Contentious Politics in the Syrian Conflict:

Opposition, Representation, and Resistance

Maha Yahya, editor

CARNEGIE
MIDDLE EAST CENTER

Contentious Politics in the Syrian Conflict:

Opposition, Representation, and Resistance

Maha Yahya, editor

CONTENTS

CONTENTIOUS POLITICS IN SYRIA

MAHA YAHYA WITH ISSAM KAYSSI

INTRODUCTION

The uprising in Syria that began in March 2011 politicized the country's overwhelmingly young population in an unprecedented way. Following the incarceration and torture of youths in the southern city of Daraa by the authorities, hundreds of thousands of Syrians took to the streets in protest against decades of state repression. They expressed discontent with how their country was being governed and demanded basic freedoms and dignity.

The opposition formed hundreds of local committees and civil society groups. These groups organized mass demonstrations in towns and cities across Syria, engaged in creative ways to express grievances, launched online publications and alternative media sites, and initiated broad-ranging debates and discussions over the Syria that they knew and the future that they desired. However, the state's increasingly harsh response to this and the growing involvement of regional and international actors facilitated the beginning of an armed insurgency.

What Is Contentious Politics?

Those various forms of resistance to, and engagement with, the reality of the Syrian regime can be broadly labeled as forms of contentious politics—that is, the interaction between contention, collective action, and politics.[1] The hallmarks of contentious politics are collective actions outside the bounds of state institutions—protests, petitions, civil disobedience, riots, and in some cases violent action and subsequently conflict. In its nonviolent forms, contentious politics is a critical component of political participation. The forms of political contention have been broad and varied around the world—ranging from the Occupy movement in the United States to more recent protests in Chile and the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong. These movements have often revolved around questions of inequality, political and civic rights, especially for ethnic and religious minorities, and climate change, among others.

Contentious politics takes place under both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Its success or failure is directly connected to the political opportunities available. Those opportunities, which are determined by the openness of a contested system to emerging actors as well as the existence of multiple independent centers of power, have a significant impact on the outcome of contentious movements.[2] Scholars have long noted that such movements are much more likely to succeed in democracies than under authoritarian regimes where repression may radicalize initially more moderate elements.

In 2011, political contention erupted across a large number of countries in the Middle East and North

Over time, the ideological spectrum of Syria's opposition broadened. Islamic groups that had received abundant foreign funding and support, including foreign fighters, gained traction. . . . Meanwhile, civic activists, many of whom were at the forefront of the peaceful protests, were deliberately targeted by the Syrian regime and even some opposition groups.

Africa, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of citizens in the region engaged in protests of varying sizes demanding change. They acted in an unprecedented manner, coming together as individuals and groups, organizing community-based events, public debates, civic awareness campaigns, and online activism. There was also a distinctly cultural response in the form of graffiti art, street theater, and music, among other approaches.

Several factors played a critical role in determining the trajectory and outcomes of these movements. These included whether the political elite believed the protests to be an existential threat to their own vested interests; the ways in which this elite (and their militaries) chose to respond; the sociocultural contexts and past experiences of political violence; and the existence of organized civil society organizations, such as labor unions, capable of leading the charge.

The involvement of regional and international actors also affected outcomes, particularly when it led to the militarization of initially peaceful opposition to state policies. Yet the violence that ravaged countries such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen after 2011 also provided

a forewarning that would reinforce the nonviolent nature of protests in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and Tunisia.

Contentious Politics in Syria

When the protests began in Syria, they were met with violence by a regime incapable of accepting new actors on the scene. Within months, what had begun as a peaceful, civic uprising in which local coordination committees had played a significant role was transformed into an armed rebellion.

As armed groups, most of them funded by external actors, became active, the political opposition established a representative body in Istanbul known as the Syrian National Council in October 2011.[3] Over time, the ideological spectrum of Syria's opposition broadened. Islamic groups that had received abundant foreign funding and support, including foreign fighters, gained traction among the political and armed opposition. Some of these groups later took on an influential role in formal peace negotiations. Meanwhile, civic activists, many of whom were at the forefront of the peaceful protests, were deliberately targeted by the Syrian regime and even some opposition groups. A large number of these activists—among them Razan Zeitouneh, Samira al-Khalil, Wael Hamada, and Nazem Hamadi (known as the "Douma Four"), as well as prominent Syrian Kurdish opposition figure Issa Hiso—were either forcibly disappeared, killed, jailed, or pushed into exile. In time, opposition armed groups came to control upward of 60 percent of Syrian territory.[4]

Today, almost a decade later, the Syrian regime, with vital military help from Russia and Iran, has regained control over most of Syria. It has done so using sieges, starvation tactics, and forced reconciliations.[5] Meanwhile, by the end of 2018, 6.7 million Syrians had sought refuge across the world.[6] As of March 2020, at least 5.4 million of Syrian refugees resided in neighboring countries,[7] while another 6.6 million are internally displaced.[8]

Syria's physical destruction is extensive, and reconstruction costs have been estimated at $250 billion by the former United Nations special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura.[9] The World Bank has similarly estimated that, since 2010, Syria has lost the equivalent of at least $226 billion of GDP.[10] In the first half of 2020, the northern governorate of Idlib, the last part of Syria still in rebel hands outside Kurdish-dominated areas, faced an offensive by Syrian regime, Russian, and Iranian forces, and more than 950,000 people were trapped by the fighting.[11] Idlib has become a repository for internally displaced Syrians forced out of other areas through so-called reconciliation deals.

President Bashar al-Assad's regime has made political opposition within Syria very difficult. Nonetheless, such opposition persists among activists, journalists, and academics, especially in the Syrian diaspora. This volume brings together the texts of six Syrian activists, researchers, journalists, academics, and analysts closely involved in the uprising over the past decade to assess the trajectory of Syria's uprising and its prospects for the future. Their sections explore different forms of political contention and their continuity or departure from previous types of civic protest. They offer insights into the possibilities of civic action in the pursuit of change as the regime regains control of Syrian territory.

The authors show that contentious politics in Syria has exhibited similar characteristics to that in other countries, albeit in a far more amplified manner. While the political opportunity to push for change appeared to open up across the region in 2011, the Syrian regime was unable or unwilling to absorb new political actors. In a context of state repression and international and regional interest in funding regime change, the turn to political violence became perhaps inevitable.

The violence led to a number of challenges that served to undermine opposition to the regime. The first was organizational fragmentation. As Amr Alsarraj and Philip Hoffman show in their piece, the absence of organizational coherence and the disconnect between

the internal opposition and the political opposition outside of Syria was the Achilles heel of the civil-nationalist wing of the opposition to Assad. This civil-nationalist opposition in exile remained unable to exert meaningful influence over the intricate and opaque network of civilian governance institutions that emerged inside Syria as the conflict progressed. It also remained physically separated from the myriad factions that guaranteed security in areas outside government control.

This fragmentation was amplified by a second challenge, namely that of financing a revolution. The political opposition struggled for years without the money necessary to build significant influence inside Syria. The military conflict and worsening humanitarian crisis further frustrated this opposition, as international actors created funding channels that bypassed its organizations entirely.

The organizations that paid the price for this included both military and civilian actors, as Assaad Al Achi demonstrates in his section. He shows how the three main opposition structures that emerged in 2011—the local coordination committees, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, and the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution—were eventually co-opted by regional and international actors. This co-optation occurred in two stages. First, through the growing reliance of the armed opposition on foreign powers for funding, and then through foreign financing for nongovernmental organizations.

In time, these foreign funders came to exert considerable influence over the political and humanitarian agendas of the different groups in Syria. For civil society organizations this called into question their agency in providing services. Many later shifted to nonpolitical service provision, becoming the main purveyors of essential public services that had been the responsibility of the government in the prewar period. Today, the civil opposition faces a similar situation. The political framework for ending the Syrian conflict is for the most

part defined by armed combatants and international powers. This makes a sustained civil opposition and a unified vision for Syria's future incredibly difficult.

Such challenges were accompanied by a third one: The fragmentation of Syria's contentious movements meant that no one institution represented Syria's opposition on the ground or in negotiations. It also meant that no one really spoke on behalf of the millions of Syrians displaced internally or forced into exile. For many of these Syrians, the political opposition was a distant reality, disconnected from their own daily misery, while the myriad military groups operating under the banner of the opposition were simply representatives of their international backers. In time many Syrians felt betrayed by these groups.[12]

In this context, the legacy of the past took center stage. As Alsarraj and Hoffman as well as Manhal Bareesh show in their pieces, the history of contentious politics in Syria informed the behavior of opposition actors and civil resistance. The civil-nationalist wing of the opposition, discussed by Alsarraj and Hoffman, was composed mainly of individuals and groups who had opposed the regime in the past, whether signatories of the October 2005 Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change or the Muslim Brotherhood and other activists in exile.[13]

This history of contentious politics also played a considerable role in Idlib Governorate, the focus of Bareesh's section. There, a semiautonomous government emerged under the purview of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a coalition of groups whose main component was Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's branch in Syria. Bareesh argues that even though the Syrian regime and Russian forces used the presence of Jabhat al-Nusra to portray Idlib as a bastion of extremism, thereby justifying their offensive against the governorate, the reality was quite different. Local resistance to Jabhat al-Nusra's rule was significant and was sustained through Idlib's complex social structures and networks. These included political parties with a history of clandestine opposition to the Syrian regime, the middle class of certain towns, charismatic religious leaders, and tribes. Such dynamics, Bareesh argues, may also play a role in resisting the consolidation of regime control over Idlib, if or when it is retaken.

Opposition has developed differently in those parts of Syria under the control of the regime, which is employing every tool at its disposal to consolidate its power and survive. Sawsan Abou Zainedin and Hani Fakhani look at how reconstruction is being used to influence outcomes in these areas.

Using the construction of a new quarter in Damascus called Marota City over what had been the informal settlement of Basatin al-Razi as a case study, the authors outline the ways in which the regime is using reconstruction to reinforce its authoritarian rule. It has issued decrees facilitating the expropriation of informal settlements and private property, while its excessive procedural requirements have left thousands of evicted families caught in a corrupt bureaucratic quagmire as they try to secure alternate housing or lay claim to their property rights. With their limited means, former residents are resisting the project through state and social media, creating groups to express collective demands and share information. Syrians in the diaspora are also mobilizing to counter regime strategies. They have engaged with the international community on principles for just reconstruction, conducted spatial mappings to document property rights and violations, and formulated alternative housing options.

4

Parallel dynamics are also emerging in Homs, the focus of Jomana Qaddour's piece. Homs, once hailed by the anti-Assad opposition as the capital of the revolution, was the first governorate to face a military assault by government forces, and by May 2018 had fallen to the regime. The city today is deeply divided along three distinct lines—between those with and against the regime; between sects; and between Syria's main international backers, namely Russia and Iran. And as in its approach to Marota City, the regime is using the reconstruction of Homs to reward its constituencies and deny former opposition-held areas access to funding, or their displaced inhabitants a right of return. Sectarian tensions and the competing interests of Russia and Iran are fragmenting the city even further.

In this context of weary Homsis focused on their own survival, the prospect for peaceful contentious politics in which groups are able to make claims is very limited. More likely, Qaddour argues, Homs is a place of future conflict, one without a proper transitional justice program in place that engages with Homs's societal rifts and ensures some form of accountability.

