

A Decade of Lost Chances: Past and Present Dynamics of Bashar al-Asad's Syria*

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Abstract

The forming of the new National Coalition of Revolutionary and Oppositional Forces in Doha in mid-November 2012 added a new domestic and international dimension to the conflict in Syria. The recognition of this platform as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people by more than 100 countries puts additional political pressure on the regime of Bashar al-Asad. The President has run out of political options after he had chosen to act exclusively militarily. This article looks back at the decade of lost chances under Asad in order to find an explanation to the "security reflex" that the regime opted for when the peaceful demonstrations started out. In this article, the Syrian intifada is placed into a political context of the Arab Spring in which it belongs despite the different path that Syria has been taking since then. The strong fragmentation of the Syrian opposition is part of the Syrian "specialty". The main cleavages are elaborated here. Finally, five scenarios are offered that look possible at the moment of publication, not all of them are as negative as the current situation suggests.

Keywords: Syria, Bashar al-Asad, Arab Spring, revolt, opposition, National Coalition

Kaybolan Fırsatlarla Geçen On Yıl: Beşar Esad Yönetimindeki Suriye'nin Önceki ve Şimdiki Dinamikleri

Özet

2012 Kasım ayının ortalarında Doha'da kurulan Suriye Muhalif ve Devrimci Güçler Ulusal Koalisyonu Suriye'deki çatışmaya yeni bir ulusal ve

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uluslararası boyut kazandırmıştır. 100'den fazla ülkenin bu platformu Suriye halkının tek meşru temsilcisi olarak tanıyıp olması Esad rejimine fazladan bir siyasi baskı uygulamaktadır. Cumhurbaşkanı Esad tamamen askeri yollara başvurmayı seçtikten sonra siyasi olarak tüm seçenekleri tükenmiştir. Bu makale, barışçı gösteriler başladığında rejimin başvurduğu "güvenlik refleksi"ne bir açıklama getirmek amacıyla Esad yönetimi altında kaybolan fırsatlarla geçen on yılın analizini sunmaktadır. Makalede Suriye intifadası, Suriye'nin olaylar başladığından bu yana farklı bir yola başvurmasına rağmen siyasi anlamda Arap Baharı bağlamında ele alınmaktadır. Suriye muhalefetinin güçlü bir şekilde bölünmesi Suriye'ye "özgü" bir durumdur. Muhalefet içindeki temel bölünmeler bu çalışmada ayrıntılı bir şekilde ele alınmaktadır. Son olarak ise mevcut durumda muhtemel görünen beş senaryo sunulmaktadır ve bu senaryoların tamamı mevcut durumun vermiş olduğu izlenim kadar olumsuz bir tablo çizmez.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, Beşar Esad, Arap Baharı, isyan, muhalefet, Ulusal Koalisyon

عقد من الفرص الضائعة: الديناميكيات الماضية والحاضرة لسوريا بشار الأسد

كارستن ويلاند

خلاصة:

أضاف تشكيل تحالف وطني جديد من القوات الثورية والمعارضة في الدوحة في منتصف شهر نوفمبر/ تشرين الثاني ٢٠١٢ بعدا محليا ودوليا على الصراع في سوريا. إن الاعتراف بهذا التحالف كممثل وحيد وشرعي للشعب السوري من أكثر من (١٠٠) دولة يضع ضغطا سياسيا إضافيا على نظام بشار الأسد. لم يتبقى للرئيس أي خيارات سياسية بعد أن اختار الخيار العسكري فقط. وهذا المقال يبحث في عقد الفرص الضائعة تحت حكم الأسد من أجل إيجاد توضيح «الانعكاس الأمني اللاإرادي» الذي اختاره النظام عندما انطلقت المظاهرات السلمية. في هذا المقال، وضعت الانتفاضة السورية في السياق السياسي من الربيع العربي التي تنتمي إليه بالرغم من المسار المختلف الذي اتخذته سوريا منذ ذلك الوقت. إن التشرذم القوي للمعارضة السورية هو جزء من «الخصوصية» السورية. الانقسامات الرئيسية توسعت هنا. وأخيرا تم تقديم خمسة سيناريوهات تبدو محتملة لحظة النشر، ليست كلها سلبية كما يبين الموقف الحالي.

