



Battling the Lion of Damascus

Syria's Domestic Opposition and the Asad Regime

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Front cover: Syrian president Bashar al-Asad waves to onlookers outside the parliament building in Damascus, March 5, 2005. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/SANA.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Executive Summary	vii
Introduction	1
Gains of the Secular Opposition	4
Weaknesses of the Secular Opposition	12
The Islamists	22
The Syrian Opposition and U.S. Policy	28

Acknowledgments

THIS STUDY COULD have never been written were it not for Syria's brave civil society activists, political dissidents, writers, and human rights defenders who sat down with me during the first half of 2006 to talk about the Syrian opposition. Although I cannot name all of them here, this study is dedicated to them and their extraordinary efforts.

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Executive Summary

SYRIA HAS EXPERIENCED domestic opposition since the Baath Party took control of the government on March 8, 1963. The Baath coup instituted a military dictatorship headed by minorities, with members of the Alawite sect at the helm. The Baathists' economic nationalizations angered the Sunni commercial class, and this class's ties with the religious establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood led to the Brotherhood's radicalization and, ultimately, a civil war between Islamist and government forces. That war ended with the government's 1982 massacre of Islamists in the city of Hama and the true establishment of Syria as a totalitarian state. Although secular parties were not as dangerous to the Syrian regime as the Islamists, the government treated communists and secular dissidents harshly as well, thereby stamping out any form of dissent within the country and rendering the Syria of President Hafiz al-Asad a republic of repression.

When Bashar al-Asad, the son of Syria's former president, took power in 2000, Syrians from all levels of society believed that a new era in their country's history had arrived. During the Damascus Spring movement of 2000, secular activists began forming discussion groups, engaged in open criticism of the regime, and called for political reform. Not since the 1950s had Syria seen such civil activism and calls for domestic change. Despite government suppression of the movement six months after its birth, the secular opposition persevered, unifying Arab and Kurdish elements in the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change in October 2005 and Syrian intellectuals' support for the Beirut-Damascus Declaration in May 2006, which called for a reassessment of Syrian-Lebanese relations. Growing internet access enabled human rights advocates and civil society groups to communicate with each other, unite, and publicize conditions within Syria. The activities of the secular opposition posed a serious threat to the Syrian regime and made it hard to dismiss.

Despite making itself known on both the national and international scenes, however, the secular opposi-

tion is no match for the Syrian security apparatus, which dominates all aspects of daily life. The government ended the Damascus Spring by making widespread arrests, closing the discussion forums, and emphasizing that communicating with dissidents abroad would be harshly punished. The secular opposition was further hampered by its message, which focused primarily on political reform and not on the harsh economic realities of average Syrians. This fact—coupled with the absence of effective vehicles to transmit the opposition's message to the masses (those distributing subversive literature are arrested), the divisions between Arab and Kurdish members of the opposition, the failure to attract youths, and the regime's success in dividing the opposition's ranks through bribery, intimidation, and isolation of its leaders—has marginalized the opposition and prevented it from becoming a powerful force.

The regime has confronted Islamic opposition in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood and rising Islamism through the Arab world. This factor has informed Syrian policy toward Islam. The regime continues to regard any contact with the Muslim Brotherhood as a red line and jails individuals identified with Islamic parties. At the same time, it has fostered a policy of "state-friendly" Islam that welcomes greater Islamic practice, supports religious institutions, and allows pro-government clerics to speak freely. No successful, organized Islamic opposition exists, and many believe that Islamic groups such as Jund al-Sham or Ghuraba al-Sham, which have clashed with regime authorities, are simply regime creations designed to show the government is effectively dealing with radical Islam through co-option or suppression. The government has been successful in reining in suspected Islamists, but its support for greater mosque construction is inherently risky and could lead to a loss of government control.

The United States has a poor record with the domestic Syrian opposition. The Bush administration has spoken with opposition groups both inside and outside Syria, but the domestic opposition has greeted U.S. support with a cold shoulder. The Syrian govern-

ment labels those who communicate with foreigners as traitors, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, isolation of Hamas after democratic Palestinian elections, and lack of support to Lebanon during the Israeli-Hizballah war all contributed to diminished American credibility in the eyes of the domestic Syrian opposition. The U.S. State Department's public offer of \$5 million for Syrian governance and reform programs in early 2006 did not help the domestic opposition, for the prospect of taking the money would have damaged opposition members' Syrian nationalist credentials and bolstered their portrayal as foreign agents. Furthermore, Syria's domestic opposition fears it will be cast aside if any future rapprochement or "grand bargain" between the Syrian government and the United States occurs.

In Syria, the U.S. government would be better served by focusing its efforts on building stronger relationships with members of the opposition and bringing willing civic dissidents to the United States to speak with U.S. government officials about conditions within Syria. The U.S. government should carefully follow the manifestations of rising Islamism within Syria and how the Syrian government is reacting to them. In the short term, the domestic opposition remains weak and cannot be seen as a vehicle for change, but the United States can quietly assist the opposition's endeavors. U.S. engagement on Syria should focus on weakening Syria's allies, Iran and Russia, and convincing European and regional actors to isolate and pressure Syria to bring about a change in the regime's behavior.

Introduction

THIS STUDY INVESTIGATES the domestic opposition to the government of the Syrian Arab Republic. Although this paper focuses on the current state of the opposition, resistance to the Syrian regime is not a new phenomenon. For the last forty years, Syria's Baath government has faced domestic antagonism, a product of years of instability. In the quarter century after declaring its independence from France in 1946, Syria was wracked by a seemingly endless string of coups and changes in the form of government, ranging from democracy to military dictatorship. Although the Arab Socialist Baath Party took power in 1963, the 1960s saw the party undergo internal coups and purges, and the appearance of a new leadership dominated by the heterodox Alawite sect, long an oppressed minority constituting just 10 percent of the Syrian population. When Defense Minister Hafiz al-Asad took power in a November 1970 coup, Syria entered a new era of relative internal stability.

This stability, however, came at a price. Syria's Sunni Muslim Arab commercial establishment was angered when the secular, mostly poor, minority-led cadre of Baath army officers took power on March 8, 1963. The Baath coup threatened Sunni political interests by taking over the government and economic interests by nationalizing broad sectors of the economy. Furthermore, Asad took power at the time that the young, radicalized Arabs of the "Generation of 1967," seeing the Arab world's rout in the 1967 war against Israel, turned to communism and other political movements to express their outrage and protest the political, economic, and social corruption of Arab regimes. In this way, the parallel streams of religion/commerce and secular politics formed the basis of modern opposition in Syria.

Religious and Secular Elements of the Opposition

The Baath takeover in 1963 incited both Syria's religious and secular camps. The Baath Party's economic

nationalizations hit the Sunni commercial class hard and embittered the business communities in the big cities. Many of Syria's merchants, especially in the central city of Hama, were closely tied to the Muslim religious establishment, and the first clashes between the Sunni majority and the government manifested themselves as a conflict between members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had established itself in Syria in the late 1930s, and government police forces. The Brotherhood rebelled against the government throughout the 1960s, but stability ushered in by Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 led to a respite from the violence. For the first six years of Asad's rule, Syria experienced levels of stability, freedom, and economic expansion unseen since independence.¹ By 1976, however, the country's progress began to slow. From 1976 to 1982, the clashes between the Brotherhood and the government intensified and led Syria down the path of civil war. The government made a final stand against the Brotherhood in its stronghold of Hama in 1982, razing a third of the city, killing between 15,000 and 25,000 people, and stamping out the Brotherhood's influence on daily life.

The Hama incident marked a pivotal moment in Syrian domestic politics. Asad morphed from a leader who preached economic growth and a brighter future for Syrians into a brutal dictator who relied on the most savage of means to suppress internal opposition. It also painted the Islamists as the biggest threat to the regime and domestic security, making suppressing or co-opting Islamist elements the regime's top priority.

The years leading up to the Hama massacre included other types of domestic suppression as well. The government cracked down on professional organizations set up before the 1963 revolution, which for decades had enjoyed relative autonomy. In the late 1970s, the Bar Association and Engineers Association called for the release of political detainees, and in 1980, the latter called for freedom of expression and an end to the state

1. Patrick Seale, *Asad: Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 171, 318.

of emergency.² In March 1980, these organizations and the Pharmacists Association called for a nationwide strike to protest the government's unresponsiveness to their calls for reform. When intimidation failed, the Syrian regime dissolved all professional associations and established new ones subject to government-appointed leadership and Baath Party control and oversight.³

Numerous other parties and groupings opposed the Asad regime. Young Arabs who had seen the Arab defeat in 1967, which occurred while Asad was the Syrian defense minister, protested the emptiness of the Baath regime's rhetoric. In response to the National Progressive Front, a consortium of regime-allied parties, regime critics formed the National Democratic Gathering in 1979, an umbrella for opposition parties. Although many of these individuals and parties advocated peaceful opposition and nonviolent means of resistance, the regime treated them harshly and imprisoned their members for long periods. Today, some of Syria's most prominent dissidents were among those imprisoned during the government's broad arrest campaigns of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many spent at least a decade in jail.⁴ Although secular parties and individuals did not pose the same existential threat to the regime as the Muslim Brotherhood, the government's experience with the Brotherhood led it to adopt a hardline approach to all political dissidents in the country.

Understanding Syria Today

Unlike the 1970s, when the main conflict was between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime of Hafiz al-Asad, the first years of the twenty-first century have seen a different juxtaposition: the regime of Bashar al-Asad, the Western-educated, English-speaking, ophthalmologist son of Hafiz al-Asad, and

an overwhelmingly secular opposition. Because Syrian Law Number 49 (1980) declared membership in the Muslim Brotherhood a capital offense, the most prominent forms of opposition today are secular in nature and advocate peaceful change toward democracy, recognition of basic freedoms and rights, and an end to the state of emergency and one-party rule. Many of these groups identify themselves with the concept of a secular "civil society," or civic and voluntary organizations bridging the gap between state and society, such as advocacy groups, nonprofit organizations, and women's associations.⁵ This concept is revolutionary in Syria. For decades, the state extended its influence into almost every sphere of life. The remaining space was generally occupied by Islamic civil society: the Islamic religious establishment provided the services and assistance the government did not.

Following the massacre at Hama, Hafiz al-Asad understood the power of Islamic sentiments and advocated an Islam conducive to Baath, Alawite rule that would sideline domestic Islamist opposition. He did so through state sponsorship of Islamic activities and made Damascus headquarters for nearly a dozen Palestinian and Islamist terrorist groups.⁶ In recent years, an Islamic awakening has taken place throughout the Arab world, including Syria. Arabs are turning to greater Islamic belief and practice after seeing the bankruptcy of communism, Baathism, and Arab nationalism. The regime of Bashar al-Asad has stepped up its co-option of Islamist elements to prevent a grassroots religious backlash.

The only true organized opposition to the regime is a secular patchwork of civil society groups, human rights organizations, political parties, and individual activists. The presence of these opposition elements, strong Islamic sentiments by many Syrian Muslims, and

2. "Scientists and Human Rights in Syria," National Academies Press, 1993, <http://newton.nap.edu/html/syria/repression.html> (inactive, accessed January 15, 2007). Syria has been under a state of emergency since the Baath Revolution of 1963, making it the Middle Eastern government with the second-longest emergency law in effect.

3. Ibid.

4. One of Syria's most prominent dissidents, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, was arrested as a student at Aleppo University and was imprisoned for sixteen years. After his release, he finished his medical degree and is now a weekly columnist for the pan-Arab London daily *al-Hayat*.

5. A more elaborate definition of "civil society" can be found online (www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm).

6. For more on Hafiz al-Asad's orientation toward Islam in the 1990s, see Eyal Zisser, "Hafiz al-Asad Discovers Islam," *Middle East Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (March 1999). Available online (www.meforum.org/article/465).

the regime's attempts to become more sympathetic to Islam are all key elements in U.S. policy considerations. This study looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the

secular opposition, the place of Islam within Syrian state and society, and recommendations for U.S. policy vis-à-vis these two elements.

Gains of the Secular Opposition

THE SECULAR OPPOSITION felt change had arrived when Bashar al-Asad delivered his inaugural speech on July 17, 2000. The speech touched on all the problems afflicting Syrian society: the lack of development, the role of the citizen, political and economic transparency, democracy, administrative reform, education, and preparing Syria for the twenty-first century. He touched on themes his father had neglected for over a decade: Hafiz al-Asad had focused primarily on Syria's foreign policy. Bashar's mere mention of Syria's domestic woes was an important step.

Careful analysis of his speech, however, indicates how Bashar hedged on the important issues he raised. On democracy, the new president said:

To what extent are we democratic? And what are the indications that refer to the existence or nonexistence of democracy? Is it in elections or in free press or in free speech or in other freedoms and rights? Democracy is not any of these because all these rights and others are not democracy, rather they are democratic practices . . . we cannot apply the democracy of others on ourselves. Western democracy, for example, is the outcome of a long history that resulted in customs and traditions which distinguish the current culture of Western societies . . . we have to have our democratic experience which is special to us, which stems from our history, culture, civilization and which is a response to the needs of our society and the requirements of our reality.¹

On transparency, he said: "There's no doubt that transparency is an important thing and I support such an endeavor, but through a proper understanding of the content of the idiom and of the ground on which it might be based."²

Bashar al-Asad did not speak about how he would apply the principles of democracy or transparency to

Syrian governance; rather, he focused on semantics. Asad used the buzzwords of twenty-first-century international politics but focused most on exercising caution in their definition and context.

Many of those who had actively opposed the regime of Hafiz al-Asad believed that the new president might change the system.³ Until they were disabused of that notion less than a year after that maiden speech, activists and dissidents who had struggled for years saw an opening with the new president's inauguration.

The Damascus Spring and the Statements of 99 and 1,000

Between the summer of 2000 and the summer of 2001, in a movement now known as the "Damascus Spring," Syria saw a flowering of expression, assembly, and political action unknown since the 1950s. Leading the movement were groups of men, predominantly in their sixties and seventies, who had experienced the repression of Syria's various governments firsthand in prison and through interrogations by the intelligence and security services. These individuals had seen Syria of the 1940s and 1950s, when it was a torrent of political movement and change, and organization into political parties was possible. A smaller, vocal generation born in the 1950s joined the movement as well. They had been radicalized by Israel's defeat of the Arabs in 1967, and they rejected Arab nationalism in favor of communism and other ideologies.