In sum, the different sections show that the regime's instinct to survive at any cost closed off any possible opportunity for change. Yet resistance at various levels is not only possible, it is actually taking place. Despite all the challenges, contentious politics since the beginning of the country's uprising has made generations of Syrians aware of their political, socioeconomic, and cultural rights. And the experience of other countries shows that contentious politics can trigger long-lasting change and affect political systems and policy options.

While the possibility of a durable political settlement in Syria seems dim today, thousands of Syrians continue to work for a country that is more just. This comes as a considerably weakened regime is obliged to rely on a broad range of military and nonmilitary actors to sustain its control over recaptured territories. Yet in some areas such as Daraa, the birthplace of Syria's uprising, people are already back on the streets demanding change. The rivers of contention in Syria today still run wide and deep, and this will continue for the foreseeable future.

Maha Yahya is director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, where her research focuses on pluralism, political violence, and social justice, the challenges of citizenship, and the political and socioeconomic implications of the migration/ refugee crisis.

Issam Kayssi is a research assistant at the Carnegie Middle East Center, where he works on contentious politics, mutating states, cross-border conflicts, among other issues facing the region. He holds a master of arts degree in Middle Eastern studies from the American University of Beirut, where he studied at the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies (CAMES).

5

THE SYRIAN POLITICAL OPPOSITION'S PATH TO IRRELEVANCE

AMR ALSARRAJ AND PHILIP HOFFMAN

INTRODUCTION

From the outset of the Syrian uprising, the civil-nationalist opposition—the activists and politicians who had collectively won international recognition as an alternative to President Bashar al-Assad's regime—faced obstacles to becoming an effective actor inside Syria. It was unable to exert meaningful influence over the intricate and opaque network of civilian governance institutions that arose as the conflict progressed, and was physically separated from the armed factions that guaranteed security in areas of Syria outside government control.

While a range of political and military groups have opposed the Assad regime, members of the opposition's civil-nationalist wing share a more specific history. This opposition has its roots in the October 2005 Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change, signed by activists from across the political spectrum and demanding political reform. After the uprising began in 2011, many of the original signatories joined with the Muslim Brotherhood and other exiled political figures to form the Syrian National Council. The council and other groups later transformed themselves into the Istanbul-based National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, also known as the

For years, both Syrians and international actors have referred to the opposition's civil-nationalist wing as the "the Syrian opposition," showing its perceived importance.

Syrian National Coalition, whose governance arm is the Syrian Interim Government. Syria's political opposition also includes the Higher Negotiations Committee, an umbrella organization created at the urging of Saudi Arabia to unify Syrian political groups in preparation for United Nations–sponsored peace negotiations.

For years, both Syrians and international actors have referred to the opposition's civil-nationalist wing as the "the Syrian opposition," showing its perceived importance. Because it participated in a UN-approved peace plan for Syria and had its roots in a longer-term civil campaign against the Assad regime and in favor of reform, this opposition enjoyed a legitimacy that was not seriously questioned early on in the uprising. Yet Syria's escalating military conflict, humanitarian

crisis, and increasingly sectarian characteristics created dynamics that made both its civil and nationalist dimensions increasingly irrelevant, ultimately leading to the political opposition's complete marginalization.

THE CHALLENGES FACED BY SYRIA'S OPPOSITION

Throughout the course of the Syrian conflict, several factors helped to limit the civil-nationalist opposition's ability to behave as an effective political force. These encompassed matters related to the opposition itself, its choices and shortcomings, as well as those linked to the political environment in which it was operating and over which the opposition had less control. Among the former was that the civil-nationalist opposition never formulated clear strategic objectives and was unable to successfully address the challenges of exile. As for the latter, the opposition had to contend with a multiplicity of political actors in conflict with the Assad regime, including Islamist groups, while more generally struggling with the disparate agendas of its foreign backers.

Internal Challenges: Unclear Goals and the Tribulations of Exile

From the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the civil-nationalist opposition advocated for President Bashar al-Assad's removal from power. However, it lacked a detailed vision of a post-Assad Syria and an actionable plan to bring about change. This would represent a major deficiency, raising doubts about whether the opposition was a reliable substitute for the Syrian regime, with a clear sense of the new order that it sought to put in place.

Initially, the political opposition centered its efforts on implementing the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012, a six-point plan that the UN Security Council described as a framework for a political solution in Syria. However, the opposition's overall goals remained ambiguous, partly due to the stated objectives of the communiqué itself. The document called for a "transitional governing body with full executive powers, which shall be formed by mutual consent." Members of the political opposition saw this condition as granting them veto power over whether Assad could be part of any transitional authority,[14] further reinforcing their maximalist goal of complete regime change.

However, there was a downside to taking such an absolutist position on the Assad regime without credibly developing other options. The political opposition limited the impact it could have as a negotiating body by showing the regime that it had nothing to gain from negotiations. A former Dutch ambassador in the Middle East and author of a highly influential book on Syria, Nikolaos van Dam, echoed these thoughts, saying "there was no space for working with the regime" in the opposition's vocabulary.[15] By centering its demands on leadership changes and far-reaching reforms of Syria's military and security institutions, the opposition was implicitly asking its interlocutors on the Syrian government side to voluntarily surrender the foundations of their power in the state. Conversely, the state's refusal to grant the political opposition legitimacy led to unresolvable tensions that also undermined the negotiations as well. The opposition was also overoptimistic in its perception of international support, mistaking the moral justification of its cause for tangible political strength, while failing to fully recognize that "being right and getting it right are two different things."[16]

The opposition's lack of clarity in defining achievable political objectives was accompanied by another problem, this one also self-inflicted. In choosing to operate from outside of Syria, the constituent groups of the civil-nationalist opposition isolated themselves from the military actors inside the country who came to control the rapidly evolving dynamics of conflict. Moreover, by being perceived as far from the suffering of Syrians at home, the exiled opposition gradually faced a major problem of legitimacy. All this gave

the forces on the ground in Syria the upper hand in defining the approach to take with regard to the Assad regime, as well as in receiving foreign assistance.

Whether they were based in Istanbul in the case of the Syrian National Council, and later the Syrian National Coalition, in Riyadh in the case of the Higher Negotiations Committee, or in other opposition offices in Geneva, Vienna, and Cairo, representatives of the civil-nationalist groups were unable to significantly alter the course of the conflict or negotiations for a settlement. Indeed, the drawbacks of exile came to also negatively affect those who had initially opposed the Assad regime from within Syria and who were later co-opted by the civil-nationalist opposition outside the country. The political opposition would often absorb activists from inside Syria, hiring them to work in its institutions and removing them from the context in which they had operated. As a result, within months they had lost all their contacts on the ground, rendering them largely superfluous.[17]

More damaging is that all this took place at a time when armed factions and ad hoc local councils inside Syria began taking over security and civil administration in areas outside government authority. These new bodies established separate funding channels with international donors, reducing the civil-nationalist opposition's sway over events on the ground. This cycle soon became self-reinforcing. The funding secured by Syrian-based opposition groups, who already had doubts about the exiled opposition's credibility as a coordinating body, diverted resources away from the exiles, further diminishing the political opposition's power and coordination capabilities.

External Challenges: A Multiplicity of Actors and Foreign Agendas

Prior to 2011, the political opposition in Syria had been characterized by divisions, which the uprising only magnified. While the signatories of the Damascus Declaration, who spanned the ideological and sectarian

divides in Syria, had hoped for it to evolve into a separate political movement, many of the declaration's key figures were detained after the document's signing. Between 2006 and 2008, key signatories left Syria after internal disputes and state pressure prevented them from creating an entity that embodied the declaration's principles, leading to one of many intraopposition schisms.

After the start of the 2011 uprising this pattern persisted, as opposition groups advocated for different approaches toward the emerging conflict. In Damascus, opposition figures initially established the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC). The NCC differentiated itself from other opposition groups by rejecting the influence both of political organizations outside Syria and of foreign powers, adopting positions that other opposition members viewed as unacceptably accommodating toward the Syrian government. Signatories of the Damascus Declaration, led by veteran opposition leader Riad al-Turk, and the NCC, led by another opposition figure, Hassan Abdel Azim, struggled to agree on a common platform. According to Burhan Ghalioun, a Paris-based intellectual who would later lead the Syrian National Council, disagreements over leadership roles frustrated these attempts at collaboration.[18] While international pressure pushed the Syrian National Council and the NCC to sign a "National Covenant for a New Syria" in 2012, the political opposition failed to unite meaningfully. The disparity among the demands of its constituent groups, ranging from a transition away from Assad to more gradual reforms, prevented the emergence of a unified negotiating stance.

This vacuum created an opening for others to fill the void. The military escalation in Syria soon underscored the strength of newly formed armed Islamist factions, who quickly showed themselves to be better organized and more capable of large-scale coordination, mobilization, and recruitment than their non-Islamist counterparts. While members of the political opposition preoccupied themselves with discussing

The ambiguous approach taken by the political opposition toward Islamist armed factions and civilian bodies . . . proved detrimental to the opposition's overall ambitions.

unification efforts at international conferences, the Islamist factions assumed control of major population centers inside Syria and expanded their influence over civilian governance. Islamist entities, such as the Public Service Administration put in place by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a main Islamist faction in Idlib Governorate, assumed coordinating roles among local councils in areas outside government control. These developments placed the civil-nationalist opposition in a quandary. While Western donors regarded Islamist factions and civil coordinating bodies as toxic and moved to sanction the most visible ones, many non-Islamist opposition figures believed that tactical alliances with such groups were the only way of confronting the Assad regime effectively.

The ambiguous approach taken by the political opposition toward Islamist armed factions and civilian bodies—initially defending them from international criticism while privately maintaining a skeptical distance—proved detrimental to the opposition's overall ambitions. As the Islamist groups assumed greater power over lucrative checkpoints, courts, and aid distribution channels that formed the basis of an informal power structure in opposition-controlled areas, the civil-nationalist opposition was nearly powerless to assert itself as the administrative alternative to the Assad regime that it had originally intended to be.

This weakness was exacerbated by an inconsistent international approach toward the conflict. The absence of a unified, cohesive response from outside powers confused the civil-nationalist opposition and complicated its efforts to work on achieving a common goal. For example, although Robert Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria in 2010–2014, made clear to opposition figures that the United States would not commit to military action, he and other international envoys showed their support for the growing protests in the uprising's early days. They joined demonstrations, encouraging people to participate despite escalating violence from the Syrian government. These actions came with seemingly impactful acts of international support. In August 2011, governments gathered together in the international Friends of Syria group called for Bashar al-Assad's removal and recognized the Syrian National Council as "the legitimate representative of all Syrians."

Despite these displays of pro-opposition sentiment, Western governments remained divided over the usefulness of pursuing this course. For example, key figures in then U.S. president Barack Obama's administration, such as then secretary of state Hillary Clinton and director of the Central Intelligence Agency David Petraeus, favored a rapid escalation of support to armed opposition factions. In summer 2012, their plan to arm the Syrian opposition found backing from the Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. However, Obama rejected the plan and high-level White House officials argued for a more reserved approach, expressing skepticism about the Syrian opposition's long-term prospects.

Such divergent approaches had the effect of creating false expectations in the opposition. Symbolically meaningful gestures were viewed as more significant than they really were,[19] as the opposition itself erred in allowing an excess of wishful thinking to cloud an understanding of its real power.