الكلمات الدالة: سوريا، بشار الأسد، الربيع العربي، الثورة، المعارضة، التحالف الوطني.

Introduction

Let me start out with a personal anecdote of the last days inside the “Old Syria”. Damascus in November 2010 was a very interesting experience. There was a wide-spread feeling of frustration and stagnation, especially among the representatives of the opposition whom I have been meeting throughout the long and lost decade under President Bashar al-Asad. Widespread resignation and a feeling of defeat prevailed—sometimes even melancholy. Paralyzed by prison sentences, travel bans, and intimidations, Syria’s traditional opposition was preparing to hand over their political legacy to future generations in a distant future. None of them had anticipated that circumstances would change so unexpectedly. Some of the classic oppositional figures said that they had to admit that they had failed in their effort to change the country and that the regime was stronger than ever. The journalist Michel Kilo, for example, concluded prophetically: “Once the spark ignites the younger generation, we can withdraw. At least we have paved the way.”

Three months later, the revolt started and the young people took to the streets and with them came their families, mothers and fathers. The first phase of the revolt had a quite different character to what is happening in Syria today, and it is the “last lost chance” of Asad to have let the situation escalate as it finally did. An escalation of unprecedented cruelty that has caused the political death of the President and ruined the entire country.

Before I turn to the present developments, I would like to look back to the decade of lost chances of Bashar al-Asad. When he came to power, he originally had not had the intention to implement the leaders’ cult to such an extreme extent as his father did but in the end he ended up using the same repertoire of instruments of power as his father. The style of his ruling became more and more similar to what used to be before the year 2000 when he took power, although he was propagating a modern and more open Syria – and many believed him. Indeed, he had a different idea of a Syria, also in foreign policy issues, very different from what we are witnessing now. But he is the President and thus completely responsible for the fact that his country has drifted into the abyss.

The regime has been riding on the mantra of the old autocratic rulers: “You have us and you have stability or else you will have chaos and

Islamism.” This was Egypt’s Husni Mubarak’s mantra, too. For sure, Western states and actors for a long time bought this false alternative. This was part of the old notion of stability that was the basis of international politics in the Middle East.

The Syrian Intifada and the Arab Spring

When the upheaval broke out as peaceful demonstrations, there is no doubt that Syria had become really dragged into the Arab Spring. Today, we obviously have a very different reality in Syria. When the Arab Spring broke out, people articulated a common basis of demands, common frustrations against the old social, economic and political order. After some time, each country took a different path obviously because of different historical and political conditions.

The Syrian scenario showed plenty of similarities with the Arab Spring scenarios elsewhere: social frustration, lack of economic perspectives, cruelty and arbitrariness of authorities, the call for dignity, pluralization and even democracy. These are the same slogans as we witnessed in Tunisia and in other countries.

Asad always maintained that Syria was different. Of course, in some aspects Syria *was* different. Remember the famous interview of Asad in January 2011 in the *Wall Street Journal* in which he recommended himself as the big reformer in the Arab world and gave advice to other monarchs and autocrats in the region. He said you have to be in line with the thinking with your people. Why did he think he was in line with his people? Because in Syria there was a common resistance discourse that was much more deeply entrenched in the Syrian polity and popular culture, even up to parts of the intellectual opposition that had incorporated pan-Arabism, anti-imperialism, anti-Israelism, etc. The problem was that when these revolts broke out, the resistance discourse, which was the glue between the population and the regime for a long time, collapsed much more quickly than Asad had imagined: as soon as Asad turned his weapons inside and directed them against his own population instead of liberating the Golan. Precisely, the brigade that was responsible of the Golan dossier, the famous 4th Brigade of Maher Asad (the President’s brother), was the brigade that committed the first massacres in Dera’a when the revolt broke out peacefully. People were shouting in the street: “Maher, you coward, why don’t you liberate the Golan! Why are you shooting at your own people?” This

was the moment when the resistance discourse collapsed and with it one major speciality of the Syrian case.

