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Syrian Civil Society in Conflict and Post-Conflict Setting

- *Joseph Daher*

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The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world. In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to identify the main challenges and research priorities for civil society in Syria for the upcoming years. For such a purpose, the writer analyzes the past and current situation of Syria and adopts a holistic approach in his analysis of the material situation in Syria in order to suggest propositions of direction for the future. This paper should be seen as a work in progress to which other elements could be added as per any new happening on the political scene. The research paper is based on four main areas of research:

1. Secure and viable conditions for the return of refugees and IDP's, and transitional justice;
2. Socio-economic developments and reconstruction;
3. Gender dynamics;
4. Sectarian and ethnic dynamics. Concluding, the research acknowledges that the Syrian civil society actors face many challenges and a very difficult situation for the future with the political evolutions in favor of the regime; nonetheless, it highlights that the documentation of the uprising that is unprecedented, surely offers a glimpse of hope in this regards.

Introduction

By summer 2018, the Syrian regime with the help of its allies, especially Iran and Russia, had controlled more than 60 percent of the territory in the country and nearly 75 percent of the population. As the regime was accumulating new military victories and capturing new territories with the assistance of its foreign allies, it started to envision reconstruction and establish the conditions for stabilizing territories under its control. However, numerous challenges were awaiting.

The war in Syria is still very far from over, and reconstruction has already started but on a small scale in certain regions; nonetheless, a global socio-economic and political perspective is absolutely needed to counter the main challenges facing the Syrian society. Different dynamics within Syrian society should be included for this purpose, including socio-economic inequalities, gender dynamics, sectarianism, ethnic divisions, and

regionalism. A holistic view is mostly necessary as these themes should be understood as a whole and not as separate items without any connection among them.

In this regard, the calls for "stability" and "security" made by the Syrian regime and other state actors on a worldwide scale should not prevent civil society actors from continuing their work to empower the society in order to seek improved and shared governance. Similarly, compensations and true reconciliation are key elements to reach some form of stability, although looking nearly impossible to achieve as the regime is consolidating and appears to be here to stay. Eventually, civil society actors can try to help policymakers understand the ties and tensions between these shared aims.

Civil society in Syria

The term civil society encompasses every organization operating outside the realm of the state and its actors, and includes organizations, educational and religious institutions, the media, and so forth. This paper will focus on actors of the civil society in Syria that tried to play an autonomous role in society away from the state, and challenge the power of the regime by calling for its democratization and an end to its repressive apparatus before and after the uprising.

Civil society under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad 1970-2000

The Syrian civil society had been nearly totally under the control of the regime since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970. The Ba'th Party was the only political organization that was allowed to organize events, lectures and public demonstrations, and publish and distribute newspapers on university campuses and even among soldiers at military barracks.

In line with the ongoing scheme to maintain social control, the use of popular corporatist organizations was also on the rise. For example, following Assad's coup in 1970, trade unions were progressively denatured in order to assist the regime rather than defend working class interests. The regime then established new professional associations and appointed new leaders acting for their far majority as corporatist arms of the state and the ruling party (Middle East Watch 1991: 19).

After Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, a wind of hope swept through various sectors in the country at first. In early 2001, the regime authorized the first privately-owned newspaper *al-Dommari*, owned by caricaturist Ali Ferzat, to resume publication after a halt of nearly 40 years. Nonetheless, the authorities did not hesitate to censor contents of newspapers it considered unacceptable, and the country was still far from any form of pluralism or free press (George 2003: 133).

At that time, discussion forums started growing popular among activists and opposition members, and by 2001, there were more than 170 forums across the country that engaged large numbers of participants (Abbas 2013: 18). However, the regime's officials were quick to brutally counter-attack at the rhetorical level through the press, accusing the opposition members of being backed by foreign countries and being anti-nationalist. The reprisal took a physical turn, as the regime forces were arresting or assaulting activists (George 2003: 48). By the end of the summer of 2001, ten of the most prominent civil society leaders were imprisoned, and all the debates forums, except for one, were closed (Landis and Pace 2009: 121).

Some youth movements that comprised university students from various backgrounds emerged out of these forums. Aleppo and Damascus saw the formation of clandestine student organizations that were more organized, but subsequently repressed as well.

Throughout the 2000s, Syrian civil society and political organizations continued to mobilize, calling for reforms and a democratization of the state. This came to be known as the "Statement of 99" or the "Committee to Revive Civil Society" (announced in a press release under the name of the "Statement of 1000"), which included intellectuals, artists, writers, researchers and even representatives of some political parties. The "Statement of 99", published in the Lebanese press in September 2000, called on the authorities to put an end to the martial law, liberate political prisoners and provide political freedoms (Abbas 2013: 18; Perthes 2004: 13).

In 2005, over 250 major opposition figures and political parties signed the "Damascus Declaration", a manifesto that called for "a democratic and radical change" in Syria based on dialogue, the end of the state emergency and the release of political prisoners. The signatories

to the declaration included the National Democratic Alliance (a nationalist and left-liberal-wing alliance of five parties), the committees for the revival of civil society, the Democratic Kurdish Coalition, the Kurdish Democratic Front, and a number of independent personalities such as former MP Riyad Seif. The Muslim Brotherhood of Syria supported the Damascus Declaration, but in 2006 they joined forces with fifteen other opposition groups along with the former vice-president of Syria Abdul Halim Khaddam, who had just defected from the regime, to establish the National Salvation Front (NSF). The "Damascus Declaration" did not join this new coalition, which was roundly criticized by several of its prominent signatories (Porat 2010: 4).

In December 2007, the National Council of the Damascus Declaration was established in Syria and included 163 members. Few days after its formation, the regime launched an arrest campaign targeting the Declaration's members, and 12 of members of its leadership were prosecuted and sentenced in 2008 to prison terms ranging between three and six years (Perrin 2008; Sawah 2012: 10; Kawakibi and Sawah 2013: 13). Arrests of political activists continued until the end of the 2000s. It is worth noting here that the Damascus Declaration and its leadership were increasingly poisoned by divisions (Carnegie 2012a).

More generally in the years preceding the beginning of the uprising, a new generation of young activists was rising in Syria, often not involved in traditional political parties. These activists carried out a series of community activities around social and economic issues. Between 2004 and 2006, several sit-ins were organized at the initiative of these young political activists and civil society organizations, on various issues relating to democratic and social rights (Sawah 2012: 14). These campaigns were an opportunity for young people to come into direct contact with the street and opened new channels for dialogue with the public on various issues (al-Aous 2013: 25).

Activists were also involved in social assistance to the victims of the drought that hit the Eastern region in Syria that forced hundreds of thousands to leave their hometowns and villages and come to Damascus countryside. Civil society activists started organizing several initiatives for the provision of food, shelter and toys and education for the children of the displaced population, risking their own safety while faced with a regime that opposed any social movement outside its umbrella. Young men and women also challenged the status quo, and drew a development plan to help the displaced return to their schools and home (Sawah 2012: 2).

Women's rights organizations also started gaining prominence, and were involved in the aforementioned campaigns. Al-Thara Group for example, the first website to tackle women's and children's rights in the country, started attracting considerable interest from civil activists (see Al-Aous 2013; Kawakibi and Sawah 2013).

It is worth noting that a vast segment of this new generation of activists would play an important role in the beginning of the uprising in 2011. It is also important to note confuse these civil society actors with the so-called NGOs promoted by the regime or linked to it (basically governmental NGOs "GONGOs"), which embraced the business elite linked to networks close to the regime. The rapid growth in the number of GONGOs went hand in hand with the repression of activists (Donati 2013: 44). Syria Trust for Development, an umbrella association set up with the sponsorship of Asma al-Assad in 2007, stands as an ideal example of these NGOs, as many evidences indicate it played a role in blocking the emergence of an autonomous and democratic civil society (Kawakibi 2013: 172).

