

The Syrian Opposition

For decades, U.S. policy toward Syria has been single-mindedly focused on Syria's president, Hafiz al-Asad, from 1970 to 2000, followed by his son Bashar. Because they perceived the Syrian opposition to be too weak and anti-American, U.S. officials preferred to work with the Asad regime. Washington thus had no relations with the Syrian opposition until its invasion of Iraq in 2003. Even then, the Bush administration reached out only to Washington-based opponents of the Syrian regime. They were looking for a Syrian counterpart to Ahmad Chalabi, the pro-U.S. Iraqi opposition leader who helped build the case for invading Iraq.¹

Washington was not interested in engaging Islamists, whom it considered the only opposition with a demonstrated popular base in Syria. As for the secular opposition in Syria, U.S. embassy officials in Damascus considered them to "have a weak back bench," without a popular constituency or connection to Syrian youth.² Moreover, contact between opposition members and embassy officials could be dangerous for opponents of the regime and leave them open to accusations of treason. For these reasons, the difficult terrain of opposition figures within Syria remained terra incognita.

Although Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has insisted that Washington does not seek regime change in Syria but merely a change of regime behavior, Damascus has never been sure that the Bush administration is not planning for regime change.³ U.S.-Syrian relations began to deteriorate rapidly following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which Syria opposed vociferously.

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Accusing Syria of supporting terrorism in Iraq and elsewhere, Washington placed a number of sanctions on Syria in May 2004. Three months later, Syria pressured the Lebanese parliament into overriding its constitution and reappointing Emile Lahoud, a Syrian ally, to an additional three years as Lebanon's president. In reaction, the United States and France cosponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for withdrawal of all

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foreign forces from Lebanon, implying Syria; the disarmament of militias, implying Syria's Lebanese Shi'ite ally, Hizballah; and a Lebanese presidential election free from external pressure.⁴ Washington was determined to pry Lebanon out of Syria's sphere of influence as part of its policy to reform the broader Middle East. Syria was just as determined not to allow Lebanon out of its control.

Former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri was assassinated in Beirut on February 14, 2005. The United States immediately implied that Damascus was to blame for the murder by withdrawing its ambassador the next day but only after she had delivered a note to Asad expressing the United States' "profound outrage" over Hariri's assassination.⁵ In Lebanon, massive anti-Syrian demonstrations demanding the withdrawal of Syrian troops began what became known as the Cedar Revolution.

Within one month, Lebanon's popular uprising combined with foreign pressure forced Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, ending Syria's 30-year military presence there. In September 2005, the United Nations issued its first preliminary report implicating Syria in the Hariri murder, naming relatives of Asad himself. The boldness of the report threw the presidential palace in Damascus into confusion and caused Western leaders to speculate that the Syrian regime might be on the ropes.

The Syrian opposition did not want to miss the historic moment if the regime were to stumble. Encouraged by the Cedar Revolution and emboldened by the foreign pressure on Damascus, its leaders set out to make themselves a viable alternative to the regime. Leaders of the Marxist left and Islamic right struggled to find common ground on freedom and democracy in order to build a broad coalition to combat the regime. The opposition within Syria reached out to exiled groups in a series of historic compromises designed to unify their ranks, increase pressure on the regime, and convince the Syrian public that they were a trustworthy alternative.

The hope that Syrian authorities had lost their moorings and that the regime would soon collapse was unfounded. Not only did Asad turn out to be a shrewder opponent than expected, but pressure on Syria began to diminish during 2006. Many questions remain: From where did the opposition come?

Is it a serious threat to the regime in Damascus today? What should Washington do now?

Anatomy of a Schismatic Opposition

On June 10, 2000, after 30 years of rule, Asad died. A Syrian dissident expressed the mood when she remarked, “The strong man is dead. Now we have a chance.”⁶ His son’s ascent to power kindled hope that the leadership would embark on much needed political reform, bringing about what came to be known as the Damascus Spring.

Indeed, the first few months under Bashar were auspicious. In his inaugural speech to parliament, he appealed for “creative thinking” and recognized the “dire need” for constructive criticism, reform, and modernization.⁷ In a move to patch up relations with Islamist groups and end the bitter war between the regime and fundamentalists, Asad closed down the notorious Mezazah political prison, which had become a symbol of the regime’s brutality. Human Rights Watch estimated that Syria held some 4,000 political prisoners in 1993.⁸ Asad whittled the number of known political detainees down to 300–1,000 within the first years of his rule.

Almost immediately, Syria’s once catatonic intellectuals began showing signs of life, and human rights organizations and discussion forums began proliferating across the country. Encouraged by what seemed to be a real social base for dissent, a number of prominent establishment figures—parliamentarians, businessmen, academics, and former opposition leaders—also began to step into the reformist limelight. The Damascus Spring activists produced a manifesto to give direction and a semblance of unity to the flood of reform demands emanating from Syria’s long-suppressed public. More than 1,000 civil society activists signed the Statement of 1,000 in January 2001, calling for comprehensive political reforms.⁹ The following week, parliamentarian and vocal regime critic Riad Seif announced the formation of the Movement for Social Peace political party. These developments proved too much for the regime to bear.