Another difference from the other Arab Spring states was that in Syria the upheaval started out with a very decentral character. Very few people knew the place of Dera'a before. First people took to the streets in Dera'a then in Banyas at an early time, then it moved to the urban areas like Homs or Hama. But there was no Tahrir scenario of a mediatic kind as it happened in Cairo when international media was present and the whole world looked at a single square. When you compare how many people have been participating in the revolts in Syria and how many took part in Egypt, probably many more people made sacrifices and went to the streets in Syria, many more than would fit in any Tahrir Square.

There is also a speciality of tactics in Syria. We are witnessing a very capable propaganda war by the regime and a much better organized and ruthless *mukhabarat* and intelligence system.

Another speciality is Syria's geopolitical location with four important players in the neighbourhood: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Proxies of these four powers are present in Syria's political discourse and as parties on the battlefield, too.

Asad Missed Many Chances of Political Accommodation

One of the major heads of secret services in Syria, Bahjat Suleiman (now Syria's ambassador in Jordan) said in 2003 that Syria's opposition is not the enemy that wants to topple the regime but that they just have some specific grievances and demands like the end of the state of emergency, political pluralism and a more equitable redistribution of wealth. This statement shows the tragedy today.

One of the big lost chances of Bashar al-Asad is that he never tried to reach out to the moderate and secular civil society movement, the traditional Syrian opposition, part of whose heads are now part in the bigger opposition politics today. Among them is Riad Seif, who is a moderate Sunni businessman and ex-member of Parliament and many others who were very moderate. Or Michel Kilo, who was the intellectual head of the civil society movement, is a secular Christian writer. Instead of reaching out to moderate elements, the regime throughout

the years let the Islamist elements grow in order to nurture them as a deterrent inside the country. The real secular alternative to this so-called secular Bathist state was a moderate secular opposition whose members were treated as criminals.

Let's have a look at the 10 years of lost chances under Asad. When we juxtapose foreign policy and domestic politics we get some very interesting conclusions.

Foreign Policy		Domestic Policy	
2000-2002	Orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No significant steps, continuation of know problems and discourses. 	2000-mid 2001	Cautious Opening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Damascus Spring debating clubs Civil Society Movement
		mid 2001-2002	First clampdown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suppression of the Damascus Spring, First losses of the Civil Society Movement arrest of Riad as-Seif.
2003-2005	Ideologization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stiff ideological positioning against the Iraq war, isolation, strengthening ties with Iran but mending relations with Turkey from 2004 onwards. 	2003-2004	Stagnation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CMI Society Movement simmers.
		2005-2006	Confrontation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opposition gains courage, Damascus Declaration (Oct05), confrontational Course between regime and Civil Society Movement, Rising Influence of Islamists.
2005-2007	Contraction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hariri assassination and consequences, withdrawal from Lebanon, further isolation also by Europeans (France) and Arabs (Saudi Arabia). 	2006	Secont clampdown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> End of open confrontation silencing of the Civil Society Movement, arrest of Michel Kilo, Anwar al Bounni.
		2007-2008	Silence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The comeback of fear to the streets, rest-opposition is in the underground continued rise of Islamist influence.
2008-2010	Liberation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start of liberation from foreign policy dead-ends and pariah status, back on the international stage, wellthought alliances and decisions (Turkey, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia), consolidation of the regime. 	2009-2010	Third clampdown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrest of further senior opposition members and HR activists like Haitham Maleh, rising suppression of secularists and secular ideas; increased influence of Islamists up to the legislative level.