Civil society during the uprising

The actors in the uprising came from several fabrics in the society. Even before the protests erupted in 2011, activists had been involved in various struggles against the regime, and the majority of them were secular democrats coming from all communities, including ethnic and religious minorities. Some of these activists played an important role within the grassroots committees and in the development of peaceful actions against the regime, which mostly included young individuals from lower-middle class, often graduates and users of social media. The Syrian grassroots civilian opposition was indeed the primary engine of the popular uprising against the Assad regime. They managed to sustain the uprising for several years by organizing and documenting protests and acts of civil disobedience, and by encouraging people to join the protests. The earliest manifestations of the 'coordinating committees' could be seen in the emergence neighborhood gatherings across Syria (Khoury D. 2011:3; Abi Najm 2011). These gatherings slowly developed internal structures and formed several coordination committees that played a particularly important role on a national level, particularly the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU), Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS) and the Local Coordination Committees (LCC). The cadres of these coordination committees were mostly highly educated and globalized male and female youths, including some human rights activists and lawyers. Some local coordination committees were not affiliated with any higher coalition, which did not prevent them from getting together with other coordination committees in neighboring areas.

The various coordination committees organized the popular resistance against the Assad regime, which in turn deemed them the dynamic of the uprising. They organized protests, campaigns of civil disobedience and strikes, played a substantial humanitarian role, and contributed to the militarization of the revolution. In 2011

and 2012, neighborhoods, villages and cities liberated from the regime forces saw an upsurge in civilian activities as large numbers of protestors flocked the streets. The relative absence of regime forces gave space for civilian activities (including discussions, debates, seminars and meetings), and allowed concerned actors to communicate and coordinate with their counterparts in different Syrian cities. Areas freed from the regime's security forces also started witnessing exemplars of self-organization, even if on a temporary basis.

The committees also played an important role in the ongoing revolutionary process by trying to coordinate among the various forms of popular resistance against the regime. By early 2012, there were approximately 400 different *tansiqiyyat* (the coordinating committees) in Syria, despite intensive campaigns of repression organized by the regime's security forces (Khoury D. 2013: 3).

By the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012, an increasing number of regions started to see the withdrawal or expulsion of regime forces by opposition armed groups. In the void they left behind, the grassroots organizations began to evolve into ad hoc structures of local government, and on many occasions LCC activists were the main nuclei of the local councils. In some regions liberated from the regime's armed forces, civil administrations were also set up to make up for the absence of the state and take charge of its duties in various fields like schools, hospitals, roads, water systems, electricity, and telecommunication (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014: 9).

This did not mean that there were no shortcomings in the local councils, such as the lack of representation of women or of religious minorities. Many female activists, notably from Aleppo, stated that they were not able to hold decision-making positions in their local councils or authorities because of their gender (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015: 32). Women were generally poorly

represented in most local councils throughout the uprising. A study conducted by Omran for Strategic Studies (2016: 16) between January and May 2016 on 105 local councils (out of 427 in all Syria) found that the percentage of female members was only 2 percent.

Councils were far from being well established in opposition-held areas and were at different stages of development, depending on their security situation, access routes to border areas, length of time since their establishment or existence of other competing

structures or spoilers (Khalaf R. 2015: 46). Civil councils were also not always completely autonomous from military groups, and often relied on military groups for resources (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2016: 158).

Council members were also appointed rather than elected, based on the influence of local military leaders, clan and family structures, and elders. According to a study made by researcher Agnes Favier (2016: 11),

"the majority of local councils (over 55 percent) did not emerge through elections but were established by 'elite self-selection' mechanisms (i.e. a group of leaders including rebel fighters, notables, tribes, families, and revolutionary activists agree to share the local council seats among themselves by consensus without elections)"

The selection process of the council's representatives also suffered from the lack of particular professional and technical skills.

Despite these limitations, local councils were able to restore a minimum level of social services in their regions and enjoyed some sort of legitimacy. The role of local councils continued throughout the years in various opposition-controlled territories, even as threats multiplied and the war deepened. The number of local councils however diminished continuously throughout the years because of the military advances of pro-regime forces while capturing opposition-held territories, and the attacks of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist armed

groups against civilians councils, replacing them with their owns.

The regime specifically targeted these networks of activists that had initiated demonstrations, civil disobedience actions and campaigns in favor of strikes, because of their qualities as organizers and their democratic and inclusive rhetoric and message, which undermined the propaganda of the regime that denounced a conspiracy of armed extremist and sectarian actors. Large numbers were imprisoned, killed or forced into exile. Civil society activists were largely and increasingly pushed outside the country to escape imprisonment or death.

Wars, destruction, refugees and IDPs

Seven years after the popular uprising erupted and later transformed into a murderous war, the situation in Syria is catastrophic at all levels, especially in terms of human loss. More than half of the population of Syria was displaced either internally or outside of the country. Moreover, an estimated 2.3 million people, approximately 11.5 percent of the population within Syria, were killed, injured or maimed as a result of the armed conflict, only in 2015 (SCPR 2015: 51). With the increase in mortality rate, life expectancy significantly diminished across all age groups, especially the youths, as a male's life expectancy at birth declined from 69.7 in 2010 to 48.4 in 2015 (SCPR 2016b: 9). By the end of 2015, 85.2 percent of Syrian people were living in poverty (SCPR 2016a: 37+ 45-46), and as 2016 drew its curtains down, the GDP was a shy $12.4 billion after it stood in 2010 stood at $60.2 billion, according to data by the Central Bureau of Statistics (cited in The Syria Report 2018).

Right of refugees and right of Return

The United Nations (UN) has been working on the issue of refugees and IDPs since the 1950s, and has been keen on emphasizing the need for voluntary repatriation and the right of the aforementioned individuals to return to their original homes. Alas, such endeavors rarely succeeded. UN officials and other policymakers have promoted an understanding of the right of return as providing a right to property restitution as well. In August 2005, a sub-commission of the UN Commission on Human Rights formally advocated guidelines addressing legal and technical issues related to property restitution for individuals arbitrarily or unlawfully displaced from their property. These guidelines are generally known or referred to as the "Pinheiro Principles" (or the Principles), after the UN Special Rapporteur on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro (Ballard 2010: 465).

The Pinheiro Principles introduced legal, administrative and enforcement guidelines for the construction and implementation of property restitution processes. More especially, they suggested elements of a legal framework within which a process of restitution might materialize, as well as possibilities for administering that process and options for enforcing restitution orders (UNHCR 2005).

The right to the restitution of one's original home has grown in significance following massive ethnic cleansing operations that occurred in Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo (Kibreab 2003: 27) and elsewhere as well throughout the world. Refugees and IDPs generally face tremendous obstacles in going back to their original home, which include proving the right to an occupancy in light of the destruction or nonexistence of property records. Other difficulties are resisting the intentional or collateral devastation of structures, surmounting abandonment laws that has the objective to deprive those who have fled their homes of their property rights, and confronting the possibility that others might have occupied homes during the interim without consent (secondary occupation) (Ballard 2010: 464).

The right of refugees to voluntarily and secured return is among the main concerns for the Syrian civil society. Actors fear that Decree 66 of 2012[1] and Decree 10 of April

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[1] Decree 66 (Cham Press 2012), which entered into force in September 2012, allowed the government to "redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas" and replace them with "modern" real estate projects with quality services (Ajib 2017). Initially the decree promulgated by Bashar al-Assad allowed the Damascus governorate to expel the populations of two large areas in Damascus: the first, already started, included Mazzeh, residential area near the presidential palace, and Kafr Soussa. The area of the second zone, included Mazzeh, Kafr Soussseh, Qanawat, Basateen, Daraya, and Qadam, reaches 880 hectares, or 10 percent of the area of Damascus. The evacuation of its inhabitants is announced for 2018 (Cham Press 2012).