The stirrings of the Damascus Spring came days before Hafiz al-Asad's death in June 2000, when well-known journalist and civil society activist Michel Kilo organized a meeting of writers, activists, and artists at the home of film director Nabil al-Maleh that would evolve into the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society (CRCS), which continues to operate today. It began as

1. Speech delivered by Bashar al-Asad on his inauguration as President of Syria, last revised March 31, 2001. Available online (www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm).

2. Ibid.

3. Leaders of Damascus Spring movement, interviews with author, Damascus, April–June 2006.

an informal discussion group with the aim of “reviving the cultural and democratic movement in Syria.”⁴

Other forums soon followed. Soon after the CRCS started, parliament member Riad Seif established the National Dialogue Forum, a political discussion group that met weekly at his home in Damascus.⁵

The Damascus Spring and its leaders can take credit for two achievements that set the tone for opposition activities during Bashar al-Asad's tenure. The first was effective use of public statements released to the media. In September 2000, the pan-Arab London daily *al-Hayat* released the “Statement of 99,” signed by ninety-nine Syrian intellectuals, dissidents, and civil society activists. It made four demands:

- An end to the state of emergency, in place since 1963
- Amnesty for political prisoners
- The granting of public freedoms
- The liberation of public life from constrictive laws⁶

Whereas the “Statement of 99” was a tersely worded, one-page document, the “Statement of 1,000,” released in January 2001 and signed by 1,000 Syrian dissidents, was more ambitious and detailed. The statement denounced one-party rule and the marginalization of civil society and included an eight-point platform:

- Cancellation of the Emergency Law
- Comprehensive political freedoms
- Freedom of the press

- A democratic election law
- An independent judiciary
- Economic rights for all citizens
- A reassessment of the National Progressive Front, the group of parties in the Syrian parliament allied to the regime
- An end to discrimination against women⁷

Common to these demands was a basic call for participatory democracy and a role for the Syrian citizen. The “Statement of 1,000” broadly attacked the one-party Syrian regime, which focused power in a small, sectarian elite and dispersed power only to its close, trustworthy allies. While the “Statement of 99” spoke in generalities, the “Statement of 1,000” presented itself as a blueprint for reform.

The two statements demonstrated how powerful public statements and the media could be. In 2000, the internet hardly existed in Syria, but releasing statements to the pan-Arab media was an effective tool for disseminating the opposition's position. As the internet became more widespread, Syrian opposition members used websites and e-mail to broadcast their message. Although the Syrian authorities have banned some opposition websites inside Syria, various groups and individuals have relied on e-mail as a vital means of communication with those outside Syria.

The Syrian government made no official response to the “Statement of 99,” but the publication of the “Statement of 1,000” heralded the end of the Damascus Spring. At the end of January, Riad Seif called for the formation of an independent political party, the

4. Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (New York: Zed Books, 2003), p. 33.

5. Seif served in the Syrian parliament between 1994 and 2001, and during his first four-year term, he made waves by openly addressing corruption and the government's economic mismanagement. In response, the government drove Seif to bankruptcy in 1998 by accusing him of owing back taxes. Seif's son was killed in 1996, and Seif suspected that government agents were behind it as part of a campaign of intimidation and retribution (interview with author June 2006). Seif won reelection in 1998, despite an intense government smear campaign. George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, pp. 30–31.

6. “Statement by 99 Syrian Intellectuals,” translation from the original Arabic by Suha Mawlawi Kayal from *al-Hayat* (London), September 27, 2000, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 2, no. 9 (October 5, 2000). Available online (www.meib.org/articles/0010_sdoc0927.htm).

7. “The Statement of 1,000,” January 9, 2001. Translation and summary from George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, pp. 44–45 and 182–188. George lists the source for the document as al-Watha'iq as-Sadira' an al-Hiy'at al-Ta'sisia, Lijan Ihya' al-Mujtama' al-Madani fi Suria, Damascus.

Social Peace Movement, and the regime could not tolerate that move. Beginning in February 2001, the regime began its arrests and crackdowns on opposition members.

Discussion Forums

Discussion forums were the second pillar of the Damascus Spring movement. After Kilo's CRCS and Seif's National Dialogue Forum were established in the summer of 2000, political discussion forums sprang up in every major city and town in Syria. They played a vital role in political education and in bringing people together. The post-Hama era in Syria shut down all debate and dialogue, and during the 1980s and 1990s, politics was the sole province of the government. The lack of political discussion during these periods, in addition to the Baath Party's monopolization of every area of society, stifled any sort of dialogue or discussion of political and nonpolitical topics. One intellectual, who began a film discussion group in 1996 for Syrian students, remarked that Syrians did not know how to think for themselves, take initiative, or discuss and develop their ideas.⁸ After forty-three years of Baath rule, Syrians had ceased to understand what practicing politics meant or even how to write effectively about politics.⁹ The discussion groups allowed people to voice their opinions in an atmosphere that seemed less threatening than the one before 2000.

Bringing people together in different regions across Syria was a major achievement of the discussion forums. Although ignored by the Syrian media, Riad Seif's forum attracted the attention of the pan-Arab media and was featured on al-Jazeera.¹⁰ Other forums included the al-Kawakibi forum in Aleppo, named after Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi, a Syrian intellectual who advocated an Arab renaissance; the Tartus Forum for National Democratic Dialogue, headed by Habib Saleh (who was later arrested and has spent five of the past six years in prison); and the Jaladat Badr Khan

forum, named for the active Kurdish nationalist, led by Meshal Temo in Qamishli, in northeastern Syria.

Perhaps the most well-known forum was the Jamal al-Atassi Forum for Democratic Dialogue, which was the last forum to close, doing so in the spring of 2005. Named after a prominent Syrian nationalist who was a minister in Syria's first Baath government but later opposed Hafiz al-Asad's vision for Syria, the forum met the first Saturday of every month at the home of Suheir al-Atassi, Jamal's daughter. Meetings began with a half-hour lecture followed by a discussion. The forum was open to the public, and on many occasions more than 300 people attended. Prominent activists, artists, and journalists addressed the forum, speaking about human rights, democracy, education, unemployment, and poverty, with a measure of freedom to criticize the regime unknown until that point.¹¹ The Atassi forum owed its longevity to its namesake, because Jamal al-Atassi had been one of the Baath Party's earliest members and was acknowledged by all in Syria—even the Asads—as a true patriot.

Human Rights Groups, Publications, and Civil Society Groups

The current operation of human rights groups, online journals, and civil society groups is a testament to the continuing, albeit weakened, spirit of the Damascus Spring. Although their websites might be banned in Syria, human rights groups have made good use of the internet and e-mail to publicize internationally the human rights situation in the country. Ammar Qurabi, head of the National Organization for Human Rights in Syria, sends out near-daily Arabic-language e-mails to a list of more than a thousand people and organizations that detail arrests, trials, and human rights violations. His reports are frequently quoted in pan-Arab dailies such as *al-Quds al-Arabi*, *al-Hayat*, and *Elaph*.¹² Another website, Thara, is home to an online weekly literature and social criticism magazine

8. Syrian activist, interview with author, Damascus, February 2006.

9. Syrian political analyst, interview with author, Damascus, March 2006.

10. George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, p. 37.

11. Member of Atassi forum governing committee, interview with author, Damascus, May 2006.

12. It must be mentioned that the *Elaph* Syria correspondent, Bahja Mardini, is Ammar Qurabi's wife.

focusing on women's and children's rights. A prominent website, All4Syria.org, run by Baath Party member and reformer Ayman Abdel Nour, sends out a daily digest of stories in Arabic and English, written inside and outside Syria, on foreign affairs, social policy, and reform to a list of more than 17,000 people, 11,000 of whom are in Syria.¹³

The Syrian authorities have used a number of means to counter the swelling of expression. For example, shortly after the inception of the All4Syria.org website, the authorities shut it down. When Abdel Nour began distributing the contents by e-mail, the authorities shut down the originating e-mail address, and he was forced to send it from a new one. Over the course of six weeks, Abdel Nour and the authorities played a game of cat and mouse, shutting down and changing e-mail addresses.¹⁴ In early 2007, Abdel Nour took the site down for improvements, and he continues to change the sending address and server periodically to avoid blocking of the internet address.¹⁵

In the field of human rights, the government uses legal means to counter human rights organizations. The government frequently turns down rights groups' requests for licenses.¹⁶ Qurabi, of the National Human Rights Organization in Syria, however, uses these rejections to his benefit, by publicizing the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor's rejections of his group's license requests in his reports.

Efforts to build Syrian civil society and community action groups also exist, although this process is very slow. Very few of the activists know how to put together a press release or a grant proposal.¹⁷ Understandably, these individuals lack experience or training, but even more, they have difficulty even defining their ideas.¹⁸ Nevertheless, a number of Syrian civil society and human rights organizations conduct their

own training seminars, teaching skills such as issuing a statement, making a proposal, or devising a plan; however, as one rights activist noted, "we go to a conference, learn some skills, but we really can't use them in this environment . . . civil society doesn't exist here, except for the fact that we have training and conferences."¹⁹ In addition, many of the activists go abroad to other Arab countries or to Europe, but their excursions outside the Middle East spark a litany of accusations, most prominently that they are foreign agents working against the national interest.

The Damascus Declaration

The opposition received a morale boost with the publication of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change on October 16, 2005. The declaration was signed by five political groupings and nine nationally recognized opposition figures. The Damascus Declaration's importance stems less from its content and more from the fact that prominent thinkers and activists from across the ideological spectrum, as well as Kurdish parties, the CRCS, and the National Democratic Gathering (NDG), signed the document. According to Hassan Abdel Azeem, the spokesman for the NDG, work on the declaration began when two members of the CRCS met exiled Muslim Brotherhood secretary-general Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni in Morocco to agree on a platform for a united Syrian domestic-exile opposition front.²⁰ Although an examination of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition parties outside of Syria is beyond the scope of this paper, the Damascus Declaration, above all, should be seen as a document of consensus between Arab and Kurdish parties within Syria and elements inside and outside Syria.

Civil society activists met in the offices of Aleppo businessman and Free National Party leader Samir

13. Ayman Abdel Nour, statistics provided to author, March 2007.

14. Ayman Abdel Nour, interview with author, Damascus, March 2006.

15. E-mail message from Ayman Abdel Nour to author, March 2007.

16. See "For the Second Time, the Syrian Authorities Reject the Licensing of the Arab Organization for Human Rights," *Levant News*, October 26, 2006. Available online (www.thisissyria.net/2006/11/26/syriatoday/07.html); and "Syria Denies Permit to New Human Rights Group," Agence France-Press, September 2, 2006.

17. U.S. embassy official stationed in Damascus in the first half of 2006, interview with author, November 2006.

18. Ibid.

19. Women's rights activist, interview with author, Damascus, February 2006.

20. Andrew Tabler, "Democracy to the Rescue," *Institute of Current World Affairs Letters*, AJT-1-Middle East, March 2006.

Nashar during the spring of 2005 to begin drafting the declaration. Nashar emphasized that the time had come to open dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood and bring the exiled and domestic opposition together.²¹ The declaration emphasized the following points:

The declaration emphasized the following points:

- Attributing the damage to the country and rending of the social fabric of the Syrian people to the monopoly of power by the authoritarian regime
- Establishing a democratic national regime as the basic approach for change and political reform based on dialogue and mutual recognition
- Giving no party or trend the right to claim an exceptional role
- Guaranteeing the freedom of individuals, groups, and national minorities to express themselves
- Finding a just, democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria, guaranteeing the rights and equality of all Syrian Kurdish citizens
- Suspending the Emergency Law and abolishing Law Number 49 (the death penalty for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood)
- Establishing forums, salons, and bodies to organize Syrian social, political, and cultural life
- Popularly electing a new assembly to draft a new constitution

Unlike the Statements of 99 and 1,000, which were signed by individuals, the Damascus Declaration carried the imprimatur of Syrian political groupings. In an even greater show of unity and transparency, a November 2005 edition of *al-Mawqif al-Dimoqrati*

(The Democratic Stand), the organ of the NDG, carried twenty pages of support statements by the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communist Workers' Party, Kurdish political groups, human rights groups, and discussion forums.

Although it is an imperfect document, the Damascus Declaration was the basis upon which national coordination between different groupings began. In February 2006, the signatories established a National Council; a Damascus Declaration representative in every governorate; a press office; and follow-up, coordination, and executive committees. Damascus Declaration communiqués frequently appear in two pan-Arab, London-based news organs, *Elaph* and *al-Quds al-Arabi*, and online in *Levant News*, connected to the National Salvation Front (NSF), the alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood and exiled former Syrian vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam.

The signatories of the Damascus Declaration tried to take advantage of the regime's preoccupation with other events in the wake of the declaration's distribution. On October 20, 2005, the UN investigation into the February 14, 2005, assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, led by German judge Detlev Mehlis, was due to be issued. Nashar, the Aleppo businessman, was intent on releasing the Damascus Declaration before the Mehlis report, to stave off accusations that the opposition was attempting to exploit regime weakness.²² The opposition did receive a respite, however, because the Syrian government was busy countering the findings of the Mehlis report, which concluded Hariri's assassination could not have taken place without the knowledge of top-ranked Syrian intelligence and security officials,²³ a damning indictment of Syrian complicity in the assassination. Because the regime was busy fielding these charges, no activist was imprisoned in the immediate wake of the declaration's announcement. On November 2, shortly after the report's release, Syria released

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. United Nations, *Report of the International Independent Investigation Commission Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1595 (2005)*, "Section V: The Commission Investigation," Detlev Mehlis, Commissioner, Beirut, October 19, 2005. Available online (www.un.org/news/dh/docs/mehlisreport/).