Figure 1. Foreign Policy and Domestic Politics in the 2000s

The Foreign Policy Dimension

Asad started out at an age of 34 years when he took power. He was insecure, he had a lot of advisors, a lot of competition from within, and he did not dare to go any faster steps ahead than necessary. But on the other hand, other factors and events took place in the region and internationally that were not the fault of Asad like September 11 and the Iraq War. Asad was challenged. Basically, his reaction to external challenges was to strengthen the pan-Arab ideology. His father Hafez Asad had rather opted for pragmatic decisions in foreign policy. From time to time he was siding with the USA against Iraq, and at times he had turned against the US siding with the Russians, once with Saudi Arabia, once against it. But Bashar Asad chose the pan-Arab ideology as his fundamental ground of defense. This came to effect most clearly against the Anglo-Saxon involvement in Iraq.

However, at the same time happened the rapprochement with Turkey, a quite pragmatic foreign-policy initiative. This was one of the major foreign policy successes of Bashar al-Asad, and an effort to diversify Syria's foreign policy orientation away from a unilateral orientation towards Iran.

The West lost chances, too, not only Asad himself. Western politics let Syria drift towards the Iranian orbit more and more – and the Syrian part of the political elite that were pro-European, pro-Western, lost power within the Syrian polity and those that were rather conservative and Eastern-looking up to China gained ground. One example is the missed chance of the EU to sign the EU Association Agreement with Syria when the regime was still ready for it. Instead, it remained in a deadlock for a long time, until the Syrian side shifted priorities. Another example is the Syrian readiness to cooperate on the security level even after 9/11 and the Iraq War. This cooperation was highly appreciated but there were no rewards for the Syrian regime for its cooperation against Islamist terrorism.

The fight against Islamist terrorism is a very important point because there were actually two important discourses at the time of the US President George W. Bush. One was the “pro-Israel discourse” that aimed, roughly speaking, at protecting the security of Israel. The other one was the “fighting Islamist terrorism” discourse. Both discourses did not necessarily overlap. The Iraq War, for example, did not have

anything to do with fighting Islamist terrorism. There were no strong links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida, however, this became rather a self-fulfilling prophecy after the Iraq War because of the power vacuum that emerged there. Syria was taking part in the fight against Islamist terrorism for the regime's own sake with the excellent knowledge of their secret services. But Syria was an enemy state in the frame of the "pro-Israel discourse" because Syria had a territorial and political problem with Israel. So, Syria, was placed under the extended "axis of evil" by George W. Bush despite its close cooperation on the security level with the United States, Great Britain and even Israel. Statements of the security establishments in the US and Israel have always been more moderate towards Syria than those of the political establishments. In a nutshell, with the termination of cooperation at the security level the West had lost an important partner in Syria around 2005 at the latest.

In 2005 a home-made problem reached Syria with the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. This was followed by the strong isolation of Syria not only by Western countries but also in the Arab world. This became a trauma for the Syrian regime and for the first time discussions broke out if Bashar al-Asad was capable of defending Syrian national interests. Should he be toppled from power or should he be kept? This was an important discussion at that time and a great challenge for Asad. From there, he never really recovered fully.

This is why between 2005 and 2007 the regime contracted. The circle of trust narrowed down to becoming more and more Alawite, and later contracted more and more to his family clan. In the previous cabinets there were important Sunnis or Christians present, like the defense minister. But all these official positions these days do not have any significance any longer.

An interesting period opens up between 2008 and 2010. It was the foreign policy honeymoon for Syria in which Syria was accepted on the international stage, where Bashar al-Asad was invited to the Mediterranean Summit in Paris in 2008 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and, of course, the relationship between Turkey and Syria flourished. More and more measures were taken to underline the "friendship" of both countries.

The benefit Turkey had from the friendship with Syria was above all of economic nature. Turkish products were sold tremendously well in Syria and the cost for Syria was that the Free Trade Agreement ruined parts of the industry, especially small industries and manufacturers. This contributed to the impoverishment of the working class that went into the suburbs of Syrian cities, especially Damascus and Aleppo, exactly where some hotspots of the revolt developed. This is definitely not the only reason for the intifada but there is a strong socio-economic component to it. The other such factor is the rural economic impoverishment in Syria. Whereas Hafez al-Asad still modernized the country in the sense that he constructed infrastructure, schools, hospitals in the provinces, the modernizational aspects of Bashar al-Asad's economic progress targeted the urban middle class, precisely those groups that held on to Asad much longer than others.