2018[2], by allowing the destruction and expropriation of large areas, can be used as an efficient instrument for rapid and large development projects that would benefit regime cronies, while at the same time operating as punishments measure against populations known for their opposition to the regime. Such decrees aim at replacing the former populations that once resided in the destroyed and expropriated areas, with higher social classes and new elites who, prior to the war, were generally less inclined to rise up against the regime, and other populations supportive of the regime.

Another strain facing the return of civilians to certain areas are the conditions imposed by the regime's various security institutions. First, an individual had to possess the necessary documents to access their destroyed property. However, the war has left many Syrian land registries destroyed, some at the deliberate initiative of pro-regime forces in some recaptured areas in the country such as Zabadani, Daraya, and Qusayr, in addition to Homs, making it complicated for residents to prove home ownership (Chulov 2017). According to approximate pre-war estimates by the Ministry of Local Government, only about 50 percent of land in Syria was officially registered. Another 40 percent had boundaries delimited but had not yet been registered. The multiple land registries were paper-based and often not properly stored (Prettitore 2016). It is worth noting here that estimates of the population figures who lived in informal housing varied, usually fluctuating between 30 to 40 percent; they may have been as high as 50 percent (Goulden 2011: 188).

A significant number of displaced people had also lost their ownership documents or did not have them in the first place, according to Laura Cunial, a legal and housing expert at the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Nearly half of the Syrian refugees surveyed by the NRC and the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said that their home had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the war, while only 9 percent had their property title deeds with them and in good condition. According to the survey published in 2017, large proportions of those refugees actually came from informal areas, where property records were often absent; these areas represented around 40 percent of all housing units in Syria (Yazigi 2017: 6; Zweynert 2018).

However, even those who had the necessary documents often found it difficult to access their properties. The process of entry into the areas controlled by the regime involved blackmail, bribes and threats of detention; it often required obtaining entry permits from various security institutions in order for carriers to cross checkpoints. Residents were also required to pay electricity, telephone and water bills for the years of absence during the war, which equated nearly 50 percent of the cost of these assets (Aldeen, Syria Untold, Syrian Independent Media Group 2018).

Add to that, opposition activists would most likely not return out of fear of detention and torture; others do not see any possibility of compensation by the regime because of their political activities. Decree No. 63 enacted in 2012 allowed the Ministry of Finance to seize immovable assets and property from individuals who fell under Law No. 19 of 2012, the counterterrorism law. According to Human Rights Watch, the former law provided "a dangerously broad interpretation of what constitutes terrorism, and unfairly criminalizes a large segment of the population without any due process rights or fair trial" (cited in Othman Agha 2018).

Similarly, the processes of so called "reconciliation agreements" multiplied throughout 2017 and 2018 as

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[2] Decree No. 10 was enacted as an amendment to Decree No 66 of 2012 and stipulated that property owners would have to submit their title deeds to the relevant authorities, all local administrative units, within one year, if they were not able to do it, they could ask their relatives to do so by procuration or to be represented by an attorney. Law No 10 therefore extended Decree 66 to the whole of the country in the sense that it permitted all local administrative units (LAUs) throughout Syria, such as cities and governorates, to configure real estate development zones within their administrative boundaries and, based on that, to expropriate their populations and rebuild them (The Syria Report 2018a).

the regime tightened its control over former opposition-held areas and security forces were arresting former FSA members or civilians, or forcing them to disappear in unknown conditions. This demonstrated how Syrians were suffering from the lack of safety and security.

The Syrian civil society based today mostly outside the country has an important duty of working in order to help as much as possible the voluntary and secured right to their homes. As mentioned, property restitution is a right under international law, while the security and safety of refugees and IDPs in their former locations is a necessity to guarantee their voluntarily return. If these conditions are not present, safe return becomes an impossible task.

Guarantees in this regard are almost entirely off the table in light of the persistence of the Assad regime. However, some recommendations can be put forward, already from now as small portions of refugees are returning or summoned to, to try to provide resources to assist Syrian refugees to secure this right through different means.

- Helping refugees and IDPs in proving their property rights,
- seeking financial compensations and assistances to return to their former homes,
- monitoring their return and security to guarantee a safe process,
- monitoring the Centre for the Reception, Allocation and Accommodation of Refugees, which will "monitor the return of all temporarily-displaced people and Syrian refugees from foreign countries to their places of permanent residence",
- ensuring that there is no discrimination (ethnic, sect, gender, etc...) against refugees, in order to prevent homogenization of regions and the return of particular categories of refugees such as

in Bosnia and Herzegovina[3]
The "Ten Principles for Protecting Refugees and Internally Displaced People Arising from Burma's Rohingya Crisis" (Human Rights Watch 2017) stands as a great source in this issue, as it lists series of principles such as recognition of refugee status (see below), provision of humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, and IDPs without any discrimination, and secure and safe voluntary return.

Right to remain and have a life in exile country with all rights

At the same time, even with the strive for the right to return as explained above, the struggle to ensure the right of refugees to remain in their host countries and guarantee them, as well their rights in these societies, is also vital. Pressures are mounting in neighboring countries in order to push Syrians to return forcefully to Syria without security guarantees. These countries such as Lebanon and Turkey, which do not recognize Syrians as refugees, were and still unfortunately receive Syrians as temporary guests who need temporary haven (Kibreab 2003: 25).

In 2017, UNHCR said that it is not yet safe for refugees to return, but assured its willingness to help those who do choose to go back with their documentation (Reuters Staff 2018).

Taking it back to the Bosnia case, most of the country's refugees were admitted into European countries under temporary protection, and were expected to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina as soon as possible following the end of the war. UNHCR The UNHCR had put forward the temporary protection regimes as a way of persuading and encouraging European countries to welcome a larger number of refugees without assuring them proper rights. Under such a regime, the individual has no access to determination procedures,

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[3] In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as Cox (1998:38) states «During and since the war, all three groups have used property rights to cement the results of ethnic cleansing, erecting legal and administrative barriers in the way of return. In addition, by giving property to members of their own ethnic groups, the authorities reinforced the results of ethnic cleansing."

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and is provided a much more restricted package than those listed under the 1951 Convention, especially when it comes to the rights of employment (Cox 1998: 617). Soon after the end of the Bosnia war, German authorities for example considered that the temporary protection regime had ended, which left some 220,000 individuals liable for deportation as of 1 December 1997. Around 1,000 Bosnians were deported from Germany between August 1996 and the end of 1997. Most of the remaining refugees had their "residence" or "toleration" permits cancelled, and were sent notice of impending deportation. The threat of deportation, accompanied by the suspension or reduction of social benefits, was employed to pressure refugees either to return by their own means or to participate in "voluntary" repatriation programs organized by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration. Approximately 95,000 refugees returned from Germany in 1997, most into internal displacement (Cox 1998: 618).

Here we can see the significance of the right of refugees to remain in their host countries and opposed forced returns. In this perspective work and collaboration with local associations, civil society and public administrations working on the defense of democratic and social rights pertaining to refugees can be helpful. The right to housing, education, work, etc... to enable the refugees to be part of their host societies can also be included in this framework.

More generally and in addition to the lobbying work towards governments and INGOS of many NGOs, a change of orientation or at least more energy could be put to build solidarity network from below and work with Syrian refugee communities in their host countries.

Transitional Justice

The concept of transitional justice has emerged in the past decades and can be traced to the events that shaped a number of Latin American countries in the 1980s and 1990s as they challenged their own dictators and authoritarian regimes. The experiences of Argentina (1980s), Chile (1990) and El Salvador (1992) are ideal examples as these countries aimed at uncovering the truth behind dark chapters in their histories. Argentina's fact-finding commission addressed a widely shared national concern for the fate of its 'disappeared' for example.

