odaklanmakla birlikte, diğer azınlıklardan büyük ölçüde uzak durmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arap Baharı, Söylem, Suriye Ulusal Konseyi, Ayaklanma, Muhalefet, Beşar Esad.

## أقوال حول ثورة : رسم إطار ثورة سوريا

أما لوندكران جوروم

### خلاصة :

يتولى هذا المقال اجراء مقارنة حول كيف تتم رؤية وتأطير حركة الثورة في سوريا في الفترة التي تشمل أشهر مارس وتشيرين الثاني/ اكتوبر ١٠٠٢ من قبل بعض المنظمات المعارضة الرئيسية الى جانب رؤية النظام السوري للموضوع. وكما هو متوقع في الصراعات، فان التقييمات والتعقيبات عليها تكون متباينة بدورها. ويفيد النظام ان سوريا ضحية لمؤامرة مصدرها من الخارج يقوم فيها الارهابيون المسلحون بقتل افراد الشعب وقتل رجال الأمن في نفس الوقت. ومن جهة اخرى، فان المعارضة تبين بان ما يحدث في سوريا عبارة عن ثورة بدأ بها اناس من عامة الشعب من اجل مصلحة البلاد. وفيما عدا ذلك، فان المقال يحاول الفاء نظرة عامة على وجهات نظر كل من النظام والمعارضة فيما يتعلق بسوريا بعد هذه الثورة، وعلى وجهة نظر كل من الطرفين في معرض التوصل الى حل بافضل وجه. ويوضح المقال ان المعارضة السورية تتخذ بشكل عام موقفا موحدًا حول القضية. ولربما، وكما يمكن توقعه، فان الاختلاف الاساسي في وجهات النظر ليس بين المعارضة الداخلية والخارجية، بل ان هذا الاختلاف موجود بين المعارضة الداخلية «الأكثر قدما» وبين الآخرين. ويؤكد المقال في نفس الوقت على ان كلا من المعارضة والنظام لا يهتمان بشكل جدي بقضايا الأقليات. والواضح ان كلا الطرفين يركزان على موضوع الأكراد ويقفون وبشكل كبير بعيدا عن سائر الأقليات.

**الكلمات الدالة :** الربيع العربي، المقولات، المجلس الوطني السوري، حركة التمرد، المعارضة، بشار الأسد.

## Introduction

Developments unfolding in North Africa and the Middle East during 2011 have taken most of the world, area specialists included, by surprise. Often repeated claims that oil, Islam, political culture and weak civil societies were efficient gate keepers of long-lasting regimes across the Arab World were put to shame as unrest spread from North Africa into the Arab East. As Tunisian president Ben Ali went into exile in Saudi Arabia and Egyptian demonstrators showed the world the meaning of Tahrir (Liberation) Square in January 2011, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad shared his analysis of the early stages of what has become known as the Arab Spring. In his view, Syria shared many of the problems that had led to demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt. Unlike these two countries, however, Syria would not see an uprising. It had staunchly challenged US and Israeli schemes for the region and the Syrian leadership was thereby, according to al-Asad, closely linked to the beliefs of the Syrian people. The government was going to initiate a number of long planned reforms to meet the needs of the people. In his analysis, this was something Tunisian and Egyptian leaderships should have done long ago since “If you didn’t see the need for reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it’s too late to do any reform now”<sup>1</sup>. Ironically, a little more than a month later, the arrest of a group of school children who had sprayed anti-regime graffiti in the southern town of Deraa sparked a nation wide uprising. As demonstrations and protests spread, international media was banned from entering Syria and it became increasingly difficult to verify information stemming from inside the country. While both the regime and representatives of the opposition testified to a violent development, their accounts of reasons for this violence and their identification of perpetrators, aggressors and victims could not be more disparate. Added to the physical battle on the ground was thus a virtual war of words where both sides tried to convey their own versions of events.

This article seeks to compare how the uprising was framed by the regime and by the opposition between March and November 2011. Framing is usually understood as prioritizing the reporting of certain facts and developments, thereby promoting one particular interpreta-

1 “Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad”, *Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011.

tion of events over others. This is not necessarily a conscious act but may rather be the result of interpretative structures journalists, politicians and others use to set particular news items within a broader context<sup>2</sup>. However, in the context of conflict, framing can also be a clear legitimization act aimed at creating sympathy for one's own position. Rojo & van Dijk point out that the act of legitimization is usually carried out through persuasive discourse where one's own actions are described as beneficial for society as a whole and the actions taken by the opponent are condemned and described as unacceptable.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that Syrian discourses on the uprising are acts of legitimization, the article will compare the way the two sides describe the uprising with regard to causes, consequences, victims and aggressors. It will also compare the image of the future Syria the two sides convey and their perceptions of the best way to get there.

Apart from the regime and the active opposition, a third part is obviously also heavily affected by the uprising – the silent majority. As the voice of this group is rarely heard it cannot be said to have either framed or effectively formulated a discourse concerning the uprising. The silent majority is therefore not included in this study. Nevertheless, depending on developments, this group may very well decide the future of Syria.

### *Background*

As most Arab states, Syria has exhibited remarkable stability for the last decades. At the time of writing the “Asad era” has lasted for over 40 years. When Bashar al-Asad took over when his father passed away in June 2000, the regime moved into its second generation in what has been described as a “quasi-monarchical change”<sup>4</sup>. While Hafez al-Asad had ruled Syria with an iron fist, Bashar al-Asad, in his inauguration speech, made clear that time had come for reforms. The first

2 Pippa Norris, Marion Just & Montague Kern, *Framing Terrorism: News Media, the Government and the Public* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 10-11.

3 Luisa Martin Rojo and Teun A. van Dijk, “There was a problem and it was solved!”: Legitimizing the Expulsion of “Illegal” Migrants in Spanish Parliamentary Discourse”, *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 8, No 4, 1997, p. 528.

4 Volker Perthes, “Politics and Élite Change in the Arab World” in Volker Perthes (ed.), *Arab Élités: Negotiating the Politics of Change* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), p. 7.

year of his reign, known as the Damascus Spring, brought the establishment of discussion forums and human rights organizations as well as the release of political prisoners. This period of relative openness and tolerance was dominated by intellectuals and academicians who first and foremost sought dialogue with the regime in order to initiate reforms.<sup>5</sup> The Damascus Spring came to an abrupt end with the arrest of a large number of activists during summer and autumn 2001. A few years later, as international pressure on Syria grew intense following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, for which Syria was at that point widely blamed, the majority of Syrian oppositional groups, parties and independents signed the so called Damascus Declaration (2005), demanding peaceful, gradual democratic reform. Twelve of the leading figures involved in the declaration were sentenced to two and a half years in prison in 2008 and oppositional forces in Syria kept a low profile until March 2011, when the ongoing Syrian uprising started.