190 political prisoners, the vast majority members of the Muslim Brotherhood, in a sign that Damascus understood the intense international pressure it was under.²⁴

The recanting of testimony—perhaps under Syrian pressure—by one of Mehlis's leading witnesses, the extension of the investigation, and the stepping down of Mehlis as chief investigator in December 2005, however, gave the Syrian regime renewed confidence to weather international pressure, prompting the government to continue its campaign of silencing hostile domestic elements. The regime renewed its muzzling of dissidents in full force in March 2006, when it released a statement warning "human rights activists and Syrian opposition members" that "communication with the United States is considered a red line."²⁵ This warning occurred following the arrest of Ammar Qurabi, the human rights advocate, after his return from a conference in Paris sponsored by the Aspen Institute. That conference followed a prior gathering held in Washington, D.C., in January 2006, where Syrians based both inside and outside Syria met to discuss the opposition and the points of contact between the two sides. The regime feared strengthening ties between these elements, and especially connections between the domestic opposition and the NSF of Khaddam and Bayanouni, which represented the Muslim Brotherhood, the reddest of the regime's red lines.

The Opposition Goes West: The Beirut-Damascus Declaration

The opposition crossed a regime red line by issuing a document—the Damascus Declaration—signed by both individuals and banned political parties. In May 2006, it did so again by issuing a document critical of Syria's Lebanon policy. On May 12, the Lebanese media and Syrian opposition websites published the

Beirut-Damascus Declaration, a ten-point document criticizing Syrian-Lebanese relations and stressing the following points:

- Respect for the sovereignty and independence of both Syria and Lebanon, diplomatic representation, and the delineation of a clear border between the two countries
- Mutual respect for law, institutions, elections, and human rights
- Establishment of democracy-based regimes in both countries
- Denunciation of political assassination and support of the investigation into the killing of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri

The statement was signed by 250 Lebanese and Syrian intellectuals, and within a week, Syria made the largest number of arrests since its crackdown on the Damascus Spring in 2001. The timing of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration was significant for both the signatories and the government. The declaration was published during the ongoing investigation into the murder of Rafiq Hariri, at that time led by Belgian prosecutor Serge Brammertz, placing Syria under even more regional and international scrutiny. In addition, the declaration was published a few days before the announcement of UN Security Council Resolution 1680, which reiterated the need for a clear Syrian-Lebanese border and Lebanese sovereignty throughout all Lebanese territory.

The state-run media called the declaration's timing "suspicious,"²⁶ and a Syrian intellectual noted that the regime's harshness was because discussing Syrian-Lebanese relations was taboo.²⁷ The regime's response

24. "Syria Releases 190 in Effort to Ease International Pressure," *Newsday*, November 4, 2005.

25. "The Syrian Leadership Warns the Opposition That Communication with Washington Is a Red Line," Radio Sawa, March 19, 2006. Available online (www.radiosawa.com/article.aspx?id=820154). The term "red line," as used in this paper and by Syrian dissidents, refers to a line that citizens cannot cross without risking punishment.

26. *Tishrin* (Damascus), as quoted in Rhonda Roumani, "Syria Launches Crackdown on Dissent," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 25, 2006. Media are state controlled in Syria.

was fierce; the security apparatus arrested two of Syria's most prominent dissidents, both of whom had signed the declaration: journalist Michel Kilo and human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni. In a letter written from prison in December 2006 and published on the *Levant News* website, Kilo wrote his prime motivation for supporting the document was to anchor the Syrian-Lebanese relationship on a firm foundation, and he reminded those that suspected him of being in cahoots with Abdel Halim Khaddam, the former Syrian vice president, that he had written numerous articles criticizing Khaddam and even said that the NSF's joining of the Damascus Declaration posed a grave threat to the domestic Syrian opposition.²⁸ Kilo was charged with violating at least four Syrian laws, including "weakening national sentiment" according to article 285 of the Syrian constitution, "inciting sectarian strife" according to articles 307 and 376, and "spreading false or exaggerated news that can affect the standing of the state" according to articles 278 and 287.²⁹

Kilo's letter and the reasons for his arrest dovetail with another issue that has always plagued the domestic Syrian opposition: its foreign connections. In response to the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, a "Declaration to the Syrian Intellectuals," signed by 117 Syrian intellectuals, was released to the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*. This document criticized those parties holding Syria responsible for Hariri's murder; condemned the internationalization of the Syrian-Lebanese relationship to "prevent it from crystallizing within a sound framework"; held that Resolution 1680 contravened the UN charter; objected to the outcry surrounding the extension of Lebanese president Emile Lahoud's term of office by those parties (the United States and

Europe) that approved the term extension of his predecessor, Ilyas Hrawi; and denounced the continuing violence and occupation in both Palestine and Iraq.³⁰ The statement was signed by Syrian officials and Syrians involved with various human rights groups, and it underscores how the official Syrian position vis-à-vis the opposition—publicly shared by those co-opted by the regime—always returns to criticism (whether on a sound foundation or not) that the domestic opposition represents foreign forces, be they sovereign countries, individuals, or groups outside Syria that threaten its stability.

In addition to violating the same laws as Kilo, Bunni was charged with "belonging to an international political organization without government approval" and making "a commercial transaction in favor of a foreign country,"³¹ the latter a very serious charge. In March 2006, two months before the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, Bunni opened Syria's first-ever human rights center, which offered legal advice, counseling, and training on human rights issues.³² The center was part of a project by the Belgium-based Institute for International Assistance and Solidarity, and the European Union provided over \$100,000 of funding. The Syrian authorities closed the center less than two weeks after it opened, informing Bunni that the center was unlicensed. To the Syrian government, the center, run by a human rights lawyer with a known record of civil disobedience, crossed an even more dangerous line because it involved the transfer of funds from a foreign entity to a private citizen. In late April 2007, following nearly a year of detention and trial suspensions, as well as discussions of being stripped of his citizenship, Anwar al-Bunni was sentenced to five years in prison.

27. Ibid.

28. Michel Kilo, "The Story of My Arrest and Indictment," *Levant News*, December 14, 2006. Available online (www.thisissyria.net/2006/12/14/articles/02.html).

29. "Another Activist Is Arrested in Connection with the Beirut-Damascus Declaration," *Elaph* (London), October 23, 2006. Available online (www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/Politics/2006/10/185678.htm).

30. "117 Syrians Reply to the Beirut-Damascus Declaration: Our Forces Returned Security ... and a Criticism of March 14," *al-Hayat* (London), June 1, 2006.

31. "Syrian Rights Lawyer Charged over 'False Information,'" Agence France-Presse, October 9, 2006.

32. "Syria: Activists Condemn Closure of Human Rights Center," Arabicnews.com, March 6, 2006. Available online (www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/060306/2006030615.html).

Gains of the Damascus Spring, Damascus Declaration, and Beirut-Damascus Declaration

The Damascus Spring proved one crucial thing to the Syrian regime and to the world at large: when given freedom of expression and assembly, some Syrian citizens will take full advantage of this opportunity. Discussion forums, human rights organizations, and civil society groups took root, and their organizers achieved prominence among the educated elite and notoriety among the security apparatus. The six months of freedom activists enjoyed, however, was not enough time to set up any sort of true, national coordination and direction. What arose during the Damascus Spring was a product of regional social entrepreneurship, and each group took up concerns relevant to its own agenda: while the Atassi forum focused on large issues of democracy in the capital, smaller groups such as the Jaladat Badr Khan forum in Qamishli discussed Kurdish rights. When the government began to suppress these groups in February 2001, they lacked firm foundations and all but the Atassi forum immediately bowed to the pressure and closed.

Both the Damascus Declaration and the Beirut-Damascus Declaration anchored the opposition's calls for regime change and democratic reforms. The content

of the Damascus Declaration indicated that Syria could not change as long as it was governed in the name of Article 8 of the Syrian constitution, which states the Baath Party is the "leading party in both state and society." This assertion flew in the face of the theme of the Tenth Baath Party Congress held in the summer of 2005, which cemented the party's and the president's absolute power. The Beirut-Damascus Declaration succeeded in broaching another taboo—Syria's role in Lebanon. Lebanon was always the prize for Hafiz al-Asad, and he succeeded in capturing it with the Taif Accord of 1989 and with (apparent) American blessings after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The Taif Accord consecrated the fraternal Syrian-Lebanese relationship, making its discussion or criticism another justification for punishment.

Despite statements by opposition members, critics, and supporters that the Syrian opposition is weak, it has managed to rattle the authorities by attacking a number of canonical doctrines of Syrian political life. This activity has led to stock regime reprisals and critiques: waves of arrests, trials and prison sentences, and charges of weakening national feeling and engagement with foreign elements. The opposition has managed to crack the wall of fear that has existed in Syria since 1982, but it still falls victim to the crushing power of the police state.

Weaknesses of the Secular Opposition

THE SECULAR OPPOSITION is all but powerless to stand up to the Syrian regime. Although they have bravely struggled to meet, hold an open dialogue about social issues, and publicize conditions within Syria, the efforts of this loose band of activists are no match for a regime that has become a master of stamping out dissent. Because the opposition in its current form (post-Damascus Spring) includes members of various ethnic, regional, and age constituencies, internal divisions also hamper the opposition's abilities to counter all of the tools the regime uses against critics.

The Closing of the Discussion Forums and the Damascus Winter

The government began its crackdown on civil society and political activities in February 2001, when the government sent Baath regional command members to Syria's seventeen provinces and four main universities in a campaign countering the discussion forums and criticisms of the government.¹ On February 17, then vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam addressed the faculty and Baath Party officials at Damascus University, saying the intention of the recent forums and public statements was neither "democracy nor freedom." Khaddam said that "no citizen has the right to attack the bases of society ... his freedom ends where the safety and stability of the society ends," and that the forums were meant "to divert Syria's attention ... from the Arab-Israeli conflict."²

The government followed up these statements by imposing conditions on each forum:

- A permit from the security apparatus fifteen days before the meeting was to be held

- A copy of the lecture and the name of the lecturer
- A list of the names of the participants
- The location of the meeting and the name of the host³

These conditions were oppressively difficult because some of these forums—like the Atassi forum—were attended by upward of 100 (and sometimes 300–400) people, and the security apparatus issued permits at its discretion. When the governing board of the Atassi forum applied for a license to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, it was rejected, as were all the license requests from the various political discussion groups, because the ministry deemed them "unqualified."⁴ Before the new regulations were issued, one forum was officially licensed by the government: it was run by a Baath member of parliament, Suheir Rayyes, who said the forum would focus on cultural, not political, issues.⁵

Following the new regulations, the government began to defame the opposition, calling its members operatives working for foreign embassies, and then, during August–September 2001, arrested the most prominent activists, including Riad Seif, member of parliament Maamoun Homs, former Aleppo University economics dean Aref Delilah, Communist Party leader Riad al-Turk, and others.⁶ While all of the other forums across the country had been closed by August 2001, the Atassi forum remained open—albeit unlicensed—and Bashar al-Asad pointed to that forum's existence as evidence of democracy and freedom in

1. *Al-Hayat* (London), February 16, 2001.

2. Razook al-Ghawi, "Damascus: Khaddam Attacks Those Who Criticize the Government in the Name of Freedom and Democracy," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), February 18, 2001.

3. "The Syrian Regime vs. the Reformers; Part I: Backlash, the Regime Fights Back," *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series No. 50* (Middle East Media Research Institute, February 27, 2001). Available online (<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=syria&ID=IA5001>).

4. Member of Atassi forum governing committee, interview with author, Damascus, May 2006.

5. Maher Chmaytelli, "Cultural Forums: Pseudonym for Syria's New Political Activities," Middle East Online, January 18, 2001. Available online (www.mafhoum.com/press/forsyr.htm).

6. They included Fawaz Tello, Habib Issa, Kamal Labwani, Walid Bunni, and Hassan Sadoun.

Syria. At the same time, however, the government pressed its ranks to intensify efforts to rebut the activists' arguments.⁷ According to one analyst, at that time Asad was interested in recruiting the National Democratic Gathering—which Jamal al-Atassi had been pivotal in forming—to the governmental National Progressive Front and allowed the forum to continue to operate until the NDG's lack of interest in joining became clear.⁸

The Atassi forum continued to meet, and one of the governing committee members described how the Damsacus Spring had chilled by the fall of 2001: "It was the government's strategy to place the forum under siege and watch it. Everyone who attended knew he was being watched, and anyone who crossed the red lines laid down by the regime knew he could be thrown into prison."⁹ Between late 2001 and the forum's eventual closing in the spring of 2005, the government embarked on a different strategy. In 2003, the Baathists and members of the security apparatus "occupied" the forum by becoming the majority of attendees, and the usual attendees saw this phenomenon and stopped coming. Baathists would use the forum to praise the regime, and a forum member was openly told by a security official this "occupation" was the Baath strategy.¹⁰ Shortly before the forum's closing in May 2005, individuals sympathetic to the government became nearly the entirety of attendees¹¹ and even more stringently enforced the red lines. In a May 2005 meeting, writer Ali Abdallah read an email from Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, and Abdallah—along with the rest of the forum's governing board—was immediately arrested. Although other members of the forum's governing board were released soon after the arrest, Abdallah remained in prison until November 2006.¹²

Riad Seif and Fragmenting the Opposition

Between 2002 and 2005, opposition and civil society activists saw the glimmers of free expression completely disappear, and the movement was forced underground. Riad Seif's imprisonment was a particular blow, because he was the only true "leader" whom others could rally around. The majority of those who openly defined themselves as or sympathized with members of the opposition were journalists, artists, physicians, lawyers, and other members of the middle class. Few had the stature of Riad Seif, who was drawn to the regime's declared push for economic reform, and he was twice elected to parliament with a solid reputation as an honest businessman. Furthermore, the Syrian parliament had never experienced a whistleblower. In addition to his anticorruption drive, in June 2001, on the floor of the Syrian parliament, Seif presented a detailed study on the government's exploitation and manipulation of the cell phone industry. The government's reaction was intense; less than three months later, Seif was arrested. His actions and sacrifices garnered the respect of opposition members. Since his arrest and even following his release in early 2006, the government has made sure to rein him in as much as possible. As he said in an interview a few months after his release:

The regime tried to intimidate me. They beat me, forbade me from making public statements, or hosting any foreigners or diplomats. They tried to intimidate my friends and relatives with security detachments¹³ following me wherever I went, including my office and in restaurants. They even stationed people in front of my children's houses. They wanted to isolate me, and people were afraid to contact me, knowing my phone lines were bugged and I was being watched.¹⁴

7. Baath Party Circular No. 1072, February 17, 2001, quoted in Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (New York: Zed Books, 2003), p. 52.