Regional and international backers of the political opposition compounded their absence of clarity by imposing conflicting visions of what the opposition's future should be. Western powers largely envisioned a cross-sectarian, nominally liberal political body that would build a consensus around the outlines of

a postwar transition. Yet Western diplomats remained unable to achieve this, particularly when the opposition itself was isolated from developments inside Syria and hard-pressed to define a unified negotiating stance. Pro-opposition countries in the Middle East, however, pursued a more maximalist agenda that created a wider tent under which anti-Assad forces could gather. The openly sectarian and extremist armed groups that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar supported at various times only increased the West's reticence to associate itself with the opposition's in-country centers of power, furthering the contradictions that plagued the political opposition's relationship with its international backers.

Ultimately, the civil-nationalist opposition could isolate three broader failings that prevented it from asserting itself as an effectual actor. One was its organizational fragmentation. By failing to present a clear, unified, and implementable set of demands, the opposition limited its own impact. Even as its political bodies issued statements emphasizing the importance of unity, such gestures rarely translated into tangible efforts to integrate its constituent parts administratively. This flaw only reflected, and reinforced, the opposition's unclear, indeed conflicting, goals about the nature of a post-Assad Syria.

A second drawback was that the civil-nationalist opposition overestimated its reach, presuming that gestures of symbolic or rhetorical backing by foreign actors were tantamount to having influence inside Syria, which was not the case. Though regional and global calls of support for the opposition came often in the conflict's early years, the armed factions controlling territory inside Syria paid little attention to either the political opposition's international status or its attempts to have a say in developments within the country. When the armed opposition's fortunes began waning in 2016, the bodies nominally recognized as sovereign over all anti-government forces in Syria had no practical tools, beyond rhetoric, through which to contest the Syrian government's advances.

A third failing is that from early on in the conflict, both the civil-nationalist opposition and its foreign backers failed to openly recognize the outsized influence of armed Islamist factions. The superior organization of these factions allowed them to seize Syrian territory, but the widespread unwillingness of the civil-nationalist opposition to recognize the true reach of these groups left it with no means or structures to seriously counter Islamist forces once they became a part of the conflict. Such impotence would have far-reaching consequences, since by being so patently unable to oppose these groups, let alone assert meaningful influence over them, the civil-nationalist opposition would itself lose the backing of foreign powers repelled by the Islamists' behavior.

THE CIVIL-NATIONALIST OPPOSITION MOVING FORWARD

The civil-nationalist opposition finds itself trapped in an obsolete framework for ending the Syrian conflict. International mediators, still stuck in a mindset that took form in 2011 and 2012, have been unable to advance a settlement process that includes the military actors most responsible for events in Syria. This contradiction—a political framework for resolving a conflict defined by armed combatants—is rooted in the early marginalization of the civil-nationalist opposition, but still informs efforts aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict.

Though anti-government armed factions and opposition governance bodies inside Syria, with the exception of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, have taken significant steps toward unity since 2017, they have done so with near-exclusive Turkish financial backing. Turkey, which has been engaged in a deconfliction process with Russia and Iran, has compelled the political opposition to blunt its original objective of regime change. In the ongoing Syrian government offensive against remaining opposition forces in Idlib Governorate, however, Turkey has struggled to enforce even a ceasefire line,

scrambling to build new military positions to deter Syrian government forces while armed opposition factions retreat from a rapidly shrinking territory.

Throughout this most recent phase in the Syrian conflict, the civil-nationalist opposition has remained largely out of view, cut off from the groups engaged in the fighting and unable to coordinate the massive amounts of humanitarian aid needed to sustain the civilian population trapped in Idlib. Whether Idlib remains a de facto Turkish protectorate in the near future or quickly falls to government forces, the political opposition faces two unappealing choices: it can either remain committed to the framework of a negotiated resolution of the conflict that even backers of such an outcome have tacitly abandoned; or it can retreat from its original regime change goals to advocate for incremental reforms. The lack of options beyond these two illustrate the extent to which the political opposition's ability to impose itself as an indispensable actor in the Syrian conflict is limited.

Amr Alsarraj is a researcher and analyst specializing in Syria and the Middle East. He has contributed to the strategic design of U.S.-funded programming in Syria, as well as in the Syrian Transition Roadmap. He has also participated in the UN-supported Geneva consultations and the Civil Society Support Room.

Philip Hoffman is a PhD student in history at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has previously worked on humanitarian aid projects in Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.

HOW SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY LOST ITS INDEPENDENCE IN A WAR OF CONFLICTING AGENDAS

ASSAAD AL ACHI

INTRODUCTION

The 2011 uprising against the Syrian regime and the country's descent into a civil war led to a relatively unknown phenomenon in Syria. Following nearly half a century of authoritarian rule by the Assad family and a multitude of secret services, numerous Syrian political, military, and civil actors were given the space to challenge the state.

In light of this, Syrian civil society groups took on a major role in changing the status quo. By advocating a different vision for Syria and eventually assuming duties in opposition-held territories usually reserved for the state, such as service provision, they were able to present themselves as independent alternatives to the rule Syria had experienced under the Baath Party.

However, as the conflict forced the opposition to seek outside support against the Assad regime and to sustain rebel-held territories, it was gradually co-opted by regional and international actors. This occurred first on the military and political sides of the opposition while civil society activists remained independent

the longest. However, as these activists gradually became service providers through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) financed by foreign countries, they became implementers of those countries' agendas and lost their agency. As a result, civil society is in a much weaker state than during the early period of the uprising and, importantly, is no longer seen by many as an embodiment of a unified Syrian national identity.

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Social movements demanding civil liberties emerged as the vanguard of the uprising in March 2011. Given how strongly oppressed civil society was before 2011, it was not surprising that numerous groups and activists found in the uprising a chance to exercise their long-awaited right to shape Syria's future. However, the Syrian government's brutal crackdown on protests during 2011 led to the transformation of a mostly peaceful opposition movement into an armed one. As

Hundreds of networks, associations, and organizations, some with loose structures, appeared across Syria during the initial phase of the uprising. While some were led by veteran dissident activists, the majority were established by young activists who did not possess any previous associational or organizational experience.

the uprising descended into war, efforts by civil society groups took a back seat to the political and military facets of the opposition's campaign, which rapidly fell under foreign influence.

Hundreds of networks, associations, and organizations, some with loose structures, appeared across Syria during the initial phase of the uprising. While some were led by veteran dissident activists, the majority were established by young activists who did not possess any previous associational or organizational experience. Early on, the groups mainly focused on organizing the protest movement and trying to draw international attention to what was happening inside Syria.

As the contentious movement solidified during the first four months of the uprising, it manifested itself more and more through three main groupings: the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), led by Razan Zaitouneh and Mazen Darwish; the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), led by Suhair Atassi and Nidal Darwish; and the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution (SCSR), led by Imaddedine Rashid and Wassel al-Shimali. Members of these three groups either joined or indirectly supported the first unifying structure of the Syrian opposition: the now-defunct Syrian National Council (SNC).

The cases of the SRGC and SCSR demonstrate the short-lived independence of the armed opposition in Syria. In 2012, the SRGC supported the first armed opposition group in Syria, the Farouq Brigade, which mainly operated in the city of Homs and its suburbs. The SRGC then threw its support behind other local, armed factions, which in the early stages of the conflict aimed to protect areas affiliated with the opposition against the Syrian military. For its part, the SCSR relied mainly on Syrian army defectors to establish military councils across Syria, with Muti al-Butain coordinating the SCSR's military efforts. Among the most prominent of these were the Daraa Governorate Military Council and the Damascus Governorate Military Council.

Both the SRGC and SCSR realized in 2012 that they needed foreign sponsors to continue their military efforts.[20] Ammunition was running low, weapons were increasingly deficient or malfunctioning, medical bills started increasing, and cash donations from local communities were not enough to finance military purchases. In November 2012, the SRGC's military coordinator Nidal Darwish moved to Doha to represent the SRGC in the formation of the Syrian Opposition Coalition and to solicit Qatari support for the Farouq Brigade and other local factions operating in Idlib and Hama Governorates. Due to its connections with former Syrian army personnel who defected with their weapons and ammunition, the SCSR was in a slightly better position to handle the shortages. Butain had joined the SNC in December 2011 and became a member of the group's Executive Office. However, by 2013 the SCSR was also struggling to raise enough funds via the SNC to sustain its military activities. This led it to contact foreign sponsors—mainly Salafi networks in the Gulf—to fill the funding gap.

Meanwhile, the international community backing the opposition—most notably the United States, France, Turkey, and Gulf countries—tried to organize military support for the rebels, particularly after their takeover of half of the city of Aleppo in July 2012. Two main operations rooms were established to

coordinate military efforts: the Müsterek Operasyon Merkezi, or joint operations center, based in Turkey, was responsible for northern Syria while the Military Operations Center, based in Jordan, handled southern Syria. The Daraa Military Council would go on to form a component of the Southern Front, an alliance of rebel groups operating in Daraa, Suweida, and Quneitra Governorates.

Despite backing from Western countries, the trend of the armed opposition groups toward adopting Islamist ideologies became increasingly visible. As they competed for funding, brigades rebranded themselves with Islamic references more ideologically in line with sponsors from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. This empowered more militant Islamist factions in the opposition at the expense of their less dogmatic counterparts. As a case in point, the Damascus Governorate Military Council was slowly absorbed over time by predominantly Islamist groups operating around the capital such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham.

The political wing of the opposition movement resisted aligning directly with international backers a bit longer than the military opposition—mainly due to its diversified source of funds and smaller overall budget—but it too eventually became influenced by foreign powers. The SNC, the initial torchbearer for the opposition, began to lose influence with the international community after adopting maximalist positions and rejecting the June 2012 Geneva 1 Communique, the result of a UN-backed conference that advocated for the formation of a transitional government in Syria. This led to a decrease in funding from key opposition backers Saudi Arabia and the UAE.[21] The SNC was later eclipsed by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which subsequently became known as the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC).

It soon became evident that the SOC was also subject to international backing and influence. The United States, the United Kingdom, France, most Gulf countries, and dozens of other countries recognized the SOC as the sole and legitimate representative of the Syrian people in December 2012 at the fourth Friends of the Syrian People conference in Marrakesh, and some provided SOC representative offices with foreign mission status. Although the diversity of the SOC's membership ensured some form of independence earlier on, the coalition soon became factionalized, with various members affiliated with different countries supporting the political opposition. These factions became representatives of these backers' diverging interests and agendas. At SOC general assemblies, international envoys would consult with their proxies on the sidelines and use them to affect the outcomes of the meetings. Major decisions within the SOC, such as whether to attend or boycott negotiations, were conceded to foreign powers.

The international dimension within the Syrian political opposition was further enshrined in the Riyadh 1 (December 2015) and Riyadh 2 (November 2017) conferences. These gatherings sought to unify the Syrian opposition and increase its inclusivity by adding independents and representatives from armed groups and disparate opposition platforms to the SOC. Riyadh 1 also saw the formation of the Higher Negotiation Committee, which was intended to serve as the principal negotiator with the Syrian regime during peace talks. However, the decision to bring in opposition groups based in Cairo and Moscow—both created to represent the agendas of their respective backers—served to dilute Syrian agency and independence further.