#### *Sources – the main actors*

With regard to the Asad regime and its way of describing and framing the uprising, the material used in this article consists mainly of interviews and speeches held by President Asad himself as well as reports published on the website of the state controlled Syrian Arab News Agency. The regime talks of the uprising with one voice and alternative “regime versions” of what is going on, is – as usual – not to be found in Syria. Any governmental document, reports in Syrian media or formal statements by Syrian officials point to the same causes for and consequences of the uprising. The Syrian opposition, on the other hand, has long been known for its disparity and difficulties to join forces.<sup>6</sup> As the uprising wore on, this was a source of concern often pointed out by outside analysts since this disparity creates insecurity with regard to the prospects for a post-Asad Syria.

5 For a detailed account of the Damascus Spring and its abrupt end, see Alan George, *Syria – neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2003).

6 See for instance Elizabeth Picard, “Fin de partis en Syrie”, *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée*, Vol. 81, No. 81-82, 1996, pp. 207-229; George, *Syria – neither Bread nor Freedom*, 2003; and Joshua Landis & Joe Pace, “The Syrian Opposition: The Struggle for Unity and Relevance 2003-2008” in Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi Books, 2009).

For the first six months, the Syrian uprising shared many of the organizational features of the much shorter Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, foremost of which was the lack of a clear and identifiable leadership. A network of local coordinating committees, engaged in the organization of local demonstrations, the reporting on the number of casualties and the uploading on content sharing sites of photos and videos, were established. Several attempts were made to create a unified and identifiable framework that would be able to represent as many oppositional currents as possible and at the same time provide the international community with a Syrian interlocutor apart from the regime. A number of opposition conferences were held, the majority in Turkey, starting in June 2011. Throughout summer and autumn, the creation of executive boards and councils were announced on several occasions but none of them managed to get off the ground. This changed in early October with the creation of the National Syrian Council (*al-majlis al-watanī al-surīy*, SNC). With a membership that linked *al-khārij* (the outside, i.e. dissidents in exile) with *al-dākhil* (the inside) and included representatives from all parts of the ideological spectrum as well as ethnic and religious minority groups, the council quickly moved to establish media relations, a finance bureau, a 230-seat general assembly with 55 seats reserved for grass root activists inside Syria and a 29-member executive committee<sup>7</sup>. Burhan Ghalioun, a Homs-born Professor of political sociology at the Sorbonne University in Paris, became Chairman of the Council. Having left Syria in 1971, he had visited Syria frequently as an active participant in the Damascus Spring where one of his lectures made it to fame as 10 people from the audience were arrested and sentenced to between two and ten years in prison.<sup>8</sup> He was further involved in the 2005 Damascus Declaration. During autumn 2011, several of the talk shows aired on the al-Jazeera satellite channel, dealt almost exclusively with different aspects of the Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising was a recurring topic. Interviews with Burhan Ghalioun and other members of the SNC on these shows have been used in this article in order to examine the views of the council.

Several coalitions and committees have been formed inside Syria with the aim of creating a common framework for the internal opposition.

7 Samer Araabi, "Syrian National Council seeks Legitimacy at Home and Abroad", *IPS News*, 18 October 2011.

8 Eman El-Shenawi, "Is Burhan Ghalioun Syria's New Hero?", *Al-Arabiya*, 6 November 2011.

The Committee for Coordination of Democratic Change (*hay'ah al-tansiq al-watanī lil-taghyir al-dimuqrātī*, CCDC), created in June, is the biggest internal bloc consisting of “older” opposition. It includes a number of opposition figures, active during the Damascus Spring and the 2005 Damascus Declaration. Among others, Michel Kilo, Fayez Sara and Hasan al-Azem are listed in the executive committee. Their website as well as their Facebook page contains a number of interviews and declarations. In August the Syrian Revolution General Commission (*al-hay'ah al-'āmah li-th-thawrah al-sūriyyah*, SRGC) was created. 44 local coordinating committees nationwide were signatories to the mission statement.<sup>9</sup> It recognizes the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and represents a younger generation of oppositional movements, which has abandoned the possibility of dialogue and reform and instead taken its demands for immediate change into the streets. As the website of the SRGC was under construction during autumn 2011, it communicated mainly through its Facebook page where it posted its declarations, press releases and communiqués. These have been used in order to complete the image the opposition conveys of the uprising. Also based inside Syria is the Local Coordination Committees (*Lijān al-tansiq al-watanīyyah*, LCC), an umbrella organization for local coordination committees. Like the SRGC it recognizes the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and together with the SRGC it is among the Syria based organizations most frequently quoted in media with regard to casualties and ongoing demonstrations. Finally, included in this article is also the Free Syrian Army composed of defected officers and soldiers from the Syrian Army. Its creation was announced the 29<sup>th</sup> of July.<sup>10</sup> Under the leadership of Riyad al-As'ad it declared that it would protect Syrian civilians and help them in bringing about the fall of the regime. Its exact amount of members and resources are unclear. These above mentioned organizations and coalitions, were chosen in order to include representatives of the most active opposition both inside and outside of Syria. Nevertheless, once things in Syria calm down and the dust settles it may become evident that the choice to include other or additional groups would have added to the results.

9 البيان التأسيسي للهيئة العامة للثورة السورية (The mission statement of the Syrian revolution General Commission), 18 August 2011.

10 Announcement of the foundation of the Free Syrian Army, *You Tube*, 29 July 2011.

## What it is all about

The months of protests, demonstrations and violence that by late November had resulted in more than 5000 lives lost<sup>11</sup> was referred to differently by the two sides. While the regime referred to the developments since March 2011 as either “the crisis” (*al-azmah*) or “the events” (*al-ahdāth*), the opposition used the terms “revolution” (*thawrah*) or “uprising” (*intifādah*). The regime thus used undefined terms that could just as well have been used to describe a natural disaster, while the opposition chose to talk about the developments as conscious actions intended to produce political change. As will become evident below, differences in the description of developments went beyond this basic divide.