The concept developed further during South Africa's landmark process in 1994 and again during later transitions in Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Timor Leste, Kenya, Afghanistan, Iraq and many others. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a valuable forum through which victims could share their experiences; it was also a platform for engaging a number of low-level perpetrators in this conversation. In the cases of Sierra Leone and the Balkans, special ad hoc criminal tribunals were created and some personnel bearing significant responsibility for some of the most serious crimes committed during their conflicts were trialled.

Transitional justice[4] and reconciliation are key goals for the civil society actors for the future of the country. In this perspective, documentation of crimes by civil society organizations is fundamental in reclaiming the centrality of victims in transitional justice processes through a renewed focus on the importance of the role of victims and of addressing stories of victimhood. Their histories are therefore not forgotten, neither are the crimes of the regime and other armed actors, including the wide range of opposition militias. Noha Aboueldahab (2018) echoes this notion when she says:

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[4] There is no single agreed upon definition of transitional justice, it is generally understood as a set of judicial and non-judicial processes and mechanisms that a society adopts to address a legacy of large-scale abuses and atrocities.

"Documentation is a process that has been particularly vital to the preparation of criminal cases for local and international courts, for the preservation of memory, the preservation of history, and for truth-seeking initiatives geared toward reconciliation. International, Independent, and Impartial Mechanism (IIIM), prosecutions of Syrians in German and Swedish courts, and other international avenues have used the extensive documentation produced by Syrian civil society in order to pursue and prepare for judicial accountability via universal jurisdiction".

The documentation of violations of human rights in Syria therefore serves the objectives of preparing evidences for future criminal prosecutions, and keeps the memory and history of victims alive, in order to shed light on a period of oppression and allow for an understanding of the broader political culture and the role of specific institutions. Syrians are well aware of the cost of impunity; they can still sense the memory and impact of massacres and violent political confrontations in the 1970s and 1980s.

Syrian activists and human rights lawyers have used universal jurisdiction laws that allow third-party countries like Germany, to prosecute Syrians for crimes such as torture. Mazen Darwish, a Syrian lawyer and activist, along with several other former Syrian detainees, has been at the forefront of pushing for criminal cases in Germany. One such case accuses six high-ranking military intelligence officials close to Syrian Bashar Assad of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The well-known Syrian military defector,

who is known by the pseudonym "Caesar"[5], massively contributed to the documentation of violation of human rights after leaking 55,000 images of men, women, and children who had been tortured and murdered by the Syrian regime (Aboueldahab 2018). In November 2018, French prosecutors issued arrest warrants for three senior Syrian regime and intelligence officials[6] on charges of torture, enforced disappearances, crimes against humanity and war crimes[7]. Tackling this aspect is very important in order to maintain the pressure on the Assad's regime and its ruling personnel.

In addition to all this, transitional justice can also include a social component by integrating effort to recover state assets and punish serious financial crimes such as privatization of state, public assets, or distribution of public land plots through processes that benefit businessmen close to the regime at the expense of the interests of popular classes and public resources more generally.

Again transitional justice should be seen as a global process including various aspects. The main challenge mentioned at the beginning of this text, is that Syria is not witnessing a process of stable and sustainable political transition towards a form of peace in Syria, governed by the rule of law. Here, comprehensive justice and accountability could be implemented process to defeat the culture of impunity that has allowed violations to go unchallenged for decades. The foundations of the regime are there to remain unfortunately. In this perspective, the situation in Syria is closer to Lebanon post civil war when no accountability or justice for the crimes committed during the civil took place. No one has ever been prosecuted for the crimes that were committed then, in large part due to a comprehensive amnesty law passed in 1991 that allowed the war elites to keep their power. This amnesty law is today largely felt to have denied victims their right to justice, allowed many of those guilty of serious crimes to rise to positions of power in Lebanon and encouraged others to follow the pathway of crimes and violations that were amnestied (Dawlaty 2017).

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[5] Caesar was a military photographer between 2011 and 2013 in Syria.

[6] The director of the National Security Bureau Ali Mamlouk; head of Airforce Intelligence Jamil Hassan, who is already the subject of a German arrest warrant; and head of the Air Force Intelligence Investigative Branch at Mezzeh military airport, Abdel Salam Mahmoud.

[7] The arrest warrants were issued following a case filed in France in 2016 by Obeida Dabbagh, whose brother and nephew, Mazen and Patrick Abdelkader Dabbagh, dual Syrian-French nationals, were arrested and forcibly disappeared by Syrian Airforce Intelligence in Damascus in November 2013.

Socio-economic development and reconstruction

A number of authors put forward economic grievances that marginalized large sections of the population and eroded the Syrian regime's political base that one of the most important reasons behind the eruption of the 2011 uprising in Syria. Gilbert Achcar (2013; 2016) described in his two books that the Syrian revolutionary process was rooted in the same reasons as the other popular uprisings in the region.

Syria underwent an accelerated implementation of neoliberal policies in the decade after Bashar al-Assad rose to power in 2000, which also represented an instrument with which the new ruler could consolidate his power. The aim was to encourage private accumulation principally through the marketization of the economy while the state withdrew from key areas of social welfare provision, aggravating already existing socio–economic problems.

The share of the private economy continued to grow, reaching up to 65 percent of Syrian GDP (over 70 percent according to some estimates) in 2010, while also being the largest employer. Approximately 75 percent of the Syrian labour force worked in the private sector (Achcar 2013: 24). The Syrian economy became increasingly rent-based, as the share of productive sectors in the GDP diminished from 48.1 percent in 1992 to 40.6 percent in 2010. Moreover, the share of wages in the national income was less than 33 percent in 2008-2009, compared to nearly 40.5 percent in 2004 – meaning that profits and rents constituted more than 67 percent of GDP (Marzouq 2011).

Neoliberal policies benefitted the Syrian upper class and foreign investors (particularly from the Gulf Monarchies and Turkey) at the expense of the vast majority of Syrians, who were hit by inflation and the rising cost of living. Liberalization measures were accompanied by the reduction subsidies, the halt of public sector employment expansion, and the reduction of the state's role in domestic investment. Social security spending was reduced considerably by the cutbacks to the pension system in the 2000s.

Neoliberal policies and deepening processes of privatization created new monopolies in the hands of relatives and other figures associated with Bashar al-Assad and the regime, either through familial ties or public and governmental positions or posts in the military and security service. Rami Makhlouf, Bashar al-Assad's cousin and richest man in Syria, represented the mafia-style process of privatization led by the regime. His vast economic empire included telecommunications, oil and gas, as well as construction, banks, airlines, retail, and more (Seifan 2013: 113). The role of the new businessmen emerging from the state bourgeoisie and high officialdom grew prominent in Syrian economic life, increasingly taking up positions occupied by the old and traditional bourgeoisie.

The regime thus expanded its predatory activities from control over "rents derived from the state" to a position that permitted it to dominate "private rents" without even a modicum of transparency. These new incomes also enabled ruling elites to establish a network of associates whose loyalty was purchased with market shares and protection.

Bashar al-Assad's political rule and economic policies led to an unprecedented impoverishment of society while the wealth gap continued to widen, even though the GDP was growing at an average rate of 4.3 percent per year from 2000 to 2010 in real terms, but benefiting only a small strata of economic elites. During this period, GDP more than doubled, going up from $28.8 billion in 2005 to around $60 billion in 2010 (The World Bank 2017).

In 2003-2004, the poorest 20 percent of the population accounted for only 7 percent of total expenditure, while the wealthiest 20 percent were responsible for 45 percent of total expenditure. In 2007, the percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line was 33 percent, representing approximately seven million people, while 30 percent of them were just above this level (Abdel-Gadir, Abu-Ismail, and El-Laithy 2011: 2-3). The proportion of the poor was higher in rural areas (62 percent) than in urban areas (38 percent), while over half (54.2 percent) of all unemployed were located in rural areas (IFAD 2011: 1).