The hard-liners, anxious that the criticism was escalating beyond control, inaugurated the crackdown that would become known as the Damascus Winter. The regime unleashed its attack dogs, publicly impugning the opposition’s nationalist credentials and even physically assaulting its critics. Syrian vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam warned that the calls for change had gone too far and claimed that the regime would not tolerate threats that could drive Syria into civil war. By the end of the summer, eight of the most

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prominent civil society leaders had been imprisoned, and all but one of the civil society forums were shut down.

Despite its brevity, the Damascus Spring movement had several lasting, if modest, accomplishments. For the first time since the late 1970s, individuals could vocalize critical views of the regime in public settings. The newfound freedom drew scattered and secretive activists out of the shadows. Even if ideological disputes persisted, dissidents at least became aware of each other's existence, and the language of reform was injected into political discourses.

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

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS

Ten human rights organizations and two centers for human rights studies, as well as a series of smaller, single-issue associations, such as the Free Political Prisoners Committee, operate in Syria. Because no agency within the state is receptive to the concerns of these organizations, their main function is to collect information on human rights violations and issue press releases with condemnations or calls for a detainee's release. These groups are arguably the most effective parts of the Syrian opposition. The increasing frequency with which families file reports with these organizations is indicative of the trust they have built with vulnerable segments of the population.¹⁰ They have also become more communications savvy, feeding a constant flow of information to international nongovernmental organizations, thereby deterring the most egregious abuses.

Unfortunately, these groups are not without their share of problems. Membership is trifling, and of those who formally belong, only a fraction actively participate. For example, all of the Human Rights Association of Syria's research, reports, correspondence, and press releases in 2004 were the products of one woman. The Syrian Organization for Human Rights splintered; the core group has only 10 members, and the split-off has one who is widely suspected of being a state security agent. Even better staffed organizations run on shoestring budgets, relying on membership dues that rarely surpass a total of a few hundred dollars per month or on the personal wealth of their founders.

The constant financial strain has undermined democratic practices within these organizations. Often, the only organizational real estate is an activist's personal office, which gives him or her undue influence over internal operations. One activist who severed his relationship with a human rights association lamented that its founder and office owner "ran the association like a personal fiefdom."¹¹ There is no neutral meeting space; if a personal conflict flares up between the proprietor and another activist, the latter is forced to capitulate or disaffiliate.

Then there are the personal conflicts between organizations, illustrated by the decision of multiple human rights organizations to boycott a demonstration in front of the High National Security Court during activist Aktham Naisse's trial, no small slight for a community that shows its utmost solidarity when its members are facing sham political trials.¹² These squabbles limit cooperation and information sharing, which leads to redundant and inefficient uses of organizational resources.

CIVIL SOCIETY FORUMS AND COMMITTEES

Civil society in Syria is a wasteland. Even at the height of Bashar's reformist fervor, the regime refused to license dissident groups, choosing instead to tolerate their illegal operation until political convenience dictated otherwise. The few civil associations that have been licensed are either pet projects of regime figures, such as the president's wife's development associations, or professional syndicates, whose leadership is by law drawn from Ba'ath Party loyalists.¹³

Aside from human rights associations, the only civic associations to survive the Damascus Winter crackdown have been the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society and the Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue. The stated goals of these associations are multifaceted. They are supposed to provide a forum to voice critical viewpoints, be a staging ground for cobbling together a united platform, and act as a counterweight to sectarianism by facilitating dialogue between different ethnic and religious groups.¹⁴

The report cards are mixed. The Jamal al-Atassi forum's monthly meetings regularly attract hundreds of participants, consistently more than demonstrations, but these meetings have produced no tangible results. In the words of one activist, "People voice their views, others disagree; and when the forum ends, people go home without ever resolving the argument. Three hours of talk once a month is not going to produce a unified opposition."¹⁵ All the same, the Atassi forum provides an important venue for opposition figures to be seen and heard in public. It is a signal to the secular left that the public conscience had not been erased. It is also useful to the president as evidence that he is not categorically opposed to free speech.

POLITICAL PARTIES

The political parties are the weakest link in the opposition. With the exception of the Kurdish parties, whose members are resoundingly nationalist, none have planted roots in society. The most popular nonsectarian party's membership is less than 1,000, leaving active members vastly outnumbered by security agents.

Human rights groups are arguably the most effective parts of the Syrian opposition.

Contrary to the popular presumption, Syria does not suffer from a shortage of oppositional political parties. In fact, the problem is that there is a glut of these parties, despite the fact that all of them are technically illegal. Straw-man parties, consisting of two or three political entrepreneurs, are being formed with such frequency that people have stopped keeping track.¹⁶ The combination of security pressures and lack of internal democracy have rendered

the parties brittle and prone to splintering. State agents easily infiltrate parties, foment internal discord, and form breakaway parties with disaffected members.¹⁷ There is no better example of Syria's fissure-prone opposition than the prodigious quantity of Kurdish parties, whose number changes so frequently that rarely will two opposition watchers report the same number.¹⁸

Although other indicators—popular protests, civil society gatherings, dissident presence in the media—reflect that opposition activity increased from 2002 to 2005, party membership actually decreased during that time. The parties have proven particularly inept at recruiting youth. Riad al-Turk, the opposition's most highly esteemed party leader, rejuvenated his party last year with this dilemma in mind: "We don't have a platform suitable to the present conditions this society is facing.... University students, the youth, those from the countryside—none of them are finding anything within [the opposition] that suits them."¹⁹

The Nasserists, who still adhere to Gamal Abdul Nasser's platform of pan-Arab nationalism and socialist economics, and leftists who dominate Syria's largest oppositional party alliance, the Democratic National Gathering (DNG), are widely viewed as relics of the past, clinging to an ideology that collapsed with the Soviet Union. Turk's party, the second largest in the DNG, has been one of the few success stories. Formerly the Communist Party, it was refashioned into a liberal party with a renovated platform and newer, younger leadership.²⁰ By most accounts, it is the only party with a steadily rising membership base.