### *The opposition: the entire people against a single family*

The image given by the opposition is that of a people that has had enough and cannot take it anymore.<sup>12</sup> It has therefore heroically risen in an uprising that was initiated domestically and by ordinary people. According to the opposition, the regime has chosen to respond with unjustified violence for which the entire Syrian people is paying a high price. Burhan Ghalioun, the Chairman of the Syrian National Council, in his *Eid al-adha* speech in November declared that “there is no home in Syria without a missing father, a raped daughter, a detained young man or a violated child.”<sup>13</sup> The uprising is nation wide, all cities and regions are taking part<sup>14</sup>. Both Ghalioun and Michel Kilo, member of the CCDC, describe the regime as run by one single family; the extended

11 According to UN estimates at least 3500 civilians, including 187 children, had died as a result of the government crackdown. See, Ian Black, “Syria death toll `is more than 4000`, says UN”, *The Guardian*, 1 December 2011. President Asad claimed at the end of October that 1200 members of the security forces had been killed. See Andrew Gilligan, “Challenge Syria at your peril”, *The Telegraph*, 29 October 2011. Thus, the total number reached to 5 200 lives lost. This number is an underestimation. As figures for the security forces have not been updated since late October and as the UN estimates that the real number of civilians is more than 4000, the real number of Syrians killed is probably much higher.

12 أزمة المعارضة السورية، في العمق – (In Depth – the Crisis of the Syrian Opposition), *Al-Jazeera*, 12 September 2011.

13 “Burhan Ghalioun Address to the Syrian people” (Video and translated transcript), *Jadaliyya*, 6 November 2011.

14 بلا حدود – مستقبل الثورة السورية (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011.



Asad family.<sup>15</sup> The SGRC, likewise, talks of the regime as “the Asad occupation of the homeland”<sup>16</sup> and some of the local committees active on Twitter even refer to the Syrian Army as “the Asad Army”.<sup>17</sup> (This was also part of one of the slogans used in demonstrations in Aleppo in late November “The Free Syria Army protects me, the Asad army kills me”<sup>18</sup>). On some of the oppositional Facebook pages, the regime is further referred to as “the gang from Qardahah” (the birth village of the Asad family).<sup>19</sup> Obvious in all this is the care the different oppositional groups and coalitions are taking to disconnect their struggle against the regime from the “Alawite question”. Ghalioun makes this very clear in an interview on one of the al-Jazeera’s talk shows when the host refers to the Syrian regime as “sectarian”. Ghalioun immediately corrects him, stressing that the Syrian regime is not sectarian but “family based”. When asked whether there are Alawite members in the Council, Ghalioun initially avoids the question but then reluctantly answers that “of course there are Alawites, there are Ismailites, there are Sunnis and there are Druze if you want to talk the language of the imperialists”. He makes clear that any individual member of the council represents the entire Syrian people, not just people who happen to share his or her background. The host then refers to the Syrian people as a mosaic and Ghalioun resents this, stating that it is an insult to the Syrian people to be talked of as a mosaic of sects and minorities. “We talk of *one* people” he stresses.<sup>20</sup> Ghalioun further emphasizes that the *shabītha* (armed gangs of mercenaries and civilians working for the regime) are composed of members from all religious affiliations and represent the majority population of the area they operate in. “We always imagine that all topics are related to a specific sect, but the *shabītha* come from all backgrounds, they are criminals who were released from

15 Deborah Amos, “Syria’s Best-Known Dissident Reflects On Uprising”, *NPR*, 8 July 2011; مستقبل الثورة السورية - بلا حدود (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 8 October 2011.

16 See for instance دعوة إلى إعلان الإضراب العام (Invitation to a Call for a General Strike), 24 October 2011.

17 See for instance tweets by Ahrar Halab, Shamnews and others.

18 See for instance the Facebook page of الثورة الحلبية لإخراج العصابة القرداحية من حلب وسورية (The Aleppo Revolution for ridding Aleppo and Syria from the Qardaha gang).

19 See for instance *ibid*.

20 مستقبل الثورة السورية - بلا حدود (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011.

jail and who are now an organized security organization created by the regime.”<sup>21</sup> The SGRC, likewise, states that the regime – to which it refers as a “psychopathic gang” – targets Syrians from all sects and backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> The entire Syrian people have thereby, according to the opposition, been targeted by the regime and it stands united.

The uprising must, according to the majority of the oppositional groups included here, be peaceful. Violence is practiced only by the regime which attacks unarmed demonstrators, carries out waves of mass arrests and shells residential areas in its endeavour to put an end to the uprising. Peaceful demonstrations are necessary, according to Ghalioun of the SNC<sup>23</sup> and Michel Kilo of the CCDC stressed that only if the opposition remains peaceful will it succeed.<sup>24</sup> With the creation of the Free Syrian Army in July 2011, an oppositional actor contradicting peaceful demonstrations emerged. Riyad al-As`ad, the commander of the FSA made clear that security forces attacking civilians were now fair game<sup>25</sup> and armed struggle would be the only possible way to defeat the regime. In a November interview on al-Jazeera he did not find the Syrian Army, which well outnumbered his own 15 000 men, overwhelming: “We came from that army, we know it very well”.<sup>26</sup> At roughly the same time, several oppositional leaders hinted that although peaceful demonstrations was the preferred way forward, should the regime insist on using brute force instead of stepping down, armed struggle could be the outcome. Representatives of CCDC, for instance, stated that the regime is responsible for whatever developments may follow from its actions as it is effectively “closing the door in the face of peaceful, gradual change and security” instead opening the door “to calls for violence and armament”.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Burhan Ghalioun, could

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21 Ibid.

22 “Condemnation of the assassination operations initiated by the Asad militias”, 7 Oct 2011, SRGC’s Facebook page.

23 بلا حدود - مستقبل الثورة السورية (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011.

24 “Syrian dissident Kilo fears civil war”, *al-Arabiya*, 30 September 2011.

25 “Announcement of the foundation of the Free Syrian Army”, *YouTube*, 29 July 2011.

26 حديث الثورة – الملف السوري (Talk about the revolution – the Syrian Case), *Al-Jazeera*, 14 October 2011.

27 رؤية هيئة التنسيق الوطني لقوى التغيير الديمقراطي للمرحلة الانتقالية من الاستبداد الى الديمقراطية، في سورية (The view of the Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change regarding the transitional period from tyranny to democracy in Syria), *CDCC*, 8 October 2011.

not guarantee that continued violent response from the regime would not result in “an explosion of violence”, the responsibility for which would be borne by the regime alone.<sup>28</sup> Claims by the regime that it is not dealing with peaceful demonstrations but armed gangs are rejected by the opposition but Basma Kodmani, a SNC representative, states that some forces and individuals are turning to armed struggle in self defense and in defense of their homes and families. The defected soldiers now making up the Free Syrian Army protect peaceful demonstrators and are therefore complying with the constitutional duty of the army – protecting the people.<sup>29</sup> Another SNC representative, Omar Idlibi, claims that the only actor with armed gangs is the regime itself.<sup>30</sup>

### *The regime: protecting Syria against armed terrorists*

The Syrian regime has a different view and presents a different version of the developments. The uprising is part of a conspiracy directed against Syria. This conspiracy has its roots “in countries far away, in countries close to Syria and to some extent also inside the country”.<sup>31</sup> Specific conspirators are not named but it is made clear that imperialistic Western states have long targeted Syria. According to Bashar al-Asad, neither prior to or after its independence has Syria ever experienced a time when it was not the target of a conspiracy. Three reasons for conspiring against Syria are pointed out: Syria’s geostrategic position<sup>32</sup>, Syria’s refusal to bow to imperialistic interests in the region<sup>33</sup> and the role model a reformed Syria will be to the region. “Some” (again

28 مستقبل الثورة السورية - بلا حدود (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011.

