The Spirit of an Uprising: Contentious Politics and Pluralism in Syrian Society Post Arab Spring

by

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Abstract

The transformation of the crisis in Syria from a peaceful uprising, into a geopolitical proxy war, shifted scholarly attention away from Syrian society to other issues such as security, geopolitics, and the refugee crisis. While these topics are important, more research is required to better understand Syrian society and contentious politics under difficult circumstances. Charles Tilly defines contentious politics as the process of making claims against other interests, where governments can either be initiators of claims, targets or third parties consisting of various types of actions – including protests, strikes, riots, revolution, and, as shown by James Scott and Asef Bayat, it also includes informal everyday resistance. I examine these practices in Syrian society, shedding light on vibrant social dynamics that continue to operate across the country under difficult conditions. More specifically, I focus on the two primary questions: How was contentious politics exercised in Syria under semi-totalitarian conditions and what explains the emergence of the 2011 uprising? What impact has the escalation of the crisis had on the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society?

This dissertation employs a two-fold methodology, examining primary/secondary sources and semi-structured interviews. The former is employed to examine a content produced by notable individuals and civil society organizations, while the latter is used to analyze data from interviews with a representative sample (based on various socio-economic indicators) of 34 individuals recruited from members of the Syrian diaspora. Theoretically, I rely on what I refer to as a postcolonial critical cosmopolitan (PCC) framework and Asef Bayat's theory of social non-movements to offer a critical understanding of the dynamics of contention in politically-closed societies, as well as the examine capacity of societies governed by autocratic regimes/undergoing conflict to retrain pluralist ideals -focusing on Syria.

I investigate the history of state-society relations, highlighting the contradictions, challenges and complexities underpinning the formation of the Syrian state and its relations with society. I argue that such relations have been conditioned by colonially imposed realities and a turbulent post-colonial political process. I demonstrate how Syria has traditionally

enjoyed one of the strongest and most vibrant civil societies in the Middle East, which played a crucial role in mobilizing strong anti-French resistance during colonial occupation. The Assad's regime' semi-totalitarian policies effectively dismantled and fragmented civil society, leading most observers to assume that contentious processes were virtually eliminated for good – especially after the 1982 Hama massacre. Contrary to these assumptions, findings from my field research reveal that in the void left due to the fragmentation of civil society, various patterns of underground contention emerged and operated across Syria.

Applying Bayat's theory of social non-movements, I demonstrate how contention processes in Syria have operated through social non-movement, mainly through informal, close-knit inner circles formed among people across society. I argue that through these social spaces, ordinary Syrians created defiant alternative spaces to express agency that succeeded in bypassing the regime's security network. Such communities of inner circles survived by producing organic support and collective defence mechanisms that allowed them to be resilient under harsh conditions. Through such processes, cultural manifestations of resistance emerged and permitted people to forge networks and solidarities to defy and bypass the Syrian state and its intelligence agencies. I show how these non-movements mobilized into formal protest movements in 2011, demonstrating how the solidarities, identities and tactics employed by decades of underground contention sustained such a shift.

Aided by the PCC framework, I turn to the second question – locating the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising. I demonstrate that this project remains vibrant and alive in society. Data collected from my field research shows a solid commitment to a free and democratic Syria. Overall, participants' outlook on the future reflected cautious optimism: While the majority strongly believed that the uprising would succeed in the end, there was a recognition that Syrian society is suffering from significant wounds and traumas that need to be remedied. Analysis of civil society groups demonstrates that the discourse of a sample of examined organizations is aligned with the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising.

Preface

This thesis is an original work of Noureddin Mahmoud Zaamout. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board under the Project Name "The Spirit of an Uprising: The Question of Pluralism in Syrian Society Post Arab Spring," No. Pro00107444 on February 12, 2021, and extended on February 1, 2022.

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Dedication

To my dear parents, Dr. Mahmoud and Mrs. Amal Zaamout, who inspired me to excel and realize my full potential. Their endless love and support have given me the confidence to achieve the impossible. I appreciate all they have done for me throughout the years, and I owe them my deepest gratitude and sincere love.

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing crisis in Syria began eleven years ago when a peaceful uprising against the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad, escalated into a violent geopolitical proxy war. According to reports, since 2011 over 606,000 Syrians have been killed and over 13.3 million have been displaced – internally and externally (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2021, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2021). The conflict has left massive destruction to civilian infrastructure and homes as some neighbourhoods and towns are destroyed in their entirety. What began as a peaceful uprising has transformed into the world's "worst man-made disaster since World War II," according to the United Nations (Collins 2017). The ongoing humanitarian crisis is the most unfortunate tragedy of the Syrian quagmire, as ordinary people have endured traumatizing episodes of violence and deprivation for over a decade. An entire generation of young people have now lived in conflict most of their lives – some have been in refugee camps for over a decade with limited access to education and basic medical care (The World Bank 2022).

In light of this context, it is easy to be preoccupied with the harsh realities of the conflict and forget about the origins of the crisis as a peaceful grassroots uprising spearheaded by ordinary people who mobilized in protest movements to call for freedom, social justice and dignity (Dabashi 2012). Such protests brought together Syrians of all ethnic and religious backgrounds and incorporated students, farmers, factory workers, blue- and white-collar workers. (Hinnebusch 2012, Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). They swept across Syria, from small villages and towns to large urban centers (Hinnebusch 2012, Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). The crisis, therefore, began as a peaceful project of liberation – driven by ordinary people striving for a better future. The regime's violent response forced the militarization of the crisis, as defectors from the crumbling Syrian army formed small local groups to initially protect protestors and later to confront the regime more directly (C. Phillips 2020). Foreign intervention expedited this militarization and plunged the country into a geopolitical war between regional and international actors competing through their proxies to advance their respective interests (Achcar 2016). Regional states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Iran supported different sides, seeking to expand their influence through their proxies, while international actors such as Russia and the United States played a crucial role in shifting the balance of power on the ground (C. Phillips 2020). More importantly, Russia's support for the Syrian regime allowed the latter to re-establish its control over most of the country and initiate a process of authoritarian peace (Abboud 2018). Through this process, the regime is rebuilding post-conflict institutions and economy

to support authoritarian reconstruction – attempting to reimpose “its authority and sovereignty over all pre-2011 Syria” (Heydemann 2018, 11). Above all else, the priority for the Assad regime is to consolidate power and survive - leaving Syrians trapped in a cycle of suffering and poverty which continues to worsen (Heydemann 2018, Daher 2019a, 2019b).

The transformation of the crisis impacted the prioritization and focus of academic research on Syria. More specifically, given that Syrian society has been displaced, cities destroyed, and the country trapped in cycles of violence, scholarly attention has *shifted away* from Syrian society to a focus on questions of security, geopolitics, and the refugee crisis (Abboud 2018). The limited research on Syrian society hinders our ability to fully understand politics in a country whose existence has been conditioned by contradictions dating back to the colonial era. These contradictions continue to complicate state-society relations, widening the gap between an increasingly oppressive state and a society struggling to emancipate itself. While the focus on issues relating to security, refugees and geopolitics is important, more research is also required to better understand Syrian society and contentious politics under difficult circumstances.

The focus of this dissertation, therefore, is centered on Syrian society - it aims to make sense of human agency and resilience under difficult circumstances. Before moving forward with this discussion, it is important to first define the concept ‘contentious politics’ given its centrality in this project. Contentious politics is defined as the "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interest, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties” (Tilly 2008, 5). It consists of various types of actions – including social movements, protests, strikes, riots, revolution and even terrorism as well as informal forms of everyday resistance exercised by the powerless in an attempt to advance their claims and/or improve their lives such as tax evasion/misreporting, squatting in prohibited spaces, sabotage, foot-dragging, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, and slander (Scott 1985, Tilly 2008, Tilly and Tarrow 2015, Bayat 2021).