When you ask Syrians what was the advantage of the Syrian-Turkish alliance when they had so many economic disadvantages they say it was politics. Syria was in a process of diversifying its foreign policy away from Iran, and the Syrian regime always knew it needed an access to Washington in order to walk the last mile in negotiations of any peace arrangement in the region. In this sense Turkey was also a bridge to Europe and finally to Washington. Therefore, the last foreign policy success of Asad was the designation of a US ambassador to Damascus in January 2011 (after the interruption in 2005), shortly before everything started to collapse.

Almost ironically, at the time when the revolt broke out in Syria, actually nobody outside Syria was interested in toppling Asad's regime. Very different from 2003-2004 when plans existed in Pentagon that if everything went smoothly in Iraq, Syria could be next.

The Domestic Dimension

When juxtaposing domestic developments with foreign policy events, certain matters emerge. Domestically, Asad started out with a great amount of insecurity. In this phase he clamped down on the Syrian opposition for the first time during the Damascus Spring. First, the opposition had felt encouraged by the speeches of Asad to tackle corruption and discuss more freely. But then the young president was afraid to end up like Gorbachev. Reforming and then being toppled as

a result. So he cracked down on the opposition. This was when people like Riad Seif, who intended to found a party of his own, and others were put behind bars.

Later in 2005, when Hariri was assassinated the regime was weakened. Syria had to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, and the opposition felt encouraged to become more assertive. This is the time when the famous Damascus Declaration was drafted, a document written by the moderate forces of the opposition and for the first time including the exiled Muslim Brotherhood. This was considered a serious threat by the regime, and in 2006 the signatories of the Damascus Declaration were arrested one by one, including Michel Kilo and others.

But interestingly, in the last phase from 2008 onwards we do not see any correlation between foreign policy and domestic politics. We have a foreign policy honeymoon, we have a liberalization in international politics but at the same time we have another clamp-down on the opposition with the arrests of Haitham al-Maleh and others. Why is that?

The thesis that when you put the Syrian regime under pressure the regime will not be very interested in democratic experiments is a thesis that had its logic especially after the Iraq War. But the reverse thesis does not work, which is if you ease the pressure on the regime then somehow automatically you will get better conditions for the opposition. This did not happen. In conclusion, when the Arab Spring hit Syria, Syria was by no means on the way towards reform. This is something that has to be remembered.

Damascus Spring a Dress Rehearsal of the Arab Spring?

One of the main Syrian intellectuals, the philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, said in July 2011 in Berlin that the Damascus Spring of 2001 was a dress rehearsal of the Arab Spring of 2011. The debating clubs during the Damascus Spring of 2001 articulated the frustrations and the demands that reemerged in 2010/11. These were social problems, problems of democratization and civil society etc. Nothing in these demands pointed to the classic Arab discourse of being anti-somebody or anti-something. Arab nationalism has almost always been anti-something: anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-Western or anti-US, anti-Israeli. This time it was anti-Arab regimes and their policies. All

this was already reflected in the Damascus Spring 2001. This is why some of the Syrian opposition claims that they have done actually the intellectual groundwork for the programs of the Arab Spring ten years later. But if Syrians were the first ones in articulating such demands, they may be the last ones in the chain of the Arab Spring which turns ever more brutal in Syria itself.

The Complexity of the Syrian Opposition

The Syrian opposition appears much more fragmented than other Arab oppositions in the Arab Spring countries. To get an overview, rough categories can help. On the one hand, there is the traditional Syrian opposition, the Civil Society Movement, discussion groups in tea houses, and private rooms, and opposition on the paper writing manifestos, writing critical articles, etc. Something very new emerged in 2010 in Syria, which was the street. The old Civil Society Movement, the somewhat cerebral, grey haired, mostly elder men, moderate opposition of mostly secular, ex-communist character was not really attached with the movements of the younger population in the street. So, the street was something independent and very few figures did serve as bridges between these different forms of opposition. Riad Seif, for example, was one of them who joined the dangerous protests in the street unlike others of the Civil Society Movement, at least initially.