Global and regional powers would become the ultimate decisionmakers in Syria at the expense of the Syrian opposition. The conflict had drawn interventions from many countries and non-state actors in terms of funding and material support on both the government and opposition side. However, it was Russia's military intervention in the country on behalf of the Assad regime in September 2015 that enshrined this trend. As Moscow assumed a primary decisionmaking role on

the government side, rival powers began to negotiate on behalf of the Syrian opposition. The culmination of this international co-optation of the opposition was seen at the Astana (January 2017) and Sochi (February 2018) conferences where Turkey, Iran, and Russia became guarantors of local "ceasefires." These countries, with the help of the UN, also nominated or vetoed members for the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which was formed in September 2019 and included representatives of both the opposition and the Syrian government.

FROM ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION TO NGOS

During the uprising, civil society initially focused on promoting civil and human rights in opposition-held areas as well as stepping in for the absent Syrian government to ensure proper service delivery. However, as events evolved into a mainly military contest, the LCCs avoided entering the fray of armed conflict and high-level opposition politics, in contrast to the SRGC and the SCSR. Thus, civil society initially demonstrated more resilience to outside intervention and influence. However, its independence gradually was put into doubt as activists and networks became service providers through NGOs financed by outside countries. This reliance eventually led them to become implementers of their funders' agendas.

Early in the conflict, as Syria fragmented into government- and rebel-held territories, Syrian civil society undertook initiatives aimed at promoting human rights and social justice. These ranged from documenting human rights violations to running workshops on and spreading the ideals of peacebuilding and transitional justice. Syrian human rights organizations—such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the Violation Documentation Center, and the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center—would later partner with the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Commission of Inquiry

on Syria, and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism on Syria in an effort to reveal violations committed during the conflict and hold the perpetrators to account. Meanwhile, the work of organizations focusing on female empowerment led to women's centers multiplying across Syria. These allowed for women to be better informed, provisioned, and engaged in society. Some women from these centers eventually took public roles in different forms of local governance. For example, the head of the women's center in Hass, Idlib Governorate, became a member of the town's local council.

Civil society organizations also worked with local administrative councils and other quasi-governmental structures to provide educational, health, and other public services. By promoting resilience within the population, the LCCs became key players in early stabilization and recovery projects. Until mid-2012, the LCCs were either self-funded or sponsored financially by private citizens in Syria. Other fundraising avenues for these relief efforts included local Islamic charities, which would collect money at mosques during Friday prayers.

The seeds of civil society's co-option by international actors came as international donor money started flowing to relief efforts in conjunction with external support for the opposition military effort. In summer 2012, the Qatari government raised $350 million domestically for its We Are All Syria (*Kuluna al-Sham)* campaign. The SRGC, SCSR, and LCCs all tried to get a slice of the cake, though the latter backed off at the last minute to avoid politicizing aid. During this period, the SRGC and the Syrian Forum, a fund formed in support of the uprising by Syrian businessmen, led by Mustafa Sabbagh, became local implementers of the distribution of Qatari aid inside Syria.

Meanwhile, the militarization of the uprising in 2012 added urgency to relief and humanitarian issues and challenged civil society's foundational mission of promoting justice and freedom. As Syria's military

opposition grew more fragmented, chaotic, and overtaken by extremism, civil society found it difficult to continue working on a vision of promoting a future inclusive democratic state. In response to the shrinking space for public advocacy, as well as the increasingly dire humanitarian situation, the LCCs increasingly focused their efforts on nonpolitical service provision.

The trend of activists forming or joining NGOs was reinforced by the international donor community. As countries increasingly failed to provide the promised institutional support to the Syrian Opposition Coalition, many governments decided instead to focus on humanitarian relief. Often, countries looked for local implementation partners and found them in civil society initiatives and organizations. As useful as these efforts had doubtlessly been for many areas during some of the most difficult phases of the conflict, they served to reinforce the charitable and humanitarian orientation of civil society organizations away from their initial role as community mobilizers and leaders of the opposition movement.

Local Syrian NGOs became public service providers for nearly everything the government had provided in the prewar period. This included health, education, and food distribution, as well as water, sanitation, hygiene, and shelter for the displaced. Medical NGOs such as the Syrian American Medical Society and the French Union des Organisations de Secours et Soins Médicaux established and ran hospitals and regulated the health system. Other NGOs such as the U.S.-based Big Heart Foundation or the Qatari-backed Ihsan for Relief and Development—part of the Syrian Forum—sought to ensure food security by building and operating bakeries. A sprawling support structure for Syrian and international NGOs developed in neighboring Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon to support operations. These organizations also became the main employers in areas outside the control of the regime and were thus direct contributors to sustaining local livelihoods.[22]

As countries increasingly failed to provide the promised institutional support to the Syrian Opposition Coalition, many governments decided instead to focus on humanitarian relief.

The reliance of Syrian NGOs on foreign donors to finance operations gave outside countries increased influence over the policies adopted. Role confusion and the eagerness of local service providers did not allow for local councils to fully impose their authority over governance. This represented a challenge to the power and legitimacy of local political and military authorities and led to conflict between them and NGOs. Indeed, NGOs were almost always better funded and more stable than local councils. Moreover, as direct recipients and distributors of aid, NGOs became power players at the local level. In the education sector, for example, donors dealt directly with community-based organizations managing schools, which eroded the legitimacy of education directorates formed by opposition authorities and limited their ability to impose educational standards and regulations.

Given the lack of access on the ground for international organizations, Syrian NGOs became conduits for competing local agendas. The formation of aid mafias that benefited from the flow of humanitarian aid funds served to alienate certain local communities. Community aid provision became increasingly linked to perceived loyalty to the agendas of these aid mafias, which were mainly formed by influential local families and variously driven by ideology, politics, or greed. For instance, groups mainly funded by Gulf countries or foundations had a more Islamist agenda, whereas NGOs primarily funded by Western countries or foundations had a more secular mission. Gulf-backed organizations began to include material on Islamic

teachings and references as part of food baskets while groups with more secular agendas generally spread their ideals through indirect communication campaigns such as graffiti work. Thus, Syrian NGOs underwent clear and undeniable politicization stemming from the source and agendas attached to their funding.

CONCLUSION

Civil society's primary role should be advocating for and upholding the highest adherence to human rights. This mission is particularly important during conflict, as commitment to these ideals can help to prevent a complete disintegration of the social fabric. In the Syrian context, however, the shift of focus toward humanitarian aid and service delivery led to the erosion of civil society's ability to pursue long-term impact in local communities. This is perhaps unsurprising given the difficulty in mobilizing people on issues such as democracy, good governance, and human rights while they lack basic necessities such as water, food, shelter, and security. Financial support for such efforts also dwindled as armed groups in large swathes of Syrian territory became more radicalized.

As activists became NGO employees, they became less visible and outspoken, and thus communities lost their reference points within the civil society movement. The rise of new leaders within civil society was negatively impacted by a lack of mentors, who either are no longer present in the country or have been lured to the more lucrative NGO business. Donor agendas have also served to entrench sectarian and ethnic divisions while the politicization of aid has contributed to the emergence of local grievances and enshrined a culture of dependency. Meanwhile, civil society's previous ability to build bridges and linkages across communities has dissipated in tandem with Syrian agency.

As the Assad regime consolidates its power and territorial control, it is likely that Syrian civil society will continue to wane in influence. This trend can only be reversed by a concerted, sustained, and institutionalized effort at the grassroots level to redefine civil society and refocus its role on Syrian-led priorities.

Assaad Al Achi is a Syrian economist and civil society activist. He currently serves as the executive director of Baytna Syria, a Syrian civil society support organization.

HOW AND WHY IDLIB DEFIED ITS JIHADI OVERLORDS

MANHAL BAREESH

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a Salafi-jihadi group led by Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate, has come to occupy a prominent position in northwestern Idlib Governorate. Idlib is the country's last rebel-held bastion of any significance, although the Syrian regime began retaking large areas of the governorate toward the end of 2019. Idlib is populated by some 3 million people, half of whom are internally displaced, with HTS the strongest faction there. Even before the Syrian regime and its allies retook much of Idlib in a recent ground assault, they played up its association with hardline Islamists to justify a brutal air campaign against it. Much of the world accepted the regime's assessment and acquiesced in its behavior, as evidenced by the inaction over large-scale air strikes on Idlib by the Syrian and Russian air forces, which resulted in numerous civilian casualties. This paved the way for the regime's largely successful ground offensive.

Yet, insofar as the influence of hardline Islamists was concerned, the situation on the ground in Idlib and beyond was a good deal more complicated than it appeared. For one thing, HTS failed to penetrate major segments of society due to their functioning as closed groups. Moreover, locals translated their opposition to

HTS, particularly its monopolistic economic practices and embodiment of a harsh strain of Islam, into action. In 2017 and 2018, the towns of Saraqeb, Maarat al-Numan, and Atareb held elections for local councils in open defiance of HTS, which considers such practices to be un-Islamic. Residents of these towns as well as those of Sarmada, Kafr Takharim, and Ariha also staged demonstrations in which they openly condemned HTS and called for its removal. Fearful of further eroding its standing, HTS increasingly avoided direct confrontation with locals.

HOW IDLIB JIHADIS LOST THEIR CACHET

With the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and through its transformation into an armed conflict, many people in northern Syria were sympathetic to armed Islamist groups fighting the regime. A number of these groups would in time fall under the umbrella of Jabhat al-Nusra, which from 2012 to mid-2013 provided much-needed services as a means of ingratiating itself with the population. Jabhat al-Nusra operated bakeries, distributed heating fuel, and set up *sharia* courts to resolve disputes. Its cadres also established a network of indoctrination centers to spread its ideology.

The honeymoon did not last long. In addition to repeated instances of theft, looting, kidnapping, and killing of civilians by Jabhat al-Nusra, the group engaged in battles—widely seen as counterproductive—with anti-regime Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions. In late 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra declared itself to be the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda. Such actions alienated many ordinary Syrian Sunnis from the Salafi jihadism embodied by Jabhat al-Nusra and similar groups. This mood was palpable even when the self-proclaimed Islamic State took over Idlib (it would be expelled from the governorate in 2014), and well before HTS came into existence.

In early 2017, Jabhat al-Nusra merged with four Islamist rebel groups to create HTS. Early in 2019, HTS seized control of Idlib and its environs following battles with a coalition of rebel factions known as the National Front for Liberation as well as with one of the Islamist groups—the Noureddine al-Zinki Brigades—that had originally joined with Jabhat al-Nusra to create HTS but later broke away. Once it had seized control, HTS proceeded to institute a harsh form of rule in the areas under its control. The group clamped down on independent merchants in favor of those whose allegiance it had secured, and it levied high taxes on farmers, traders, and other professionals. It raised the price of basic services such as water, electricity, and telephone communications and confiscated the property of Christians who had fled the city of Idlib. By all accounts, HTS attempted to dominate and profit from all aspects of economic life in the region.

Predictably, such measures stoked disaffection, even more so given the residents' already negative experiences with Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. This resentment manifested itself in the local elections held in defiance of HTS in 2017 and 2018, as well as in demonstrations against the group in various parts of Idlib. For example, in September 2019, after a period of relative quiet, demonstrations flared in the towns of Saraqeb, Maarat al-Numan, Atareb, and Sarmada. More recently, protests also erupted in Kafr Takharim and Ariha. HTS was in nominal control of all these

towns yet failed to cow the population or even deter people from publicly denouncing the group.