Due to the fragmentation of Syrian political society, the spine of the opposition in the post-Spring period has become intellectuals and independent

activists who at best had a readership and no following. As activist Amar Qurabi noted, "Really, there is no such thing as 'the opposition.' There are individual activists and writers."²¹

AN ISLAMIST RESURGENCE?

Despite Asad's pardoning of hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members during his first three years in office and repeated, albeit abortive, efforts at reconciliation, there is no indication that the regime is growing more tolerant of Islamic political activity. The memory of the Hama massacre, which crushed the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in 1982, and Law 49, which punishes membership in the Muslim Brotherhood by death, although most sentences are reduced to 12 years, have inhibited the emergence of an organized presence inside Syria.

Although it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which the public sympathizes with the Muslim Brotherhood, growing religiosity and a dearth of credible liberal trends would make the Muslim Brotherhood a formidable political force if it were allowed to mobilize. Nonetheless, despite alarmist predictions, it is unlikely that they would monopolize Syrian politics. The roughly 30 percent of Syrians who are Kurds, Christians, or Alawites generally oppose the Muslim Brotherhood by default, as do many upper-middle-class urbanites who are weary of Islamist puritanism.

The only Islamist party inside Syria is Hizb At-Tahrir (the Liberation Party), which has less than 1,000 members, according to its own activists.²² It has become cliché for journalists to note the increase in veiled women and bearded men, archetypal signs of a religious awakening. In general, however, the type of Islam that is resurging in Syria is neither fundamentalist nor militant. Rather than fall victim to it, the regime has managed to harness its energy by monopolizing the religious establishment and burnishing its Islamic credentials. The puritanical Salafi and Wahhabi trends are divided, some advocating political silence and even cooperation with the state, others counseling political agitation; and their activities are largely limited to tiny, scattered discussion groups. There is no established network worth mentioning.

Since the summer of 2005, there have been repeated clashes between security forces and those whom the government claims are Islamic militants. There is a plausible theory, however, that the Syrian regime has staged at least some of these attacks to evoke sympathy from the West and justify its assault on peaceful Islamists. The timing of these clashes, skeptics argue, has been too convenient for the regime. Since the start of the occupation of Iraq, the Syrian regime has come under tremendous pressure to crack down on foreign insurgents who have been using Syria as a point of embarkation into Iraq.

A 2004 bombing in Mezzah occurred just as the Bush administration, infuriated with Syria's support for infiltrators, was contemplating how strictly to enforce congressionally mandated sanctions against Syria.²³ Moreover, a subsequent spate of attacks happened as the Mehlis Commission was concluding its preliminary investigation of Syria's complicity in Hariri's assassination.²⁴ An anchorwoman for the pan-Arab Al-Arabiya television network unwittingly described a potential motive for engineering the clashes when she remarked, "The incident places Syria on the list of countries facing terrorist threat. Consequently, the Syrians hope the incident will ease world pressure on them, especially with regard to investigation into [Hariri's] assassination ... and the extent of Syrian control of the border with Iraq."²⁵

Even if the attacks were the work of hostile Islamists, their occurrence testifies only to the spread of isolated militant cells. They command very little popular support in a Syrian street still wary of the violent clashes between Islamists and the regime in the early 1980s. Given the regime's stranglehold on political Islamic trends, it is highly unlikely that Islamists will emerge as a major oppositional force inside Syria regardless of how well the Muslim Brotherhood fares in exile.

The Iraq War: Energizing or Enervating?

For proponents touting the so-called reverse domino theory—that Saddam Hussein's collapse would send a tidal wave of democratic fervor through the region—the war turned out to be a double-edged sword. Activists amplified their calls for reform in the name of protecting Syria from Iraq's fate, but the war also shocked the general population into rallying behind the regime, whose chief boast was maintaining stability. The Bush administration's newfound democratization fervor forced Damascus to adopt the language of reform, but it also facilitated state efforts to label dissidents as lackeys of the West. Saddam's collapse kindled an awakening of the Kurdish opposition but in doing so exacerbated tensions between the Kurdish and Arab oppositions.