This dissertation contributes to a body of critical research in this area, highlighting the characteristics of everyday resistance in Syrian society that have unfolded for decades under autocratic regimes. It specifically addresses two primary questions: How was contentious politics exercised in Syria under semi-totalitarian conditions and what explains the emergence of the 2011 uprising? What impact has the escalation of the crisis had on the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society? In answering these questions, this research investigates the history and development of state-society relations, highlighting the contradictions, challenges and complexities underpinning the formation of the Syrian state and its relations with society. It demonstrates how successive oppressive regimes have suppressed and fragmented Syria’s

once vibrant civil society (Khoury 1989). As the space for civil society diminished, this research shows how people developed alternative, underground spaces for contention, which played a crucial role in sustaining the mobilization of the 2011 Syrian uprising. Lastly, this research shows that the pluralist discourse of the Syrian uprising remains vibrant in society despite the transformation of the crisis into a complex geopolitical proxy war.

Contribution to Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies

Conventional theory-building in comparative politics has been almost exclusively shaped by a focus on the study of political phenomenon in Western societies, concerned with developing criterions of normal political behaviours and patterns that supposedly apply across spatial and temporal contexts (Anderson 2022). Politics in non-Western societies is expected to unfold as per the normalized trajectories, and failure to do so often reinforces Orientalist characterizations of these societies (Said 1979, Parekh 1999, Sen 2003, Zaamout 2020a). The Middle East, in particular, has been articulated through Orientalist lenses as 'exceptionally' immune from progress and modernity where democracy never emerged, civil society is non-existent, and the politics of identity and religion continue to drown the region in endless conflict (Huntington 1993, Lewis 1993, Fukuyama 2006). Such theories, therefore, are limited in their utility, often leading observers to unhelpful conclusions: At best, they fall short of accounting for all the variables at play, at worst, they write off entire regions/societies/cultures (Mahdavi 2013a, 2023,). Exclusionary theory building leaves the analyst with one-sided models that fail to capture the complexity of politics in societies that have been ravaged by colonialism, enduring structures of coloniality and neocolonial relationships with the Global North (Quijano 2000, Dabashi 2015, Anderson 2022).

It is not surprising, therefore, that conventional readings of democratization, civil society and social movements have failed to "anticipate the most important events and trends" in the global south broadly and the Middle East specifically (Lynch 2022, 1). More recently, the failure to predict the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, placed a greater emphasis on the need for better theoretical and conceptual tools that would allow for a more nuanced understanding of contentious politics and social agency in politically closed environments (Allam, et al. 2022). Conventional readings have for decades led scholars to the conclusion that social uprisings were unlikely to occur in the Middle East, given that civil societies in the region were fragmented, corrupt, aggressive, hostile, infiltrated, co-opted, and insignificant (Norton 1993, 1995, Wiktorowicz 2000, Carothers and Ottaway 2005). Without strong civil societies, it was assumed that social movements are unlikely to form. The

outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings challenged subscribers of the conventional theories and models to make sense of this anomaly. In so doing, some have revived the same outdated conceptual models rather than reflecting on new and inclusive ways of understanding the phenomenon of the Arab Spring. This is evident in neo-Fukuyamaian theories that explained the uprisings as an indication of the triumph and diffusion of Western values across the Arab world (Harrison and Mitchell 2014). Liberal values, according to this approach, have finally gained traction after a brief period of turbulence. As the uprisings failed to result in democracies across the Middle East, neo-Fukuyamaian approaches were quickly replaced by arguments that reinforced earlier political culture theories, arguing that the uprisings were doomed to fail, given that Muslim/Arab societies foster values that are incompatible with democracy (Zisser 2019).

In critique of these approaches, there has been a persistent attempt by critical scholars to highlight dynamics of social contention and agency that have been overlooked by the conventional models (Bayat 2013a). In the context of the Middle East, this body of research has emerged out of the study of the Green Movement in Iran and the Arab Spring Uprisings, shedding light on informal forms of contention – embedded in routine everyday resistance exercised by ordinary people in an attempt to improve their lives (Bayat 2013, Allam, et al. 2022). These approaches have formed a critical research paradigm that "has opened up the space for investigating wider range of claims, collective actors and contentious tactics" that were otherwise excluded from the analysis of the politics of contention (Allam, et al. 2022, 67). The work of Asef Bayat is noteworthy in this regard. Bayat (2013b) is credited for being one of the first scholars to offer a model for explaining the dynamics of everyday resistance in the Middle East, demonstrating how contentious politics operated through *social non-movements* and *quiet encroachment* practices rather than formal movements and organizations (Bayat 2017, Allam, et al. 2022). Bayat's (2013, 2017, 2021) work has paved the ground for a new line of research that reveals vibrant patterns of human agency that operate across politically closed environments. While Bayat's approach is unique in many respects, it is worth noting that it builds on literature examining everyday resistance that emerged out of the study of contentious politics in Eastern Europe under Soviet dictatorships and in East Asia (Konrad 1984, Scott 1985, Havel 1985).

This dissertation employs and builds on Asef Bayat's (2013b, 2017, 2021) theory of social non-movements and quiet encroachment to elucidate the unique characteristics of contentious politics in Syria. Bayat (2013b, 2017, 2021) developed his theory out of the study of contentious politics in Egypt and Tunisia. Governed by authoritarian regimes, Bayat observed that non-movements in both cases developed and operated primarily through street

politics in public spaces such as parks, coffee shops, markets etc. where people came together to voice frustration about deteriorating economic and political conditions and through these interactions forged defiant identities. In Syria, such spaces were not available to perform the same functions. In fact, they were much more surveilled through a complex network of security agencies and citizen informants, making it nearly impossible for people to engage in discussions of what may be deemed as sensitive political/economic or even social issues. This is perhaps why Bayat (2022) was less optimistic about the prospects that such patterns of contention could emerge in Syria. To counteract this lack of optimism, I engage with the works of Konrad (1984) and Havel (1985) to draw parallels between their study of contentious politics in Eastern Europe under totalitarian regimes and my findings about contentious politics in Syria, demonstrating that the limitation imposed on public spaces did not eliminate non-movements but instead forced them to develop and operate primarily (but not exclusively) in private and (more recently) virtual spaces. My findings help expand how non-movements are conceptualized to include *non-public spaces*, stressing the centrality of underground social spaces formed by people as an avenue to express their agency.

More specifically, I argue that Syrian non-movements formed through informal underground close-knit inner circles among people across Syrian society. Through these inner-circles, ordinary Syrians created alternative spaces to express agency that bypassed the regime's security network. Such communities of inner circles survived by producing organic support and collective defence mechanisms that allowed them to be resilient under harsh conditions. Through such processes, cultural manifestations of resistance emerged and permitted people to forge what Asef Bayat describes as *passive networks*, which are "spontaneous communication among atomized individuals which is established by a passive recognition of their commonalities and mediated through real and virtual space" (Bayat 2022). I show how these non-movements mobilized into formal protest movements in 2011, demonstrating how decades of underground contention allowed for the formation of an underground culture of resistance that offered protesters cultural expressions such as art, poetry and music, which became critical in the formation of defiant society-wide identities and solidarities.

My research also examines the capacity of societies governed by autocratic regimes and experiencing conflict to generate pluralist ideals. Classical Orientalist arguments have consistently articulated the Middle East as stagnating, dominated by ethnic/religious conflict and incapable of producing pluralist ideas (Huntington 1993, Lewis 1993, Fukuyama 2006). Focusing on Syria, I contribute empirical findings to a rich body of post-colonial research critiquing these Orientalist articulations. Through relying on the review of primary/secondary

sources and data from interview with a sample of 34 members of the Syrian diaspora, I demonstrate that Syrian society has the experience and capacity to generate democratic and inclusive projects, which have been suppressed for decades under autocratic regimes but has not been eliminated. These projects are embodied in grassroots discourse for a pluralist and democratic system of governance. I explain that the failure of these idea from materializing during the 2011 Syrian Uprising is due to the confluence of a multiplicity of domestic, regional, and international factors such as the transformation of the crisis into a geopolitical proxy war among various actors, and the Assad regime's reliance of severe violence which created unfavorable conditions that once again overshadowed the cosmopolitan richness of Syrian society.