Detractors of HTS in these localities did not restrict themselves to criticizing the group for its monopolistic practices, financial corruption, and clampdown on freedoms. They even brought up the explosive matter of its dealings with the regime. In what struck many outside observers of the Syrian conflict as counterintuitive, HTS and the regime maintained trading links through their respective economic networks. On one occasion, protesters even publicly criticized HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, accusing him of effectively handing over northern Hama Governorate to regime forces by mounting insufficient resistance there.

Syrians who spent years silently enduring oppression at the hands of HTS, in large part because they saw it as constituting their main defense against the regime, began to realize that HTS was unable to prevent the continued encroachment on Idlib by regime forces. To make matters worse, the group's salient role in the administration of the governorate provided the regime (and its Russian backer) with a pretext for future military campaigns, including a dreaded all-out assault to recapture the governorate. Indeed, the regime repeatedly expressed its keenness to launch an offensive through which it would retake this pocket of opposition.

As for HTS, it found itself in a bind. Rising opposition to its rule appeared to necessitate a crackdown on its part. However, the Syrian regime's attempts to bring to heel the towns and villages of Idlib, which embraced the uprising starting in 2011, had backfired in that opposition grew even more fervent. Given already simmering tensions, it was more than likely that a similarly repressive effort on the part of HTS would lead to the same outcome. Nevertheless, granting the opposition leeway, as HTS took to doing, could embolden it and cause it to increase its activity. HTS was wary of going the way of the Islamic State, which was expelled from Idlib in 2014. This dilemma for

HTS underlined a broader reality in Idlib. Time and again, the population proved able to resist the jihadis' influence. As such, in considering its options, HTS was obliged to take into account local society's ability to translate its distaste for the group into active opposition.

REASONS FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OPPOSITION TO HTS

While the inhabitants of Idlib showed great courage in standing up to HTS, the governorate's complex social structures and networks are what enabled them to prevent the group from making significant inroads into their society. These structures and networks, which proved cohesive enough to resist penetration by the militant group, included political parties with a history of opposition to the Syrian regime, the socioeconomic makeup of certain towns and the strength of their middle class, the pull of a regional movement with a charismatic religious leader, and even tribal politics. Together, they played a decisive role in thwarting HTS's attempts to embed itself in Idlib.

Political engagement served as one of the notable barriers to HTS influence. Locals with a history of political activity, much of it clandestine owing to the nature of Baath Party rule under the Assad regimes, made use of what they knew about operating in secrecy and staying one step ahead of those in power. The impact of long-running political engagement was characteristic of the relatively prosperous town of Saraqeb, for instance, a hotbed of resistance to HTS rule where residents had joined a multitude of political parties since the 1950s. These ranged from various communist organizations—the Communist Party–Political Bureau, the Communist Action League, the Syrian Communist Party's Youssef Faisal wing—to the Muslim Brotherhood. The people of Saraqeb also enthusiastically supported the Damascus Declaration, an opposition coalition named for a document of the same name that opposition figures signed in 2005 calling for reform in Syria.

Not surprisingly, while the politically active incurred the wrath of the authorities, they also learned how to sustain underground information networks, organize low-key civil disobedience campaigns, and stymie intelligence-gathering efforts by security agencies.

Not surprisingly, while the politically active incurred the wrath of the authorities, they also learned how to sustain underground information networks, organize low-key civil disobedience campaigns, and stymie intelligence-gathering efforts by security agencies. Saraqeb's residents employed these same skills against the jihadis. When able, they also brought their opposition out into the open, as with the establishment of a local governing council that for years prevented Jabhat al-Nusra from gaining a foothold in the town. Later, the council successfully resisted attempts by HTS at encroachment until the group seized control of Idlib and its surrounding areas by force.

Another barrier to the advance of HTS in Idlib was class identity and solidarity. The middle class in the governorate resisted allowing HTS, whose ranks were filled with working class, poor, and conservative young men, to gain authority over it. Despite enthusiastically supporting the Syrian uprising almost from the very beginning, most middle-class families in Idlib drew the line when it came to throwing their weight behind HTS and similar groups. After carving out its area of control in the governorate, HTS attempted to convince prominent members of Idlib's middle class to join a salvation government it had established. The offer was largely rebuffed. Many of the governorate's well-known families then progressed from boycotting HTS-sponsored initiatives to agitating against the group directly. This trend was particularly noticeable in the

towns of Atareb, Sarmada, and Hazanu. The Akkoush, Ubaid, and Fajj families took the lead in organizing popular resistance to HTS in Atareb. In Sarmada, the Sheikh family played a similar role, while in Hazanu the Zayn, Saleh, Zukkur, Hablas, and Khatib families were at the forefront of the struggle.[23]

HTS generally tried to avoid antagonizing Idlib's middle class. The reason for such diffidence had more to do with a recognition of its economic clout than anything else. The middle class in Idlib enjoyed a high degree of self-sufficiency, thanks in large part to its long-standing role in operating a black market economy that ran parallel to the state-run economy. As a result, it was less susceptible to the financial rewards that HTS offered the poor and disadvantaged in return for their loyalty. For its part, HTS was more interested in penetrating this class than in fighting it. A confrontation could have led to the flight of the middle class and consequently the collapse of the local economy.

Intra-group solidarity of a different sort was apparent on the tribal scene and also militated against HTS's attempts to tighten its grip on Idlib. Although tribal affiliations are relatively weak in Idlib and northwest Syria as a whole, particularly when compared to the northeastern part of the country, they still galvanize a sector of the population. The Muwali tribe is the most cohesive of the tribes in the region. HTS tried unsuccessfully to win over its leadership,[24] which is drawn from a single family and based in the village of Qatrah. The group then sought to fragment the Muwalis by both backing member clans that have long dreamed of unseating the traditional leadership and intimidating weaker clans into submission. This strategy met with limited success in areas other than the tribal stronghold of Qatrah. However, HTS failed to isolate the bulk of the tribe, let alone dislodge the leadership. For all its use of violence against some of the Muwali clans—including a mass killing in Abu Dali following a dispute with a tribal leader with whom it had formerly been allied and a murder and kidnap operation targeting two members of the Siyad branch

of the tribe in Barisah—HTS refrained from launching a military offensive against Qatrah. In all likelihood this was because it had learned a lesson from the experience of Jabhat al-Nusra, whose initially violent approach to the Muwalis prompted, among other responses, a warning by the tribe that took the form of a quasi-military display in 2014.

Opposition to HTS also emerged from former members of, or sympathizers with, the Fudoul Alliance. This was a short-lived homegrown coalition of armed Islamist-leaning factions that expelled the Islamic State from Idlib in 2014. The Fudoul Alliance was led by Sheikh Salah Hablas, a charismatic Muslim religious figure who wielded much influence in northern Idlib and the adjoining area of western Aleppo Governorate. Hablas' family had long opposed the Syrian regime. One of his brothers died in the notorious Palmyra Prison, while another was released after more than twenty years of incarceration. Hablas played a key role in organizing demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience against the regime shortly after the uprising broke out in 2011. As such, he was well-suited to lead a movement focused on combating jihadi groups.

Following Hablas's establishment of the Fudoul Alliance and his constant agitation against the Islamic State, the latter attempted to assassinate him in late 2013. Hablas was critically wounded and withdrew from politics in order to convalesce. The Fudoul Alliance proceeded to launch an all-out military campaign against the Islamic State in early 2014 and succeeded in expelling it from Idlib later that year. With the Islamic State out of the picture and Hablas still recovering from his injuries, the Fudoul Alliance fell apart some months later.

However, when locals held demonstrations early this year denouncing attacks by HTS against other armed opposition groups, Hablas returned to the political scene. His reemergence infused people with confidence.[25] For many in Idlib, the legacy of the Fudoul Alliance is that it reinforced a conviction that interlopers such as the Islamic State and HTS, however militarized

and ruthless, are not invincible. This encouraged them to take an activist approach to opposing HTS, one characterized by demonstrations, civil disobedience, and occasional acts of sabotage. Furthermore, rumors swirled among locals that, in addition to organizing demonstrations, Hablas would either revive the Fudoul Alliance or create a new military coalition.[26] This would allow him to launch an offensive against HTS, much as he did against the Islamic State.

AN UNTENABLE SITUATION

From the moment it captured Idlib in early 2019, HTS found itself in a fraught position. It clearly wanted to cement its control over the governorate but feared further alienating an already restive population. At the same time, the opposition was hardly poised to oust the group from Idlib. If anything, a stalemate took effect. Such a development granted both HTS and the opposition breathing space. However, the Syrian regime, backed by Russia, considered this state of affairs less than satisfactory, as it wanted to reclaim control over the country in its entirety.

In order to maintain its very existence, but also to avert a humanitarian disaster, the opposition sought to forestall a regime offensive. For the opposition, the importance of expelling HTS was therefore twofold. Not only would such a step have removed from Idlib a group most locals viewed as repressive and exploitative, it would also have deprived the regime of its major justification for an all-out military attack on the governorate. Moreover, the population's loss of trust in the willingness of HTS to fight the regime meant that it no longer viewed the group as a deterrent to such attacks.

The problem, insofar as those opposed to HTS were concerned, was that the social networks in Idlib lacked the ability to expel HTS from the area. With a reconstitution of the Fudoul Alliance or the creation of a similar coalition not yet in sight, this made all

the difference. Though some networks, such as the Muwalis, were armed, their ability to go on the offensive was limited; correspondingly, their posture remained defensive. Frustrating HTS's attempts to integrate itself into the local milieu constituted the extent of what the different elements of Idlib society could achieve on their own.

The stalemate between HTS and the opposition has been broken by the Syrian regime—not in favor of one or the other, but at the expense of both. When the regime, backed by Russia, launched its ground offensive toward the end of 2019, it steadily overcame armed resistance, displaced nearly one million civilians, and upended the local HTS-versus-opposition equation. The struggle between HTS and civil society has become largely moot. Despite the intervention of Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and the Turkish military itself to halt its advance, the regime by March 2020 controlled at least half the governorate and may succeed in retaking more territory if that month's ceasefire fails to hold. Yet the political fallout is far from clear. Time will tell whether the various social structures and networks described here succeed in blocking the regime's attempts not only to subdue Idlib, but to penetrate its society.

Manhal Bareesh is a Syrian journalist and researcher within the framework of the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project, part of the Middle East Directions Program in the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence. He focuses on the local and regional dynamics of the Syrian crisis, working extensively on military mapping, armed groups, local councils, and civil management in northwest Syria.

SYRIA'S RECONSTRUCTION BETWEEN DISCRIMINATORY IMPLEMENTATION AND CIRCUMSCRIBED RESISTANCE

SAWSAN ABOU ZAINEDIN AND HANI FAKHANI

INTRODUCTION

Despite ongoing fighting in Syria, the Assad regime says it has embarked on reconstruction. In 2012 the government issued Decree No. 66, providing the legal foundation for developing areas of unauthorized housing and informal settlements—those in which properties have not been registered but may have been passed on for generations. In October 2018, the government issued Law No. 10, which expanded Decree No. 66 beyond informal areas and allowed towns and cities to earmark zones for development and reconstruction. Marota City, a pilot project in Damascus under Decree No. 66, is the blueprint for future projects under Law No. 10 and ground zero for the regime-led reconstruction process.