Even though the vast majority of Syrian dissidents harshly condemned the Iraq war, they coupled their scathing rebukes with calls for reform. In May 2003, a mere month after the fall of Baghdad, civil society activists submitted a petition to the president warning against the "aggressive, racist, egotistical, and evil policies and ideology" of the United States and Israel and appealed for reform to strengthen Syria against external threats.²⁶ On May 8, 2004, opposition activists staged an unprecedented sit-in in front of parliament.²⁷ At the same time, however, they found themselves increasingly vulnerable to accusations of treachery. For example, the one exception to the media blackout concerning the sit-in was an article by the editor in chief of the Ba'ath

newspaper that accused the protesters of trying to “reinforce pressures being exercised from outside.”²⁸

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

Masha'al Temu, spokesman of the recently founded Kurdish Future Trend, observed, “The Iraq war liberated us from the culture of fear... [P]eople saw a Kurd become president of Iraq and began demanding their culture and political rights in Syria.”²⁹ In March 2004, a soccer match erupted into clashes between Kurds and Arabs in the northeastern city of Qamashli, spawning Kurdish protests throughout Syria’s major cities.³⁰ The Syrian regime did not tarry in crushing the so-called intifada, rounding up thousands of activists and flooding the Kurdish-dominated northeast with security forces.³¹

The effect of the rise of the Kurds on the opposition as a whole was again mixed. In some ways, the sudden outburst of Kurdish nationalism in the midst of increasing U.S. and Israeli pressure on Syria—months earlier, Israel had launched an air strike on Syrian soil—played into the regime’s hands. While the state-run press accused foreign agents of initiating the riots, the security agencies stoked suspicions that the Kurds were a fifth column—secessionist and in favor of U.S. military intervention—thus containing the agitation within Kurdish circles.³² Even nervous Arab activists once sympathetic to the Kurdish plight hesitated to support a movement, many of whose leaders affectionately referred to President George W. Bush as Abu Azaadi (Father of Freedom).

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

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Soon after the uprising, Arab and Kurdish leaders began forming contacts and engaging in low-level coordination. The Arabs hoped to piggyback on the Kurd's manpower while the Kurds hoped to insert Kurdish rights into the Arab opposition's agenda. The goals were to surmount the mutual suspicions that had been so carefully cultivated by the regime and to create a united front for reform. The increasing prominence of Kurdish forces was even recognized by the Muslim Brotherhood, which, exactly one year after the uprising, issued a statement declaring its solidarity with the Kurds and for the first time in history recognizing the legitimacy of their grievances.³³

In Hariri's Death, New Life for the Opposition

On February 14, 2005, a bomb ripped through Hariri's convoy, killing him and 22 others. The United States immediately pinned the blame on Syria and ratcheted up pressure on the regime. Despite initially broadcasting bombastic assurances that Syria would not submit to the newest international witch hunt, Asad finally bowed to the pressure and ended Syria's 30-year occupation of Lebanon. Syria's growing international isolation and its humiliating expulsion from Lebanon had a profound psychological effect on the opposition. According to Kamal al-Labwani, "For the first time, the possibility of regime collapse, even if improbable, was in view, and people began to think more seriously about providing an alternative."³⁴

The spring of 2005 witnessed a flurry of efforts to unite the ranks of the opposition. First, the low-level contacts between Arabs and Kurds germinated into the formation of the National Coordination Committee for the Defense of Basic Freedoms and Human Rights, the most inclusive oppositional alliance to date.³⁵ In April, the Committee for the Revival of Civil Society, Syria's largest civil society formation, issued a statement calling for the "opening of channels of dialogue" with all segments of Syrian society, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

For the first time since the infamous 1982 Hama massacre, an opposition group inside Syria had called for dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁶ One month later, activist and writer Ali Abdullah read a letter from Muslim Brotherhood secretary general Ali Sadr Ed-Din al-Bayanuni encouraging the exploration of all of Syria's political movements; even the ruling Ba'ath party was represented. It was the first time the Muslim Brotherhood had been publicly represented inside Syria since 1982.³⁷ Soon thereafter, Turk sat next to Bayanuni and announced his intention to form an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. The groundwork was being laid for an even broader oppositional coalition.

THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION

On October 18, 2005, a mere five days before the scheduled release of the UN's first report on the Hariri assassination, the most diverse coalition of the opposition to date unveiled the Damascus Declaration, a document establishing a unified platform for democratic change. The declaration grew out of a clandestine trip to Morocco only a few months earlier by intellectual Michel Kilo to meet with Bayanuni to discuss a new initiative to unite forces. The two agreed on four guiding principles—democracy, nonviolence, oppositional unity, and democratic change—and Bayanuni delegated authority to Kilo to negotiate a broad-based alliance on the Muslim Brotherhood's behalf.³⁸ The intentional release of the final declaration, just days before the first Hariri findings were released, allowed the opposition to take advantage of inflated press coverage of Syria and magnified the political buzz about finding alternatives to Asad's regime.

Advocates of internationalizing the reform movement have recently been empowered.

The declaration was announced with the signatures of five party coalitions and civil society organizations as well as nine intellectuals. Within 24 hours, dozens of associations and parties, inside and outside Syria, began declaring their support. For the first time in Syrian history, an assemblage of bickering parties and scattered intellectuals representing Kurdish nationalists, Arab nationalists, Socialists, Communists, liberals, and Islamists united under a single platform for democratic change. Civil society activists who had previously turned their nose up at political parties joined forces with them, and a deliberate effort was made to ensure that the signatories of the declaration hailed from a majority of Syria's provinces.³⁹ According to one activist, "[O]nly with the Damascus Declaration could we speak about a 'Syrian opposition.'"⁴⁰

The document sidestepped many of the niggling issues that dogged opposition groups. It refrained from declaring a state religion, taking a stance on any economic model, or specifying the nature of the solution to the Kurdish problem, other than to say that it would be addressed within a democratic and inclusive framework. Another significant feature of the Damascus Declaration was that, unlike previous declarations, it was followed up by a temporary committee to oversee continued coordination among its signatories.