29 حديث الثورة - سوريا والمبادرة العربية (Talk of the Revolution - Syria and the Arab Initiative), 4 November 2011.

30 حديث الثورة - مناقشة الملف السوري في الجامعة العربية (Talk of the Revolution – The discussion of the Syrian case in the Arab League), 10 November 2011.

31 القى السيد الرئيس بشار الأسد كلمة أمام مجلس الشعب تحدث فيها عن القضايا الداخلية والظروف التي تمر بها المنطقة وسورية (President Bashar al-Asad gave a speech to the Parliament where he spoke of the domestic issues and the circumstances Syria and the region are going through), 30 March 2011.

32 كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الأسد على مدرج جامعة دمشق بتاريخ ٢٠ حزيران ٢٠١١ (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad at the amphitheatre of Damascus University 20 June 2011).

33 كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الأسد أمام الحكومة السورية الجديدة بتاريخ ١٦ نيسان ٢٠١١ (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad to the new Syrian Government 16 April 2011).

unclear who) are afraid of this.<sup>34</sup> The Syrian people, which is civilized and orderly and does not accept chaos, is aware of the conspiracy and protects the country from falling.<sup>35</sup>

The uprising is not, and has never been, peaceful. The violent developments are, according to the regime, the result of infiltrations by armed terrorist gangs and the Syrian security forces are responding in kind. By late October, al-Asad claimed 1200 security forces personnel had been killed<sup>36</sup> (a number confirmed by Human Rights Watch) and asked “How were they killed? Were they killed through peaceful demonstrations?”<sup>37</sup>

The Syrian Arab News Agency’s homepage has a special section, called *the Truth about the Events*, dedicated to the uprising. It consists of reports and interviews supporting the regime’s version of the developments. Between August and late November 430 articles were published. Four kinds of stories dominate. The first kind consists of personal testimonies. A large number of these are testimonies by “terrorists” who testify to having engaged in violence for money. The articles are summaries of their stories, broadcast on Syrian state TV the day before. All “terrorists” are identified by name, age and at least one photo. They admit to having kidnapped, killed, tortured and shot at civilians and military personnel. Sometimes they have dressed up in uniforms in order to put the blame on the Syrian Army and Security Forces. Their testimonies typically include having been recruited to a terrorist cell by a friend, relative or a person they were remotely familiar with.<sup>38</sup> The recruiters are also identified by name and it is understood that they hold inferior moral standards. They are typically described as people who make a living from smuggling and a sheikh in Daraa

34 “At UN, Syria warns of ‘blatant conspiracies’ from outsiders against its people”, *UN*, 26 September 2011.

35 كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد امام الحكومة السورية الجديدة بتاريخ 11 نيسان 2011 (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad to the new Syrian Government), 16 April 2011.

36 Andrew Gillian, “Assad: Challenge Syria at your peril”, *The Telegraph*, 29 October 2011.

37 مقابلة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد مع التلفزيون الروسي. القناة الاولى. بتاريخ 30 تشرين الاول (President Bashar al-Asad’s interview with Russian Television), *Channel One*, 30 October 2011.

38 See for instance الارهابي غنطاوي: قمت مع ارهابيين آخرين باختطاف وتعذيب وقتل مدنيين واطلاق النار على حواجز الجيش (The terrorist Ghantāwī: Together with other terrorists I kidnapped, tortured and killed civilians and fired at army check points), *SANA*, 13 October 2011.

(also identified by name) is said to have asked the (male) “terrorist” for sexual favors.<sup>39</sup> Most testimonies state that money and weapons are smuggled from neighbouring states, especially Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Non-Syrian nationals are not identified by name but referred to as for instance “a Saudi man” or “two Lebanese guys”.<sup>40</sup> There are further testimonies by people who do not confess to violence but to having provided channels and news agencies with false or exaggerated information on the numbers of casualties. Some also testify to having instigated demonstrations and then filmed them in order to spread false information, typically by handing the films to “the satellite channels”.<sup>41</sup>

Two of the testimonies published by SANA during this period made it outside of Syria. One was the testimony of officer Hussein Harmoush, who defected from the Syrian army in June and recorded a video where he states that the reason for his defection was the mass killings of Syrian civilians and that as a soldier his duty is not to kill the people but to protect it.<sup>42</sup> He later disappeared from a refugee camp in Turkey and appeared on Syrian television on 16 September. According to his wife, he has not been seen or heard from since.<sup>43</sup> In his testimony he contradicts his defection video, claiming that he left the Syrian Army because of all the bloodshed caused by armed gangs. During his time in the Syrian Army there had never been orders to shoot at anyone. While in Turkey he had been contacted by different strands of the external opposition such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Abdel Halim Khaddam, Burhan Ghalioun, Rifaat al-Asad and “most of the people present at the Antalya meeting”.<sup>44</sup> He was promised money, arms and logistic

39 See for instance شبابان من درعا: قمنا بتصوير مناطق في دمشق بهدف فبركة صور تظاهرات لارسالها للقنوات الفضائية (Two young men from Daraa: We filmed areas in Damascus in order to fabricate photage of demonstrations and send them to the satellite channels), *SANA*, 30 September 2011.

40 الارهابي الصالح: قتلنا 3 من عائلة واحدة وعناصر من الجيش بالحراك وهاجمنا مؤسسات حكومية وأحرقناها (We killed three from the same family and members of the army and we attacked governmental institutions and burned them), *SANA*, 9 October 2011.

41 See for instance شبابان من درعا: قمنا بتصوير مناطق في دمشق بهدف فبركة صور تظاهرات لارسالها للقنوات الفضائية (Two young men from Daraa: We filmed areas in Damascus in order to fabricate photage of demonstrations and send them to the satellite channels), *SANA*, 30 September 2011.