8. Syrian political analyst, interview with author, March 2006.

9. Member of Atassi forum governing committee, interview with author, Damascus, May 2006.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Abdallah was rearrested in March 2006 for insulting the head of the State Security Court and released in October 2006.

13. As of June 2006, four months after Seif's release from prison, a member of the security apparatus sat in front of Seif's offices in central Damascus and took down the name of all individuals who visited him.

14. Riad Seif, interview with author, June 2006. A similar account can also be found at "Syrian Oppositionist Tells of Harassment and Threats by Syrian Security Forces," *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series No. 1292* (Middle East Media Research Institute, September 19, 2006). Available online (<http://memri.org/bin/opener.cgi?Page=archives&ID=SP129206>).

Although many were arrested following the Damascus Spring, no others have received the attention that Seif has. Most members of the opposition, whether or not they agree with his strategy, tactics, or ideas, concede that if the movement is to have a true leader, Riad Seif would be it. He has the reputation, popularity, and credentials enabling him to unify the opposition and give it some measure of populism, which is the opposition's biggest Achilles' heel. Consequently, the authorities have made a special effort to threaten, intimidate, and marginalize him.

A Commitment to Baathism and Arrests of Dissidents

The government renewed its arrests and intimidation of opposition members following the Tenth Regional Baath Party Congress in June 2005. On the first day of the congress, President Asad announced, "We believe that the ideas and teachings of the party are still relevant and current and respond to the interests of the people and the nation. Where their implementation has fallen short, it is individuals who bear responsibility, not the idea or ideology."¹⁵ These statements are consistent with those made in a February 8, 2001, interview with the pan-Arab daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, in which Asad emphasized his support for the Baath Party, pan-Arabism, and Syrian state institutions. He answered all questions about intellectuals, civil society institutions, and political parties by saying that all possibilities were open but the state's security and stability were his paramount concerns.¹⁶

The 2005 Baath Party congress was Bashar al-Asad's firm iteration of Syria's future: commitment to the party, economic reform without political reform, and

stability. For civil society activists, the congress marked the beginning of a new chapter in repression.¹⁷ While the conference was being convened in Damascus, Syrian police used tear gas to disperse a demonstration in Qamishli, in which hundreds of Kurds had gathered to protest the killing of prominent Kurdish cleric Muhammad Mashuq Khaznawi, which was widely blamed on the Syrian regime; Khaznawi was a popular figure whom the regime feared could energize Kurdish and Muslim sentiments.¹⁸ On June 29, the Syrian security apparatus ordered the Atassi forum to close.¹⁹ In July, a member of the National Democratic Gathering from Homs, Hassan Zeno, was arrested for carrying NDG pamphlets.²⁰ In August, the Syrian Arab News Agency reported police had arrested rioters in the Kurdish city of Ayn al-Arab.²¹ In September, police, unable to find suspected militants wanted in clashes that took place with Syrian authorities in Hama, arrested the wives of the wanted men.²² In October, human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni was pursued by Syrian authorities for allegedly striking a woman at the Palace of Justice; eyewitnesses say that the woman stood in front of Bunni, fell to the ground of her own accord, and an ambulance appeared within a minute, indicating a setup.²³ Members of the security apparatus beat Bunni in the street. Bunni believed he had drawn the ire of the regime for drafting a new constitution for Syria and posting it on the internet.²⁴

The Syrians continued this policy at the beginning of 2006, after they felt that the UN investigation into the Hariri assassination had been sufficiently discredited and posed no further threat to the regime's survival. Beginning with the meetings of Syrian dissidents held in Europe and the United States in January and February 2006, and leading up to the publication of the Beirut-Damascus

15. Quoted in "Syria Leader Looks Set to Stay the Course; At His Baath Party Congress, Bashar Assad Avoids Mention of Political Change and Calls Technology a Threat to the Identity of the Arabs," *Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 2005.

16. Bashar al-Asad, interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), February 8, 2001.

17. Syrian dissidents, interviews with author, February–June 2006.

18. "Syrian Rights Body Says Activist Arrested, Police Disperse Kurdish Demonstration," al-Jazeera, translated by BBC, June 6, 2005.

19. "Syria Orders Closure of Only Remaining Political Forum," Agence France-Presse, June 29, 2005.

20. "Syrian Opposition Member Arrested While Carrying Pamphlets," Agence France-Presse, July 11, 2005.

21. "Syrian Agency Reports Arrests after 'Riots' in Northern Region," Syrian Arab News Agency, carried by BBC, August 16, 2005.

22. "Syria Arrests Wives of Three Suspected Militants," Agence France-Presse, September 26, 2005.

23. "Syria to Arrest Rights Activist after Woman Files Lawsuit," al-Arabiya TV, carried by BBC, October 11, 2005; Eyewitness accounts relayed to author, March 2007.

24. Anwar al-Bunni, interview with author, Damascus, February 2006.

Declaration in May 2006, the government made clear that individuals were not to meet or speak with dissidents abroad. In February, the authorities detained Riad Seif and former parliament member Maamoun Homsy, who had been released the month before, following more than four years in prison.²⁵ In March, the authorities rearrested Ali Abdallah, who had served six months in prison after reading a message from the Muslim Brotherhood at the Atassi forum.²⁶ Later that month, the authorities arrested Samir Nashar, one of the architects of the Damascus Declaration, but he was released a day later. Nashar said he was arrested because he attended meetings of Syrian dissidents in Berlin and Washington in early 2006.²⁷ In May, Fateh Jamous, a member of the banned Communist Labor Party, was arrested at the Damascus airport after meeting with Syrian opposition figures in Europe.²⁸ Throughout the spring of 2006, the security apparatus raided the Damascus Declaration steering committee meetings.²⁹ After the publication of the Beirut-Damascus Declaration in May 2006, the regime was not worried by international pressure, and the arrests of Michel Kilo and Anwar al-Bunni came swiftly.

The regime has used other means at its disposal to curb the activities of dissidents. It effectively made use of travel bans on well-known activists such as Yassin al-Haj Saleh (denied a passport in 2005), Riad Seif (denied a passport following his 2006 prison release), and human rights lawyer and advocate Razan Zeitouneh (banned from leaving Syria since 2002).³⁰ Again, behind these travel bans is the need for the Syrian authorities to prevent the forging of any bonds between activists and dissidents outside Syria.

Lack of Grassroots Appeal and Poor Publicity

Even though the Damascus Declaration brought both prominent personalities and Arab and Kurdish groups

together to agree to a joint program, the declaration's biggest weakness was focusing on political reforms and not on the concerns of the general working public. Although the political forums of the Damascus Spring were open to the public, only certain categories of people (many of whom overlap) attended: former communists and others imprisoned for their political beliefs; journalists, authors, and intellectuals who had dedicated their lives to fighting for freedom of expression; and politically active youths. In a country whose population is nearing 20 million, the number of self-declared activists is barely in the thousands, making the Damascus Spring and Damascus Declaration products of a small vocal minority.

When talking to Syrian dissidents, civil society activists, or self-identified members of the opposition about the inclusivity of their message for the Syrian public, two phrases often arise: "wall of fear" and "silent majority." The repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, the ubiquitous presence of the military and intelligence apparatus, and the virtual inability to criticize the regime buttress this wall of fear. Members of the opposition feel that the majority of Syrians are on their side, but this "wall" prevents the majority from joining opposition ranks. In a country where the average government employee earns \$200 a month and citizens frequently hold two or three different jobs, the government no longer grants all engineering graduates government jobs, the nature of the bureaucracy makes opening a private business nearly impossible, and corruption has become the system's currency, neither democracy nor freedom of expression tops the average Syrian's priority list. The average Syrian, according to a professor of entrepreneurship at Qalamoun University, has become completely inured to thinking about economic stability and not taking risks in his life or career.

25. "Syria Detains Two Dissident Former MPs," Agence France-Presse, February 15, 2006.

26. "Syrian Forces Re-arrest Dissident Writer: Rights Groups," Agence France-Presse, March 23, 2006.

27. "Jailed Syrian Human Rights Activist Freed by Authorities," AP Worldstream, March 28, 2006.

28. "Syrian Authorities Detain pro-Democracy Activist for Meeting with Dissidents Abroad," AP Worldstream, May 2, 2006.

29. E-mail message from Human Rights Watch researcher to author, March 2007.

30. "Syria: Civil Society Activists Barred from Traveling," *Human Rights Watch*, July 12, 2006. Available online (http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/07/12/syria13722_txt.htm).

Economic and financial concerns remain paramount, but they were not the central issues the Damascus Declaration addressed. Instead, the call for political freedoms appealed to a very narrow band of vocal activists, and their demands for the intangible continue to hamper their ability to rally a population whose main focus is a higher standard of living and greater opportunities. Some have argued that because many of the Damascus Declaration activists came from different economic ideologies—Marxism, communism, socialism, capitalism, and all shades in between—they sidestepped economic issues to reach consensus.³¹ Nevertheless, this delay in presenting an economic program hampers the opposition's connection with greater Syrian society and its financial woes.

The second obstacle facing the Damascus Declaration—and the opposition in general—is the means to disseminate its message. Since the first dissident crackdowns in 2001, the government has become more sensitive to the presence of antiregime literature from the opposition. The Damascus Declaration's website, www.damdec.org, is blocked in Syria, and distribution of the declaration is fraught with danger and difficulty. In light of the public's fears of regime reprisals and the disinclination toward political activism, an ordinary Syrian would have needed to make a special effort to obtain a print copy of the declaration or to find it on a website that the government did not block. Furthermore, only a minority of Syrians have internet access. Even if the declaration's message may not have resonated with the average Syrian, the difficulties in distribution further hindered its effectiveness.

Divisions within the Domestic Opposition

The Syrian opposition and its allied elements—civil society groups, human rights organizations, dialogue forums, and nonprofit organizations—have constituencies from all parts of Syrian society: the Druze of

Suweida in the south, the urban Sunni Muslims of Damascus, the Kurds of the northeast, and the Alawites of the coast. Consequently, the opposition is divided in its makeup as well as in its aims and goals. The domestic opposition is marked by three major cleavages: Arab versus Kurd, young versus old, and religious versus secular (the next section of this study is devoted to the final cleavage). These three broad categories point to the opposition's strengths and weaknesses, as well as which elements the government punishes moderately and which it punishes severely. The opposition is also hampered by regime co-option: government informants have been very successful in penetrating opposition meetings and making opposition members suspicious of each other.

Arabs and Kurds. The Arab-Kurdish divide is the most prominent in the opposition, and the Kurds themselves are quite divided. At the time of writing, at least fourteen Kurdish political parties existed, and smaller ones continue to form. The following are the major players on the Kurdish political spectrum:

- The Kurdish Democratic Front in Syria (*al-jabha*, the Front) consists of three political parties: the Kurdish Democratic Party, the Progressive Democratic Party, and the National Democratic Party.
- The Kurdish Democratic Alliance in Syria (*at-takhaluf*, the Alliance) consists of four parties: the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, the Kurdish Left Party, the Progressive Democratic Party, and the Kurdish Democratic Party.
- A small alliance comprises three independent parties: Yekiti (Unity), Azadi (Freedom), and the Future Movement.
- Two parties have branched off the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): the Democratic Union Party and the Democratic Kurdistan Party.

31. Syrian opposition expert, e-mail message to author, March 2007.

Since the first Kurdish party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, was established in 1957, multiple divisions, combinations, and realignments have occurred in the fifty-year history of Kurdish political parties. Some groups (like Azadi) have left the Democratic Front or the Democratic Alliance; others have joined. Although other parties refused, the Democratic Front and the Democratic Alliance both signed the Damascus Declaration with the Arab signatories. Their participation was crucial in showing that Arabs and Kurds could peacefully and nonviolently unite in pursuit of democratic reforms.

This cooperation was an exception in a long history that, well before the Asad family rose to power, saw Syria's Arab majority repress Syria's Kurdish minority. The rise of Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s in Syria saw increased discrimination against Syria's Kurds, which represent 10 to 15 percent of the country's population. In 1962, the government carried out a census in the northeastern province of Hassake, the most densely Kurdish governorate, to identify "alien infiltrators" from Turkey.³² This census stripped 120,000–150,000 Kurds of citizenship. By 2004, the number of stateless Kurds doubled to 300,000, roughly 20 percent of the entire Syrian Kurdish population, including 200,000 registered "foreigners" and nearly 100,000 *maktoumeen* (silenced ones), individuals who failed to participate in the 1962 census or children born of unions between registered foreigners and Syrians.³³ The latter are unregistered persons who are not present in official Syrian records and thus truly stateless. In the 1970s, the Syrian government continued the Arabization policy by constructing the "Arab Belt," a cordon around the Kurdish population concentrated in the northeast, abutting the borders of Turkey and Iraq, built by

appropriating Kurdish lands and settling Arabs in the northeast. Adding insult to injury, discriminatory cultural practices were introduced, including forbidding the public instruction of the Kurdish language, Arabizing the names of Kurdish villages, and prohibiting Kurdish names on Syrian documents.³⁴

Two critical events in 2004 and 2005 emboldened the Kurds against the Syrian regime. The first was a March 12, 2004, soccer match in Qamishli, where scuffles between supporters of the opposing Kurdish and Arab teams led to security forces' shooting several Kurds. This action sparked a riot³⁵ that took place over the following week, involving Kurds throughout northern Syria, including Aleppo. In Qamishli, Kurds set fire to public vehicles and Baath Party offices. Over an eight-day period, forty people (thirty-three Kurds and seven Arabs) were killed, and more than 2,000 Kurds were arrested. Calm was restored only after Syrian army tanks were sent into all major Kurdish towns.³⁶ In June 2005, Syrian Kurds were further radicalized when it was revealed that Muhammad Mashuq Khaznawi, a prominent Kurdish cleric and assistant director at Damascus's Islamic Studies Center, had been tortured and killed the month prior. All fingers pointed at the regime. Although Khaznawi had gradually become a more vocal supporter of Kurdish rights and had drawn closer to Kurdish parties, his meeting with Muslim Brotherhood head Bayanouni in February 2005 is believed to be the reason for the murder.³⁷ Thousands of Kurds attended his funeral, and many were beaten in demonstrations that followed it.³⁸

With this history, it should not be surprising the Kurds are the most powerful opposition group in Syria. Historical and recent events radicalized a population that resents living in a country calling itself the

32. "Syria: The Silenced Kurds," *Human Rights Watch* 8, no. 4(E) (October 1996). Available online (<http://hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm>).