In many ways, the criticisms of the Damascus Declaration were evidence of the pettiness of the divisions that plague the opposition. A clause stressing Syria's affiliation to the "Arab Order" drew fire both from Arab and Kurdish nationalists. Some Arab nationalists decried this as a despicable compromise

of Syria's Arab heritage, and some equally extreme Kurds decried the mere reference to Arab identity as evidence of unceasing Arab chauvinism.⁴¹ As these criticisms reveal, many dissident efforts fail to gain widespread support because of diction, not content.

The more substantive criticisms of the declaration revolved around the special reference to Islam, which it referred to as "religion and ideology of the majority" and "the more prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people," and the treatment of Kurdish rights. Some commentators warned that such efforts to court the Muslim Brotherhood would exacerbate sectarian tensions.⁴² One argued that the drafters had "surrendered, without so much as fluttering an eyelid, [Syria's] long history of secularism and the separation of church and state."⁴³ As for the Kurdish issue, three Kurdish groups praised the declaration's demands for democratic change but ultimately rejected the declaration on the grounds that it was deficient on the issue of Kurdish rights because it did not explicitly recognize the Kurds as an independent nationality with historic ties to the land.

The pact between secular groups and the Muslim Brotherhood was a tremendous boon for both sides. The Muslim Brotherhood could project its voice through the conduits of Syrian civil society, while secular elements gained the endorsement of a prominent Islamist movement. After a disappointing Ba'ath Party conference, secular activists hoped that this association would mitigate popular suspicions that the secular opposition was anti-Muslim, elitist, and pro-Western.⁴⁴

The coalition set off alarm bells for a regime that had struggled for 20 years to deny the Muslim Brotherhood a foothold in Syrian society. The regime counterattacked through its proxies within intellectual and dissident circles. Rihab al-Bitaar of the quasi-opposition Free Democratic Gathering impugned the motives of the declaration's signatories, parroting the regime's logic that, amidst the onslaught of international pressures, any challenge to the state endangers the security of the Syrian people.⁴⁵ The regime cast itself as the guarantor of stability and accused the opposition of disregarding U.S. and Israeli treachery or, worse, facilitating it by seeking to undermine the state.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, indictments of the opposition's loyalty still resonated with an anxiety-ridden public.

THE OPPOSITION GOES GLOBAL

A debate has long raged within the Syrian opposition about the role of foreign forces. At one extreme is a sizable group of nationalists that rejects any form of outside assistance, especially from the United States, and whose ideology is encapsulated in the slogan "We will not ride to heaven on the back of Satan." At the other extreme are a spattering of marginalized liberals who

welcome any and all pressure that could weaken the regime. The moderate contingent recognizes the need for foreign assistance but rejects anything that influences the opposition's agenda or takes power out of their hands.

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

The regime intensified its repression of activists during the 2005 pullout from Lebanon to levels unseen since the 2001 Damascus Winter. It began arresting and harassing civil society activists and scrambled to deny them a voice in the media. In mid-March 2005, the Ministry of Information yanked the licenses from the U.S.-sponsored channels Al-Hurra and Radio Sawa because they covered a March

10 protest in front of the Palace of Justice.⁴⁷ A Web site featuring frequent articles on the opposition, called the Elaph Web site, was blocked along with the critical newsletter All4Syria. This sent a clear message to remaining journalists not to engage with or cover the opposition.

In May 2005, security forces arrested the entire administrative committee of the Jamal al-Atassi Forum for reading aloud a message from the Muslim Brotherhood. All of its members were subsequently released except one, and the forum—the last association to survive the Damascus Winter crackdown—was indefinitely closed. The number of arbitrary arrests and security summons skyrocketed. By midsummer, all oppositional gatherings were banned, and those trying to skirt the ban found their houses and offices besieged by security forces. One activist explained the impact on the opposition: “It [was] becoming almost impossible for us to do anything inside of Syria. So people ha[d] two choices: they [could] regress and revert to secretive work like what they did in the 1980s and 1990s or they [could] travel and organize abroad.”⁴⁸

After several abortive conferences, the internal and external opposition successfully linked up in January 2006 in Washington, D.C. The conference did not create a new coalition, but its attendants from inside Syria all attested to its singular accomplishment. It had been an important first step breaking down the walls of mistrust between activists inside Syria and expatriates residing in the United States.⁴⁹

Regime repression has prevented the emergence of a liberal alternative to Ba'athism.

Khaddam's Bombshell Reinvigorates the Opposition

On December 30, 2005, former vice president Khaddam, once a staunch critic of the opposition, stunned the regime and opposition alike by lashing out at the regime on the Al-Arabiya news network. It was an open secret that he opposed Asad's inheritance of the presidency and was posturing to assume the position himself. After Asad came to power, Khaddam found himself increasingly marginalized until he resigned from or was forced out of the vice presidency.

Using support for the opposition as a tool to bludgeon the Syrian regime will not work.