42 “Syrian soldier Hussein Harmoush announces split from Army”, 10 June 2011.

43 Ivan Watson, “The mysterious disappearance of Hussein Harmoush”, *CNN*, 14 October 2011.

44 هرموش: لم أتلق اي أوامر خلال وجودي بالجيش بإطلاق النار على المدنيين..العصابات المسلحة هي كانت تقتل المدنيين.. والإخوان المسلمون أرسلوا السلاح لي إذلب وحماة وحمص واللاذقية (Harmoush: There were no orders to shoot at civilians while I was in the army..the armed gangs were killing civilians..the Muslim Brotherhood sent weapons to Idlib, Hamah, Homs and Lattikiyya), *SANA*, 17 September 2011.

support, all of which turned out to be empty talk. Another story that made it outside of Syria was that of Zaynab al-Husny. In September she was internationally reported as the first Syrian female dead in custody, after her arrest and torture in response to her brother's activism against the regime.<sup>45</sup> On October 4<sup>th</sup>, Syrian state TV aired an interview with al-Husny where she explained that she had never been detained but had escaped from home due to the ill-treatment her brothers were subjecting her to.<sup>46</sup> The story of Zaynab al-Husny is, according to SANA, proof of the involvement of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in "the Western American inimical plans against Syria".<sup>47</sup> There are also a large number of testimonies by Syrians from the Jisr al-Shughur area returning from refugee camps in Turkey. They all explain that they left for Turkey because they were either harassed by armed gangs or they were encouraged to leave by people who claimed they would otherwise be attacked by the Syrian army. They testify to ill-treatment inside the Turkish camps, both on behalf of Syrian terrorists who raped women and children and Turks to whom Syrian women and children were sold.<sup>48</sup> Finally, there are also a number of testimonies by injured security and army personnel who tell the story of how they were attacked by terrorists.

The second kind of article is reports of funeral ceremonies for army and security personnel killed by terrorists and taken to their final resting place in their home villages. The third kind of articles report on arm caches found by the army or smugglers of weapons captured while trying to enter Syria.

Followers of the SANA website are not unaware of the existence of other versions of what is going on. Several reports deal with "the sat-

45 "Syria unrest: 'First woman dies in detention', *BBC News*, 23 September 2011.

46 زينب الحصني تكذب قنوات التحريض: لم اعتقل ولم يداهم منزل عائلتي بل هربت من تعذيب اخوتي لي (Zaynab al-Husny proves that the channels of incitement are lying: I was not arrested and my family's home was not raided. I ran away from the torture of my brothers), *SANA*, 5 October 2011. Her family later confirmed that the girl on TV was in fact Zainab al-Husny but the slogans did not know her whereabouts nor had it been able to talk to her. *Joint Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch statement on Zaynab al-Hosni*, 5 October 2011.

47 قصة الحصني تكشف زيف الشعارات التي ترفعها العفو الدولية وهيومن رايتس ووتش وانخراطها في المخطط العدائي (The story of al-Husny reveal the falsity of the slogans used by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and their involvement in the inimical Western American plan against Syria), *SANA*, 7 October 2011.

48 See for instance نساء سوريات عائدات من المخيمات التركية يؤكدن تعرضهن للاغتصاب من قبل افراد المجموعات الارهابية المسلحة وبعض الاتراك (Syrian women returning from the Turkish camps assure that they were raped by individuals from the armed terrorist gangs and some Turks), *SANA*, 20 September 2011.

ellite channels” and “the channels of aggression” that, according to SANA, are engaged in a campaign of incitement against Syria and the Syrian people.<sup>49</sup> For instance, al-Jazeera is said to collaborate with the armed terrorists as it portrays civilian victims of these terrorists as victims of the Syrian security forces.<sup>50</sup> These channels, according to SANA, encourage outside intervention and arming the terrorists.

## The way forward

### *The opposition: no dialogue, no return and no foreign intervention*

Although all oppositional groups and coalitions included in this article shared a common goal – the fall of the current regime – the way to get there was perceived somewhat differently. All but one of the oppositional groups and coalitions agreed that dialogue with the regime was not an option. The CCDC constitutes the exception as representatives of this organization state that as long as the regime is engaged in violence against the people there will be no dialogue<sup>51</sup>, thus opening up for the possibility of a future dialogue. Should the regime change its ways and fully meet a number of demands<sup>52</sup>, there is also, in the view of the CCDC a possibility for creating a national unity government. The SNC stresses that the regime has made dialogue impossible.<sup>53</sup> Ghalioun further stresses that a point of no return has been reached as “to give up now would also be suicide”.<sup>54</sup>

49 See for instance قنوات العدوان الإعلامي على سورية تواصل مسلسل تضليلها (The channels of the media enmity towards Syria continue the soap opera of deception), *SANA*, 17 September 2011.

50 قناة الجزيرة تشارك المجموعات الإرهابية المسلحة جرائمها بحق الشعب السوري وتقدم جثث ضحايا هذه المجموعات على قناتهم (The al-Jazeera channel takes part in the crimes of the armed terrorist gangs against the Syrian people and shows bodies of victims of these gangs claiming they were killed by the Security Forces in Homs), *SANA*, 22 October 2011.

51 لا مشاركة في أي مؤتمر مع السلطة قبل وقف العنف (No participation in a conference with the regime before it stops the violence), *www.ncsyria.com*, 25 October 2011.

52 Among these demands were to allow peaceful demonstrations, freedom of speech, provide Syrian refugees with assistance so that they could return home “with dignity”, the release of all people arrested during demonstrations as well as all political prisoners in Syria, compensation for all previous and present political prisoners, to allow all emigrants the freedom to return to Syria and the abolishment of all laws hindering work for democracy رؤية هيئة التنسيق الوطني لقوى التغيير الديمقراطي للمرحلة الانتقالية من الاستبداد الى الديمقراطية في سورية (The view of the Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change regarding the transitional period from tyranny to democracy in Syria), *www.ncs.syria.com*, 8 October 2011.

53 بلا حدود - مستقبل الثورة السورية (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011; حديث الثورة - سورية والمبادرة العربية السورية (Talk of the Revolution – Syria and the Arab initiative), 4 November 2011.

54 بلا حدود - مستقبل الثورة السورية (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011.