Marota City is an urban development project being built over the informal settlement of Basatin al-Razi in western Damascus. Some 50,000 residents of Basatin al-Razi have lost their homes because of Marota City. However, the project's implementation is floundering. State institutions have imposed excessive requirements that are hindering progress. Thousands of families have been evicted and are lost in a corrupt bureaucratic quagmire while trying to secure a roof over their heads and claim their property rights.

The [Marota City] project underlines a broader truth about Syria's reconstruction framework, namely that it will not rebuild Syria or stimulate recovery.

Marota City is illustrative of the problems likely to surround reconstruction under Decree No. 66 and Law No. 10. The project underlines a broader truth about Syria's reconstruction framework, namely that it will not rebuild Syria or stimulate recovery. It is mainly a politically motivated gentrification process that, by transforming the socioeconomic landscape through a reconfiguration of urban space, aims to consolidate the regime's authoritarian control.

A DISCRIMINATORY FRAMEWORK AND STUMBLING IMPLEMENTATION

Marota City faces many complications. These include restrictions on residents' claiming their property rights, delays in paying compensation, evaluations of

property that have disadvantaged shareholders, and a reconstruction approach favoring regime-connected capitalists. The state has allowed few effective means of addressing these shortcomings, though resistance to the project is visible.

Restrictions on Claiming Property Rights

In preparing for Marota City, the authorities imposed conditions making it very difficult for residents of Basatin al-Razi to lay claim to their property rights. Decree No. 66 and Law No. 10 gave only thirty days for residents to prove their property rights. In a country at war this was a limited timeframe, allowing for abuse. The problem was addressed in an amendment to Law No. 10 in November 2018 that extended the deadline to a year in future projects. However, this left issues unresolved. In Basatin al-Razi, the timeframe implied that the forcibly disappeared could not claim their rights or appoint legal agents on their behalf. Their families faced restrictions by association through harassment, surveillance, and persecution. Residents who had fled Syria or were internally displaced had the challenge of confirming their property rights remotely. This was exacerbated by the fact that many lacked identification documents to make a claim or appoint a representative. Moreover, individuals displaced to and from opposition areas faced discrimination and additional risks and barriers.

Those who claimed their property rights successfully faced the dilemma of informality. A flaw of Decree No. 66 is that while addressing informal settlements, it accounted solely for people with formal property rights. Only those with deeds received shares in Marota City. Residents could submit proof that they owned unregistered property. However, this entitled them only to a rental allowance and in some cases substitute housing. Many residents were left with very little, since thousands of properties in Basatin al-Razi were informally owned. Indeed, before 2011 nearly

50 percent of land in Syria was unregistered. This was exacerbated during the war with most property registries being destroyed or suspending their work. Unregistered property could be primarily attributed to the state's failure to introduce effective regulatory procedures during periods of rapid urbanization.

Once residents claimed their rights, an inspection commission valued resident's properties for compensation before issuing eviction notices. Between 2015 and 2017, all residents were evicted, and their properties, estimated at over 6,700, were demolished. The lack of clear rules in the valuation process, however, resulted in certain properties being deemed ineligible for compensation. Those affected could not contest the decision.

Inadequate Compensation

Another problem with Marota City has been that compensation to former residents has been inadequate and delayed. Those receiving rental allowances— including former property owners, residents of informal buildings on public and private land, and leaseholders—have received sums equivalent to 5 percent of their property value. This is worthless in Damascus's inflated rental market. In 2016, rent prices were over 300 percent higher than in 2010. When residents complained, local authorities told them to "rent in other informal settlements."

Those entitled to substitute housing, including former property owners and leaseholders who resided in Basatin al-Razi until their eviction, have still not received substitute housing, which had been promised for 2016. Although no plans were introduced to reassure eligible evictees, they were asked for a 15 percent down payment on their substitute houses in July 2018. Deductions were made to rental allowances to cover these payments. Today, with no progress having taken place, the Damascus Governorate's administration has

blamed the delays on uncertainty over the location of substitute houses and difficulties in signing contracts with developers. While the authorities ignored the war when setting deadlines for residents to prove their property rights and engage in other steps, they repeatedly used it to excuse their deferrals in providing compensation.

In addition, residents contested the conditions of eligibility for substitute housing. According to the official responsible for implementing Decree No. 66, 15 percent of Basatin al-Razi's evictees were ineligible for housing and 5 percent filed complaints against their ineligibility. In January 2019, officials in Damascus Governorate said they would reopen 500 rejected housing claims. This bothered residents whose eligibility had been confirmed, as they feared further delays.

Struggling Shareholders

Those who legally owned property in Basatin al-Razi were compensated with shares in the Marota City project. However, the valuation of their properties was systematically lower than market prices, while administrative costs further reduced what residents received. The valuation was based on the properties' condition and surroundings at the time of estimation, not on their projected value after development. This lowered their price and therefore the value of compensatory shares. The actual value of land left to resident shareholders after the assessment and deductions of all costs—including administrative costs, licensing, contractors, and green spaces—is estimated to have barely reached 17 percent of total land value.

Shareholders had only a year to conduct transactions with their shares. They had one of three options: they could combine shares with those of other shareholders and request a plot for development; they could combine shares with those of other shareholders to establish a joint stock company to invest in, exchange, or sell their

plots; or they could sell their shares at a public auction through the Damascus Governorate, which dispensed payment via the central bank.

There is no conclusive information about how many shareholders chose each option. However, dozens of comments on social media suggest that many sold their shares as they could not afford the other options. Those who chose to sell had their shares assigned to plots of land by the governorate, which could purchase some of these plots itself or sell them at public auctions. The equivalent value of the residents' sold plots was deposited at Syria's central bank and distributed to shareholders every six months.

Those who developed their plots were requested to collaborate with their co-owners and purchase a license for the proposed development. This presented difficulties, ranging from the shareholders identifying each other and making joint decisions to determining share value at every stage of the project's advancement, allowing them to make informed choices. However, the greatest challenge was securing the financing to develop their plots.

Damascus Governorate subjected Marota City to Law No.82/2010, requesting that shareholders obtain a building license within one year starting from March 2018. Otherwise, an annual fine of 10 percent of the plot's value would be imposed for four years, after which the plot would be sold at a public auction. Obtaining a license required approval for a provisional architectural design so that a technical study could be authorized by the Engineers' Syndicate. In March 2019, acknowledging delays, the governorate allowed a one-year extension before fines would be imposed. By June 2019, 60 percent of owners had gained approval for their designs, but only one plot had been licensed. This leaves only a few months for owners of the remaining plots to gain their licenses before significant fines are deducted from their shares.

Profiteering Developers

There is little information on how many Basatin al-Razi residents can develop their plots in Marota City. Nor is there much data on whether they might afford access to its residences in the future. Their complaints on social media suggest they will not, especially as the average cost of a square meter in residential units is estimated at $6,000. One certainty, however, is that private companies with regime ties have secured major development contracts in the area.

According to the development plan, 270 plots are planned in Marota City, of which 166 belong to private individuals, sixty-two to Damascus Cham Holding Company, and the remainder to the government. The Damascus Governorate established Damascus Cham Holding in 2016 with a capital of $133 million to manage some of its properties. Between July 2017 and March 2018, the company signed six contracts with businessmen close to the regime whose companies would invest in Marota City in exchange for land. The first was with Samer Foz at a cost of $333 million. The second was with Mazen al-Tarazi at a cost of $250 million. And the most recent contract was with Rami Makhlouf at a cost of $48.3 million. In these companies, the businessmen's shares are greater than those of Damascus Cham Holding, giving them more power over implementation. Three other contracts were signed in 2018, and others are likely. However, nothing has been allocated to fund substitute housing or help citizens develop their own plots. In fact, the interests of Syrians appear to be the last thing on the regime's mind.

AN UNJUST PROJECT TO ENHANCE THE REGIME'S POWER

Since the announcement of Decree No. 66, activists in Basatin al-Razi have called Marota City a politically motivated gentrification project. This is valid given that most residents are from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom had joined the opposition in the uprising's early days. Community leaders requested a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad to voice their concerns, but it was never granted. Given the obstacles to organizing a collective response, residents have had no choice but to comply with the project.

Worse for them, the project's framework restricts the residents' latitude to challenge it. The only available way for them to reclaim their rights is through the official appeals channels under Decree No. 66. Damascus Governorate established a disputes settlement commission, but the plan's implementation is not halted during the appeals process. The commission mostly investigates cases related to the assessment of residents' properties or disputes between shareholders. Furthermore, it is exempted from the rules of civil procedure, with the power to arbitrate disputes and issue binding decisions based on "principles of justice," not actual law. There have been no public reports on the number of disputes raised around Marota City, but posts on social media community groups have reported hundreds of objections.

Advocacy through social and state-registered media are the only spaces left for residents to voice their apprehensions outside the restricted official process. Groups have been established, mostly on Facebook, for people to share updates, help each other understand the process, and express frustration. The exchanges indicate that people hold Damascus Governorate responsible for failing to formalize property ownership. They are demanding that it be held accountable for undermining the rights of residents of informal settlements. Residents have requested that they be considered partners in Marota City's development and that measures be put in place to facilitate this. This includes providing lists of potential funders and developers, creating incentives for banks to support citizens in developing their plots, and exemptions from certain taxes and fees. Many also reflected on the social costs of fragmentation due to their eviction.

Resistance to the project has also grown overseas among Syrian exiles. However, given their limited influence over developments inside Syria, they have focused on working with the international community and potential investors and funders to influence regime-led reconstruction. Their activism centers around two lines of argument. The first is based on the principle that contributing to reconstruction in Syria, which is largely led by the regime and loyal businessmen, means being implicated in human rights violations and crimes against humanity.

The second argument, implicit in the first, engages with the legislative and procedural frameworks set by the regime to guide reconstruction. It affirms that the regime's neoliberal projects are aimed at consolidating its authoritarian power while punishing communities opposed to it. Meanwhile, Syrian-led efforts to produce options other than the regime's reconstruction approach are increasing. These include the drafting of principles for just reconstruction, awareness-raising campaigns to explain controversial legislation and projects, spatial mapping to document property rights and violations, and creating alternative housing solutions, among other initiatives.

The campaign to influence reconstruction has opened up a debate over doing so to affect political outcomes in Syria. The restrictions enforced by the European Union and the United States on reconstruction funding, as well as economic sanctions, are a result of this campaign. The EU even expanded its sanctions list to include Syrian businessmen and companies investing in Marota City. The regime has dismissed such worries, claiming its efforts are directed at rebuilding the country and reviving its economy. The government has held reconstruction fairs, declaring that Syria is open for business and announcing that participation in reconstruction would be exclusive to "friends of Syria" or its allies. The regime has also portrayed sanctioning countries as "enemies" that should have no place in reconstruction. It has taken advantage of international calls for refugees to be repatriated by affirming that countries blocking reconstruction funds

The destruction during the conflict was not solely collateral damage. Its scale, nature, and consequences implied that it was used as a weapon of war to eradicate the populations of opposition areas.

have delayed this process. The regime's allies, notably Russian President Vladimir Putin, have backed this attitude. Putin has told the EU that stability anchored by the regime, which reconstruction funding would reinforce, is the only way for the 6 million Syrian refugees to go home.