Another aspect is the Internet. What we know about the revolt is mostly from the Internet. But how do we know if all details reflect the reality on the ground? And who are the individuals who shape our picture abroad? To which part of the opposition do they belong?

Yet another aspect is the political platform: Most recently, the National Coalition (NC) and before that the Syrian National Council (SNC). The NC is a much more inclusive body that includes more of those activists that have been fighting for the revolution from inside than those in exile.

Meanwhile, another aspect has emerged: The military fight between different armed groups and the government side. As Suheir Atassi, now one of the NC's vice presidents once put it: "The Syrian opposition has the wrong friends." Weapons and money are coming from Islamic forces. So those groups that claim to be Islamists will get the weapons to defend their families and villages. Some have grown beards and use religious symbols just to get access to weapons and resources.

Another remark on the armed opposition: I had an interesting conversation with one of the intellectual opposition figures who said to me that in the German constitution you have the right of resistance in case somebody is about to destroy the democratic foundations of the country. Due to the events in German history this is very understandable. So, he asked, can you explain to me why the Western countries, when they talk about the armed opposition, focus on the aspects of arms only and not on the decision behind it that each individual took at the time when the protests were still peaceful. A decision with a high personal risk of being killed when throwing the weapon away or taking it along and run from the armed unit towards the demonstrators mingling in the crowd with the strong conviction that he will not shoot on unarmed civilians. This is a highly ethical decision. It took half a year till the Free Syrian Army was formed. This means for half a year people went into the streets every Friday or more often knowing that maybe one dozen, two dozen will be killed in the end, and they still did it. I met so many of the Syrian opposition who have been pacifist before, had nothing to do with arms and today they say: "I am sorry I don't have any alternative." This is something one has to keep in mind when we look at the chronology of events. Chronology is very important when we consider Syria part of the Arab Spring. This helps to explain the motivations and dynamics of the first months of the revolution, which is necessary to develop a correct analysis of what is going on now.

Common Ground and Dividing Lines

In the beginning, the upheaval had – despite its fractured nature - three common denominators and three common no's. One is that there is "no negotiation possible with Bashar al-Asad any longer". There are only a few leftist groups inside Syria that still hold on to a kind of dialogue. In 2011, there were many chances to get out of this mess by international mediation and negotiation. Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan was in Damascus twice. He felt humiliated by Asad when Asad said "if you want to have war, you can have it!" after having spent common family holidays with Erdoğan a year before.

The second common denominator was "No to sectarianism". This is still an important slogan today in the mainstream opposition of different shades. In the beginning, there was also a common "No to foreign intervention" but this is something that has become increasingly con-

troversial due to the brutal approach of the regime. Today many oppositional figures say that they do not need foreign intervention but arms to defend themselves.

But what is more visible than the common grounds that are mentioned above seem to be the cleavages. Why is the opposition in Syria more divided than in the other Arab Spring states? One major cleavage of interests consists of “inside” and “outside”. Since Syria was a very closed system and many dissenters had been living in exile for a very long time, the voice of the exile is louder than elsewhere like in Egypt or Tunisia. Another cleavage is secular versus religious state. Secularism has been discredited by the old notion of authoritarian secularism or secular authoritarianism. Today’s activists and politicians rather use civil (*medenî*) instead of secular (*‘almani*). This is an interesting aspect when it comes to post-Arab Spring terminology. Another cleavage is the pan-Arab vision of the state versus a civil democratic vision of the state. During one of the important opposition conferences in June 2011 in Istanbul the Kurdish delegates left the conference hall in anger because they were fighting against the pan-Arab minded part of the opposition about the future name of Syria. The question was and still is if Syria was to remain “Syrian Arab Republic” or to be called simply “Syrian Republic”. Yet another cleavage is non-violent or violent resistance. Due to the unscrupulous use of violence and torture, most Syrians have lost their pacifist ideals. Finally, cyber-literate versus cyber-illiterate activists is another important phenomenon. This was mentioned shortly above. Elderly members of the Civil Society Opposition were not exactly Internet freaks. So who is shaping the discourse of the Revolution?