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation is divided into five primary chapters. *Chapter 1* maps out the analytical framework, highlighting this research's two-fold methodology based on the review of primary/secondary sources and semi-structured interviews. The former is employed to examine a sample of content produced by elites and civil society groups, while the latter is used to analyze data from interviews with a sample of 34 individuals from the Syrian diaspora, representative of Syrian society by various socioeconomic metrics (ethnicity, gender, economic class, education, religion, hometown, age). Through this methodology, this dissertation examines the space for contentious politics, and the capacity for the generating pluralist ideas in Syrian society. Theoretically, my research relies on two theoretical frameworks. First, I employ what I call a 'postcolonial critical cosmopolitan' (PPC) lens of analysis, grouping together a body of literature developing out of post-colonial scholarship, sharing epistemological commitments to offer models of cosmopolitanism from below that decenter the hegemony of Western-centric theories/models on the concept (Mignolo 2000, Dabashi 2012, Mahdavi & Knight 2012, Bayat 2013a, Bhambra 2016). I employ this framework to assess the capacity of societies governed by autocratic regimes, and/or undergoing conflict of generating pluralist ideas. Second, I employ Asef Bayat's (2013a, 2017) theory of social non-movements to examine the dynamics of contention under harsh conditions – to demonstrate that contentious politics is not necessarily spearheaded by formal movements but is embedded in latent everyday interactions exercised by ordinary people in an attempt to improve their life.

Chapter 2 provides a brief history of state-society relations in Syria, starting from the late Ottoman period. It argues that such relations have been inorganic, conditioned by

colonially imposed realities and a turbulent post-colonial political process. This chapter demonstrates how Syria has traditionally enjoyed one of the strongest and most vibrant civil societies in the Middle East, which played a crucial role in mobilizing strong anti-French resistance during the colonial occupation (Khoury 1989). With the ascendency of the Assad regime in 1970, and its reliance on harsh semi-totalitarian policies, the Syrian regime effectively dismantled and fragmented this civil society (George 2003).

Chapter 3 briefly problematizes conventional theories, approaches and concepts of democratization, civil society, and social movements. It argues that such literature is rooted in a particular context and does not adequately explain politics in non-western societies. Its application to the study of the Middle East has often resulted in context-lacking analysis that contributes to the Orientalist articulation of the region as undemocratic, hostile, and backwards - exceptionally immune from progress and modernity. Although this literature has been critiqued in recent years, its influence remains visible in comparative politics – shaping the concepts and tools scholars continue to apply in their research on the Global South.

Chapter 4 highlights the findings from my field research with regard to the questions on contentious processes in Syria before and during the 2011 uprising. Through applying Asef Bayat's theory of social non-movements and quiet encroachment, I demonstrate the following: (1) contention processes in Syria were exercised by social non-movements through various forms, most importantly through the formation of communities of informal and disconnected close-knit inner-circles, as social spaces between friends, neighbours, and family members (among others). Inner circles operated outside the regime's security network, offering people networks of support and safe spaces to vent frustrations about political or economic issues, and survived through producing organic mechanisms of support and collective defense that allowed them to be resilient under harsh conditions. In addition, I show how people engaged in a variety of quiet encroachment strategies on public spaces in an attempt improve their lives, including unpermitted street vendors occupying squares/streets/intersections to sell goods, ordinary people fixing water and electricity lines and building illegally building homes in public spaces, and participating in corruption and bribery, among other examples; (2) these non-movements mobilized into formal protest movements in 2011, as the solidarities, identities and tactics employed under decades of underground contention sustained such shift. Disconnected and fragmented communities of inner circles primarily spearheaded early protests. As people flooded streets and public squares, Syrians began discovering each other, transcending the structures of oppression and fear that, for decades, fragmented society. Through this discovery process, broader identities and bonds emerged, which helped sustain the protest movement. As the uprising

expanded, organizational structures developed nationwide organically, to plan protests and provide logistical support. Such structures relied on the very practices of non-movements and quiet encroachment, employed by Syrians for decades, to evade the regime's security network and successfully coordinate protests.

Chapter 5 addresses the question on the status of the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society. Through employing the postcolonial critical cosmopolitan framework and drawing on data interview data and analysis of primary/secondary sources, this chapter demonstrates that the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising remains alive and vibrant in Syrian society. I demonstrate the presence of a strong desire for developing an inclusive and pluralist system of governance in Syrian society. In addition, through examining recent social media activity, I demonstrate how Syrians are increasingly taking to social media to express discontent with deteriorating economic and political conditions – which includes direct criticism of the Syrian regime by those residing in areas outside the regime's control, and indirect forms through indirect/latent communication in areas under government control. These activities, including continued protests, are evidence of brewing processes of contention there are being expressed more visibly and in different ways - alluding to the fact that contentious politics remains vibrant in society and evolving to take on different forms despite all that has happened on the ground.

Chapter 1
THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss this dissertation's theoretical and methodological approaches. Theoretically, this research relies on what I refer to as a postcolonial critical cosmopolitan (PCC) framework and Asef Bayat's theory of social non-movements to examine the capacity of societies undergoing conflict to generate pluralist ideals and to offer a nuanced understanding of human agency and resilience in politically closed environments focusing on Syria. I employ the term PPC to group together a body of literature developing out of post-colonial scholarship, that shares a commitment to provide an alternative critical understanding of cosmopolitanism. I associate this framework with the work of scholars such as Hamid Dabashi, Walter Mignolo, Asef Bayat and Mojtaba Mahdavi, among others. These scholars have offered different models/understandings that are not necessarily in agreement with one another, but despite their differences, their arguments are based on the same epistemological foundations. They decenter the hegemony of Western-centric theories/models and offer alternative models of cosmopolitanism from below. Such models posit that societies develop in conversation with one another, highlighting how hybrid and pluralistic transnational cultures have formed out of "complex flows, innovations, interactions [and] exchanges" (Bayat and Herrera 2021, 1). Under authoritarian/totalitarian, these pluralistic transnational cultures are often overshadowed by oppressive state policies – but not eliminated. They activate "in moments of large-scale social crisis – such as coups, revolutions etc. – when the nation retrieves and reactivates its aesthetic intuition of transcendence" (Dabashi 2012, xix). In the context of Syria, this reactivation became evident in the pluralist discourse that dominated protest movements across the country. I employ the PCC framework to examine how the transformation of the crisis into a geopolitical war may have impacted expressions of the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society, given that its revival has once again been hindered by conflict and violence. Bayat's (2013, 2017, 2022) theory of *non-movement* and *quiet encroachment* exposes realities of contention that are otherwise unaccounted for by conventional theories/models in comparative politics. It does so by highlighting how "seemingly mundane social practices present protracted political struggles in which the ordinary attempt to extend their rights" (Bayat 2022). This theory demonstrates how people in politically closed environments "engage in quiet, pervasive and

enduring encroachments on the propertied, the powerful and the public" in the quest to survive and better their lives (Bayat 2017, 106). They mobilized through non-social movements – which are non-structured, leaderless, and non-ideological forms of mobilization embedded in everyday life and street politics. I will employ this theory to understand the dynamics of contention in Syria under harsh semi-totalitarian conditions and explain the emergence of the 2011 Syrian uprising.

Methodologically, this research employs a single case-study approach to qualitatively examine societal dynamics in Syria before, during, and after the 2011 uprising. Using this approach, my research employs a two-fold methodology, relying on the analysis of primary/secondary sources and semi-structured interviews to examine the politics of contention in Syria under decades of semi-totalitarian rule and to make sense of how the uprising developed and emerged. I will also examine discourse/content produced across Syrian society (by samples of ordinary people, civil society organizations and elites) to assess the space for pluralist ideas in the context of a growingly complex crisis.

1.1 Theoretical Approach

Post-Colonial Critical Cosmopolitanism

This research employs what I call a 'Post-Colonial Critical Cosmopolitan' (PPC) approach. I use this term to combine a rich body of literature emerging from post-colonial scholarship, aiming to provide a critical perspective on cosmopolitanism. Combining this literature under a broader PPC framework is analytically helpful, but it is important to recognize that there are notable differences/disagreements among scholars I associate with this framework. Despite these differences/disagreements, I highlight the similarities among various relevant perspectives to create a theoretical framework centred on several key assumptions. This includes reconceptualizing cosmopolitanism to focus on everyday interconnectedness and hybridity underpinning contemporary societies. Such reconceptualization challenges liberal top-down models, proposing a grassroots and grounded understanding of cosmopolitanism. Before discussing the PPC framework in more detail, it is important to review the conventional literature on cosmopolitanism to draw a clear distinction between the approach employed in this project and the dominant theoretical reflections in this area.