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

whom it described as "partners in the homeland."⁵⁰

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

The alliance has bolstered the positions of Khaddam and the Muslim Brotherhood. By linking up with the secular Khaddam, the Muslim Brotherhood has showcased its eagerness to prioritize political pragmatism over narrow ideology. It may have alleviated the anxieties of Alawites and military leaders who believed that the Muslim Brotherhood's first move in power would be to purge old regime loyalists. Khaddam can appeal to Ba'athists in a way Bayanuni never could. The former vice president issued an open letter to regime Ba'athists, appealing to them to reject loyalty to the small family clique ruling Syria and instead to give their loyalty to the fatherland, which the NSF claimed to represent. The Muslim Brotherhood also benefits from Khaddam's international and internal connections. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood has given Khaddam its Islamic imprimatur, and he can now piggyback on its support within Syria.

The NSF reopened some fissures within the internal opposition, however, that the Damascus Declaration had hoped to seal. No activists within Syria openly declared their support for the NSF—doing so would have assuredly

carried a stiff prison sentence—but most dissidents divided into two camps. One camp strenuously objected in principle to dealing with Khaddam, an icon of the oppressive Ba'athist regime and an architect of the Damascus Winter crackdown. Some in this first camp condemned the shift in the opposition's center of gravity from Damascus to western Europe, given that Khaddam had fled to Paris. Some criticized the gall of the NSF conference participants for not including any activists from inside Syria. Other critics bemoaned the Muslim Brotherhood's failure to consult their new Damascus Declaration allies. Some on the declaration's temporary committee in fact flirted with the idea of officially expelling the Muslim Brotherhood from the declaration's ranks.⁵¹

The second camp, while cautiously optimistic about the NSF as a political formation and elated about the emergence of an oppositional alliance, is still wary of Khaddam's character. This contingent is dominated by liberals, dissidents more receptive to foreign assistance, and those who are most severe and uncompromising in their opposition to the regime. Turk, who in October 2005 boldly called for Bashar's resignation, said on record, "While we do not have to support Khaddam, we will not fight him on behalf of the regime," adding that the opposition is open to everyone, including Ba'athist defectors.⁵² A sizable number of foreign opposition movements have endorsed the NSF, even while holding their noses. The fact that the NSF's formation has not fractured the opposition is one of the few concrete testaments to the cohesive force of the Damascus Declaration. The declaration provided the wrangling camps with an agreed-on set of ideals, and no committed activist wanted to see the fledgling opposition's single-greatest achievement unravel mere months after its birth.

The NSF has since embarked on a diplomatic campaign to partner with regional forces hostile to Bashar, setting up meetings and offices in Turkey.⁵³ It has also consolidated its ties with anti-Syrian elements in Lebanon, raising fears in Damascus that Lebanon might be turned into a beachhead for oppositional forces. The Muslim Brotherhood, for example, discussed the mechanisms for opposing Asad with Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt.⁵⁴ The opposition's success in building a broad, even if fragile, coalition and its ability to gain tentative support from foreign governments prompted the regime to go on the offensive.

Another Damascus Winter

The crackdown that began in March 2005 escalated to a feverish pitch after Khaddam's defection. The regime was likely emboldened to intensify the crackdown by two events. First, the Asad regime feels that it has dodged a bullet with the second UN report on the Hariri murder. Unlike the first one

that was issued in October 2005, subsequent reports have not indicted Syria and have made it more difficult for the West to sustain pressure on Damascus. Second, the Syrian regime probably believes that the United States is preoccupied with the war in Iraq and Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, too busy to spend its precious political capital on agitating for internal reform in Syria.

There is no easy formula for promoting civil society and democratic movements in Syria.

In March 2006, no doubt anxious about the buildup of opposition forces abroad, the regime amplified its persecution of dissidents by outlawing contact with foreign elements. Labwani was immediately arrested, as previously described, following his return after meetings with European and U.S. officials in Washington, and initially charged with belonging to a banned organization, inciting sectarian strife, and "damaging the

nation's image," the worse case scenario being a 10-year prison term.⁵⁵ The regime later leveled new charges against Labwani: "communicating with a foreign country and prompting it to direct confrontation," which carries a sentence of life imprisonment or death.⁵⁶

As of the summer of 2006, virtually no Syrian dissident has been allowed to leave the country. Security agents confiscate activists' passports or inform them of the travel ban during interrogation. More often, activists are turned away at the border without reason, as happened to several who tried to travel to Jordan and Lebanon in the summer of 2006.⁵⁷ Despite periodic amnesties for political prisoners—the regime released five of the eight Damascus Spring detainees after they completed their sentences—the regime has adopted a revolving-door policy of arrests, releasing one only to detain two more, days later, or the same activist is detained again to maintain a constant level of pressure. The vocal regime critic Seif, for example, was detained twice in the three months after his release.⁵⁸

Security forces are also deterring potential recruits from joining opposition forces by punishing once-tolerable offenses committed by people without oppositional affiliation. In a throwback to the terror of the Hafiz al-Asad days, even ordinary citizens are being picked up for passing remarks against the regime. In April 2006, a retired 70-year-old man was detained for making such remarks with friends at a café; at the time of this writing, his whereabouts are still unknown.⁵⁹ Even corruption, which was the subject of numerous state campaigns and discussed frankly in state newspapers, has become a risky topic. Firas Saad, who founded the National Initiative to End Corruption in Syria, was interrogated and threatened after publishing an anticorruption memo in the spring of 2006.⁶⁰

On May 12, 2006, 300 Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, calling for a normalization of relations between Lebanon and Syria. At first glance an innocuous document, the regime interpreted it as evidence that the Syrian opposition was officially teaming up with the anti-Syrian government in Lebanon.⁶¹ Jumblatt, Lebanon's most vociferous anti-Syrian politician, who had called for U.S. military intervention in Syria, had met with members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Khaddam.