Foreign intervention is, on the face of it, rejected by all groups and coalitions included here. A closer look, however, reveals that this is correct only if intervention is understood as physical military intervention on the ground. The Free Syrian Army, for instance, encourages the international community to arm the defected soldiers, who will otherwise “fight with their claws”<sup>55</sup>, the Syrian National Council, the SRGC and the LCC demand international protection for the Syrian civilians through the imposition of a no-fly zone and international observers.<sup>56</sup> The LCC, in response to the sanctions decided upon by the Arab League in late November, welcomed all Arab efforts to put pressure on the Syrian regime but demanded that sanctions be strictly monitored to make sure there would be no possibility for circumvention.<sup>57</sup> The CCDC again stands out as different by rejecting any kind of no-fly zone or international protection stemming from the UN Security Council as it considered this a precedent to military intervention. Arab and other observers sent by NGOs would however be accepted by this part of the opposition.<sup>58</sup> By mid-November, the month with the highest death toll since the beginning of the uprising in March, the CCDC modified this in view of the increasing calls for armed struggle within Syria. The CCDC then encouraged all Syrians to work for a Security Council resolution whereby the Syrian regime would be obliged to allow international observers and media to enter Syria.<sup>59</sup> The SNC, SGRC and the LCC demanded that the Arab League suspend the Syrian membership and that the case of Syria be handled by the UN Security Council.<sup>60</sup> Basma Kodmani of the SNC however stated that the Council wished

55 حديث الثورة – الملف السوري (Talk about the revolution – the Syrian Case), *Al-Jazeera*, 14 October 2011.

56 *The Vision of the Local Coordination Committees on International protection*, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2011.

57 *Statement by the Local Coordination Committees of Syria on the Arab League’s Decision to Impose Economic Sanctions on Syria*, 27 November 2011.

58 انقسامات بين المعارضة السورية و«تيار بناء الدولة» يرفض التدخل الخارجي (Splits within the Syrian opposition and ‘Building the State Current’ rejects external intervention), *al-Hayat*, 11 November 2011; حسن عبد العظيم: نجحنا في توحيد 70 في المائة من أطراف المعارضة; (Hasan Abd al-Azem: We managed to unify 70% of the spectrum of the opposition) [www.ncsyria.com](http://www.ncsyria.com), 19 September 2011; John Irish, “Syrian opposition must avoid splits”, *Reuters*, 11 October 2011.

59 بيان هام للنشتر ضد العنف وضد التسليح (Important announcement against violence and armament), *CCDC*, 16 November 2011.

60 (A l - Arabi receives a delegation from the Syrian internal opposition today and the Syrian Revolution General Committee protests: They do not represent anyone but themselves), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 November 2011.



to keep the Syrian case within the “Arab frame”<sup>61</sup>, thus indicating that a solution stemming from the Arab League would be preferable.

Although the Free Syrian Army is, according to the SNC, protecting peaceful demonstrators and thereby carrying out the constitutional duty of the Syrian army, individual defections from the army are not encouraged by the SNC. Instead, the army shall remain intact, take its responsibility and act on behalf of the people and not on behalf of the regime.<sup>62</sup> The SNC will, together with the Syrian Army, take temporary responsibility for the transition period. All segments of Syrian society that have not stained their hands with the blood of the people, stolen its resources or been involved in the regime will be invited to take part in the process of democratic change. Within a year from the fall of the regime, elections for a Constitutional Assembly will be held with Arab and international observers. The Assembly will draft a new constitution which will subsequently be subjected to a referendum.<sup>63</sup> The LCC stresses that the future Syria will not belong to an individual or a family and will not be inherited from fathers to sons.<sup>64</sup>

#### *The regime: the political solution – reforms and national dialogue*

When disturbances began in March, Syria had, according to the regime, long planned for reforms. Due to regional developments, foremost of which were the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the isolation of Syria starting 2005, these were delayed.<sup>65</sup> There were therefore people with legitimate demands but some – it is not made clear who – have “confused reforms, daily needs and *fitna*.”<sup>66</sup> In order for the regime to “feel the pulse” of the people, a process of national dialogue called *Syria for all* has been initiated. President al-Asad has dedicated himself to taking part in meetings with ordinary citizens where he has met with people

61 سوريا والمبادرة العربية – حديث الثورة (Talk of the Revolution – Syria and the Arab initiative), 4 November 2011.

62 بلا حدود – مستقبل الثورة السورية (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011.

63 مشروع البرنامج السياسي للمجلس الوطني السوري (Political Program of the Syrian National Council), November 20 2011.

64 *Vision of the Local Coordination Committee (LCC) for a Political Solution in Syria*, 12 June 2011.

65 Haidar, Dalia: “Q & A: Faisal al-Mikdad, Deputy Foreign Minister”, *Syria Today*, October 2011.

66 القى السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد كلمة امام مجلس الشعب خذت فيها عن القضايا الداخلية والظروف التي تمر بها المنطقة وسورية (President Bashar al-Asad gave a speech to the Parliament where he spoke of the domestic issues and the circumstances Syria and the region are going through), 30 March 2011.

from all strands of society and from all parts of the country.<sup>67</sup> All Syrians are encouraged to contribute to the national dialogue. This goes not only for Syrians in Syria but the Syrian diaspora is also encouraged to take part. The Syrian Embassy in Washington encourages the Syrian American community to both e-mail suggestions to the ambassador and to travel to Syria to take part in the dialogue, with the guarantee that they will “face no obstacles entering or leaving the country”.<sup>68</sup> There will be elections and the constitution will be worked through and amended where needed.<sup>69</sup> Reforms will need to be speeded up but at the same time one can not move too fast as reforms have to be built upon stability and security. President Asad refers to Syrian society as “complicated”, which is one of the reasons reforms have to be slow. They may otherwise cause division.<sup>70</sup> According to the regime, the kind of reform the West wants is for Syria to stop resisting (not specified what), renounce its rights, agree to concessions (unclear with regard to what) and give up its sovereignty.<sup>71</sup> The planned and initiated reforms are the cure for anti-Syria conspiracy currently under way.<sup>72</sup> According to the Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid al-Muallem, the surge in the activities of armed groups in Syria is a manifestation of an ongoing foreign intervention but Syria will continue to protect its citizens from blatant conspiracies aimed at sabotaging stability.<sup>73</sup>

## What the future holds

*The opposition: a civil, democratic state*

The different oppositional groups and coalitions describe post-Asad

67 كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد على مدرج جامعة دمشق بتاريخ ٢٠ حزيران ٢٠١١ (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad at the amphitheatre of Damascus University 20 June 2011); حوار السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد مع التلفزيون العربي السوري بتاريخ ٢١ آب ٢٠١١ (Interview with President Bashar al-Asad on the Syrian Arab TV 21 August 2011).

68 See *An invitation to dialogue*, 6 July 2011 and *Ambassador's Message to the Syrian American Community* at the homepage of the Syrian Embassy in Washington.