Cosmopolitanism is a contested term that originated "from the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope who responded to questions about his citizenship and political allegiance

by claiming that he was a *Kosmopolite* ('citizen of the world')" (G. W. Brown 2009a, nn). However, philosophical reflections in this area can be traced back to the Egyptian Akhenaten, who advocated a "universal monotheism where all humans owed each other equal moral duties regardless of political affiliation" (G. W. Brown 2009b, 4). Over centuries, the concept appeared in philosophical reflections across various societies - in the Middle East, for example, it appeared in Islamic philosophy centred on the concept of *Umma* – a community of people from all backgrounds united by faith (Hayes 2017). More contemporarily, cosmopolitanism as a philosophical idea has been popularized into political philosophy by enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century – particularly the work of Immanuel Kant (G. W. Brown 2009b). In his essay "Perpetual Peace," Kant envisioned establishing a cosmopolitan community of states governed by a condition of permanent peace (Brown 2019). According to Kant, this would be achieved by remoulding states within the international community into independent republics governed by universal laws of hospitality and citizenship and internally by representative governments that uphold liberty, freedom, and equality. Kant's theory has been widely referenced and discussed by contemporary scholars of cosmopolitanism across disciplines in the social sciences. As Brown (2009, 11) points out, it is "near impossible to find a discussion within contemporary cosmopolitanism that do not make protracted and direct references to the political philosophy of Kant."

Inspired by Kant's work, contemporary literature on cosmopolitanism has mainly been grounded in liberal theory, concerned with developing some form of community among all human beings regardless of their social backgrounds (Kleingeld and Brown 2019). Some scholars limit this community to embracing a set of universal moral laws, while others develop a system of global governance and political institutions that would integrate international societies. At the center of various versions of liberal cosmopolitanisms is a concern for individuals and their rights, tastes, travels, and ethical obligations (Calhoun 2012). The goal, for most liberal theories, is formulate universalist visions of cosmopolitism global community (moral, political, cultural, economic) that would integrate people across countries and communities (Brown 2009a). This integration would transcend local particularities, requiring people to set aside local attachments and affiliations, in order to forge a larger cosmopolitism community of human beings united by single moral, cultural and/or political visions (Robbins and Horta 2017).

Liberal cosmopolitanism flourished in the 1990s for several reasons. First, the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War was, according to some scholars, evidence of the triumph of liberal Western values (Fukuyama 2006). Their task from there was to conceptualize how to extend liberal values worldwide and create a harmonious cosmopolitan

society across borders. For some, this was to be achieved through cosmopolitan citizenship extending beyond physical borders, while for others, it was through the establishment of democratic international institutions and a global civil society that would override state sovereignty in favour of a democratic cosmopolitanism (Bobbio 1995, Bonanate 1995, Held 1995, Archibugi 1995, Falk 1995, Hutchings 1999, Linklater 1999). Some scholars extend the debate to focus on questions of distributive justice, stressing that protecting individual rights and liberties can only be extended by ensuring equal access to goods and resources (Tan 2004). Second, the wave of violent civil conflicts that swept the world in the 1990s raised debate about our responsibilities to strangers during massive humanitarian suffering and genocides (Daniel Levy 2010). The Rwandan genocide, in particular, shocked the moral conscience of humanity, where hundreds of thousands of people were massacred under the inaction of the international community. The emerging literature, therefore, sought to develop theories of moral cosmopolitanism concerned with outlining the roles and responsibilities of the international community in time of crisis where human rights are massively being violated (Archibugi 2004). All of the aforementioned theories aim to remould the international community in one way or another, while assigning Western democracies a moral duty to oversee and administer global cosmopolitan.

Liberal theories have increasingly been challenged in recent years on several grounds. First, they are criticized for their normativity, concerned with moulding the world in a particular way or another while leaving almost unanswered the question of how to operationalize their outlined visions (Kurasawa 2004). Second, scholars have critiqued liberal theories for extending the Western paradigm of modernity across societies without taking into account non-Western experiences and perspectives (Delanty 2014). This results in often one-sided approaches that are disconnected from politics in the Global South. As Delanty (2014, 7) argues that even when liberal theories engage with non-Western perspectives, they do so on terms "dictated by Western liberal discourse." Third, liberal theories are largely top-down and elitist, developed by privileged scholars in Western societies whose experience is disconnected from the lives of the subaltern in the Global South (Kurasawa 2004, Lamont and Aksartova 2002). Fourth, the ahistoricism and non-contextualism of liberal theories overshadow the experiences and everyday realities of non-Western societies, which continue to struggle with the challenges and contradictions with colonially imposed structures (Bhambra 2016). Fifth, liberal theories have been criticized for suggesting a moral superiority of Western states – as spreaders of democracy and protectors of human rights. This argument falls short of accounting for Western states role in jeopardizing democratic politics in the Global South in pursuit of their interests (Ghalioun 2004). For these reasons, liberal theories

are limited in their utility, unable to relate to the experiences of subaltern societies that continue to struggle with neocolonialism, autocratic structures, and capitalist encroachment. Such theories are embedded within the colonial/neocolonial matrix of knowledge production that systemically excludes and silences subaltern voices (Spivak 1988, Dabashi 2012). These critiques point to the need for a *critical cosmopolitan* approach grounded in the everyday experiences of ordinary people worldwide (Dabashi 2012, Bayat 2013a).

The literature on cosmopolitanism has undergone considerable transformation over the fifteen years due to the rise of critical perspectives that have expanded the utilization of the concept beyond its traditional normative focus (Robbins and Horta 2017). New generation of critical research has emerged, recognizing the multiplicity of cosmopolitan perspectives (Appiah 2006, Kymlicka and Walker 2012, Robbins and Horta 2017). Engagement with the concept is no longer limited to normative discussions within political and moral philosophy but has extended across disciplines in the social sciences, from anthropology to sociology and history (Robbins and Horta 2017). Scholars are, therefore, now concerned with understanding "cosmopolitanism from below" or "rooted cosmopolitanism" as a phenomenon that has been embedded in human history, giving rise to cultural hybridity and interconnectedness (Dabashi 2013, 2016, Robbins and Horta 2017).

This critical shift has to a large extent been influenced by the work of Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) who is recognized for popularizing the idea of rooted cosmopolitanism – where contrary to conventional liberal readings, cosmopolitanism is conceived in a manner that embraces rather than transcends local attachments (Kymlicka and Walker 2012). Appiah (2006) tries to reconcile the relationship between universalism and cultural particularism, stressing that humans form a single community that should share at minimum a basic acceptance of human rights, but at the same time stresses we do not have to be the same. Our relationship to strangers, Appiah (2006) argues, ought to be based on a moral obligation to others – to tolerate and accept differences. According to this vision, the cosmopolitan citizen must therefore be sensitive to culture differences and foster cross-cultural conversations. "There is much to learn from our differences", according to Appiah, and such conversations would allow for insightful dialogue that may culminate in the formation of universal standards of morality that are informed by various cultural traditions/experiences (Quiñones 2005). While continuing in the tradition of normativism, Appiah's (2006) work has enabled a body of literature to offer more pluralist understandings of cosmopolitanism.

Paralleling Appiah's approach to cosmopolitanism, Fred Dallmayr (2013) emphasizes the need to transcend Western centrism, in favor of a more inclusive cosmopolitanism. He explains that the world is increasingly becoming interconnected, through a process of cosmo-

genesis. This process could foster cosmopolitan coexistence through "large-scale pedagogical efforts aiming at the steady transformation of narrow (national, ethnic, or religious) self-interest into a willingness to care for the common interest or "common good" of humankind" (Dallmayr 2013, 44-45). According to Dallmayr (2013), this entails broadening cross-cultural and intersocietal learning experiences through education centered around humanities or "liberal arts". Education, he posits, is a central pillar to promote the formation of cosmopolitan "citizens of the world". This education should be rooted in dialogical engagement with various perspectives on different issues. Dallmayr (2013) acknowledges that we will not always agree on some issues, but this is not necessarily a bad thing: through discussing unresolved differences, we enrich our understandings by reflecting on the reasons for their persistence. On the subject of morality and ethics, Dallmayr (2003) rejects homogenizing universalisms, stressing the need to develop an inclusive global civil culture that embraces people of all backgrounds and societies in order to overcome the Western centrism associated with contemporary global moralism (Adak and Turan 2012, 307). He concludes that a "viable global ethics needs to be anchored in, or supplemented by, a global political praxis" (Dallmayr 2003, 421). Dallmayr's works offers complex engagement with various perspectives and philosophical arguments from around the world, aiming to show how through the process of engaging different readings of cosmopolitanism, rooted in a "dialogue among civilizations", new theoretical possibilities and conceptualizations become possible.