There has been a continuous impoverishment of Syria's rural areas since the 1980s, and the droughts that started in 2006 accelerated the rural exodus. This situation was exacerbated by an annual population growth rate of around 2.5 percent that particularly affected small- to mid-sized towns in rural areas, where the population has often multiplied by five to ten times since the 1980s.

Public services provided by the state in these towns did not increase; in fact, they often even shrank as a result of neo-liberal policies, leading to a deterioration of living conditions for the local population (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2016: 46-47).

This is not to say that we should adopt an economistic perspective, which reduces all elements to the economic sphere. I argue instead that we should embrace the socio-economic situation, which pays attention to increasing inequalities in the country and the general impossibility for popular classes to express their grievances through institutional processes. This continues to be the case even outside institutions – such as through strikes and other popular actions – because of the absence of democratic rights and settings. These socio-economic and political factors created the material conditions that eventually led to the uprising, as the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky argues (2008: 353):

"In reality, the mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection, if it were, the masses would always be in revolt. It is necessary that the bankruptcy of the social regime, being conclusively revealed, should make these privations intolerable, and that new conditions and new ideas should open the prospect of a revolutionary way out".

Certainly the news, ideas and conditions came from witnessing millions of people in the streets in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries of the region, demanding the overthrow of their dictators in the previous weeks and months. This created, in the minds of large sections of the population in the region a turning point at which the possibility of overthrowing heads of state through mass mobilization could be a solution.

This has unfortunately been an issue often absent or rather not taken into consideration significantly in the discourse of civil society actors in Syria. The countries studied in this paper also suffered from similar socio-economic problems prior to the conflicts/ civil war.

The war did not stop the regime's policy of deepening neo-liberal reforms and therefore increasing the control of its crony capitalists on the Syrian economy, while impoverishing even larger sectors of the population. At the same time, warlords, who grew in prominence in society during the conflict, were increasingly becoming integrated into the formal economy by establishing formal companies, which were registered as limited liabilities, or participating in investment projects.

In this perspective, the reconstruction issue would probably be one of the main projects through which the regime and crony capitalists linked to it would consolidate their political and economic power, while providing foreign allies with a share of the market to reward them for their assistance.

These large real estate projects were expected to attract foreign capital, crucial for Syrian reconstruction. The investments of public and private actors were indeed insufficient to rebuild the country, while the state was seriously indebted. The reconstruction funded by foreign capital remained as we can see insufficient at the time of the writing. Russia and Iran were running out of capital to help in the immediate future, while China was reluctant to engage massively in such an unstable country.

The issue of reconstruction was also connected to the capacities of the regime to provide stability in the areas under its control and a business-friendly environment favorable for investments.

Recommendations?

Socio-economic issues and living conditions of the popular classes have had important significances and influences on the origins and developments of the

uprising. The issue of reconstruction will be influenced by these factors.

In this framework some recommendations can be made to tackle these issues on a more strategic level.

- Continued sanctions on the country that harm the general society and only favor the regime and its cronies in developing the black market should be revised. Sanctions against regime's individuals can be an appropriate mechanism, but sanctions on the general population can hardly be seen as a solution advancing the causes of the civil society among the popular classes.
- Today, massive international funding (from Western countries and Gulf monarchies) is not as we mentioned in the text on the agenda, but this could change. Therefore, a frame for international funding could be suggested in order to take into consideration a number of requirements such as inclusion of local populations and their interests in reconstruction plans (owners and tenants provided with new housing), transparency of budgets, respects of workers rights (see below), etc... The conditions are made in order to prevent, and / or limit the regime and businessmen linked to it to use these funds to advances their own (political, security and financial) interests
- In this perspective, the work conditions of workers and their rights in reconstruction sites can also be included in the requirements for international funding. Following the 1970 Hafez Assad-led coup, the trade unions were denatured, and made to assist the regime, rather than defending working class interests. Independent and combative trade unionists were repressed violently in the past few decades. Experiences of the foundations of independent trade unions in Egypt for example can be used as models to inspire suggestions and possible solutions that challenged the role of the official general trade union supported by the state and encourage self-organization of workers, their rights and conditions of work.

- Learning from past and foreign experiences, the privatization of reconstruction benefiting particular strata of the society and / or particularly individuals close to the regime could be monitored and challenged, and may provide and propose solutions to encourage the monitoring by local population; hence, participation of public institutions in reconstruction plans could be envisioned. It is clear that public institutions are under regime's authority; nonetheless, they limit the chance for crony capitalists allied to the regime to empower themselves, and offer more possibilities for citizens to demand for more transparency. As argued in the text, privatization of reconstruction will further expand the regime's predatory activities from control over "rents derived from the state" to a position that permits it to dominate "private rents" without even a modicum of transparency. These new incomes would enable ruling elites to establish network of associates linked directly to them.

- The reproduction of previous social economic and regional inequalities present before the war should also be prevented in reconstruction plans. Economically marginalized Sunni rural workers constituted the most important component of the Syrian popular movement, along with urban employees and self-employed workers who have borne the brunt of neoliberal policies, particularly since Bashar al-Assad rose to power in 2000. The geography of the revolts in Idlib, Dar'a and other middle-sized towns as well as in other rural areas exhibits a pattern_ namely, all were historical strongholds of the Ba'th Party, and benefited from agricultural reforms in the 1960s.

Socio-economic issues and living conditions of the popular classes have had important significances and influences on the origins and developments of the uprising.

In the decade prior to the uprising, women in Syria greatly suffered from the implementation of neo-liberal policies. The labor force participation rate of women aged 15 and above decreased from between 21 and 20.4 to 13.2 / 12.7 percent between 2001 and 2010, one of the lowest rates in the world. The gender gap in access to employment was also greater in rural than in urban areas (Aita 2009: 6).

The unemployment rate in 2007 was estimated at 22.6 percent (14.5 percent for men, and 53 percent for women), increasing to 30.3 percent, if non-citizens were accounted for. Unemployment rates among young women were almost twice as high as those among young men (Aita 2009: 6), while youth unemployment rate was 48 percent, six times higher than the rate of unemployment among adults (IFAD: 2011: 1).

Similarly in terms of rights, major discriminations existed against women. For example the 2012 constitution stipulates that the president must be a Muslim man, while "the main source of law is the Sharia". Syria also has eight different personal status laws, each of which is applied according to the religious sect of an individual. These laws also include major discriminations against women.

Historically, the Assad regime since the period of Hafez al-Assad has developed a religiously conservative discourse and encouraged a conservative Islamic establishment to channel Islamic currents and legitimize the regime.

Women's participation

The first two years of the uprising saw considerable participation from women in demonstrations and activities. Women have been instrumental to the civil disobedience movement since its earliest stages. They also started to organize their own groups and movements within the opposition bodies, in which they were marginalized.

Another important element in the involvement and participation of women in the uprising was the issue of breaking social codes and overcoming traditional barriers. Female activists often agreed that the beginning of the revolution opened the door for women to challenge restrictive social conventions, whether those conventions were legal, familial, religious or social (Dawlati 2015: 39).

In some areas, however, this was made more difficult not only for security reasons but also because of religious conservative trends. Women revolutionaries were for example, given mandatory male protection, while segregated from men in some demonstrations, or they were simply prohibited from participation. Women were also left out of decision-making positions such as in representation in local LCCs, despite the fact that four out of eight members of the LCC's executive bureau were women (Kannout 2016: 37-42).

There was also gendering of roles assigned to women in the activities within the protest movement, despite their deep involvement in the uprising in various fields.