The regime went for the opposition's jugular. An editorial in the state newspaper *Tishrin* accused the signatories of "forget[ting] all Syria's victims and sacrifices for the sake of Lebanon and join[ing] the evil and open attack led by the Bush administration against Syria."⁶² Two days after its release, secret police called Kilo, the declaration's main author, to come in for questioning. He was never released. Kilo's arrest sent shockwaves throughout the opposition. He has since been charged with "weakening national sentiment" and "spreading false or exaggerated news that can affect the standing of the state."⁶³ The arrests targeted every element of the opposition—human rights advocates, Arab nationalists, Kurds, leftists, liberals. The state was intent on warning the opposition that no one was exempt from retribution should they forge alliances with outside governments or elements. Activists began speaking of the "final liquidation" of the opposition.⁶⁴

Following the summer 2006 war in Lebanon, however, the regime released eight of the 10 signers of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration whom it had arrested. Hizballah's and Syria's declared "victory" against Israel had boosted the Syrian regime's confidence and increased Asad's popularity within Syria. The regime no longer felt that it had anything to fear from the Syrian opposition teaming up with a weakened and discredited Lebanese government. All the same, neither Kilo nor Anwar al-Bunni, a lawyer who defends Damascus Spring activists, were released from prison.

No Democrat Left Behind

Stunning Islamist victories in Iraq, Egypt, and Palestine within the last year, all in elections convened largely due to U.S. pressure, have taken the wind out of the Bush administration's pro-democracy sails. Washington has understandably been shaken by the unintended consequences of its democratization campaign. It cannot afford to promote greater anti-Americanism in the region. Furthermore, Israeli political and military leaders have made it clear that they do not want Asad's secular regime to be destabilized for fear that chaos would ensue and Islamists would come to power.

Yet, U.S. efforts to cultivate civil society in Syria should not be deterred even as Washington turns away from notions of regime change and promot-

ing instability. Regime repression has prevented the emergence of a liberal alternative to Ba'athism. Those in search of a new ideology among Syria's youth have turned increasingly to Islam or latched on to their sectarian identities. As intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh commented, "When you repress the parties, for all practical purposes you are imprisoning the people in a framework of traditional or family-centric memberships.... The crushing of independent, free political life in Syria has fostered a rebirth of sectarianism and has created this crisis."⁶⁵

As the state security agencies prevent public civil-society forums from convening, informal Islamist discussion groups are proliferating. Although calling them breeding grounds for Islamic militancy is an exaggeration, they are not yielding Islamic reformists. Civil society forums are crucial locations for the propagation of alternative ideologies and liberalism.

The Syrian opposition will only mature with time. It must be seen as a long-term investment, not a short-term quick fix that can be used to destabilize or threaten the Syrian regime. Using support for the opposition as a tool to bludgeon the Syrian regime will not work because the opposition is too weak to threaten the regime seriously. Moreover, this tactic would discredit the opposition by making it appear to be a tool of foreign powers, something the Syrian authorities are only too happy to exploit. There is no simple or easy formula for promoting civil society and democratic movements in Syria. A few years of U.S. backing will not produce an opposition capable of toppling Asad. Damascus knows this, and if it perceives that Washington is buttressing the opposition as a transient political pawn, it can wait out the pressure rather than inaugurating internal reform.

Despite the Bush administration's rhetoric on supporting freedom in the Middle East, its Syria policy has been focused almost uniquely on changing Asad's foreign policy, which Syrians overwhelmingly support, and not on changing Asad's domestic policies or improving conditions inside Syria, which is what Syrians want. This focus makes it very difficult for the Syrian opposition to support U.S. pro-democracy rhetoric and policies, which are widely seen as pretexts for destabilizing regimes that oppose U.S. interests in the region. Washington's demands that Syria stop supporting Hamas and other radical Palestinian organizations, while it remains silent in the face of Israeli expropriation of Palestinian land, places the Syrian opposition in an impossible position vis-à-vis the United States. Opponents of the regime need outside support to defend themselves, but they cannot turn to the United States, which is so widely distrusted for its unwavering support for Israel.

The awkward position in which the Syrian opposition has been placed became readily apparent at the end of 2005 when the White House sought to reach out to the Syrian opposition and publicly take up their cause. On November 11, 2005, Bush demanded that Labwani be freed from prison along

with other civil society advocates and insisted that Syria “start importing democracy.”⁶⁶ Then, in February 2006, the Department of State announced its decision to grant \$5 million to promote the rule of law, government accountability, free access to information, freedom of speech, and free and fair elections in Syria. In early April 2006, State Department officials expressed interest in hearing the NSF’s views, a noncommittal declaration but the first insinuation that the United States would reconsider its stubborn refusal to dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶⁷

Yet, these steps have put the opposition in a precarious position. Labwani’s meetings in Washington prompted the nationalists, who dominate the opposition, to distance themselves from his efforts. The U.S. funding decision was even more problematic, allowing the regime to accuse activists of being compliant U.S. puppets. For their part, the Muslim Brotherhood, rather than expressing happiness that the United States would listen to its demands, has stated that it only wants the United States to stop supporting the Asad regime; it is not interested in U.S. support. These arguments strike at the core of Arab nationalism and resonate with a populace that feels unfairly besieged by a bellicose West. Syria is still the beating heart of Arab nationalism, even if it is now almost inaudible in the rest of the Arab world. The regime has cleverly exploited these sentiments to discredit the opposition. Bush recently told the Iraqi government that there will either be “unity or chaos.” Asad has said the same to Syrians, that the price of disunity—read, dissent—in the present political crisis is chaos. The Iraq debacle has given credence to the regime’s claim that foreign intervention would be disastrous.