Since the mid 2000s, post-colonial scholars have begun to pay more serious attention to the debate, in an attempt to offer more socially grounded critical perspectives that highlight embedded/rooted/everyday cosmopolitanism. I group this literature under a broader theoretical framework – which I call PPC. This framework is centred on several key goals and objectives. Those are: (1) to decenter western-centric hegemony over knowledge; (2) to highlight transnational embedded cosmopolitanism; and (3) to foster cross-cultural dialogue. These goals/objectives will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

First, the PCC approach aims to detach the literature from the monopoly of Western-centric knowledge, emphasizing the need for dialogue between various international perspectives on cosmopolitanism (Bhambra 2016, Sobré-Denton 2018). Scholars argue that Western-centric knowledge has achieved, to follow Gramsci's approach, hegemony over the social sciences, dominating the boundaries of what has come to be considered knowledge[1]

[1] In contemporary academia, social scientists are inserted into fabricated genealogies of 'Western-centric' intellectual traditions that have come to monopolize knowledge-making (Chakrabarty 2007).

(Acharya and Buzan 2010). Subaltern knowledge on the other hand, has been treated as dead and/or incompatible with modernity and systemically kept on the periphery across the social sciences (Dabashi 2015).[2] The hegemony of Western-centric knowledge resulted in the production of one-sided and exclusionary theoretical models and concepts that not only fail to capture the experiences of non-Western societies but also contribute to the Orientalist production of the non-European 'others' (Mohanty 1984, Spivak 1988, Chatterjee 1993). The PPC approach, therefore, stresses that decolonizing a society requires de-linking knowledge from the "colonial matrix of power" by disrupting the structures that shape how knowledge is produced (Mignolo 2009, 29). To overcome this hegemony, there needs to "flatten the hierarchies of knowledge" by decentring Europe and opting for a "provincialized" cosmopolitan model that is sensitive to the perspective of non-western societies (Bhambra 2010, 34).

Second, the PCC approach posits that societies "develop in complex interactions with others, where economic, political, cultural, scientific, intellectual, artistic formations are forged through a complex set of flows, innovations, interactions [and] exchanges" (Bayat and Herrera 2021, 1). To better understand this interconnectedness, the PCC approach articulates a model of 'cosmopolitanism-from-below,' as a minimum, inclusive universalism that "emerges out of open and uncoerced cross-cultural dialogue" (Mahdavi 2013a, 62-63). It stresses that thousands of years of human interactions resulted in the formation of hybrid and pluralistic transnational cultures that share broad commonalities as manifested in the arts, literature, architecture, shared histories and memories and experienced through food, fashion, language, and symbols (Mignolo 2000, Dabashi 2012, Bayat 2013a, Bhambra 2016, Sobré-Denton 2018). Such manifestations are forged in urban settings where "various members of ethnic, racial, and religious groupings are conditioned to mix, mingle, undertake everyday encounters, and experience trust with one another" (Bayat 2013a, 14). This 'everyday cosmopolitanism' serves as the basis from which ideas, identities, and solidarities are forged and sustained in civil society (Bayat 2013a). Contrary to the Orientalist language of clash of culture/civilisations/religion, this conceptualization suggests that "communities are "not simply introverted in exclusive collectives whose relation with others is defined merely in terms of mistrust. Rather, communities also attempt to overcome their differences and live together" (Bayat 2013a, 202). From this perspective, the PCC approach allows for a more nuanced examination of post-colonial politics beyond their manufactured borders and colonially imposed structures of domination (Delanty 2014, Dabashi 2016). Sectarian and communal tensions are often packaged as evidence of primordial animosities between

[2] Dabashi (2015, 27) argues that mainstream European scholars are unable to reconcile with the idea that Global South scholars can produce knowledge to inform how we think about complex issues in the social sciences.

different ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East (Hashemi 2016a). However, PCC scholars show that these issues are an outcome of the enduring contradictions of post-colonial politics, where often illegitimate and oppressive autocratic regimes have enforced exclusionary notions of identity based on religion, ethnicity, nationalism, or anti-colonial ideologies in the hope of remoulding societies to serve the interests of ruling elites (Dabashi 2012, Mahdavi 2014, Hashemi and Postel, 2017a). Through such policies, autocratic regimes of the Middle East have sought to eliminate political agency and to oppress societies into submission (Dabashi 2014).

Third, the PCC approach advances a model of "universalism from below" that would be rooted in the dignity of difference, transcending both top-down hegemonic 'universalism' and 'particularism' while emphasizing the need for a pluralistic understanding of the world that acknowledges each society's unique experiences and struggles (Mahdavi and Knight 2012, Mahdavi 2013a). It promotes the understanding of multiple modernities, stressing that each "society moves along different paths towards modernity[3] and represents different versions of modernity" (Mahdavi 2013, 63). The PPC approach embraces what Mignolo (2000) refers to as "diversality" – or diverse universality – "as a necessary epistemology upon which critical cosmopolitanism shall be articulated in a post-national world order governed by global capitalism and new forms of coloniality" (Mignolo 2000, 745).

In the context of this research, the PPC framework allows me to challenge Western-centric knowledge that imposes hegemonic universalist models that contribute to silencing non-Western voices and colonizing their experiences (Said 1979, Dabashi 2015). it also provides the analytical thrust for constructive pushback against how some conventional Western-centric ideas, concepts, theories, and understandings have become constituted and naturalized as 'knowledge', while other forms of knowledge are systemically excluded and kept on the periphery (Chakrabarty 2007, Acharya and Buzan 2010). The PCC approach challenges the articulation of the Middle East through Orientalist/Neo-Orientalist lenses as a "homogenous, closed and parochial" region that is resistant to change and prone to authoritarian tendencies due to its undemocratic political culture (Bayat and Herrera 2021,

[3] There has been a consistent attempt to articulate modernity as a linear project that can only be achieved by embracing Western values and ideas. This perspective is clearly visible within academic and policy circles and can be observed in the discourse of policymakers from George Bush, Donald Trump to Emmanuel Macron (among many other Western political leaders). George Bush often described the U.S. as the beacon of democracy that has a moral obligation to civilize and spread democracy and freedom to "illiberal" regimes of the world (Gilley 2014). Donald Trump spewed a non-ending stream of racist comments, describing Muslims as terrorists, Mexicans as criminals and etc. (Gass 2015). Emmanuel Macron described "African", on more than one occasion, as suffering a civilizational deficit (Krug 2017). Academically, it can be observed in the writings of Francis Fukuyama (2006), Samuel Huntington (1993) and Bernard Lewis (1993), among others. Such authors present Eastern societies as inferior and backwards, in need of a 'Western' savior.

1). Such articulations have presented various religious and ethnic groups in the region "as unitary primordial blocs that function collectively and engage in endless cycles of conflict among one another" (Said 2003, Zaamout 2017, 15). This line of argument suggests that the Middle East is a static and unchanging region that has "little of value to offer to the world" (Bayat and Herrera 2021, 4). It was not unexpected, therefore, that when the Arab Spring uprisings broke out, proponents of these approaches were taken by surprise. Having said that, they quickly emerged to offer two explanations: (1) the uprisings are evidence of the triumph of Western values which permeated the Arab world (Harrison and Mitchell 2014); (2) the uprisings are doomed to fail due to the dominance of Islamism on society (Bradley 2012). Contrary to these arguments, post-colonial scholars – whom I associated with the PPC perspective – have highlighted the pluralist and emancipatory disposition of the Arab Spring uprisings, demonstrating that they were locally produced, caused by societal dissatisfaction with increasingly authoritarian state structures, and exacerbated by rising unemployment and diminishing economic opportunities (Bayat 2013a, 2017). The uprisings represented the revival of civil societies, as people of various socio-economic, ethnic, religious, and gender backgrounds came together in leaderless grassroots revolutions that sought to replace the old structures of oppression with pluralist alternatives (Abdullah 2012, Ismael and Ismael 2013). The ethnic and religious differences that were thought to have held back the region appeared insignificant as people united in peaceful uprisings against the autocratic regimes of the Middle East (Mahdavi 2014). The PCC approach also stresses the need for a more nuanced examination of the contemporary crisis of the Arab Spring – to account for the reasons why the uprisings failed to transform authoritarian regimes of the Middle East into democracies (Mahdavi 2023). Contrary to Orientalist arguments that explain this crisis through cultural/civilizational factors that blame ordinary people for their own misery, PCC scholars stress the need to take into account the interplay of a complex set of factors including regional/international intervention (proxy war), internal/domestic political economy and postcolonial conditions that contributed to the emergence of the current crisis of the Arab Spring (Mahdavi 2023).