69 كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد امام الحكومة السورية الجديدة بتاريخ ١١ نيسان ٢٠١١ (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad to the new Syrian Government 16 April 2011).

70 Gillian, 2011.

71 كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد امام الحكومة السورية الجديدة بتاريخ ١١ نيسان ٢٠١١ (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad to the new Syrian Government 16 April 2011).

72 كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد على مدرج جامعة دمشق بتاريخ ٢٠ حزيران ٢٠١١ (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad at the amphitheatre of Damascus University 20 June 2011).

73 *At UN, Syria warns of 'blatant conspiracies' from outsiders against its people*, UN, 26 September 2011.

Syria as a “civil, democratic state”.<sup>74</sup> This is repeated by all. The term “civil” (*madanī*) is according to Ghalioun a substitute for “secular” (*almanī*) which, he explains, is negatively charged in Syria and brings the Baath Party’s stance towards religion and French secularism to mind, both of which are understood as inimical to religion. Instead, in the future Syria, all religions will be respected.<sup>75</sup> When asked about the role of Islam, he points to Turkey as a model in what he calls the “new era” when there is a difference between an Islamist state and an Islamist government. Within this model an Islamist party can rule a secular state (until it loses the elections).<sup>76</sup> “Nobody believes in the Islamist project à la Iran” anymore, he states.<sup>77</sup> Farouq Tayfur, deputy head of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, - also part of the Syrian National Council -, emphasizes that the goal is a civil, democratic state “with an islamic reference” but the winner of elections should rule, regardless of religious affiliation.<sup>78</sup>

According to all groups the future Syria will be a country of freedom and dignity for all of its citizens. Ghalioun stressed in his *Eid al-Adha* speech that Syria will be a country “for a united Syrian people without talk of minorities and majorities, it will be a country of citizenship and equality”, the constitution of which will protect minority rights. The only minority explicitly mentioned in this regard are the Kurds. Ghalioun talks of “the Kurds, who will regain the rights they have been robbed of”<sup>79</sup>, the CCDC holds that Kurdish rights must be constitutionally guaranteed<sup>80</sup>, a large number of local coordinating committees and other oppositional Facebook groups have logos with writing in

74 مشروع البرنامج السياسي للمجلس الوطني السوري (Political Program of the Syrian National Council), November 2011; رؤية هيئة التنسيق الوطني للتغيير الديمقراطي للمرحلة الانتقالية من الاستبداد الى الديمقراطية في سورية; (The view of the Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change regarding the transitional period from tyranny to democracy in Syria), 8 October 2011.

75 بلا حدود – مستقبل الثورة السورية (Unlimited – the Future of the Syrian Revolution), *Al-Jazeera*, 5 October 2011.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 أزمة المعارضة السورية – في العمق (In Depth – the Crisis of the Syrian Opposition), *Al-Jazeera*, 12 September 2011.

79 Burhan Ghalioun Address to the Syrian people (Video and translated transcript), *Jadaliyya*, 6 November 2011.

80 رؤية هيئة التنسيق الوطني للتغيير الديمقراطي للمرحلة الانتقالية من الاستبداد الى الديمقراطية في سورية (The view of the Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change regarding the transitional period from tyranny to democracy in Syria), 8 October 2011.

both Arabic and Kurdish and images from the conference organized by the “older” opposition inside Syria in mid-September showed posters of slogans in both languages. After a conflict resulting from Burhan Ghalioun failing to mention the Kurds as part of the Syrian people - for which he swiftly apologized - Kurdish demonstrators in northern Syria again pledged their support for the Council.<sup>81</sup> A representative of the Kurdish bloc within the Syrian National Council stated that the Kurds could not possibly suffer more in a post-Asad setting than they had until now. Kurdish demands for a future Syria, decided upon in a conference held in Qamishli, can be summarized as a demand for a constitutional recognition of the existence of the Kurdish people and its rights. Included in these rights is the right to, within the territorial integrity of Syria, decide its own fate.<sup>82</sup> The importance of the territorial integrity of Syria is also stressed by the SNC and the CCDC.<sup>83</sup>

The future Syria will work for the liberation of the Golan Heights. The SNC declares in its program that this will be done relying on international law and resolutions<sup>84</sup>, which seems to indicate that its strategy would not differ much from the current regime’s. The CCDC and the SNC also state that Syria will work for the creation of an independent Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital.<sup>85</sup>

### *The regime: A reformed Syria, a role model for the region*

Bashar al-Asad’s explicit vision for the future is that Syria will only come out of the ongoing crisis stronger than before, “after all, we are

81 Hizan Ibrahim to “الشرق الأوسط”: للاكراد مصلحة في تبني الثورة لانهم لن يعانون أسوأ مما عانوه من الأسد (Hizan Ibrahim to “Al-Sharq al-Awsat”: It is in the interest of the Kurds to join the revolution because they will not suffer worse than they did because of al-Asad”, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 November 2011.

82 Ibid.

83 رؤية هيئة التنسيق الوطني لقوى التغيير الديمقراطي للمرحلة الانتقالية من الاستبداد الى الديمقراطية في سورية; 5 October 2011; *Al-Jazeera*, لقوى التغيير الوطني الديمقراطي للمرحلة الانتقالية من الاستبداد الى الديمقراطية في سورية; 5 October 2011; *Al-Jazeera*, رؤية هيئة التنسيق الوطني (The view of the Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change regarding the transitional period from tyranny to democracy in Syria).

84 مشروع البرنامج السياسي للمجلس الوطني السوري (Political Program of the Syrian National Council), *LCC*, 20 November 2011.

85 رؤية هيئة التنسيق الوطني لقوى التغيير الديمقراطي للمرحلة الانتقالية من الاستبداد الى الديمقراطية في سورية (The view of the Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change regarding the transitional period from tyranny to democracy in Syria); مشروع البرنامج السياسي للمجلس الوطني السوري; (Political Program of the Syrian National Council), *LCC*, 20 November 2011.

talking about a 5000 year old civilization. I am not worried”.<sup>86</sup> The reformed Syria will be a role model in the Arab World and the Middle East, and a surprise to “the Orientalists” who said that Arabs can never be democratic. The citizens of Syria are the compass and wherever it points, Syria will go. It will forever remain the beating heart of Arabism.<sup>87</sup> Following the suspension of the Syrian membership of the Arab League and the imposition of sanctions, al Muallem asked what the point would be of having an Arab League if Syria was not part of it, stressing that “the others” will eventually return to Syria.<sup>88</sup>