Women's associations also raised the issue of representation of women in local councils within the country and activism in society. However, the participation of women, just as the protest movement, diminished throughout the years with the violent repression of the regime, increasing militarization of the uprising and rise of Islamic fundamentalism and jihadist forces.

The spread and hegemony of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces indeed led to more and more exclusion of women from public life, and constraints on women's rights to work, to seek education, as well as freedom of mobility.

Women, specific target of the repression

Security apparatus and Shabihas targeted women in areas considered to be supporting the uprising. They used rape in particular as a powerful weapon of repression and terror. Women were assaulted and/or raped by militiamen at checkpoints. Worse, rape campaigns were organized by pro-regime militias inside the houses of the women while their families would be present. Women in the regime's prisons were similarly subjected to inhuman and degrading and sexual abuses.

Various human rights organizations report more than tens of thousands of rape cases in the regime's prisons (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2017). It was an organized and planned crime of great magnitude. Its systematic, planned and large-scale nature by regime's organs made it a crime against humanity. The above figures were considered conservative because in many cases surviving women did not wish to expose themselves to the stigma and taboos surrounding rape and sexual violence. This was why inhuman and degrading treatment and torture suffered by women in prison were very difficult to document.

Imprisoned women were doubly victimized and isolated from the both the regime and from their own families and society who rejected them, and in some cases went even further to killing them. The patriarchal structures of society come to reinforce the torture organized by the Assad regime, which itself played on these structures: the rape was knowingly used to 'dishonor' the whole family, even the clan or the neighborhood, basing on the sexist stereotype that the honor of a family was based on the respectability of the women who were part of it (Cojean 2014; Loizeau 2017). A testimony of woman activist from Daraya reflected on this situation:

"While they (local population) considered the detention of men a Medal of Honor, they believed that the detention of women is a sign of disgrace and dishonor, due to the likability of rape that might encumber families and break their backs" (cited in Kannout 2016: 38)

Similar problems occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda. Many of those who became pregnant were ostracized by their families and communities. Some abandoned their babies; others committed suicide. The idea of sex as a conquest, associated with toxic masculinity and gender stereotypes, was integrally connected with the sexualization of domination. Historically, military conquest and repression were very often accompanied by coercive measures and sexual crimes. Sexual harassment and humiliation in all its forms are techniques used to dissuade women from participating in resistance activities and protest

movements and to establish the domination of the repressive power (Sears: 2017: 187-188).

Violence against women, especially rape, has been widespread in recent wars from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Peru to Rwanda, where girls and women were singled out for rape, imprisonment, torture and execution.

It was not until 1992, in the face of widespread rapes of women in the former Yugoslavia, that rape was included as a crime against humanity in the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY, 1993), alongside other crimes such as torture and extermination, when committed in armed conflict and directed against a civilian population. In 2001, the ICTY became the first international court to find an accused person guilty of rape as a crime against humanity. Furthermore, the Court expanded the definition of slavery as a crime against humanity to include sexual slavery. Previously, forced labor was the only type of slavery to be viewed as a crime against humanity. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR, 1994) also declared rape to be a war crime and a crime against humanity. In 1998, the ICTR became the first international court to find

an accused person guilty of rape as a crime of genocide (used to perpetrate genocide) (United Nations 2018a).

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, in force since July 2002, includes rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or "any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity" as a crime against humanity when it is committed in a widespread or systematic way. Arrest warrants issued by the ICC include several counts of rape as both a war crime and a crime against humanity (United Nations 2018b).

Effects of the war on women

Females represented 57 percent of the total number of IDPs in Syria, exceeding 70 percent in some areas (SCPR 2016b: 69). The worsening economic situation had social consequences with the increase in the rates of divorce and polygamy in Syria. According to official figures, polygamous relationships accounted for 30 percent of marriages registered in Damascus in 2015, up from just five percent in 2010 (AFP 2016b). Lana Khattab and Henri Myrttinen (2017) argued as well that:

"While gender-based violence was relatively widespread in Syria before the war, the reality of the violent conflict exacerbated it. Various forms of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation and abuse have increased, be it early marriage of girls, sexual slavery, homophobic and transphobic violence, or sexualized torture of men, women, girls and boys in situations of detention".

Syrian women both within the country and in refugee contexts encountered substantial barriers as they tried to establish new livelihoods and increasingly exposed to protection risks. At the same time, the consequence of the shortage of men in Syria, because they mostly died or emigrated, and their corresponding absence from the labor market, as a result of fighting, injuries or imprisonment, led women to occupy more space in society and in the workforce, by notably inadvertently opening the door to previously male-dominated employment sectors or being a far majority in some sectors.

According to 2015 FAO estimates for example, 65 percent of the economically active population in agriculture in 2015 were women, representing an increase of six percent since 2009. In some areas, women could constitute up to 90 percent of the agricultural labor force (cited in Aniyamuzaala and Buecher 2016:31). The result was that by 2016 female-headed households constituted 12-17 percent of the population in Syria and up to one-third in refugee-hosting countries (Aniyamuzaala and Buecher 2016: 4). Female entrepreneurship rose at the same time from 4.4 percent in 2009 to 22.4 percent in 2016 (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2017). However this was far from meaning equality, as women received generally substantially lower pay and other forms of discriminations existed and remained. Income in female-led households tended "to be below that of male-headed households," according to the research assessment "Women, Work & War" published by CARE (Aniyamuzaala and Buecher 2016:5) in 2016. At the same time, in September 2018 at the local municipal "elections" in regime-held areas, among the common denominators of the various "national unity" lists registered was the very low female representation in most governorates, with male candidates representing 95 percent of the lists in Aleppo and Suweida for example (Mashi 2018).

Recommendations

The recognition of the existence of civilian female victims of rape and torture, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, and their equal access to remedies and services, regardless of their physical location within or without the country, is an important issue to work on and tackle. Similarly, recommendations could be made for transitional justice actions to ensure the public acknowledgment and memorialization of women victims, their access to compensation, including non-material damages, and their empowerment. Specialized psychosocial and counselling programs and trauma-sensitivity for women survivors of sexual violence and rape would also be very much welcome to be integrated in propositions.

In this framework, justice and accountability for female survivors of sexual violence in armed conflict is not merely a matter of international or local prosecution but also the provision of programs and services to address the psychological and physical injuries to victims and to assist their reintegration into the broader community. Too often in post-conflict settings female survivors of sexual assault are left with little community support, insufficient economic means to sustain themselves (and often children who are the product of rape), and profound physical and psychological trauma (Jefferson 2004).

More generally the improvement of women's human rights in all aspects of their lives and the elimination of discrimination against them can be included in global solutions to engage in, while working on the empowerment of Syrian women to become active members of society, both economically and socially, and key partners in the political decision-making at the local and international level.

For example in the reconstruction process, the growing importance of women in society and in workplaces could be one place of action.

One famous women's organization in the field of empowerment was Women Now for Development, directed by the feminist activist Samar Yazbeck. Its objectives were to enable Syrian women to become active members of society, both economically and socially, and to become a key partner in the political decision-making at the local and international level. In 2015, the organization grew significantly. Hundreds of women had enrolled in vocational courses, including hairdressing, nursing, and textile work, and financial education courses, such as operations methods and budget preparations (Syria Untold 2016). Women Now for Development has been active in the country and popular among Syrian women refugees in neighboring countries.

In this framework, an important recommendation that could be tackled for the short term is that for Syrian civil society actors to increase the number of women at their own organizations at all levels[8]. As argued in the report Citizenship for Syria, recommended actions include favoring the expansion of "the level of representation for women in a way that mirrors Syrian diversity across administrative bodies on all levels, in addition to thoroughly investigating the reasons behind the low levels of participation of women in managerial levels in Syrian organization" (Citizens for Syria 2017).