In this research, I locate this cosmopolitanism in Syrian society by examining the status of the pluralist ideas that underpinned the protest movements in 2011. Pluralism, in this context, is defined as a cosmopolitan discourse that challenges the binaries of sectarianism and religious centrism. It embodies the calls for 'freedom,' 'social justice,' and 'dignity' that dominated public spaces during the Arab Spring uprisings (Dabashi 2012, 2016, Mahdavi 2014). This cosmopolitan discourse is rooted in a desire to develop a just political order away from authoritarianism and oppression (Dabashi 2012, 2016, Mahdavi 2014). While

this discourse has been overshadowed by decades of colonial and post-colonial authoritarian politics, it remains vibrant at a grassroots level, embedded in day-to-day interactions, and reinforced by the interconnectedness and hybridity that brings together different communities (Dabashi 2013, 2016). In my master's research, I demonstrated the vibrancy of such cosmopolitan discourse as evident in the pluralist slogans, chants, and songs of the 2011 Syrian uprising. This dissertation examines the status of such pluralist ideals in light of the current context. More specifically, through conducting interviews and examining primary/secondary sources of information, I trace how this discourse has transformed and/or evolved in the context of the current realities. Results from this research allow me to engage with and build on the PCC literature by carefully examining societal dynamics amid conflict.

Theory of Social Non-Movements and Quiet Encroachment

Embedded in a critical post-colonial perspective, Asef Bayat's (2013a, 2017) theory of social non-movements and quiet encroachment offers a bottom-to-top framework for understanding the politics of contention in politically closed environments. It reveals patterns of social agency that do not fit the mainstream "categories and conceptual imaginations," highlighting how contentious politics is not only exercised through formal social movements but also operates through street politics embedded in everyday struggles by subaltern populations striving to improve their lives. Conventional theories of contentious politics were designed based on the study of social movements in Western societies and are "rooted in particular genealogies, in highly differentiated and politically open Western societies, where social movements often develop into highly structured and largely homogeneous entities" (Bayat 2013a, 4). These "possibilities are limited in the non-Western world," where authoritarian regimes have violently fragmented civil societies and eliminated all forms of organized collective action (2017). This led scholars applying conventional frameworks to conclude that collective action is unlikely to occur under authoritarian regimes where people are assumed to be passive recipients of oppression with no agency.

Contrary to these conclusions, Bayat's (2022) theory of social non-movements "opens up new possibilities to explore how seemingly mundane social practices present protracted political struggles in which the ordinary attempt to extend their rights." Non-movements are non-structured, leaderless, and non-ideological forms of mobilization. Through them, the disenfranchised "engage in quiet, pervasive and enduring encroachments on the propertied, the powerful and the public", in the quest to survive and better their lives (Bayat 2017, 106). They "operate largely in a restrictive environment where the cost of forming formal social

movements is high" (Bayat 2022). Social non-movements embody disjointed, yet parallel "collective actions of non-collective actors" exercised by "large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations" (Bayat 2013a, 13). Bayat argues that whereas "the power of conventional social movements rests on the unity of actors" to create real or perceived threats of disruption, the power of non-movements, on the other hand, lies in big numbers. It rests on the "consequential effect on norms and rules in a society of many people simultaneously engaging in contentious actions" (Bayat 2022).

Bayat (2017, 122) stresses the centrality of urban spaces in forming non-movements. He argues that urbanity in a neoliberal order generates "certain demands and desires" but also "offers immense possibilities for forging of collective identities, networks of communication and mobilization" (2017, 122). Markets, schools, universities, parks, public squares, cafes, and other urban spaces offer fragmented individuals avenues to engage with one another and forge what Bayat describes as *passive networks*. These networks are "spontaneous communication among atomized individuals which is established by a passive recognition of their commonalities and mediated through real and virtual space" (2022, 122). Through these interactions, the marginalized develop contentious spaces out of public areas as well as defiant identities and solidarities. These identities surface when a trigger creates the opportunity for more organized social movements to emerge and proliferate, as we have seen during the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings (2017).

Non-movements engage not only in simple acts of everyday resistance but rather in action-oriented "surreptitious and incremental encroachments to further their gains" (Bayat 2013a, 17). These encroachments consist of everyday practices, ranging from the poor setting up their merchandise on urban sidewalks, women defying socially constructed norms, and the disfranchised building homes in prohibited areas. Bayat asserts that faced with economic deprivation and social exclusion, the marginalized "utilize the opportunities that the very cities they lived in offered" to push back against the constraints and pressures of oppression and economic hardship (2017, 144).

Bayat was one of the few scholars to highlight the possibility that wider collective social action could occur by uncovering vibrant realities of contention that were simply unaccounted for by conventional theories/models. In explaining the emergence of the Arab Spring movements, Bayat (2013a, 2017) demonstrates how cities of the Middle East have transformed into 'neoliberal' cities – driven by market forces and the logic of capitalism, not the demands of inhabitants. They lost their hybridity as public spaces were privatized and

cities remoulded to reflect the desires and interests of elites at the expense of the subaltern class, who increasingly lost their 'right to the city.' Bayat argues that the neo-liberalization of economies across the Middle East since the 1990s resulted in diminishing social conditions, stagnating economies, and widening inequality throughout the region, giving rise to a class of educated yet marginalized, 'middle-class poor'. Stripped of urban citizenship, the middle-class poor "knew about the world, used electronic media and expected a middle-class lifestyle" but only faced unemployment, economic deprivation, and social marginalization (Bayat 2017, 145). Although educated, they were forced to live the lives of the "traditional urban dispossessed in shanty towns and slums and undertake jobs in the largely precarious low-status parallel economic – such as taxi drivers, fruit sellers, or street vendors" (2017, 145). As oppression intensified, social services decayed, and access to spaces was restricted, the disenfranchised mobilized through social non-movements, forging solidarities and defiant identities. The networks created through these non-movements allowed for mobilizing people of all backgrounds into more structured social movements during the Arab Spring uprisings.

In his new book, *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring,* Bayat (2021) builds on his theoretical model, providing a more in-depth examination of the dynamic of contention and agency within politically closed environments during normal and revolutionary times. Bayat's work is grounded in his study of Egypt and Tunisia, demonstrating how contention in these cases is exercised through informal and opaque undersocieties that develop parallel to the official state/elite-sponsored society. These undersocieties "come to life when countless dispersed individuals and families, structured in the routine of daily life, take up similar and mundane practices to make their lives better" (Bayat 2021, 31). Bayat (2021, 31) argues that undersocieties of the Middle East consist of various social groups and communities where ordinary people "build and engage in enduring networks grounded in kinship, friendship, worship, and working life to sustain livelihood while resorting to the elusive nonmovements to advance claims, cultivate norms, and enhance life chances." Friendship is central to forming strong social bonds, identities, security mechanisms and survival strategies that allow members of a friendship circle to overcome the threat of state surveillance and oppression. *Shilla* (clique) is another important social grouping that emerges as part of these undersocieties. They consist of "close-knitted and exclusive groups of individuals sharing common values within a much larger group, as in a workplace, school, neighbourhood or an army barrack" (Bayat 2021, 25). Through these *shillas*, ordinary people "connect, socialize, deliberate, develop trust and often generate alternative norms and narratives" (Bayat 2021, 25).