Reconstruction That Won't Truly Revive Syria

The regime's claims that reconstruction will rebuild Syria, revive its economy, and facilitate a return of the displaced are legitimate. However, there are doubts as to whether its reconstruction framework can fulfill such assertions. Projects have failed to introduce a rights-based approach that can contribute to recovery. They have failed to critically engage with the problem of unregistered property, itself a consequence of institutional failure. Laws have restricted the margin of displaced communities to prove their property rights, resulting in the further displacement of tens of thousands of people. They have also curbed the ability of economically disadvantaged groups to maintain a dwelling in their areas of origin, while facilitating the access of a wealthy elite.

In addition to its discriminatory nature, the reconstruction framework cannot be viewed in isolation of Syria's political context. The destruction during the conflict was not solely collateral damage. Its scale, nature, and consequences implied that it was used as a weapon of war to eradicate the populations of opposition areas. This opposition mostly thrived in

informal and disadvantaged neighborhoods that bore most of the devastation. Additionally, many believe the damage took place along sectarian lines, with a majority of destroyed areas being Sunni.

The strict procedural requirements of reconstruction suggest that those who forcibly fled destroyed areas will likely not return. Most of the people who remained will not be able to afford to stay, given their relative poverty and the projects' neoliberal substance. Indeed, the reconstruction framework can be seen as a continuation of this process of destruction, which has significantly altered Syria's demographic order. By empowering crony capitalists to transform the country's sociopolitical and economic configuration, the regime hopes to fortify its authoritarian grip over the country.

CONCLUSION

Marota City is the only comprehensive project testing the regime's reconstruction framework thus far. However, manipulating urban processes to consolidate authoritarianism has taken different forms. The regime has systematically demolished neighborhoods it has recaptured, including intact and habitable buildings, and blocked access to inhabitants. Since 2011, the government has also issued dozens of laws challenging housing, land, and property rights. In addition, it has manipulated international aid and recovery funding to serve the regime's political and economic interests. This includes dictating the terms for how United Nations agencies and international organizations rehabilitate infrastructure and housing. These efforts so far have only benefited regime-approved areas.

Meanwhile, international restrictions on Syria's reconstruction are failing to influence developments on the ground. The regime's political and military allies have been granted exclusive access to key economic sectors,

including natural resources and ports, giving them the upper hand in future reconstruction. Additionally, the regime has been approaching unconventional donors, including India and Brazil, and empowering crony capitalists to invest in reconstruction.

In the long run, it is unlikely that the regime will be able to dispense with support from the EU and the United States given their economic and political weight in the region and the enormous cost of Syria's reconstruction. However, the regime has so far initiated a reconstruction process in which it can manipulate efforts in its own favor. Marota City demonstrates that while reconstruction is being debated internationally, the rights of Syrians are being further abused at home. The international community's approach has been limited to refraining from engaging in reconstruction pending a political transition while maintaining sanctions whose burdens fall unevenly on average Syrians. That is no solution. New guidelines are needed for any international role in rebuilding Syria. These should facilitate immediate action to enable the revival of the Syrian population, end human rights violations in the name of reconstruction, and ensure that any measures taken do not empower the regime.

Sawsan Abou Zainedin and *Hani Fakhani* are Syrian architects and urban practitioners. Their work focuses on housing, urban development, and reconstruction in Syria through research and practice. Abou Zainedin and Fakhani recently founded Sakan Housing Communities, a social enterprise aimed at developing inclusive and socially just housing programs to aid social, economic, and institutional recovery in Syria.*

HOMS, A DIVIDED INCARNATION OF SYRIA'S UNRESOLVED CONFLICT

JOMANA QADDOUR

Over eight years into one of the Arab world's most brutal conflicts, the Syrian government wants to create the impression that it will soon reassert control over all of Syria. The city of Homs, once hailed as the "capital of the revolution," fell to forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad in May 2018. However, enduring divisions affirm that the situation is far from being normalized.

Last June, Syrians were reminded of the unity characterizing Homs in the early stages of the uprising. Abdelbasit al-Saroot, a protest leader who later became an opposition combatant, was killed while fighting regime forces in Hama. Saroot, the goalkeeper of Homs' Karameh soccer team, had led protests in 2011 alongside the Alawite actress Fadwa Suleiman. The image of a Sunni and an Alawite together had helped dispel accusations that the uprising was sectarian. Saroot's death, however, opened a wound that many Homsis avoided acknowledging. It reminded them that the concord of the past was no more as Homs faces layers of unresolved tensions—with hundreds of thousands of displaced who are unable to return and a society so segregated it is unrecognizable even to residents. Although the military phase may be subsiding, developments in Homs underscore that we may only be entering a new phase of conflict.

Three types of division, not mutually exclusive, characterize the governorate today: divisions between supporters of the regime and those who don't support it; divisions among Homs' sects; and divisions between the regime's two main international backers, Russia and Iran.

THREE PRINCIPAL LAYERS OF DIVISIONS

Although Homs Governorate has returned to government control, a variety of political actors hold different parts of the territory. Three types of division, not mutually exclusive, characterize the governorate today: divisions between supporters of the regime and those who don't support it; divisions among Homs' sects; and divisions between the regime's two main international backers, Russia and Iran. Such dynamics have deepened Homs' fragmentation, making it difficult for any one entity to assume control

and impose a durable peace and stability. Nor would this even be possible without a credible form of transitional justice.

The Regime's Supporters and Its Opponents

The divide between those who support and don't support the Syrian regime is the most notable fracture visible in Homs today. The regime's reconstruction and rehabilitation policies are solidifying this divide. In Homs city, the regime is continuing to deprive former opposition-held quarters, including Bayyada, Waer, and Karam al-Zeitoun, of basic infrastructure, development funding, and services. The regime is also putting up barriers to the return of the displaced. The relatively small numbers allowed back require time-consuming security clearances and permits to rebuild their homes, with no guarantees these will be granted. As of 2015, at least 1.5 million Syrians were wanted by the intelligence services and still cannot return to Syria. In instances where people can do so, they are often forced to live in locations other than their own. This phenomenon, for example, has affected former inhabitants of the city of Qusayr.

The government has also introduced legislation allowing it to confiscate property. Through Law No. 10 of 2018, which allows the government to designate development zones throughout Syria, it has seized property in onetime opposition strongholds for redevelopment. For example, in September 2018 the government rezoned three former opposition-held areas in Homs city—Jouret al-Shiyah, al-Qoussour and al-Qarabis—to build high-rise buildings and shopping centers. Its scheme to compensate property owners showing proof of ownership left the owners with an average of only 17 percent of their property's value.

In July 2019 the government announced it was in the final stages of revising the Homs Dream Project, which also aims to develop other areas of Homs city with high-rises and commercial areas. Locals have renamed the project the "Homs Nightmare." The government had sought to implement the project prior to the uprising, but halted it due to local objections because it involved evicting residents of Baba Amr and Jobar, two of Homs' poorest neighborhoods that later fell to the opposition. The project is now set to move forward under Law No. 10.

The government has also done little to provide services to neighborhoods previously held by the opposition with which it signed reconciliation agreements. Although these agreements guaranteed by Russia mandated a temporary halt to the conscription of young men, the state has effectively tied the issuance of all official papers to approval from the recruitment division. This has forced young men to join the military, leaving their families with limited means of support. Others, even regime supporters, have fled Syria rather than be conscripted under the country's amnesty laws. These laws have loopholes forcing men to join the military on an emergency basis or face criminal charges. Mazen Gharibah, a researcher and activist from Waer, explained the consequences of the problem: "Even if cement and building materials are acquired, there is no young workforce to rebuild the destroyed houses and businesses. Even loyalist young men who didn't fight the regime are escaping to have a future."[27]

As of May 2019, over 460 of those in Homs reconciled with the regime had been arrested, including civilian local council leaders from Houleh in rural Homs Governorate. Others are being sued by private individuals from their areas for purported crimes committed during the uprising. This aims to keep former dissidents wanting to live in Homs tied up in extended lawsuits, possibly facing prison time. Men are being rounded up despite Russian assurances that signing a Personal Status Settlement with the regime would have afforded them an interregnum of at least six months before conscription. Last summer some were sent to the front lines in northern Hama as cannon fodder.

A Rise in Sectarian Tensions

Syria's modern history shows that for decades the two Assad regimes sought to weaponize sectarian differences to their advantage. Consequently, as the military conflict today subsides, sectarian fault lines are more pronounced. Homs was arguably Syria's most diverse governorate, with Alawites, Shia, Christians, and Sunnis living side by side. Yet it is difficult to imagine them coexisting again. The bloody attacks against Houleh, Talkalakh, and Baba Amr are etched in the memories of Sunnis, particularly the participation of Alawite and Christian militias. A doctor from Waer recounted the trauma his patients endured at the hands of Alawite soldiers: "They cannot get out of their mind the thick coastal accent [associated with Alawites] they heard during their torture."[28] Homsis will now routinely attribute sect to whether or not an individual is an Assad loyalist.

Abu Alaa, a former local council member from Homs city's Shammas quarter, recalled how his Christian and Alawite neighbors were permitted to remain in their homes while his own family and other Sunni families were expelled.[29] Malek, another former local council member from the Hamra quarter, spoke of the deep public resentment toward the establishment of the so-called "Sunni market," or Souq al-Sunna, in the Nuzha and Zahra areas of the city, infamous for selling looted Sunni property from Qusayr and other places.[30] Such markets are found in different parts of regime-held areas.

Across Homs, churches are being restored and Greek Orthodox priests have praised Bashar al-Assad in sermons for saving one of the world's oldest Christian communities. Markets in Christian areas are reopening. The Syrian government has authorized United Nations Development Program and UN Habitat funding for areas inhabited by minorities in Homs city, such as Hamidiyyeh and Khaldiyyeh. The neighborhood of Jouret al-Shiyah, which once had a Sunni majority,

Tensions are not limited to relations between Sunnis and non-Sunnis. Though rarely discussed, deep resentment also exists among Alawites in marginalized areas of Homs, who have seen no change in their access to basic needs.

is also being rebuilt with UN assistance, but without consideration for the original property owners who cannot return. Christian families from the mixed Waer neighborhood, instead of returning to their original homes, are resettling with other minorities, consolidating demographic changes. And although the Khaled Ibn al-Walid mosque was rehabilitated by the Chechen Kadyrov Foundation with Russia's blessing, this is not seen as part of a broader effort to encourage Homs' Sunnis to return.