33. Robert Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered," MEP BP 06/01 (Chatham House, Middle East Programme, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, January 2006). Available online (www.chathamhouse.org.uk/pdf/research/mep/BPSyrianKurds.pdf).

34. Many Kurds are known to their friends and family by the Kurdish name given to them by their parents, but they have an Arabic name that is used on their ID card, passport, and official government documents.

35. Disagreement exists over whether the riots were spontaneous or preplanned. See Gary C. Gambill, "The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria," *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 6, no. 4 (April 2004). Available online (www.meib.org/articles/0404_s1.htm).

36. *Ibid.*

37. Megan Stack, "Cleric's Slaying a Rallying Cry for Kurds in Syria," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2005.

38. Robert Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered."

“Syrian Arab Republic” and being forced to conform to imposed Arabism.³⁹ Despite suffering from the lack of freedom, democracy, and self-expression—conditions shared by the majority of Syrians—the Kurds are able to successfully organize themselves as an oppressed, vocal minority, whereas Arabs cannot.

The Kurds who allied with their Arab partners in the Damascus Declaration felt the wording of the Kurdish section of the Damascus Declaration was sufficient. The section called for

A just democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria, in a manner that guarantees the complete equality of Syrian Kurdish citizens with the other citizens, with regard to nationality rights, culture, learning the national language, and the other constitutional, political, social, and legal rights on the basis of the unity of the Syrian land and people. Nationality and citizenship rights must be restored to those who have been deprived of them.⁴⁰

In the National Democratic Gathering's organ, *al-Mawqif al-Dimoqrati* (The Democratic Stand), representatives of the Kurdish Democratic Front and the Kurdish Democratic Alliance noted the document represented “an important step toward unifying the national democratic forces,” stressing “the Kurdish issue in Syria is a distinctly national democratic issue,” and called for the national democratic forces, without exception, to unite.⁴¹ Yekiti and Azadi, however, did not sign the declaration because they felt the document placed a ceiling on the rights of Kurds at the issue of citizenship. These parties stressed the Kurdish issue is not one of citizenship but of land and people.⁴²

Intra-Kurdish divisions notwithstanding, fundamental cleavages exist between Arab and Kurdish members of the opposition. Human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, who has represented Arab and Kurdish detainees, emphasizes that Kurds point to the existence of a uniquely Kurdish problem in Syria.⁴³ This statement by one of Syria's most prominent human rights defenders is significant, because it indicates that the Kurdish issue is one of perception and history, and hard for Arab leaders to understand. Leaders of the Kurdish parties who did not sign the declaration reiterated that they live on their ancestral lands of Kurdistan and that Kurds have a special nationalist identity.⁴⁴

Although the Kurds are split into numerous parties, an astute Kurdish observer of Kurdish politics concluded that the party cleavages are completely personal and have little, if anything, to do with the platforms of each organization.⁴⁵ All of the *major* parties advocate peaceful resistance in the hopes of securing democracy and freedoms within Syria and would like Kurdish self-administration. The leaders of the parties advocate cooperation with Arabs to achieve that goal but lament that Arab nationalist trends among the leaders of the Arab opposition are a major obstacle to true coordination. Kurdish descriptions of Kurdish-Arab relations range from “good” to “chauvinistic.”⁴⁶ One Kurdish signatory of the Damascus Declaration noted: “We think like Syrian Kurds, but they [the other parties] think more like Kurds who happen to be in Syria.”⁴⁷ Another activist emphasized that as a Kurdish politician, he must “work in the realm of the possible, and this [Damascus Declaration] was possible.”⁴⁸

39. This discrimination also applies to the Assyrians, an even smaller, yet vocal minority ethnic group that also suffers from linguistic and cultural prejudice. Because of their small numbers, however, the Syrian regime does not deem them a great security threat.

40. “The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change,” Syriacomment.com, October 16, 2005. Available online (<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/11/damascus-declaration-in-english.htm>).

41. *Al-Mawqif al-Dimoqrati*, November 2005.

42. Ibid.

43. Joe Pace, “Anwar al-Bunni: Interview with Syria's Leading Human Right Lawyer,” Syriacomment.com, August 7, 2005. Available online (<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/08/anwar-al-bunni-interview-with-syrias.htm>).

44. Kheir al-Din Murad, leader of Azadi, interview with author, Qamishli, May 2006; Hassan Salih, leader of Yekiti, interview with author, Qamishli, June 2006; Meshal Temo, leader of Future Movement, interview with author, Damascus, March 2006.

45. Kurdish writer and human rights activist, interview with author, Damascus, May 2006.

46. Kurdish activists, interviews with author, Damascus and Qamishli, March and May 2006.

47. Member of Kurdish Democratic Union Party, interview with author, Damascus, June 2006.

48. Member of Kurdish Left Party, interview with author, Damascus, June 2006.

Irrespective of their personal and ideological differences, or their tenuous links with the Arab members of the opposition, what unifies the Kurdish opposition is their ability to organize their ranks and demonstrate against the Syrian government. Examples include a 3,000-person demonstration in Aleppo in honor of Kurdish New Year in 2006;⁴⁹ a demonstration of 500 Kurdish students at Damascus University in 2006 to commemorate the 2004 clashes between Syrian authorities and Kurds in northern Syria;⁵⁰ and, most significant, demonstrations of some 10,000 Kurds in Qamishli following the disappearance of Khaznawi in May 2005.⁵¹ The intersection of discrimination, state neglect of Kurdish areas, and Kurdish animosity toward the Syrian regime differentiates the Kurds from their Arabic counterparts, who cannot make the same claims against the Arab regime.

Young and Old. The generation gap is the Syrian opposition's greatest weakness. Those born after 1970 have known only the Baath Syria of the Asad family. Those born in the 1950s and 1960s, young children during the Baath revolution of 1963, saw the bloody, protracted battle between the Syrian regime and the Muslim Brotherhood and the establishment of a Syria ruled by the Asad family. The generation of the 1930s and 1940s, however, remembers Syrian independence from French rule; the rise of the Baathists, the communists, and other parties; and Syria's 1954–1958 experience with democracy. Consequently, the central figures in the opposition tend to be in their sixties and seventies, with a smattering of middle-aged Syrians and some young people. Riad Seif, jailed journalist Michel Kilo, veteran Communist Party leader Riad al-Turk, and human rights lawyer Haitham al-Maleh remain the mainstays of an opposition that has earned the reputation in Syria of being old and irrelevant.

In a 2002 study, a prominent dissident and former professor of medicine at Damascus University accurately explains why the overwhelming majority of Syrian youths are not interested in politics. In "Political Education for Syrian Youth: Determinants and Directions,"⁵² Hazem Nahar broadly outlines the Syrian educational system. All Syrian elementary schoolchildren wear a school uniform emblazoned with the Baath Party symbol, and until recently, would salute the president every morning. In middle school, all students are obliged to join the Young People's Revolutionary Union, which the Baath Party created in 1963. Nahar argues that becoming a member of the Baath Party, while not required, occurs without any thought or discussion of the ramifications of joining a political party. In the university, students must continuously present papers to the branches of the security apparatus, and many join the National Syrian Student Union, which is overseen by the Baath Party. The Baath Party also entrusts student members with reporting of any suspicious behavior by students on campus.

Nahar's analysis rings most true when he talks about the ignorance of Syrian youths. In claims corroborated by Syrian students,⁵³ Nahar says that most students do not know what the Emergency Law is, the content of the Syrian constitution, the names of members of parliament, Quneitra's location on a map, or the status of the Golan Heights. One very prominent example of this ignorance was revealed during this author's interview with former parliament member Riad Seif: his assistant in 2006, a young woman from the western town of Safita, acknowledged that before she started working for Seif, she knew nothing about his political activities or prominence in the opposition.

Neither Nahar's article nor the preceding examples are applicable to all Syrian youths. For example, one Syrian woman in her early twenties, a filmmaker, over-

49. "Syria Frees 75 Syrian Kurds," *Middle East Times*, September 5, 2006. Available online (www.metimes.com/storyview.php?StoryID=20060905-052746-3223r).

50. "Syria: Kurds Detained after Protest on Anniversary of Clash," IRIN, March 15, 2006. Available online (www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=26198).

51. Nicholas Blanford, "A Murder Stirs Kurds in Syria," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 16, 2005.

52. Hazem Nahar, "Al-Tanshia Al-Siyasiya Lil Shabab al-Suri: Al-Muhaddadat w'al Itijahat" (Political Education for Syrian Youth: Determinants and Directions), 2002, copy provided to the author.

53. Damascus University students, interviews with author, February–March 2006.

came many obstacles to direct a film about citizenship. She was alarmed how few of the interviewees—especially people on the street—knew what the concept meant. The filmmaker also overcame many obstacles from the intelligence apparatus in filming the movie on the streets of Damascus and not being able to screen it for audiences. Other Syrian students at Damascus University and Tishreen University in Lattakia told the author that although they do discuss politics, they regard such discussion as meaningless because they are powerless to change the status quo.

Cases of student activism exist but are few and far between. The most prominent example in recent years is that of Muhammad Arab, a medical student at Aleppo University. In 2004, Arab defeated the Baath Party candidate in the university's student elections, which resulted in his suspension. Following the university action, Arab traveled to Damascus to join a protest against the university's decision. He was arrested, and Syria's Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) convicted him and another student, Muhannad al-Dibs, of "resistance" and "support of goals contrary to the revolution" and sentenced the students to three years in prison.⁵⁴ Arab served only eight months, but during that time, he said he endured threats and beatings.⁵⁵ Arab was quoted as saying, "Prison wasn't great, but living without freedom is worse."⁵⁶ On November 28, 2006, the SSSC tried eight youths, twenty-one to thirty years of age, for founding a discussion group focusing on cultural and political issues. They were arrested in early 2006 for violating articles 278 and 287 of the Syrian criminal code, which prohibit "spreading false or exaggerated news that can affect the standing of the state."⁵⁷ A group called Syrian Youth for Justice released information about the students, who had been held incommunicado for nine months without access to a lawyer. The report also maintained the youths did not belong to any political party.

Despite the educational system's Baath indoctrination and the presence of a police state, stirrings for change exist among youths. Some have risked their own freedom and future to engage in public discourse and criticism of a one-party regime. Syrian youths today generally do not find their political voice through political parties but through other avenues, ranging from political discussions to the arts. They have formed a new class of political activists who do not use organized parties or ideologies to express themselves. This development on the Syrian political scene is important to follow, to see whether the actions of these individuals will spur others to undertake a similar course.

In the short term, however, increased youth activism seems unlikely for three reasons. First, most Syrians in their late teens and early twenties—if they are unable to leave the country—appear mainly interested in completing their education, finding a secure job, and raising a family. They are largely not interested in politics and do not want to engage in activities that would bring them, their friends, or their loved ones unwanted attention or harm. Second, none of the opposition leaders has practicable and well-developed plans for engaging youths. Many of those interviewed for this study talked about the need for and importance of energizing Syrian youths, but how to stimulate a generation inculcated with fear, ignorance, and apathy in a repressive environment remains a prime obstacle. Most important is for the younger civil society activists, in their late thirties and early forties, to reach out to youths. A number of them, active with human rights and civil society groups, talked about activism training sessions and forming committees that focus on employment, human rights, and media relations,⁵⁸ and these activities can possibly have a role. Third, and most important, involving youths in civil society activities remains a threat to the regime. At the Atassi forum, for instance, a youth committee was set up, and many

54. Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Overview: Syria," 2006. Available online (<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/syria12231.htm>).

55. James Brandon, "Flouting Syria's Martial Law, Bold Students Advocate Democracy," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 6, 2006.

56. Ibid.

57. "8 Syrian Students Face Trial for Starting Discussion Group," *Syrian Youth for Justice Report #EN006/028-II-2006*, November 28, 2006, posted on Syriacomment.com. Available online (<http://joshualandis.com/blog/?p=103>).

58. Syrian civil society activists, interviews with author, Damascus, June 2006.

students who had been punished or expelled from university for their activities addressed the forum.⁵⁹ According to a prominent member of the forum, setting up a youth committee posed a real threat to the government, and the regime succeeded in forcing the Atassi forum to shut down its youth activities, claiming the forum was corrupting the younger generation.

Regime Co-option. The Syrian authorities have not only succeeded in crippling the opposition through arrests, prolonged detainments, postponed trials, and long jail sentences—they have also been able to divide the opposition from the inside, as evidenced by their infiltration of the Atassi forum and use of other dialogue groups to defend Baath positions.

Most damaging to the movement, however, is the security apparatus's co-option and intimidation of individual activists, human rights defenders, and members of outlawed political parties. The relationship between these activists and security officials ranges from collaboration to a balancing of interests to intimidation.⁶⁰ According to an American official who served in the U.S. embassy in Damascus, "when three people [an American and two Syrians] sit in a room, the two Syrians are concerned the other will report him or her to the *mukhabarat* (security apparatus)."⁶¹ Following the Beirut-Damascus Declaration and the counterdeclaration, this official noted that the energy of civil society

moved from helping jailed dissidents Michel Kilo and Anwar al-Bunni to fighting among themselves, and this official speculated the *mukhabarat* was trying to feed this animosity. This intimidation is in addition to personal conflicts that exist between members of the opposition, which may be personality conflicts or the result of manipulation by the security apparatus and suspicion. This problem was best seen in December 2005, when various forces contributed to the split and later reconciliation between members of the Committee for the Defense of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights.⁶²

The activists themselves also concede the pressures from the Syrian government are immense. Although many members of the opposition are principled, even after enduring years of detainments and harassment, many acquiesce to bribes, are "manufactured" by the regime, or are unable to counter the regime's arsenal of tools. Constant arrests, travel bans, and monitoring wear down many activists.⁶³ One activist, a signatory to the Damascus Declaration, lamented the obstacles to simple meetings of the Damascus Declaration's committees within private homes, adding that members are suspicious of each other, which reduces their ability to speak openly.⁶⁴ This signatory, a human rights and civil society activist, noted that as of January 2007, the regime was clamping down even harder on internal dissent.⁶⁵

59. Member of Atassi forum governing committee, interview with author, Damascus, May 2006.

60. U.S. embassy official stationed in Damascus in the first half of 2006, interview with author, November 2006.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Syrian political dissident, interview with author, Damascus, June 2006.