According to Bayat (2021), these undersocieties are not necessarily hidden in the Middle East. This is an important point that Bayat (2021) emphasizes to distinguish his theoretical model from those that emerged from the study of contentious politics in Eastern Europe under communist regimes. Middle Eastern regimes were never totalitarian, Bayat (2021, 29) posits, and therefore undersocieties developed in a uniquely visible form, unlike the "hidden spheres" in Eastern Europe under communism. Bayat adds that undersocieties in the Middle East are grounded in physical public spaces where they capitalize on the exploitation of vague laws, corruption, and private-public distinction. Dissent, therefore, is visible in "public spaces, where people speak out, pester, and complain in public – in taxis, businesses or street corners" (Bayat 2021, 27). Therefore, the political street is central to forming these informal communities – it is the arena "where people forge their own public, create their norms and narratives" (Bayat 2021, 22). Bayat (2021) argues that opacity, not hiddenness, masks undersocieties of the Middle East. This is what lies at the heart of these undersocieties' strength: they forge intertwined lives, yet they are leaderless, non-ideological, non-structured and not easily accessible to an outsider.

Bayat (2021) explains that contentious politics is not limited to non-movement: Social movements as more organized and structured forms of mobilization emerge in politically closed environments in both ordinary and revolutionary times. The likelihood of their emergence depends on the available opportunity structures (Tilly 1978, Bayat 2013, 2021). Bayat (2021) states that when opportunities are present, more organized and structured social movements can emerge parallel to non-movements practices of contention during ordinary times. Such structured movements are often "initiated by exclusive circles of friends and shillas" before they expand in scope and membership (Bayat 2021, 26). Authoritarian regimes will actively attempt to eliminate these opportunity structures – through surveillance and oppression. This crackdown limits the space for these movements and deters their proliferation, and that is where non-movements emerge as the more common form of contention in non-revolutionary times (Bayat 2021).

In this dissertation, I employ Bayat's theory to uncover the processes of contention that have operated for years in Syria under semi-totalitarian conditions as well as to explain the mobilization of the 2011 Uprising (George 2003). I show that in pushing back against oppression, dispossession and inequality, people resorted to informal and non-structured forms of mobilization to forge solidarities and defiant identities. Having said that, as I will show in chapter 4, there are some key differences between the Syrian case study compared to the Egyptian and Tunisian case studies – both of which Bayat uses to build this theoretical framework. Comparatively speaking, the Syrian regime maintained a security grip on society

that was comparatively more extensive and oppressive than in any of the countries that witnessed uprisings during the Arab Spring. It consisted of a complex surveillance network that permeated both private and public spheres, ensuring that dissent/anti-government views were quickly identified and suppressed. Through this network, the regime existed in virtually all aspects of life, giving meaning to the commonly expressed sentiment in Syria, the 'walls have ears'.[4] Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, public spaces in Syria were heavily surveilled and restricted, as people avoided discussing politics publicly and in front of strangers, fearing their comments could be reported to the government. Hence, results from my analysis of the Syrian case study will allow me to build on Bayat's theory by shedding light on the character and shape of non-movement forms of contention under more harsh autocratic conditions.

1.2 Methodology

This research employs the single-case-study approach, examining the dynamics of Syrian society before, during, and after the 2011 uprising. This approach allows for a careful and thorough examination of contentious politics and pluralism in Syrian society throughout different periods in time. As argued, this research defines pluralism as a cosmopolitan discourse that challenges religious centrism and sectarianism and is entrenched in a grassroots desire for a locally produced democratic system of governance. In examining these issues (contentious politics and pluralism in society), this research employs a two-fold methodology, relying on the examination of primary/secondary sources and semi-structured interviews: (1) Primary/secondary sources: I examine documents, articles, books, interviews and other materials of some of the prominent Syrian thinkers, activists, scholars, and other 'revolutionary' figures and civil society groups that emerged before, during and after the uprising. This allowed me to trace how ideas have evolved and changed in the context of conflict. (2) Semi-structured interviews: I interview a sample of ordinary people to examine the impact of the ongoing crisis on the pluralist discourse of the Syrian uprising, as well as shed light on complex processes of agency that have underpinned contentious politics in Syria

[4] The origin of the phrase the "wall have ears" is not fully known. Some have argued that it originated in 400 B.C., during the reign of Dionysius of Syracuse who "reportedly constructed a cave in the shape of an ear so that he could hear what people were saying in other rooms. His listening posts connected palace rooms that allowed him to hear what his prisoners said from other rooms in the cave" (Writing Explained n.d.) . The phrase of course has been used in different societies around the world, including the Middle East, although varyingly. In Syria, it had a specific connotation stemming from experiences unique to the Syrian context that may differ under less oppressive dictatorships, depending on the level of state surveillance experienced and perceived by society.

for decades under harsh conditions. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom.

Sampling Approach

This research has employed purposeful and random sampling techniques to collect the required data for examining pluralist ideas and contentious politics in Syrian society.[5] Purposeful sampling was employed to select a sample of elite figures, thinkers, philosophers, and civil society organizations, while random sampling was used to engage a representative sample of Syrian society. This dual-sampling approach ensures a research sample reflective of broad segments of Syrian society – not just elites or notable individuals but also representative of Syria's population by gender, religion, ethnicity, education, and economic status. I recruited participants from several countries, including Canada, Turkey, and Western Europe, to ensure that my sample is as diverse as possible. The selection of participants from these regions ensured that the results are not skewed by the lived experience of participants since leaving Syria. Ideally, I would have liked to have interviewed people living within Syria, however, this was not possible due to the high-security risks for myself and the participants. Therefore, I recruited participants residing only within politically open environments – some more open than others. In addition to safety considerations, recruiting participants from the Syrian diaspora had an important advantage over recruiting participants residing in Syria: It allowed me to garner more accurate data from participants who were more comfortable discussing their experiences openly, without fear of repercussions or state surveillance.

Scholars have offered different approaches to qualitative sampling – there is no consensus on the ideal sample size. This is because qualitative research is about substance rather than quantity, as it explores specific issues in-depth (Creswell, 2002). In the context of this dissertation, I interviewed a representative sample reflecting various segments of Syrian society. More specifically, 34 participants were interviewed in one-on-one virtual Zoom sessions. 74% of the participants were recruited by responding to ads[6] posted on several community social media pages, while 26% were recruited through referrals (snowball

[5] Qualitative researchers tend to rely on purposeful sampling but have also employed random sampling (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013). The primary objective for a qualitative researcher is to determine the appropriate sampling technique that fits the objective of the overall research.

[6] Interviewees were recruited through referrals or by responding to ads posted on several Syrian community groups on Facebook (see Appendix A). In total, ads were posted on 11 community Facebook pages with an aggerate total of 744,000 members in Canada, Europe, and Turkey. Such groups offered good exposure to members of the Syrian community in exile. Given that most Syrians are no longer in Syria, conducting interviews with people residing outside the country is appropriate for this research. No participants were recruited from Syria due to safety concerns.

sampling). 50% of the participants resided in Western Europe, 26% in Canada, and 24% in Turkey. The sample included more individuals who identified as male – with 56% of the participants identifying as such and 44% as female. The sample comprised people from various ethnic groups: 73% identified as Arab, 12% as Kurdish, 9% as Assyrian, 3% as Turkman and 3% as other. The sample also consisted of individuals with various religious affiliations: 67% identified as Sunni-Muslim, 15% as secular/non-religious, 6% as Ismaili-Muslim, 6% as Christian, 3% as Allawi and 3% as Druze. From a socio-economic perspective, 15% identified as lower class, 70% as middle class and 15% as upper class. The sample was also representative by level of education: 15% of participants achieved a high school diploma or less, 15% completed vocational/college degrees or some post-secondary education, 50% completed bachelor's degrees, and 18% completed advanced graduate degrees. The average age of participants was 41 years: 3% were between the ages of 18-24, 21% between 25-34, 44% between 35-44, 18% from 45-54, 9% between 55-64 and 5% were 65+. The sample included participants from almost every province in Syria: 21% identified as being from Aleppo, 18% from Rif-Dimashq, 15% from Damascus, 12% from Al-Hasaka, 12% from Homs, 9% from Hama, and 3% from each of Dara ‘a, Deir Ezzor, Latakia, As-Suwayda and Tartus.