In this perspective, some elements can be learned from the Kurdish PYD experiences regarding women's rights and participation in society, although without romanticizing it. The PYD indeed promoted women's rights and participation at all levels, an accomplishment even recognized by its critics although with contradictions. Civil activist Mahwash Sheiki (2017) from Qamichli, one of the founders of Komela Şawîşka, a women's association established in Syria after the beginning of the uprising in 2012, acknowledged the improvements in the conditions of women, despite characterizing the PYD as a "totalitarian ideological party that doesn't accept others with different ideologies". In the areas controlled by the PYD, the experience of the areas under the part's control was hailed for the high levels of inclusion and participation of women in all sectors of society, including the military action, the secularization of laws and institutions and to some extent integration and participation of various ethnic and religious minorities. The authoritarian practices of the PYD forces against rival Kurdish political actors and activists and opposition members from other communities were however criticized.

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[8] 25 percent of Civil Society Organizations have no women representation among their board members, as the high-stake positions were all occupied by men, while women's presence in these organizations, severely low as it is, is merely restricted to selective or non-essential. With regards to women representation on the governing board, (42 percent) of all organizations in opposition-held areas do not include any female candidates on their board of directors, while only (13 percent) of CSOs working abroad and less that (5 percent) of organizations working in Kurdish-control and government-held areas have no women representation on their boards (Citizens for Syria 2017: 22).

Sectarian and ethnic dynamics

Firstly, our understanding of sectarianism is that it is a product of modern times and not a tradition from time immemorial. As Palestinian and Lebanese scholar Ussama Makdissi has noted, "sectarianism is a modern story, and for those intimately involved in its unfolding, it is the modern story – a story that has and that continues to define and dominate their lives" (Makdissi 2000:2). Lebanese Marxist Mehdi Amel provided a strikingly original analysis of the phenomenon of sectarianism in the Middle East region and the relationship between sect and class. Amel's (1986:248) approach to sectarianism emphasized its contemporary role in facilitating patterns of class power within the colonially-dominated societies of the Middle East. In this sense, he argued against what he described as 'historicist' perspectives that characterized sectarianism as a primordial remainder of earlier periods of history, which would disappear through processes of modernization.

The rise of sectarian tensions in the Middle East should be situated and understood in their political and socio-economic context on a local, regional and international level. The rise of sectarian tensions after 1979 was mostly rooted as a result of the increasing political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran that instrumentalized them for political objectives. This rivalry therefore boosted Sunni and Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist movements. Various authoritarian and despotic regimes in the region have also made use of sectarianism to consolidate their power and divide their population.

In this perspective, sectarian analysis characterizing the regime as Alawi or all Sunnis as victims is firstly not analytically incorrect, but also not helpful in challenging sectarianism. Although the domination of Alawi personalities at the head of the regime and its coercive instruments (the military and the secret services) is undisputable, reducing the nature of the state or its dominant institutions to an "Alawi identity" is problematic and does not level up to the complex networks of alliances made by the regime's elite.

Syria

The establishment of the modern patrimonial state occurred under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad. He patiently built a state in which he could secure power through various means such as sectarianism, regionalism, tribalism and clientelism, which were managed through informal networks of power and patronage. This came alongside harsh repression against any form of dissent. These tools allowed the regime to integrate, booste or undermine groups belonging to different ethnicities and religious sects.

During the uprising, the Assad regime adapted its strategies and means of repression according to regions and their sectarian and ethnic composition. The objective of the regime was similar across sites: to quell the protests, divide people according to primordial identities and spread fear among them in order to break the inclusive message of the protest movement.

To spread sectarianism and fear or hatred of the others in this perspective was a key tool. The most violent way to instigate sectarianism was though massacres committed by pro-regime militias and / or Shabihas, mostly from Alawi backgrounds in some specific areas, targeting poor Sunni villages and popular neighborhoods in mixed regions, particularly Homs and Hama provinces and the coastal regions where Alawi and Sunni populations lived side by side. It is also important to say that not all "Shabihas" were Alawis as some have claimed, but came from various ethnic and religious groups.

The dynamics of repression and the regime's strategic use of violence were central to the sectarianazation process. They had the clear objective of increasing fear and sectarianism among local communities and on a larger scale. The Assad regime is the main actor responsible for the killing, displacement and destruction as well as being the key to the rise of sectarianism and racism in the country. Assad's regime was accustomed to playing the "sectarian card" and more generally "primordial identities" (racism and tribalism) to divide the Syrian people and put the different groups against each other in order to maintain its rule.

However, as mentioned previously, it is wrong to describe the uprising as a Sunni revolution against a minoritarian regime, or similarly that all Sunnis were victims or targets. The regime's strategic objective through its repression measures was not demographic change per se, although occurring in some specific localities, but to quell the protests and to end all forms of dissent.

This narrative also ignored that sections of Arab Sunni populations supported the regime, especially in Damascus and Aleppo, in addition to a considerable number of these populations present within the regime's institutions. Pro-regime Sunni militias have been present since the beginning of the uprising and new ones were still being formed even in 2017 to fight alongside the regime's forces and allies in different regions.

Most probably more than any other religious and ethnic community in the country, Syrian Arab Sunnis have not had a single political position; instead, they could be categorized through various elements (class, gender, regional origin, religious or not etc...) and are diversified politically. The regime was not opposed to Sunni populations or a particular Sunni identity per se, but to hostile constituencies, which have been in their vast majority coming from Sunni popular backgrounds in impoverished rural areas and mid-sized towns, in addition to the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo.

On the other side, Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements (such as ISIS, Al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam) have also engaged in committing sectarian massacres and incurring demographic changes in some regions, although not to a similar level, notably because they did not have the same structures and tools of a state. Some of the opposition members of the SNC and Coalition or others also adopted sectarian positions, or supported sectarian massacres.

Foreign actors such as Iran, Turkey, or the Gulf Monarchies, have also played a role in the rise of sectarianism and racism by deepening the divisions among various ethnic and religious groups in the country during the uprising.

Kurdish Issue in Syria

Even before the uprising, the large majority of the Kurdish parties – as well as of the Kurdish population in Syria – has not been satisfied with how most Arab opposition political parties consider the Kurdish issue simply and uniquely a citizenship issue. In other words, the Arab opposition believes that Kurds are normal Syrian citizens who have been deprived of some of their rights and that the problem is therefore limited to the single issue of the census of 1962, which resulted in around 120,000 Kurds being denied nationality and declared as foreigners, leaving them, and subsequently their children, denied of basic civil rights and condemned to poverty and discrimination (Seurat 2012: 181)[9].

There were between 250,000 and 300,000 stateless Kurds at the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, roughly 15 percent of the estimated two million total Kurdish population in Syria (Tejel 2009). The large majority of the opposition political parties have not been

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[9] Between 120,000 and 150,000 Kurds are classified as firstly 1) non-citizen foreigners (ajanib) on their identity cards and cannot vote, own property, or obtain government jobs (but are not, however, exempt from obligatory military service) and secondly as 2) the so-called maktumin (unregistered) who cannot even receive treatment in state hospitals or obtain marriage certificates. They are not officially acknowledged at all and have no identity cards.

ready in any way to recognize the Kurds as a separate "people" or "nation" and are neither ready nor willing to listen to the demands for federalism and administrative decentralization. The demand for a federal system in Syria is a demand of the quasi majority of Kurdish parties in the country despite their political differences and rivalries.

The demand for a federal system by the Syrian Kurdish political parties is rooted in decades of state oppression, and this since the independence of the country in 1946, on a national basis (policies of quasi systematic discrimination against Kurds, policies of colonization in the framework of the "Arab Belt" and cultural repressions at all levels), but also has socio-economic consequences.