64. Syrian human rights activist, interview with author, January 2007.

65. Ibid.

The Islamists

AS IN MANY OTHER STATES of the region, radical Islam is a threat to the Syrian regime. Syria's experience with Islamism and its suppression threatened the very existence of Hafiz al-Asad's regime, and that experience has shaped the current government's tactics and politics.

The Legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood has been Syria's dominant Islamist group since the 1940s. A tolerant group in the 1940s and 1950s, the Brotherhood became more radical following the Baath coup of 1963, especially because the Baath Party's economic policies stripped the Sunni commercial class of its established prosperity. The Brotherhood and the government frequently engaged in armed clashes during the 1960s, but greater political stability and economic prosperity between 1970 and 1976 led to a reduction of tensions. By 1976, however, with a downturn in economic fortunes and Asad's entry into the Lebanese civil war, the Muslim Brothers and their sympathizers were the most prominent elements of active, domestic opposition to the Syrian regime. From 1976 to 1982, the Brotherhood organized large urban demonstrations; closed down whole quarters of cities; burned buildings; and assassinated Baath Party officials, government ministers, and even Alawite professionals, indicating that the gunmen equated Baathists and Alawites as enemies to Sunni Arabs.¹ In June 1979, an unidentified gunman slaughtered dozens of Alawite cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School, and in June 1980, President Asad was nearly killed by machine gun fire and grenades.

The Syrian government reacted savagely to these incidents. Hafiz al-Asad's brother, Rifaat, then head of the elite Siraya al-Difaa (Defense Companies), responded to the attempted presidential assassination

by dispatching units to Tadmur prison, where Muslim Brothers were being held, and indiscriminately killed nearly 500 inmates. In August of 1980, the Defense Companies rounded up and shot males over fourteen years of age in Aleppo and Hama.² By 1981, the Muslim Brotherhood and the government were engaged in an all-out war, disrupting daily life. Individuals associated with the Brotherhood set fire to government-owned food stores. Throughout the country, many Syrians did not go to work or step outside of their homes after dark.³ The Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in paralyzing the government and forcing it onto the defensive. The Brotherhood's offensive brought into stark relief the price of Syria's stability. It painted the Baath Party as a small, sectarian Alawite elite unable to deliver on its promises of economic progress, instead focusing on foreign policy and regional domination.

The clash between the two sides came to a head in February 1982. At the beginning of the month, antigovernment fighters killed dozens of leading Baathists in a bid to snatch control of Hama from the government. Over a period of three weeks, Syrian army units fought to regain control of the town and hunt down Islamist fighters. Much of the fighting included urban warfare through Hama's narrow streets, shelling of civilian areas, and use of bulldozers and tanks that razed whole city blocks in an attempt to flush out the Brotherhood.⁴ Although statistics vary, estimates place the number of casualties in Hama between 15,000 and 25,000.

This history is important when looking at Syria twenty-five years later. Although the country has a new president, the Muslim Brotherhood is banished, and the regime has been courting Islamism for some time, the Muslim Brotherhood remains a line in the sand. In light of this history, the murder of Kurdish cleric Muhammad Mashuq Khaznawi shortly after he met with

1. Patrick Seale, *Asad: Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 316.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

4. Although the damaged area has been cleared and replaced with apartment blocks, the 1982 government offensive razed nearly one-third of the city.

Brotherhood leader Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni in Europe is easier to understand; as is the six-month imprisonment of writer Ali Abdallah for publicly reading an e-mail message from Bayanouni. Likewise, this history illuminates why in the spring of 2006, amid the wave of arrests of opposition members, the Syrian government named Najah al-Attar Syria's first female vice president. Al-Attar is the sister of longtime Muslim Brotherhood leader Issam al-Attar, currently in exile in Europe. In an interview pointing to her styled blonde hair and business suit, Ms. Attar was painted as "the symbol of secular Syria."⁵ Although she has been involved in government for nearly thirty years, her appointment communicates to the Brotherhood that it is still unwelcome in Syria.

The Muslim Brotherhood of the twenty-first century is not the same Brotherhood of 1982. In 2002, Brotherhood leader Bayanouni published a national charter that called for a democratic state and rejected violence.⁶ In interviews, he has consistently affirmed the Brotherhood is a different organization than it once was, now committed to tolerance, pluralism, and democratic elections.⁷ Although this agenda is a far cry from its acts of violent terror in the 1970s, the Brotherhood is still opposed to the Asad regime. In short, the Muslim Brotherhood embodies all of the regime's fears: losing power, unbridled Islamism, Sunni hegemony, and attacks against minorities. Most important, the Brotherhood is the one force that came close to toppling the Asad regime. Given the history, it is little surprise that the Syrian government directs its most draconian policies on dissent toward Islamists.

State-Sponsored Islam

The Syrian regime's experience with the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1970s and early 1980s created both

crisis and opportunity. On the one hand, it transformed Syria into a true police state. On the other hand, realizing its population was 75 percent Sunni Muslim, the regime understood Islam's power and how suppression would only embolden both domestic and foreign elements hostile to the regime. For that reason, in the 1980s the Syrian government built mosques and sponsored Quran recitation competitions, and in the 1990s, it tolerated greater public religious observance, such as wearing the *hijab*.⁸ Since the 1990s, Syrian official sponsorship of Islam has become even more deeply rooted, with the express purpose of preventing the mosque from becoming a source of rebellion. All mosque preachers are licensed by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and their Friday sermons combine Quranic exegesis, denunciation of Syria's enemies, and praise of the Syrian government.

Bashar al-Asad has surpassed his father in building bridges between "secular" Syria and "Islamist" Syria. In recent years, these measures have included allowing mosques to be open between prayer times, lifting a ban on prayer in military barracks, and inviting religious authorities to lecture cadets.⁹ The few personalities the regime has allowed to criticize the government have included religious figures, most prominently Salah Kafataru, the son of former grand mufti Ahmad Kafataru and head of the Abu Nour mosque in Damascus, and parliament member Muhammad Habash. Kaftaru has publicly mentioned the failure of Arab governments and has supported Turkey's model of an Islamic democracy.¹⁰ Habash has called for the repeal of Law 49 (the death penalty for Brotherhood members) and has advocated legalizing Islamic political parties.¹¹ Furthermore, the government and leading religious figures, including prominent Islamic and pro-government

5. "Syria Dissidents Targeted in Crackdown," National Public Radio, April 5, 2006.

6. Anthony Shadid, "Inside and Outside Syria, a Debate to Decide the Future," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2005.

7. Ibid.; and Shaghayeh Azimi, "Interview with Ali Sadreddin Al Bayanouni," *The Middle East in London*, February 2006 (available online at www.soas.ac.uk/lmei/docs/lmei_meil_editions/15/13_bayanouni.pdf).

8. Contrast this to Syria in 1983, when female paratroopers in Rifaat al-Asad's brigade ripped the veils from women in the streets. See Seale, *Asad: Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 426.

9. Sami Moubayed, "The Islamic Revival in Syria," *Mideast Monitor* 1, no. 3 (September–October 2006). Available online (www.mideastmonitor.org/issues/0609/0609_4.htm).

10. "Religious Surge Alarms Secular Syrians," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2005.

11. "Syrian Islamic Scholar Preaches Moderation; Mohammed Habash Offers Alternative to Rising Islamic Conservatism," *Daily Star* (Beirut), January 18, 2005.

thinker Sheikh Said Ramadan al-Buti, supported the rise of the Qubaysiyya, a women's Islamic movement that has sought to set up affordable, private Muslim schools and attract prominent and upper-class women to learn Islamic scriptures. According to religious figures supported by the government, the Qubaysiyya mention Bashar al-Asad in their prayers and are not in search of political power.¹²

Muhammad Habash is most emblematic of the government-sponsored Islamist trend. In addition to being a member of parliament, he directs the Islamic Studies Center, whose brochures convey a moderate, tolerant Islam. In 2001, during the death throes of the Damascus Spring and before his election to parliament, Habash received permission to hold cultural and social debates to spread moderate Islamic thought.¹³ Habash is also keen on emphasizing the difference between conservative Muslims, Muslims who preach a reform or renewal form of Islam, and radicals; the latter, he says, represent less than 1 percent of the population. The difference between a conservative Muslim and a radical, he says, is that the latter supports violence. His renewal Islam stresses dialogue, respect, and tolerance for all faiths.¹⁴ He has emerged as an important figure who can block the moves of a nascent Islamist opposition by showing that the Syrian government both respects the practice of conservative and reformist Islam and marginalizes radical groups.

With the banishment of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1982, a true, organized Islamist opposition does not exist in Syria. Currently, a number of groups have a presence in Syria, with Jund al-Sham (the Army of the Levant) and Ghuraba al-Sham (Strangers of the Levant) being the most prominent. The former has been linked to elements loyal to al-Qaeda and claimed responsibility

for a shootout in the Mezze neighborhood of Damascus in 2004 and on Mount Qasiyoun in Damascus in 2005.¹⁵ In June 2006, Syrian authorities clashed with masked gunmen allegedly preparing to attack Umayyad Square in Damascus.¹⁶ The members of the group, according to Syrian authorities, were in possession of CDs containing sermons of Ghuraba al-Sham's leader, Abu Qaqa, the alias of Mahmoud al-Aghasi, the preacher at the Ash-Sharour mosque in Aleppo. Al-Aghasi's anti-American sermons call for creating an Islamic state based on *sharia* in Syria.¹⁷ In a television interview, al-Aghasi acknowledged that Jund al-Sham carried out the Umayyad Square operation but simultaneously agreed with the policies adopted by the Syrian government and denounced the Muslim Brotherhood for leading Syria into a state of chaos.¹⁸ In other interviews, al-Aghasi noted that he and his group were working with the government to achieve national unity.¹⁹

Because such groups engage in isolated and relatively small attacks, the government may possibly use or have even fabricated these groups to manage the radical Islamist element and provide them with an outlet. The fact that these incidents lead to relatively little loss of life, their details are very unclear, and the suspects are almost always apprehended or killed also buttresses this claim. The attack on the American Embassy in Damascus in September 2006 follows this pattern: all four of the attackers were killed, and no American personnel were injured.²⁰ The attack came at a time of great Saudi-Syrian political strain, and the Syrian Interior Ministry report indicated the attackers were not affiliated with any terror group and planned the operation in Saudi Arabia.²¹

Within the organized Syrian domestic opposition, however, no prominent Islamist element exists. Two

12. "The Qubaysi Women in Syria Recruit Women to the Islamic Call with Government Approval," *al-Hayat* (London), May 3, 2006.

13. "Syria Gives Green Light to Debates by Modern Islamists," Agence France-Presse, July 3, 2001.

14. Muhammad Habash, interview with author, Damascus, May 2006.

15. Moubayed, "The Islamic Revival in Syria."

16. Ibid.

17. Nicholas Blanford, "In Secular Syria, an Islamic Revival," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 3, 2003.

18. "Al-Arabiya TV Interviews Leader of Islamist Group Strangers of Syria," BBC Monitoring Middle East, July 4, 2006.

19. Nicholas Blanford, "In Secular Syria, an Islamic Revival."

20. "Gunmen in Syria Hit US Embassy; 3 Attackers Die," *New York Times*, September 13, 2006.

21. "Syria Says US Embassy Attack Planned in Saudi Arabia," Reuters, October 6, 2006.

reasons exist for this situation. First, the domestic opposition parties and their allies repeatedly call for a secular democracy in Syria, and the only truly Islamist party to sign the declaration was the Muslim Brotherhood, which was exiled twenty years ago. The section of the declaration that recognizes Islam as the religion of the majority and its central place in Arab life is said to have been a gesture in deference to the Muslim Brotherhood.²² Second, the regime's construction of state-sponsored Islam has left *no* outlet whatsoever for political Islam of another flavor. Syrian authorities frequently arrest members of the country's only prominent Islamic party, the Islamic Liberation Party (Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami). This group has a small following; it calls for the restoration of the Islamic caliphate and is banned in most Arab countries. According to organizations such as the Syrian Human Rights Committee, which follows arrests and imprisonments in Syria, the Syrian government is very active in arresting and imprisoning suspected Islamists, especially those suspected of links with the Muslim Brotherhood.²³

The regime's monopoly on religion has placed the secular opposition in a serious bind. On the one hand, the secular program of prominent opposition members repels any domestic Islamist group, whose members know that the punishments for an Islamist are much more severe than those for a member of the secular opposition.²⁴ On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood in exile signed the Damascus Declaration, thus establishing the connection between the domestic opposition and the most threatening element to the regime.

The government has succeeded in managing Islamism through institutions, partnerships, and personalities. Two examples illustrate this point. In

November 2006, Etana Press, which publishes titles aimed at raising Syrian civil awareness, published the Arabic translation of the Iranian book *Let's Take off the Hijab*. After complaints by Islamists to the Baath Party, intelligence agents harassed the head of Etana, Maan Abdul Salam, and then in January 2006 the government shut down the printing house. According to Salam, the Syrian authorities are "creating their own Islamic movement and using it."²⁵ The regime also heavily relies on pro-government clerics. Sheikh al-Buti is well respected in the Syrian religious community for his scholarship and has taught at Damascus University's Faculty of Islamic Law since 1960. Al-Buti has been clear and consistent in his suspicions of civil society and regime critics, calling them agents of anti-Islamic forces. In a 2005 lecture, he criticized civil society, women's groups, and others for intending to "sow dissension that will lead to an internal revolution aided by foreign forces."²⁶ Al-Buti's words struck at the heart of the regime's abilities to contain the opposition. The Syrian government has excelled at controlling Islamization and using it against enemies of the regime, and the rhetoric against the opposition continues to be couched in attacks that link opposition figures with foreign forces that strive to destroy internal unity. The regime's capabilities to marshal the security apparatus and sympathetic clerics are still more powerful than the forces of the secular, domestic opposition.