Although the Arab identity of Syria is stressed, the regime, like the opposition, brings up the Kurds. The Kurds are pointed to as a fundamental and necessary part of the Syrian people. The fact that a large number of Kurds who had been stripped of their Syrian citizenship in the 1960s were again granted citizenship in May 2011 was, according to Asad, a mere coincidence and had nothing to do with the current crisis. On the contrary, the issue was first studied by the Syrian leadership in 2002 but the process of granting citizenship was then halted as a result of the “events of 2004”.<sup>89</sup>

### **Discourses of a revolution – a brief summary and some additional thoughts**

This article has sought to provide an overview of the different discourses some of the main actors involved in the ongoing Syrian uprising engage in. As is to be expected in conflict, the two main antagonists – the regime and what is here, despite the simplification that it entails, referred to as “the opposition” – provide opposing versions of the developments in Syria between March and November 2011. The opposition describes a purely domestic affair, where a people has risen against

86 (Interview with President Bashar al-Asad on the Syrian Arab TV 21 August 2011). حوار السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد مع التلفزيون العربي السوري بتاريخ ٢١ آب

87 (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad to the new Syrian Government 16 April 2011). كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد امام الحكومة السورية الجديدة بتاريخ ١٦ نيسان ٢٠١١

88 (Al-Muallem: The decision of the Syrian leadership follows the pils of the people which went out in millions to the squares of the Syrian cities and said what it wanted to say), *SANA*, 29 November 2011 . قرار القيادة السورية يتبع مع نبض الشعب الذي خرج بالملايين الى ساحات المدن السورية وقال كلمته: المعلم

89 (The Speech of President Bashar al-Asad to the new Syrian Government 16 April 2011). كلمة السيد الرئيس بشار الاسد امام الحكومة السورية الجديدة بتاريخ ١٦ نيسان ٢٠١١

an authoritarian regime. The regime, on the other hand, describes a situation where a foreign conspiracy is directed towards Syria as a state and as a people. The opposition holds that the enemy is a single family, while the regime points to unspecified forces and imperialistic interests. The opposition claims that its peaceful demonstrations are met by brute force and mass killings while the regime claims to be involved in combating armed terrorists. Both sides accuse the other of committing criminal acts and blaming it on the other. Both sides also accuse the other of terrorism.

Both sides talk of a future Syria for everyone and both of them look at the Syrian diaspora as part of the Syrian people and an active part of national developments. Apart from the Kurds, pointed to by both sides, no minority is specifically discussed or particularly visible in the rhetoric on either side. While the Kurds are pointed to by both sides with specifications that their rights must be – or in the case of the regime have been– restored the minority around which many of the questions regarding future developments revolve, the Alawites, is carefully avoided. Although the SRGC explicitly points to traditional dividing lines present in the Syrian society as it calls for “the fraternization of cities and villages” and urges “Arabs and Kurds, Turkmens and Assyrians and others, Muslims and Christians” to join the revolution<sup>90</sup>, the Alawites are not mentioned. The opposition circumvents the “Alawite question” with its emphasis of the regime as ruled by a single family and its statements on a future Syria where all are equal. Alawite (and other minority) fears of the future are thereby not substantially dealt with.

The Syrian opposition consists of a wide range of currents, organizations, groups and coalitions. To capture them all within a single article would not be possible. The ones represented here were judged to be among the most important and most active. Judging by their statements and claims, three main strands can be identified: the “older”, previously established, internal opposition – here represented by the CCDC –, a younger, more recent internal opposition, active in organiz-

90 , دعوة للتظاهر في اربعاء التأخي الوطني (A call for demonstration on the Wednesday of National Fraternization), 15 November 2011.

ing demonstrations and strikes – here represented by the SGCR and the LCC – and the SNC which here represents the external opposition although it also counts dissidents still in Syria among its members. Also included is the FSA, the biggest armed group involved in the uprising. The main point of conflict detected is the way the Syrian regime should be toppled. The CCDC stands out as less radical with its opposition to a no-fly zone and, until mid-November, any kind of protection of civilians emanating from the UN Security Council. It also stands out with its view of dialogue as a possibility should the regime refrain from violence. Also the FSA stands out with its emphasis of armed struggle as the only way forward. The main dividing line, so far, is thus not, as could perhaps have been expected, the one between activists on the inside and activists on the outside (even though Michel Kilo of the CCDC has pointed to this saying that it is not logical to be guided from the outside when millions are protesting on the streets inside Syria.<sup>91</sup>) Rather, the main dividing line runs between the older internal opposition and the rest. (Again, obviously, a different choice of groups and organizations could have pointed to other dividing lines). This split is mirrored in the rhetoric of the other groups when commenting upon representatives of the “older” internal opposition, represented by the CCDC and the Building the State Current (*tayār binā’ al-dawlah*)<sup>92</sup>, meeting with the Arab League in Cairo and Russian officials in Moscow in October. The SRGC made clear that the delegation that went to Cairo represented only itself and not the entire internal opposition<sup>93</sup> and the delegation visiting Moscow was accused by a SNC representative to “represent the Syrian regime”.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, although the opposition has closed ranks with regards to the two main goals – the fall of Bashar al-Asad’s regime and the transformation of Syria into a civil, democratic state – what different actors understand the latter goal to entail is not entirely clear. As the possibility of closing ranks is greatest in the face

91 Irish, “Syrian opposition must avoid splits”, 2011.

92 This organization shares the views of the CCDC on a no-fly zone, international protection etc.

93 (A I - العربي يستقبل اليوم وفداً من المعارضة السورية في الداخل والهيئة العامة للنزعة تعارض: لا يمثلون الا انفسهم) Arabi receives a delegation from the Syrian internal opposition today and the Syrian Revolution General Committee protests: They do not represent anyone but themselves), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 November 2011.

94 (A representative of the National Council in Moscow to “Al-Sharq al-Awsat”: the delegation of the “internal opposition” represents the Syrian regime”), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 October 2011.

of a common enemy, clearer dividing lines between the different organizations and coalitions are likely to appear should the regime fall and Syria move into a transitory period.

As pointed to initially, Rojo & van Dijk (1997) hold that the act of legitimation is usually carried out through persuasive discourse. This is clearly true in the case of the main antagonists in the Syrian uprising. It is however also obvious that in the era of internet and social media not only words, but images, photos and videos powerfully communicate the righteousness of one's own cause. Photos of martyrs, orphaned children, destruction of residential areas and government buildings and videos of clashes are widely distributed on Facebook, YouTube and other sites as well as on the state controlled news agency's homepage. Although largely propagandistic in its nature, these kinds of sources have largely made up what the outside world has to go by when trying to decide what is going on in Syria.

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