Tensions are not limited to relations between Sunnis and non-Sunnis. Though rarely discussed, deep resentment also exists among Alawites in marginalized areas of Homs, who have seen no change in their access to basic needs. The Bustan Charity, formerly controlled by Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, rewarded the highest echelons of Syria's political and military leadership but not average Alawite families who had sent young men to die in the regime's defense.[31]

Iranian and Russian Relations in Homs

After the Syrian regime and its main allies, Russia and Iran, defeated opposition forces in Homs Governorate, they seized large swathes of land. Russian- and Iranian-backed forces exercised power in a distinct fashion and each carved out territory without significant hostilities between them. But while Homs Governorate has reverted back to regime control, this means little on the

ground, especially in the governorate's southern and northern rural areas, because the regime is hardly visible. In many areas it has been relegated to an intelligence gathering role instead of taking on responsibilities for the welfare of citizens with a monopoly over military power. The intelligence services also compete for control among themselves and fail to coordinate their activities.[32]

Russia has brokered many of the reconciliation agreements between opposition fighters and the regime, including in Homs. The Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Opposition Sides, based at the Hmeimim airbase, coordinates the reconciliation processes and the actions of Russian military police. For example, regime intelligence branches initially were in charge of talks over the withdrawal of rebels from the Waer quarter, but by the end of 2016 Russian generals were in control, offering concessions in exchange for the surrender of weapons or the transfer of rebels to Idlib. At one point, according to former negotiators, only the Russian flag was visible during negotiations.[33]

By managing reconciliation talks, the Russians portrayed themselves as peacekeepers, in contrast with regime and Iranian forces that preferred to take territory by force. Following reconciliation agreements, Russian military police generally were the first to appear. They manned checkpoints and managed a limited number of returning refugees and internally displaced persons. The returnees were largely regime affiliates, apolitical individuals, or the elderly. The appearance of orderly reconciliation processes guaranteed by Russia initially created confidence that the negotiating terms would be honored. The Russians also leveraged the perception that they were dependable to convince former opposition members to join the Fifth Corps, a unit that Russia trained, advised, and equipped. The Russians have allowed former rebels to keep their weapons and control their areas in exchange for pledging loyalty to the unit, even convincing some to fight in Idlib where the rebels are concentrated today.

However, as Russian military police retreated from Homs city in mid- to late 2018, pro-regime units, such as the National Defense Force, were given control. They created an atmosphere of terror as the regime apprehended thousands of people, reneging on promises not to arrest those who had been reconciled.

Meanwhile, Iran is also busy cementing its influence throughout Homs. The pro-Iranian Hezbollah virtually controls the southwestern rural areas of Syria that connect to Lebanese villages in the Beqaa Valley. Qusayr, an area with a population of roughly 30,000 people before 2011, lost over half that number in 2011 during Hezbollah's offensive.[34] In mid-July 2019, for the first time and with Hezbollah's approval, the regime permitted 300 families to return. In October, another 750 internally displaced were allowed back, so long as they promised not to rehabilitate their homes or conduct other reconstruction activities.[35] They were mostly civil servants and those who had cooperated with regime officials, along with their families.[36] Hezbollah, which itself had settled families in Qusayr, ordered them to make way for the original inhabitants if they held property deeds.[37] Like the Russians, Iranian-backed militias are recruiting men reconciled with the regime, giving them arms and permitting them to hold their areas if they join militias sustained by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Iran's influence has also affected Homs' social fabric. In September 2017, at a soccer match between Syria and Iran, Syrians living in the Iranian-dominated Mazraa quarter cheered for Iran against the Syrian national team. This angered Sunni locals, who increasingly view Syrians living under Iranian authority as foreign agents. Iran's tactic of gaining supporters through religious proselytism has increased the possibility of armed clashes between Sunnis on the one hand, and Shia and Alawites, perceived as being aligned with Assad, on the other.

While direct Iranian-Russian confrontations have not been reported, tensions may be rising in Homs and other parts of Syria.[38] Both Russia and Iran are seeking to secure access to Syria's ports, natural resources, and infrastructure projects. The Russians have also remained relatively passive in the face of Israeli attacks against Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in Syria, which has provoked criticism in Tehran. Both seek to have major influence in Syria while investing as little as possible given everything they have spent so far. That is why co-opting local fighters is optimal. It offers former rebels Russian or Iranian protection, sparing them from conscription or detention by a regime that, in the words of a former Talbiseh council member, "never keeps its word."[39]

According to unconfirmed reports, there has been friction between Russian-backed and Iranian-backed Syrian units. For example, in Talbiseh in late 2018 Hezbollah arrested and tortured Manhal al-Daheek of Jaysh al-Tawheed after he had led a raid on Shia villages. Daheek had pledged allegiance to the Fifth Corps. When the Russians were informed, they secured his release.[40] However, he was again detained last July by Hezbollah, and remains in custody.[41]

The Need for Transitional Justice

Homs Governorate is part of a much larger, broken Syria. The country's divisions show that elements of conflict persist and the regime appears incapable of easily resolving them. Yet, as Syria transitions into a new phase, such divisions must be addressed if Homs is to experience lasting peace.

War-weary Syrians inside Homs Governorate are, for now, focused on surviving. Those living in former opposition strongholds have to face sporadic arrest and bullying by the regime and its followers, who are eager to blame them for Syria's destruction. But even regime loyalists are not safe from harassment. Instead, Syria's

Transitional justice also means reversing many of the laws enacted since 2011 related to conscription, housing, and terrorism, which have paralyzed society.

leadership is rewarding the political elite and minorities it needs to consolidate power. It is leaving behind many Homsis, even poor Alawites who fought on its behalf. The regime continues to treat Syria as the property of the Assads and their close associates, not of all its citizens.

That is why genuine transitional justice, as a parallel track to the political process, is needed if Syria is to move forward. This would require the prosecution of those in Syria's leadership who authorized mass detentions, killings, torture, and rape. It would also mean elucidating the fate of the disappeared. In conversation many Syrians also want action to be taken against businessmen who profited from housing, land, and development laws and whom they view as complicit in the war crime of forced displacement. It is equally crucial to sanction foreign businesses and international organizations that participated in projects violating humanitarian principles to avoid future violations.

Transitional justice also means reversing many of the laws enacted since 2011 related to conscription, housing, and terrorism, which have paralyzed society. Such a process can take place through both international and Syrian tribunals, allowing Syrians to seek justice through legal and reconciliatory means not violence. The problem with all of this is that the regime will not oversee a process in which it prosecutes itself and its allies. Therefore, the assumption that the regime would want to, or could, lead Syria toward stability seems fantastical.

A GROUNDWORK FOR FUTURE CONFLICT

Homs' future will remain bleak for as long as it remains deeply fractured and the root causes of its destruction never addressed. Freezing current conditions and assuming that tensions will sort themselves out is unrealistic. What has been left behind is devastating. However, the future may bring even more dangerous consequences because of the absence of a unified, representative authority that can address what brought about the tragedies in Homs' recent past.

Rifts between those who support and don't support the regime, among religious sects, and between Russia and Iran are all open to exploitation. The regime may seek to profit from divisions in order to survive, as may international actors pursuing their foreign policy or business interests. The ensuing turmoil will only fuel resentment, laying the groundwork for forthcoming conflicts. An entire generation of children has known only violence, and they have little recollection of how Homs was once a myriad of religions and sects. Absent transitional justice, this is the risk we face. The fact that the Syrian regime has come out on the winning side of an uprising that has produced a horrific number of casualties, while displacing half the Syrian population with complete impunity, will never set Syria on a path toward a peaceful future. That will require genuine accountability and justice.

Jomana Qaddour is a Syrian-American lawyer and doctoral student at Georgetown University Law Center focusing on the Syrian constitution and ethnosectarian power sharing.

NOTES

1   Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 7.

2   Stephen Orvis and Carol Ann Drogus, *Introducing Comparative Politics: Concepts and Cases in Context* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017), p. 602.

3   Carnegie Middle East Center, "The Syrian National Council," *Syria in Crisis* (blog), September 25, 2013, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48334?lang=en.

4   Ben Hubbard, "Momentum Shifts in Syria, Bolstering Assad's Position," *New York Times*, July 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/18/world/middleeast/momentum-shifts-in-syria-bolstering-assads-position.html.

5   Emma Beals, "De-Escalation and Astana," Atlantic Council, September 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/de-escalation-and-astana/.

6   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018," 2019, https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html.

7   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response," updated March 26, 2020, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria.

8   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syria Emergency," accessed April 3, 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html.

9   UN Department of Political Affairs, Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Syria, Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura, November 2017, https://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/27112017/syria.

10 European Council on Foreign Relations, "The Geopolitics of Reconstruction: Who Will Rebuild Syria?," September 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_geopolitics_of_reconstruction_who_will_rebuild_syria.

11 UN Security Council, "Greater Cross-Border, Cross-Line Access Needed for Assistance to Syria, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tells Security Council," February 2020, https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14127.doc.htm.

12 Maha Yahya, "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Yahya_UnheardVoices_INT_final.pdf.

13 Carnegie Middle East Center, "The Damascus Declaration," March 2012, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48514?lang=en.

14 Telephone interview with a United Nations official, May 22, 2019.

15 Telephone interview with Nikolaos Van Dam, May 31, 2019.

16 Ibid.

17 Telephone interview with a United Nations official, May 22, 2019.

18 Email interview with Burhan Ghalioun, June 2, 2019.

19 Telephone interview with Nikolaos Van Dam, May 31, 2019.

20 Author discussions with SCSR leader Wassel al-Shimali, Doha, July 2012.

21 Author observation while serving as the chief accountant for the Syrian National Council, December 2011–October 2012.

22 Author interview with a civil society field officer, Idlib Governorate, via Skype, August 2019.

23 Author's observation, based on interviews with activists in Atareb, Sarmada, and Hazanu.

24 Author's observation, based on conversations with leaders of the Muwali tribe.

25 Author's observation, based on conversations with residents of Hazanu, Sarmada, and Atareb, bastions of support for the Fudoul Alliance.

26 Ibid.

27 Telephone conversation with the author, July 11, 2019.

28 Conversation with the author, Amman, Jordan, June 2013.

29 Conversation with the author, Gaziantep, Turkey, July 18, 2019. Abu Alaa asked that his full name not be used.

30 Conversation with the author, Gaziantep, Turkey, July 18, 2019. Malek asked that his full name not be used.

31 Conversation between the author and a former local council member from the Damascus Road part of Homs city, in Gaziantep, July 18, 2019.

32 Telephone conversation with one of the founders of the coordinating committee in the rural area of Talbiseh, July 10, 2019.

33 Telephone conversation with Mazen Gharibah, July 11, 2019.

34 Telephone conversation with a former local council member who had lived in Qusayr, July 13, 2019.

35 Telephone conversation with former local council member who had lived in Qusayr, October 4, 2019.

36 Telephone conversation with former local council member who had lived in Qusayr, July 13, 2019.

37 Ibid.

38 Also based on conversations with Navvar Saban, military analyst at the Omran Center, in Washington, D.C., September 24, 2019.

39 Telephone conversation with one of the founders of the coordinating committee in the rural area of Talbiseh, July 10, 2019.

40 Conversation with Malek, a former local council member in the Hamra neighborhood of Homs, Gaziantep, July 18, 2019.

41 Conversation with Navvar Saban, Washington, D.C., September 24, 2019.

For complete source notes, please read this publication at Carnegie-MEC.org.

CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER

The Carnegie Middle East Center is an independent policy research institute based in Beirut, Lebanon, and part of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The center provides in-depth analysis of the political, socioeconomic, and security issues facing the Middle East and North Africa. It draws its scholarship from a pool of top regional experts, working in collaboration with Carnegie's other research centers in Beijing, Brussels, Moscow, New Delhi, and Washington. The center aims to impact policymakers and major stakeholders by offering fresh insight and ideas that cultivate a deeper understanding of the region and by developing new approaches to the challenges of countries in transition.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.