Moreover, in the Syrian case a strong rural-urban cleavage exists. Urban wealthy middle class or rising middle class under Asad and the poor countryside is striking. This is why the frontlines are not so clear as many like to have them. It is not simply a Sunni-Alawite clash. There are other aspects in there. Among the Sunnis there are still some that are on the regime side. On the other hand, some Alawites took also part in organizing the opposition.

Some in the opposition asked why the Western countries were focusing on the fractures in the opposition. “Finally we have pluralism”, they insisted. “This is what you wanted from us. We had monopolistic, au-

thoritarian regimes all the time and now we have finally different opinions.” This is true to some extent. But in Egypt, the opposition toppled the regime and then they opened up and pluralized. Now it still looks like the time to join forces.

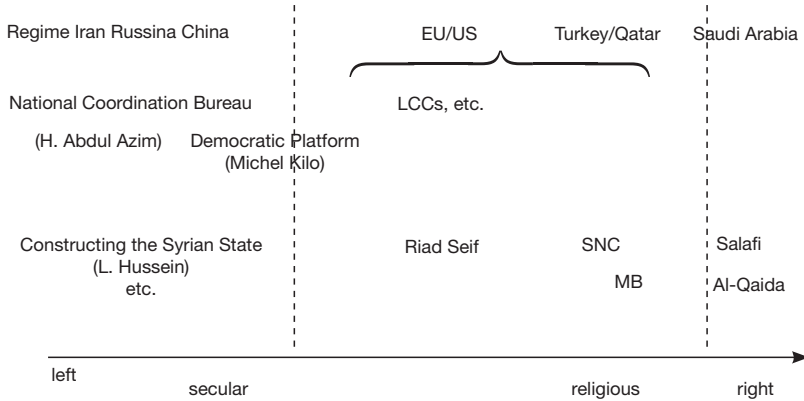
Minorities and the structure of the society are also very different from Egypt or Tunisia. In Syria minorities are stronger. More than three quarters are Sunni and half of them are politically secular. They may be personally conservative but they know that in politics they need a secular Syria in order to do business. The famous Sunni merchant class in Syria plays an important role and has been very pragmatic.

Syria in a Civil War?

It all depends of the definition if you like to apply the term “civil war” on Syria at this point or not (yet). Academically speaking, coming from experiences in Bosnia and other places, a civil war is a war between one group against another group in one country. In Syria, we have basically a war that is fought by the (rest of the) regime against large parts of its own population. This population is - yes - predominantly Sunni. The upheaval has become more Sunni due to the increased violence of the regime because other groups stayed at home. Some minorities detracted since they were more afraid of what was coming up later. It still remains to be seen if this interpretation can be upheld for long. In November 2012 fights broke out for the first time between Kurdish entities (forces of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*, PYD, which emerged from the PKK in 2003) and the predominantly Arab Free Syrian Army. If this becomes a usual scenario - Kurdish against Arab activists - another dimension will occur, something like a civil war or a civil war-like component added to the structure of conflict mentioned above.

The Current Spectrum of Opposition

On the more current debate on the spectrum of the Syrian opposition, the following chart offers a very rough overview. This is more or less the situation that presented itself during the negotiations in Doha where the mainstream opposition gathered in mid November 2012 when the National Coalition of Revolutionary and Oppositional Forces was formed.