Syria's orientation to Islamism is part of a thirty-year-old phenomenon. When Hafiz al-Asad took power in the early 1970s and was criticized for being a member of a heterodox sect, he received a *fatwa* (religious edict) from Lebanon's leading Shiite cleric, Musa al-Sadr, saying that Alawites were Shiite Muslims,

22. Joe Pace, "Syria's Islamic Challenge" (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., March 2006).

23. Based in London, the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) posts a list of its press releases pertaining to arrests and prison sentences on its website (www.shrc.org). For arrests of Islamists, see "Two Islamists Charged with Severe Sentences," SHRC, March 1, 2007 (available online at www.shrc.org/data/asp/d0/3080.aspx); "Six Citizens Sentenced on Accusation of Muslim Brotherhood Affiliation," SHRC, February 28, 2007 (available online at www.shrc.org/data/asp/d5/3075.aspx); "Five Years in Prison for Affiliation to Salafism," SHRC, October 2, 2006 (available online at www.shrc.org/data/asp/d7/2807.aspx); "Two Tahrir Suspects Arrested," SHRC, May 16, 2006 (available online at www.shrc.org/data/asp/d2/2652.aspx); "Sentence against Mus'ab al-Hareeri Based on Law of Genocide No. 49 of 1980," SHRC, June 20, 2005 (available online at www.shrc.org/data/asp/d8/2238.aspx).

24. Member of Syrian opposition with extensive Islamist ties, interview with author, Damascus, April 2006.

25. Christine Spolar, "Syria's Strange Political Spring: As the Regime Courts Favor with the Islamists, the Religious Awakening Surprises the Public," *Chicago Tribune*, May 28, 2006.

26. "Al Buti Attacks Political and Social Movements in Syria and Attributes Pressures on the Syrian Regime as a Plan to Exterminate Islam!" *Levant News*, December 26, 2005. Available online (www.thisissyria.net/2005/12/26/levant1.html).

and the Syrian media portrayed him as a pious Muslim, praying in mosques and fasting during Ramadan. The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad continues this practice, using Islamism—or any other ideology—to ensure its hegemony and survival. During the Baath Party Congress of 2005, Asad emphasized that his commitment to pan-Arabism was not contradictory to Islam. The Syrian regime has over the decades loosened its commitment to Baathism, and the growing number of senior, non-Baath office holders (including Vice President al-Attar and Syria's ambassador to the United States, Imad Mustapha) and parliamentarians is indicative of this trend. The Syrian regime can no longer be seen as officially committed to secularism or Baathism in its entirety; rather, it is officially committed to its own survival, and supporting Islamism and discrete elements of Baathism is key.

Can Islamism Move the Syrian Street?

The signs that Syria and its people are becoming more Islamic are clear and have been widely covered in the media: more women wear the *hijab*; more men grow beards and forgo wedding rings; more Islamic bookshops exist; Baath slogans have been replaced by Islamist sayings such as “Pray for the Prophet” and “Do not forget to mention God”; and more night clubs and restaurants serving alcohol have been shut down.²⁷ The key question is whether this expression of Islamic devotion can translate into protest against the regime.

In the short term, this result is highly unlikely, for the regime has proven adept at managing Islamist feeling. This talent was best illustrated by Syria's response to the September 2005 publication of newspaper cartoons denigrating the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. In late 2005 and early 2006, Arab outrage at the cartoons grew. Surprisingly, “secular” Syria reacted most harshly. Following a month in which stores across the country placed leaflets in their windows supporting a ban on Danish goods, a

mob of at least a thousand people demonstrated outside the Danish embassy in Damascus on February 4, 2006, and dozens of young men stormed and burned it.²⁸ The same occurred at the Norwegian embassy. At the Danish embassy, demonstrators replaced the Danish flag with the Saudi flag, upon which is written, “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Simultaneously, Arab men, women, and children paraded through the streets with signs in support of Hizballah, Hamas, Islam, and the Prophet Muhammad.

Given the tight security environment, having that number of people gather and attack a foreign embassy would be impossible without government complicity. No embassy employees were reported injured in the attacks because the protest had been expected, according to an official at the Danish Institute in Damascus.²⁹ Furthermore, the attacks occurred on a Saturday, when the embassies were officially closed and anyone is unlikely to have been inside. All of these elements indicate the government, if it did not encourage the demonstrations and acts of arson, at least had prior knowledge of them. At the Danish embassy, the government deployed only twenty-five riot gear-equipped policemen to handle the tumultuous crowd and dealt with individuals trying to storm the embassy very lightly. Furthermore, when the fire truck arrived to extinguish the blaze, demonstrators immediately jumped on top of it. Such behavior does not occur in repressive Syria and must be viewed as government manipulation allowing Islamists and their sympathizers to direct their sentiments against foreigners and not the regime.

With the decline of Baathism, communism, and Arab nationalism and the rise of Islam across the region, Syrians are no exception when they look to Islam as the only remaining valid ideology. The question is how the regime will react to these individuals with greater commitment. The most important way in which Islamism can threaten the regime is through

27. Blanford, “In Secular Syria, an Islamic Revival”; Moubayed, “The Islamic Revival in Syria”; Spolar, “Syria's Strange Political Spring”; Ibrahim al-Hamidi, “Damascus Speaks of Takfiri Cells and Calls for Enlightenment Efforts,” *al-Hayat* (London), June 18, 2005.

28. Eyewitness account of author, February 2006.

29. “Denmark, Norway Condemn Syria after Embassy Attacks,” CBC News, February 5, 2006. Available online (www.cbc.ca/world/story/2006/02/04/cartoon-controversy060204.html).

the proliferation of mosques. Although Grand Mufti Hasson proudly announced in 2005 that Syria had more than 10,000 mosques where 4 million prayed weekly,³⁰ the surge in mosque construction can backfire against the regime. Whereas the Syrian government has been successful in blocking the meetings of the secular opposition, it has welcomed Syrians into the mosque. Unless the government closely monitors this surge in religion and the status of religious

institutions, the mosque can become a breeding ground for more radical, antiregime elements, whether they are local teachers, religious youths, or Islamic charities. So far, however, human rights groups have indicated that Syria continues its human rights violations and persecution of Islamists.³¹ Rising Islamism and the state's management of it is an important phenomenon, and something the U.S. government should follow very closely.

30. Ibrahim al-Hamidi, "Syria: Ten Thousand Mosques Where Four Million Pray Weekly and Official Islamic Efforts 'to Curb Extremism,'" *al-Hayat* (London), August 8, 2005.

31. Syrian Human Rights Committee, "The Sixth Annual Report on Human Rights in Syria 2006" (available online at www.shrc.org/data/asp/ANNUALREPORT2006.aspx); Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Events of 2006" (available online at <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/syria14722.htm>).

The Syrian Opposition and U.S. Policy

BY SHUNNING THE 2006 Iraq Study Group report's suggestion of a dialogue with Syria, the Bush administration emphasized its official stand: Syria, represented by President Bashar al-Asad, "knows what it needs to do" in order to become a stabilizing, positive force in the Middle East. President Bush, Secretary of State Rice, and other State Department and Defense Department officials have all repeated this phrase since former secretary of state Colin Powell met President Asad in Damascus in 2003 and Asad promised to close down the offices of Palestinian terror groups and better patrol the Iraqi-Syrian border.¹ In recent months, a number of U.S. senators and congressional representatives—notably House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in April 2007, the highest-ranking government official to visit Syria since 2003—advocating dialogue with Syria have visited Damascus, but the administration has stood absolutely firm against adopting a warmer stance toward Syria.

The Bush administration, however, has been open to engaging other Syrian parties. Outside Syria, members of the administration have met with various Syrian opposition members in exile. Over the past few years, Farid Ghadry, leader of the Washington-based Reform Party of Syria, has met with senior administration officials. In March 2005, Ghadry met with Elizabeth Cheney, then a principal deputy assistant secretary in the State Department's Near East Affairs Bureau, and argued for covert CIA operations and U.S. funding for the Syrian opposition to topple the Asad government.² The Bush administration has also held discussions with the leaders of the National Salvation Front, the largest Syrian opposition group in exile, led by Muslim Brotherhood chief Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni and former Syrian vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam. Admin-

istration officials met with NSF representatives in Washington twice in the fall of 2006, but press reports indicate members of the National Security Council and State Department were not convinced by the NSF's program for a post-Asad regime.³

Although opposition groups in exile serious about regime change have been interested in meeting with U.S. government officials, the response from within Syria has been icier. In the fall of 2006, four U.S. officials visited opposition figures in Damascus, including Haitham al-Maleh, a prominent human rights activist with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Maleh, the officials told him they wanted to work with him to press the Syrian government to open up to democratic opposition, but Maleh declined because he "doubted their sincerity."⁴

In general, members of the domestic Syrian opposition articulate a combination of confusion and betrayal when discussing the U.S. government. Many opposition members fear the United States is using them only as a tool to pressure Syria and also do not understand why the United States promotes democracy and elections in the Middle East and then refuses to talk with those elected governments (like Hamas) that it does not like.⁵ Nancy Pelosi's visit to Damascus in April 2007 corroborated the belief of opposition members that America is indifferent to human rights issues in Syria, confirming their fears that human rights is secondary to American strategic interests with respect to Syria and the Middle East. In a Beirut *Daily Star* editorial, human rights activist Radwan Ziadeh noted that in all of Pelosi's discussions with Bashar al-Asad, the issue of human rights did not even appear to have been raised.⁶

1. "Powell Urges Syria to Cooperate with US for Mideast Peace," Channel NewsAsia, May 4, 2003.

2. Anne Barnard and Farah Stockman, "US Policy Makers Split on Approach to Syria," *Boston Globe*, November 26, 2006.

3. "Diplomats to Elaph: Failure in the Washington Meeting with Khaddam and Bayanouni," *Elaph* (London), November 2, 2006. Available online (www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/Politics/2006/11/187797.htm).

4. Anne Barnard and Farah Stockman, "US Policy Makers Split on Approach to Syria."

5. Syrian opposition expert, e-mail message to author, March 2007.

6. Nadim Houry and Radwan Ziadeh, "Human Rights in Syria; Pelosi's Silence," *Daily Star* (Beirut), April 6, 2007.

The White House, however, has not been indifferent to the plight of Syrian dissidents or prisoners. A January 24, 2006, press release called for the Syrian government to “cease its harassment of Syrians who peacefully seek to bring democratic reform to their country.”⁷ In December 2006, the White House reiterated its support of the Syrian people’s desire for democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression.⁸ Notably, the latter statement was timed for exactly when U.S. Senator Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) visited Bashar al-Asad in Damascus to discuss regional issues, in defiance of the U.S. administration’s rejection of the Iraq Study Group report’s recommendation to speak directly with Syria. Nelson was followed by Senators John Kerry, Christopher Dodd, and Arlen Specter, and the statement’s timing indicated that although the Bush administration stood firmly against engagement with the Syrian government, it wanted to convey concern for Syria’s citizens and interest in the release of prominent political prisoners, most prominently Anwar al-Bunni, Michel Kilo, and Kamal Labwani.

These statements, however, do little to convince those fighting for freedom inside Syria that the U.S. government is serious about changing the status quo. In a 2005 interview, Labwani, currently in jail after returning from the United States and meeting senior U.S. administration officials, said the following about the diplomats in charge of the civil society and opposition file at the U.S. embassy in Damascus: “The group that is working on that agenda is extremely weak. They deal with us through a single person who barely speaks Arabic and is incapable of initiating anything. . . . They have demonstrated no willingness to coordinate or cooperate with the elements of civil society. The U.S. is not counting on the opposition to play any internal role.”⁹

Diplomats from the U.S. embassy in Damascus give a different picture of the official relations between opposition members and the embassy. One diplomat, who speaks fluent Arabic and covered human rights in 2006, noted she worked hard to develop close relationships with human rights activists and tried to answer numerous questions about U.S. policy. One of the biggest obstacles, however, is that the Syrian government criticizes any U.S. engagement whatsoever with human rights and civil society issues on the ground, while official European representatives can engage with greater impunity.¹⁰ The United States, on the official level, has a very wide credibility gap with both activists and the government, and this situation hampers U.S.-opposition relations.

MEPI Funds for Dissidents

The most crushing blow to this already fragile credibility came with the February 2006 announcement by the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), an office of the State Department that assists grassroots organizations in the Middle East, of \$5 million in grants to support democratic governance and reform in Syria.¹¹ According to the State Department press release, the money would be used to “build up Syrian civil society and support organizations, promoting democratic practices such as the rule of law; government accountability; access to independent sources of information; freedom of association and speech; and free, fair and competitive elections.”¹² The Syrian government viewed this program as a prime example of all its worst criticisms of the United States and its Middle East interventionism. Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem condemned the announcement, saying it was interference in Syrian internal affairs.¹³ The terms “reform,” “elections,” “freedom of

7. White House, “Statement on a Call for the Release of Remaining Prisoners of Conscience in Syria,” press release, January 24, 2006. Available online (www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/01/20060124-1.html).

8. White House, “Bush Urges Syria to Free All Political Prisoners Immediately,” press release, December 13, 2006. Available online (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=texttrans-english&cy=2006&m=December&x=20061213160411eafas0.286648>).

9. Kamal Labwani, interview by Joe Pace, Syriacomment.com, August 2005. Available online (<http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/Joshua.M.Landis-1/syriablog/2005/09/kamal-al-labwani-interview-by-joe-pace.htm>).

10. U.S. embassy official stationed in Damascus in the first half of 2006, interview with author, November 2006.

11. U.S. Department of State, “Syria Democracy Program Announcement.” Available online (<http://mepi.state.gov/61533.htm>).

12. U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Investing \$5 Million to Support Reform in Syria,” press release, February 17, 2006. Available online (www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/61535.htm).