The opposition’s response to the U.S. funding was predictable. All but a few voices publicly and unequivocally rejected the aid. Activists and dissidents frenetically burnished their nationalist credentials. Kilo declared, “We are not enemies of the regime. We want to fix the regime through a large national effort to protect the country especially against America.”⁶⁸ Hassan Abdul al-Azim spoke for the Damascus Declaration when he warned, “[I]f we detect that anyone is accepting foreign assistance, we will take an unqualified position against them”⁶⁹ A smaller, more extremist segment even rejected moral and diplomatic support for detained and harassed activists.⁷⁰

Some of this is intended to avoid accusations of treachery, but it also reflects a deep-seated distrust of U.S. policy, which always seems to be tilted toward Israel and inimical to Syrian interest. The fact that the February 2006 funding announcement came during the U.S. boycott of the democrati-

Opponents of the regime need outside support but cannot turn to the United States.

cally elected, Hamas-dominated government in Palestine provided fodder to skeptics who believe that U.S.-promoted democracy is a thin veneer for the extension of its strategic interests.⁷¹ Moreover, the United States' hesitance to construct a cease-fire in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 destroyed confidence among Western-friendly Arab reformists that the United States is committed to human rights and its Arab allies.

What Now?

For the United States to build a sustainable relationship with Syria's opposition and bolster their prospects, it will have to renew efforts to promote a comprehensive peace settlement in the region. Only a regional settlement between Israel and its remaining foes in the Arab world will reverse the growing radicalism and anti-Americanism of popular sentiment in the region and make it possible for Syria's opposition leaders to embrace U.S. policies in the region. As long as the Syrian regime can accuse the United States of undermining Syria's claim to the Golan Heights and of supporting Israeli efforts to claim Palestinian land and settle the West Bank, the Syrian opposition will keep Washington at arms length, and the regime will accuse it of weakening Syria during a time of crisis.

The Syrian opposition remains weak in the face of the regime's tremendous powers of repression and monopoly over the press. The Internet and satellite television have made it possible for the opposition to spread its message, but it still remains restricted and cannot compete with the state. The message of the liberal opposition reaches only the upper echelons of society who have access to the Internet and who are politically engaged.

Perhaps most damaging to the larger democracy debate in the region has been the failure of the United States to build a working pluralistic state in Iraq. The terrible violence and instability that has overtaken Syria's neighbor since the U.S. invasion has boosted Asad's legitimacy. Many Syrians, who were at first encouraged by Bush's claim that the Middle East was ready for democracy, now believe that experimenting with pluralism may be too risky. Like Iraq, Syria is a society of great religious and ethnic diversity. There is no guarantee that political violence would not erupt in Syria should the security state collapse. Asad has exploited this fear by claiming that, just as Washington was wrong about Iraq, it is wrong in suggesting that Syria is ready for regime change and democracy.

The war in Lebanon during the summer of 2006 also strengthened the regime and weakened the opposition. Hizballah's ability to withstand Israel's invasion made it extremely popular in Syria and reflected well on Asad, who has been a major Hizballah backer. The Syrian opposition by contrast, by allying itself with Hizballah's opponents in Lebanon, came out of the struggle

weakened. Not only was the pro-U.S. opposition severely undermined by the war, but Asad also accused it of tacitly supporting Israel and opposing the “Arab position.” Because of Hizballah’s popularity in Syria following the war, the Syrian public was sympathetic to the president’s argument.

Although the Syrian opposition is still no match for the Syrian government, it has made a number of advances over the last two years. Most importantly, it has begun the difficult process of unifying its ranks around a common set of demands that are founded on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. The Muslim Brotherhood, Syria’s oldest and most respected Islamic party, has abandoned claims that Islamic law must be instituted immediately in Syria and that non-Muslim Syrians do not share the same political rights as Muslims. Its leader has embraced the language of pluralism and equal rights for all citizens.

After Iraq, many Syrians now believe experimenting with pluralism may be too risky.

Likewise, the secular left has abandoned Marxism and vanguardism for more classic liberal demands of freedom and the rule of law. Notions of human rights, respect for individual liberties, and freedom of speech have now become common demands across the spectrum of Syria’s opposition leaders. A culture of greater liberalism is growing among Syria’s upper and middle classes even though it remains in competition with Islamism, which predominates among the lower middle classes.

Over time, even the violence in Iraq may have a modifying impact on the culture wars now being waged between Islamists and liberals. Syrians have been horrified by the violence in Iraq, and all parties have taken pains to renounce sectarianism and violent revolution. In the long run, only the creation of a common identity will help Syrians overcome authoritarian government. The opposition’s development of common principles has advanced this process.

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