On the left side of the chart are some leftist or even communist groups which are mainly based in Syria. Some of them are still ready to dialogue with the regime. Their ideas are partly shared by Iran, Russia and China as international players. Michel Kilo and his Democratic Platform is definitely anti-regime but also pan-Arab and anti-Western in some sense. Kilo did not take part in Doha and has been waiting developments but he signaled his support. In this spectrum we can find also other players that are critical especially of the SNC and the part of the opposition which is mainly based in exile. According to those critical voices, the players abroad lack legitimacy since they have never directly confronted the regime from within and paid for it, for example, with prison sentences.

The US and the EU have been among those supporting Riad Seif's initiative of broadening the spectrum of the opposition and to found the National Coalition. Turkey and Qatar have been strongly supporting the more narrow SNC, and within the SNC very much the Muslim Brotherhood. The focused support of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) by Turkey is interesting. Since when Erdoğan went to Egypt and was received by Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi and his Brotherhood followers, Erdoğan confronted them and maintained that it was conducive to Turkey's development to have a secular constitution and a secular state structure. The Egyptian Muslim Brothers were quite disappointed to hear such a clear endorsement of secularism by Turkey's leader whom they claim to regard as a model. Therefore, it has become a controversial debate in Turkey, too, why the Turkish government so exclusively supports the Muslim Brotherhood in the spectrum of the Syrian oppo-

sition. Having said this, some of the Syrian MB figures have declared that they support the idea of a secular state in Syria (this reaches back to the Damascus Declaration of 2005 and was repeated in 2011). But this is not the voice of the entire MB spectrum, and signs rather point into the direction of polarization of the players on the ground, especially when the military confrontation holds on for a longer time.

On the right side of the chart are those groups that are mostly coming from outside, infiltrating Syria. They bring along various streams of Islam that are not domestically grown in Syria. These groups are the ones whom especially the Western actors are afraid of. When Western politicians say that they are afraid of weapons ending up in wrong hands, these are the groups they are talking about.

The influence of foreign actors who support those radical Islamist streams has led to bizarre results on the ground. Secular defectors and armed groups sometimes grow beards and use Islamic symbols to get access to the resources and arms in order to protect their families and villages. Sometimes they are pressed to accept an Islamist commander, and from this commander they obtain the necessary equipment.

The new National Coalition formed in Doha is trying to get Western support so that they can counteract this one sided support of the opposition in Syria. Also in the sectors of aid and welfare, secular opposition organizations have been struggling to keep up with the well-equipped Islamist organizations that are thus gaining influence in Syria. Especially the MB, like elsewhere, are trying to monopolize the welfare services.

Conclusion

Given the dark perspectives that Syria is facing at the moment, the forming of the broad opposition coalition in Doha and the recognition of it by more than hundred states as the sole representative of the Syrian people on the conference of the Friends of the Syrian People in Marrakesh in mid-December 2012 is definitely a silver lining.

Looking into Syria's political past, some hopeful elements can be found as well. Egypt and Tunisia, for example, never had a democratic past. Syria at least had civil and democratic governments in the 40s, 50s and 60s up until the coup of the Baathists. Syria was even temporarily

ruled by the so far only Christian prime minister in the Arab world, Faris Khoury, who is very respected by Syrians still today.

Looking at the intellectual achievements of Syria's long-term opposition, the Damascus Declaration is one of the most important political documents in modern Arab history. Secular forces joined up with the MB in order to articulate a common goal with peaceful means directed against their own governments and no-one else.

However, as part of its survival strategy from the very beginning of the upheaval, the regime has played the card of sectarianism. Although the intifada has started out peacefully and anti-sectarian, the longer the armed conflict drags on, the more likely it gets that sectarianism will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The regime, although it may not survive, will have reached one of its goals: chaos for a long time.

Whatever the long-term results of the Arab Spring will be in Syria, one thing is certain: Against the background of the tremendous tasks that lie ahead after physical and moral destructions, the Syrian people cannot afford and do not deserve another decade of lost chances. But if the worst scenarios unfold, the next decade may become much worse for many Syrians than under the Asad tutelage.

This article is based on numerous personal interviews and the recent publication "Syria—A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring", Seattle 2012. Further recommended literature is provided in the bibliography.

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