The majority of the Syrian Arab opposition did not address or even acknowledge this reality, thereby mirroring the regime's position. Similarly, the main Syrian Arab opposition political actors have supported the military invasion and occupation of Afrin by Turkey and some Syrian militias linked to it, while many Syrian civil society organizations remained indifferent toward the violations of human rights and situation for civilians in Afrin under occupation. Tensions between Arabs and Kurds have deepened since then.

In general, a solution for the Kurdish issue or an inclusive Syria can hardly be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper "people" or "nation" in Syria and their right to self-determination; this, however, does not mean being uncritical of the policies of the leadership of the PYD or any other Kurdish political party.

The absence of the Kurdish issue from the discussions under the pretext that it allows more unity within the opposition and civil society and less problems, is actually a recipe for division and expresses lack of confidence among the various components of the Syrian people. Recognizing the Kurdish people is a step forward towards building a new society and a concept of citizenship not based on an ethnicity, but one that recognizes the various peoples constituting Syria: Armenians, Palestinians, Syriacs, Assyrians, Turkmens, etc.

Recommendations

Post-conflict solutions such as the Iraqi and Lebanese political models that are based on sectarian and ethnic distributions of powers, have not brought any kind of stability or reconciliations among the various communities. Similarly, in Bosnia, the Dayton Agreement imposed a decentralized federal structure based on a power sharing among the three main ethnic groups (Bosniac, Croatians, Serbs) (Cox 1998: 601), at least in a bipolar fashion between the Bosniac-Croat Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on one side and the Republika Srpska on the other.

A primary issue of study is solutions on a strategic level inclusion and pluralism and a political framework eliminating all forms of exclusion, whether cultural, social, ethnic, or religious... while acknowledging the diversity of their own society. This is a long-term work to provide new and inclusive solutions.

In this perspective, various social, political, national and economic rights of the Syrian people should be dealt with, notably three main issues: political rights (democracy, self organization and equality), socio-economic rights (social justice and inequality) and the issue of self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria.

All future options in Syria, whether federal, decentralized or otherwise, should suggest propositions taking into account these issues in a secular political framework, encouraging the participation from below of the popular classes and in which democratic and social rights of all Syrians are guaranteed, regardless of gender, ethnic

and religious discrimination. In this perspective, means should be envisioned to ensure for popular classes the right to organize politically in their workplaces, society, and neighborhoods, and defend their interests.

Initiatives and / or solutions tackling these issues are one way to prevent foreign states from instrumentalizing particular religious sects or ethnicities for their own political interests, while fuelling sectarianism and racism.

Solutions also include more unity and collaboration of democratic and progressive actors and movements within civil society.

Such a struggle for radical change in society is a dynamic one that starts from below, in which the popular sectors of society are the agent of change.

A primary issue of study is solutions on a strategic level inclusion and pluralism and a political framework eliminating all forms of exclusion, whether cultural, social, ethnic, or religious...

Civil society and financial autonomy

Before concluding, I would like to mention one last challenge: financial autonomy. This is especially important as various countries have announced that they will cease funding for various civil society projects in Syria. In the spring of 2018, the US administration for example decided to cut funding for stabilization and civil society projects in north-western Syria, while other projects were under review. In August 2018, the State Department announced it was withdrawing a funding of $230 million it had allocated to rebuild parts of Syria once held by ISIS. Instead, Washington secured $300 million in financial donations for these regions of Syria previously held by ISIS, including $100 million by Saudi Arabia and $50 million by the UAE, alongside smaller funding from coalition partners, to replace its own funding. This financial assistance came after few months Trump demanded that allies contribute to allocate funds to cover the costs of the war. This was however far from the US expectations. Following US' decision, the UK government declared as well it was ending funding for some aid programs in opposition-held areas of Syria, including projects funding local councils (Singh 2018).

It becomes therefore evident that funding from western countries is not guaranteed at all. In addition to this, the possible re-legitimization of the Assad regime on the regional and international scene might make working conditions more difficult, especially in neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey.

However regardless of these decisions, financial autonomy is crucial for civil society actors. Many analyses (Jad 2007; Mitri 2015) of NGOs in Palestine and Lebanon have demonstrated that the development of the NGO movements, especially those linked to international investments, served to demobilize Palestinian and Lebanese civil societies and popular classes in various periods of struggle. Through professionalization and projectization encouraged by donor-funded attempts to promote 'civil society', a process of NGOization has occurred.

The issue around financial autonomy is rooting the activities and projects of the organization at the service of the Syrian popular classes within or without the country and dependent on foreign actors. This does not mean that all kind of funding should be opposed per se and systematically, but that organizations should not be dependent financially and politically on it. As mentioned earlier, a change of orientation or at least more energy should be put toward building a solidarity network among host communities and refugees in the countries where civil society actors are based.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Syrian civil society actors face many challenges and a very difficult situation for the future with the political evolutions in favor of the regime. The catastrophic humanitarian and socio-economic situation of Syrian communities inside and outside the country however begs the question of how to deal with them. Syria's popular classes have suffered tremendously from destructions and deaths since 2011, while progressive and democratic forces within the popular movement have been violently repressed by the regime's forces on one side, and jihadist and Islamic fundamentalist movements on the other. The most important thing today is the end of the war and the end of the possible military aggressions on regions outside the control of the regime.

This is not in contradiction with reaffirming one's opposition to the Assad regime, to refuse its re-legitimization internationally, not to forget the war crimes, the tens of thousands of political prisoners still tortured in the regime's jails, the disappeared, the refugees, the internally displaced, etc. A blank cheque given today to Assad and his crimes would inevitably increase the sense of impunity of all authoritarian and despotic states in the region and elsewhere, allowing them in turn to crush their populations if they were to revolt.

This is why the role of Syrian civil society actors is very important in the different aspects mentioned in the text. Here, it is important to realize that the current situation is not the same as at the beginning of the uprising.

Revolutionary processes are long-term events, characterized by higher and lower levels of mobilization according to the context. They can even be characterized by some periods of defeat, as the uprising in Syria was witnessing at the time of the writing. This is especially the case in Syria, when the conditions that allowed for the beginning of these uprisings were still present, while the regime was very far from finding ways to solve them. However, these conditions were at the time of the writing not enough to transform them into political opportunities, particularly after more than seven years of a destructive and murderous war accompanied by a great fatigue in the Syrian population. The effects of the war and its destructions would most probably weigh for years to come. Alongside this situation, no structured opposition body with a significant size and serious follow-up readiness has offered an inclusive and democratic project that could appeal to large sectors of society. The failures of the opposition bodies in exile and armed opposition groups have left deep frustrations and bitterness among people who participated and / or sympathized with the uprising.

One positive element nevertheless in the midst of this terrible situation and that could play a role in shaping future events is the large documentation of the uprising that is unprecedented. There has been significant recording, testimonies and documentation of the protest movement, the actors involved and the modes of actions. In the seventies, Syria witnessed strong popular and democratic resistance with significant strikes and demonstrations across the country with

The most important thing today is the end of the war and the end of the possible military aggressions on regions outside the control of the regime.

mass followings; unfortunately, this memory was not kept and was not known properly by the new generation of protesters in the country in 2011. The Syrian revolutionary process that started in 2011 is different; it is one of the most documented and its memory will remain and will not only be there as a glimpse to the past, but as on opportunity to build from the past on future action. The political experiences that have = accumulated since the beginning of the uprising will not disappear.

This memory can be used as a useful tool to propel Syrian communities towards facing the various challenges tackled in the text, while teaching them aboyt past experiences within Syria but also in other countries. In this perspective, collaborating and increasing relations among civil society actors in neighboring countries, as well as internationally, and sharing similar political objectives (democracy, social justice and equality) in their own society would enhance their work and outreach.

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