13. “Syria Condemns U.S. Aid to Opposition,” Xinhua General News Service, February 20, 2006.

speech and association," "government accountability," and "democracy" were all the buzzwords needed for the regime to attack an opposition already under siege and characterize it as foreign agents. Consequently, Syrian civil society activists, human rights workers, and opposition members criticized the announcement. "We don't need the \$5 million the government is giving out for Syrian reform. We want the friendship of the American people, and ask the U.S. government to stop using force to build democracy,"¹⁴ one activist said. The very public announcement of these grants made opposition members even greater targets. Not coincidentally, shortly after this incident, Anwar al-Bunni's human rights and legal advocacy center, supported with European financial assistance, was shut down less than two weeks after it opened.

Members of the opposition were also insulted by the *amount* of money that was offered. They saw tens of millions of dollars going to Iranian democracy and civil society programs, and only \$5 million going to Syrian causes.¹⁵ For them, it proved that despite all the rhetoric about democracy in Syria, the United States was not really interested in the Syrian domestic opposition or its goals. The mechanics of distribution also made the money nearly impossible to accept: according to the program announcement, the minimum grant amounts were \$100,000,¹⁶ an amount too large for the opposition's modest requirements (offices, equipment), and one easily intercepted by the regime. Consequently, the money was wholly earmarked for organizations outside Syria.

The most recent wedge between Syrian domestic opposition activists and the United States was a *Time* magazine article from December 2006, outlining an "election monitoring scheme" funded with MEPI money. According to the article, part of the \$5 million would be put toward an election monitoring project,

which would include printing and dissemination of material by activists inside Syria, giving money to a U.S.-friendly Syrian politician, voter education campaigns, and public opinion polling.¹⁷ Such a scheme was interpreted as a way of destabilizing the Syrian government; consequently, word of this action has only made the work of Syrian activists harder. To defend itself, the National Democratic Gathering swiftly issued a statement demanding all Syrian opposition groups reveal their sources of funding to maintain transparency, protect their credibility, and prevent the "dirtying" of the nationalistic nature of the opposition.¹⁸

Problems Facing the United States

The MEPI announcement of monies aimed at promoting "democratic governance and reform" indicates the United States' flawed policy vis-à-vis Syria, the major problems it faces, and how these problems affect the dissidents within the country.

First, the United States faces a severe lack of credibility within the Syrian domestic opposition. Most Syrians disdain the U.S. bias toward Israel and hold Washington responsible for the daily slaughter in Iraq. Consequently, Arab members of the Syrian opposition cannot really defend or be supported by the United States. By even visiting the United States, as in the case of Kamal Labwani, opposition members face arrest and long jail terms upon their return to Syria, although many, like Labwani, are willing to take the risk and make their imprisonment a political statement. For a domestic opposition so carefully watched and under constant threat, the United States' lack of credibility among the Arab publics in the Middle East makes any association with American programs or personalities unpopular and dangerous.

Second, after more than thirty-five years under the Asads, Syrian political culture has developed a deeply

14. Syrian opposition member, interview by author, Damascus, June, 2006.

15. U.S. embassy official stationed in Damascus in the first half of 2006, interview with author, November 2006.

16. U.S. Department of State, "Syria Democracy Program Announcement." Available online (<http://mepi.state.gov/61533.htm>). The announcement does state that amounts under \$100,000 could be granted, but only "in the absence of worthy applications, or under such other circumstances as may be deemed to be in the best interest of the U.S. Government."

17. Adam Zagorin, "Syria in Bush's Crosshairs," *Time*, December 19, 2006.

18. "The Democratic Syrian Movement Demands the Syrian Opposition Reveal Its Funding Sources," *Elaph* (London), December 21, 2006. Available online (www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/Politics/2006/12/199081.htm).

rooted mistrust of foreigners. The government and its media frequently denounce their internal enemies as agents of Israel or foreign governments who threaten both Arab and Syrian unity. Syrian domestic opposition members take great risks when meeting with their counterparts abroad, and this activity opens them to more attacks by the government. Because many opposition-in-exile groups exist, and because the NSF includes a former vice president and the popular leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (with whom many Syrians sympathize), open support of such groups from inside Syria is nearly impossible. Hassan Abdul Azeem, spokesperson for the National Democratic Gathering, made this domestic-foreign division clear in November 2006 when he acknowledged that the NDG agreed with the NSF's assessment of the situation in Syria but simultaneously made clear that no coordination takes place between the NDG and the NSF.¹⁹ Although individuals in the United States or Europe emphasize that prominent domestic opposition personalities support their activities or program, these individuals inside Syria can admit no such a thing, even if they truly do.

The active opposition in exile, European support for civil society activities, and the MEPI announcement all play into the constant rhetoric from regime officials and their supporters that anyone who advocates change is a foreign agent. All Arab members of the opposition consulted for this study emphasized their Syrian patriotism and their desire to have a free, democratic society in their homeland, making a clear division between their opinions on the Syrian government and their love of country. The Syrian government sees the two as one and the same. Although the Syrian regime has opened the country to the world by telephone and the internet, the political culture has not caught up with technological advances.

Finally, the civil wars in Iraq and the Palestinian territories and the victories of Islamists at the ballot box have effectively put the American agenda of

democracy promotion to rest. Members of the Syrian opposition see this failure as well and conclude that democracy cannot be imposed by force, nor do elections a democracy make. When looking at Iraq, many Syrian opposition members repeat the same phrase—democracy has always been born out of blood—and a number agree that the American project in Iraq is necessary. These same individuals, however, do not want the Iraqi experience to be repeated in Syria.²⁰ They see the MEPI announcement as an example of the United States' aimlessness generally when it comes to democracy and change in the Middle East and a misunderstanding of the people in the Middle East and opponents to dictatorial regimes specifically. Members of the opposition take little stock in charges intended to discredit them, such as accusations that they are "foreign agents." But they are put in a bind when faced with two difficult options: accepting American assistance and betraying the nationalist roots of their cause, or maintaining the repressive status quo.

Policy Recommendations

The Syrian domestic opposition faces complex challenges, and the United States faces many obstacles in formulating a coherent and practical policy toward these groups. Average Syrians hold the United States squarely responsible for the chaos in Iraq and condemn U.S. inability to match rhetoric calling for peace and order with true progress on the ground. The Syrian government denounces anyone who calls for change within the system as a foreign agent and has taken a hard line against those who have accepted foreign money. The members of the opposition are a divided group and live with a barrage of threats to themselves and their families. In this environment, however, the United States—and the State Department specifically—should take a number of measures to construct a more practical and progressive policy toward the Syrian opposition:

19. "Hassan Abdul Azeem: We Agree with the Salvation Front on Their Assessment of the Situation in Syria but There Is No Coordination between Us," *Levant News*, October 14, 2006.
 20. Syrian dissidents, interviews with author, Damascus, May–June 2006.

1. Instituting constant communication and longer terms of service. The Foreign Service Officers at the U.S. embassy in Damascus responsible for human rights and civil society should be fluent Arabic speakers and learn about the opposition itself and individuals' concerns. To develop strong relationships, they should serve longer than one year in this capacity.²¹ They must be available to answer questions Syrians have about U.S. policy toward Syria and any new announcements or programs the State Department is contemplating. These diplomats should be consulted on any contemplated Near East Bureau or MEPI Syria initiative so as not to further endanger activists. Had this step been taken in 2006, for instance, MEPI's grants for "Syrian reform and democratic governance" would not have been announced in such a public way that brought more scrutiny and accusations against members of the opposition.

2. Arranging visits between government officials and members of the opposition. If and when U.S. government officials visit Syria—be they representatives of the administration or members of Congress—they would be well served to also visit prominent opposition personalities to hear and understand the opposition's program and what activists would like from the U.S. government to help them realize their goals. Upon their return to Syria, these representatives should relay their findings to the appropriate government offices.

3. Bringing opposition personalities to the United States. The State Department should identify individuals in the Syrian human rights and civil society sectors to visit the United States, to attend conferences in their field, and also to speak with government officials. In 2006, the State Department International Visitor Program brought a Syrian human rights lawyer to the United States to participate in conferences on civil rights, immigration, and international law. He also spoke with government officials about his activities.

These individuals know that visiting the United States may expose them to arrest or imprisonment, but if they are interested in an American role, they should talk with as many people in the United States as possible to inform them of the situation inside Syria.

4. Cooperating quietly with Europeans. The European Union and private foundations in Europe have sponsored and financed a number of small civil society projects in Syria, ranging from websites on women's issues to training seminars and conferences. By identifying those projects that are amenable to foreign funding, the U.S. government and American-based foundations should cooperate with European sources to assist domestic efforts aiming toward greater dialogue and education on taboo issues in Syrian society, contributing to further openness.

5. Providing technical assistance. The U.S. embassy in Damascus should invite experts on civil society, community organizing, and human rights to hold small conferences and discussions on those issues with activists in these fields. If activists are not amenable to doing so only with Americans, then the U.S. embassy should consider coordinating these activities with European partners. If such a program would draw too much attention to Syrian activists, then the embassy and the activists can look into alternative methods of communication, such as teleconferencing or courses online. The United States can also invite experts on communication and the internet to help organizations and individuals spread their message by educating activists about different types of media.

6. Differentiating between Kurdish and Arab demands. Kurds and Arabs are united in their desire for change and greater freedoms within Syria, but the nature of their demands differs. The Arabs are a majority in Syria, whereas the Kurds are a minority that suffers discrimination and would like self-administration on their lands. Efforts should be made to bridge that

21. Typically, those officials at the U.S. embassy in Damascus who serve as the human rights/civil society point of contact do so for only one year, transitioning to another role within the embassy during the second year of their tour.

gap by supporting any and all Kurdish-Arab dialogue. In addition, U.S. embassy and other U.S. government officials must always understand that the most politically active Kurds—those who live in the north or recent migrants to the big cities from the north—all want self-administration and greater Arab awareness of the uniqueness of the Syrian Kurdish question. American officials on the ground should also, in coordination with other embassies following this issue, encourage Arab activists to ally with the Kurds to more effectively mobilize the Arab street.

Does a Credible Alternative to the Regime Exist?

The members of the Syrian opposition persevere in the face of great odds. They make great sacrifices in trying to create a better life for themselves and their countrymen and to be the voice that speaks out when no other voices will. They are also a very self-aware group and frequently bemoan, publicly, their weaknesses, fragmentation, and lack of hope for the possibility of any sort of political reform, improvement in human rights, or the possibility that the Asad regime will reform itself.²² Nevertheless, they soldier on: on the one-year anniversary of the Damascus Declaration, the signatories issued a statement calling for a multiparty system and the end of one-party rule, but the Syrian authorities barred them from holding a press conference.²³

Unfortunately, the exigencies facing the opposition are not the same as those facing the United States. The United States faces an intractable war in Iraq and is investigating all of its options in the face of criticism at home and abroad. Time is not on the U.S. side, and the United States rightly sees Syria as the root of many of the Middle East's problems, in its support of Hizballah, shelter of Hamas leaders in Damascus, close ties with Iran, interference in Lebanese internal affairs, and letting jihadists and materiel pass through both the Syrian-Iraqi and Syrian-Lebanese borders. Rhetoric

has done little to force a change in Syrian behavior. Syria feels strong, repeatedly succeeding in scuttling talk of an international tribunal into the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. It is building up its military with Russian and Iranian assistance and has deployed artillery and missiles close to its border with Israel, raising the chances of low-level conflict in the future. Furthermore, Syria has been successful at using rising Islamism to attack the United States, and the current U.S. administration is not ready to let the Muslim Brotherhood, despite a more tolerant face, be its weapon against the Asad regime.

As a loose, disunified, and heavily persecuted group, the domestic opposition cannot be compared to the Syrian regime and its security apparatus. Unable to provide jobs or a better standard of living, the regime is good at one thing: internal security and monitoring of the population. Nevertheless, the moribund popular participation in the April 2007 parliamentary elections affirms the opposition's statements of a "silent majority" opposed to Baath rule. As one BBC correspondent commented, never before have Syrians so openly voiced their lack of interest in the polls.²⁴ Syrians understand they live under a regime that does not represent them. Active popular protest, however, does not seem likely in the near future.

The best question to ask is how the current opposition can be empowered and assisted. A true understanding of what is happening in Damascus, Aleppo, Tartus, Homs, or Qamishli can only help the U.S. government understand what will happen if the Asad regime falls. The U.S. government must also be aware of Islamist elements to get a full picture of Syrian society. Government officials should continue to meet with opposition members, both inside the country and in exile, and gain the trust of the internal opposition. Diplomats have difficulty in justifying American support for Syrian democracy and the opposition, however, when U.S. credibility is at an all-time low.

22. See Thanassis Cambanis, "In Syria, a Sagging Opposition," *Boston Globe*, November 6, 2005; "Oppositional Syrian Grouping: No Hope for Political Reform Measures in Syria," *al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), October 17, 2006; "Worry over Regression in General Freedoms in Syria," *Elaph* (London), October 24, 2006.

23. "Syrian Opposition Calls for Democratic Overhaul," Agence France-Press, October 17, 2006.

24. "Syrians Unmoved by Chance to Vote," BBC, April 22, 2007. Available online (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6580517.stm).

Presently, no viable alternative to the regime exists. The internal opposition is under too much pressure to act as a potent “morning after” factor, and much of the opposition in exile has not set foot in Syria for years. The Muslim Brotherhood has popular sympathy but no powerful underground organization. Rising Islamism is a powerful phenomenon, but the regime is careful to check it. The war in Iraq has also strengthened the regime and weakened the opposition and any talk of political reform.²⁵ The 2006 Israeli campaign against Hizballah, which the United States supported, bolstered the regime’s popularity as well, again showing Syrians—including the opposition—that the United States supports Lebanon’s democracy but may be ready to sacrifice it for broader strategic interests.

Given these constraints, the only prudent strategy at this time is to weaken Syria’s allies (Russia and Iran) and convince European actors and Syria’s neighbors in the Gulf that isolating and suffocating the regime is the only way to force change. This fact was clearly shown following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 and the release of the first United Nations report on the investigation into his murder later that year. Hasty regime change will result only in a corridor of chaos between Tehran and Beirut. At this point, the United States should be working toward improving its relations with opposition personalities inside Syria and its international partners, as well as improving its credibility with the Syrian public.

25. Ellen Knickmeyer, “In Syria, Iraq’s Fate Silences Rights Activists,” *Washington Post*, October 26, 2006.

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