My review of primary/secondary sources of information aims to assess how the ideas produced by prominent civil society organizations and notable individuals have evolved as the crisis transformed into a global geopolitical/proxy war. Given the volume and scope of available texts, I confined my research to a sample consisting of texts produced by several organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Syrian Revolution Network, Syrian American Medical Association, and the Syrian National Council, as well as a number of prominent scholars, philosophers, and revolutionary figures such as Khalid Taja, Nizar Al-Qabbani, Asala Nasri, Mai Skaf, and Burhan Ghalioun. Some of the individuals listed here were part of the signatories of Statement of 99, which urged Bashar Al-Assad to pursue political reforms upon his ascendency to power in 2000 (Al-Hayat 2000). Primary/secondary sources have been selected to correspond to three time periods: before the Syrian uprising (1970-2011), during the peaceful uprising (2011-2013), and post-uprising (2013-present). Examining texts within these time frameworks allows me to examine how discourse may have evolved over time.

Virtual Field Research?

Initially, the plan was to conduct field in-person interviews in Turkey, Canada, and Western Europe. This would have entailed engaging ordinary people in coffee shops, supermarkets, restaurants, and other public spaces and recruiting them as participants.

However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this approach was no longer viable. As part of the global shift to virtual research, I changed my methodology and recruited participants using social media platforms. I conducted interviews through Zoom (an online virtual meeting platform). Although this approach had its challenges, mainly related to technology and connectivity, it allowed me to access a representative sample of Syrians from all backgrounds – with different stories and experiences.

In-person field research allows scholars to gather "firsthand experience by getting out of the 'armchair' and entering the sites under study" and to experience the context they are studying – to ensure analysis is not disconnected from reality (Howlett 2022, 398). Depending on the research topic, this approach has the potential to offer scholars a deeper understanding of the examined issue. Having said that, in the case of my study, conducting virtual field research proved to be effective and more valuable. Given that I targeted Syrians outside Syria, being grounded in the space where interviewees are residing is not necessarily relevant. This is even more true given that interview questions asked participants to reflect on already lived experiences. The benefits of virtual research in this context outweighed the limitations. As Howlett writes, virtual research allows researchers to "interact with participants, and even glimpse into their daily lives, from afar... which can help generate valuable insight not otherwise available through the use of in-person methods" (Howlett 2022, 398). Virtual research, according to Howett (2022, 398), "may actually be richer and more insightful" when "discussing personal or sensitive topics." This was especially true in my case, where participants benefited from conducting these interviewees from the comfort of their homes due to the nature of the questions, which required participants to reflect on sensitive political matters relating to their experiences living under oppression.

Interview Process

As part of the interview scheduling process, participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form in Arabic and English before the interview. The information sheet (see Appendix B) outlined the research topic, objectives, and the purpose of the interviews, whereas the consent form (see Appendix C) listed information on the purpose of the research, expectations, study procedures, participant rights, and outlined how the personal information and data will be used. Prior to commencing the interviews, I reviewed the information and consent forms with participants and allowed them the opportunity to ask questions. As part of this review, I highlighted several key points: First, I explained to participants that no personal identifiers will be referenced in the research and that the

information they share will only be discussed anonymously. Second, I emphasized that participants are not required to answer questions they do not feel comfortable answering. Third, I explained that participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point during or up to 20 days after the interview. If they withdraw, all provided information will be removed from the study and destroyed. Fourth, I notified participants that my research plan was reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. After going through these materials, participants were asked to provide verbal consent to the terms and conditions as outlined in the consent form to proceed with the interview. Participants were also asked for consent to record the interviews for transcription purposes: If granted, interview sessions were recorded using Zoom's 'record meeting' function, if not, interviews were not recorded, and instead, detailed notes were taken. Throughout the interviews, my camera was turned on; however, participants had no obligation to do the same.

Interviews consisted of four primary sections (Appendix D). The first section collected a series of demographic questions (including ethnicity, religion, gender, education, socio-economic class, provinces, hometown, etc.) to ensure that the research sample is representative of Syrian society. The second section comprised a series of questions about the participants' experiences living in Syria before the crisis – from an economic, social and political perspective. These questions were primarily geared towards gathering data on the already lived experiences. The third section consisted of questions on participants' experience living through the Syrian crisis (as it escalated from a peaceful uprising to a complex geopolitical conflict) as well as their opinions/views on the politics of the crisis. The fourth section sought to gather the opinions/views of participants on the future of the crisis. Overall, interview questions were designed to gather data on participants' experiences and political views while avoiding discussing traumatic experiences as much as possible.

In order to ensure that interviewees were as comfortable as possible, I relied on several interview techniques to create a safe space for participants. This included: building rapport with participants by being accommodating and respectful, as well as demonstrating positive body language and showing interest in what participants are saying; starting the interviews with rapport-building questions; demonstrating a high degree of respect and gratitude throughout my interactions with participants; expressing empathy with participants as they share their stories and experiences; respecting boundaries and allowing participants some degree of control over the direction of the conversation while emphasizing that it is entirely up to them to determine what questions to answer.

Data analysis procedures

The collected data has been examined qualitatively by employing discourse and content analyses. The former was used to examine interview data, while the latter was employed to analyze the content that emerged from the uprising. This section discusses these approaches as they relate to this research and will demonstrate how they have been employed to assess Syrian politics of contention and the space for pluralist ideas in Syrian society (Phillips and Hardy 2002).

Discourse analysis is a research approach in "which language material is examined as evidence of phenomena beyond the individual person" (S. Taylor 2013, 2). This language material, discourse, consists of "interrelated set of texts and the practices of their production, dissemination and reception that brings an object into being." (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 3). Texts, which may "take a variety of forms including written texts, spoken words, pictures, and symbols," are "the sites of emergence of complexes of social meanings, produced in particular history of the situation of production" (Kress 1995, 122). My research employed Phillips and Hardy's (2002) three-dimensional approach to discourse analysis that highlights the interplay between text, discourse, and context to disseminate how socially produced ideas and objects are constructed and how they evolve. Embedded in a constructivist epistemology, this approach allows for an exploration of how "socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held in place over time" (Armitage 2010). It stresses that discourse is "not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking context into consideration" (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 277). It is predicated on the assumption that "discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently" (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). The emphasis this approach draws on context is one that usefully allows me to examine how the discourses emerging out of Syrian society have evolved within the context of war.

Content analysis is the "study of record human communication," ranging from books to magazines, webpages, newspapers, speeches, letters, emails, etc. (Babbie 2013, 295). My research employs what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) describe as a summative approach to qualitative content analysis. This is a constructivist approach that seeks to interpretively uncover the underlying meanings of content, taking into account context and setting, rather than simply counting the number of times keywords or content appear in a given text" (Holsti 1969, Phillips and Hardy 2002, Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The emphasis is to make sense of a given text within the context from which it emerged. This method allows me to connect the

"textual content" that has emerged out of the Syrian uprising to "broader discursive contexts" (Phillips & Hardy 2011, 8).

These approaches are employed to examine discourse/content produced across Syrian society to locate and examine the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society. Employing such constructivist approaches allows for an examination of this discourse while acknowledging how the context of violence/conflict may impact its production. As will be demonstrated, I argue that such pluralist discourse remains vibrant across society. In other words, it has not been eliminated despite the harsh realities of conflict and violence. In some cases, it has shifted towards a pessimistic view on the future of the crisis, but in most cases, it remains vibrant across society.

Risks and Challenges

No risks to participants or the researcher were encountered. However, a few participants experienced discomfort as they reflected on their experiences. In these circumstances, interviews were paused, and participants were asked if they wished to stop the interview. Participants were also reminded that they are not required to answer questions that may cause or result in any form of distress. Interviewees were provided with mental health resources approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

Before commencing the field research, I anticipated facing challenges with getting ordinary people to speak freely and share their thoughts - given that Syrians have lived under semi-totalitarian conditions for decades (George 2003). To overcome any potential impacts from this issue, I employed a multi-step rapport-building strategy outlined in the preceding section, but also reinforced by: (1) reminding participants that they will not be referred to by name but will rather be randomly numbered and referred to in that manner; (2) emphasizing that participation is completely voluntary, and participants can withdraw their consent/retract their interview at any point in time; (3) notifying participants of the University of Alberta's strict rules and regulations regarding research ethics involving humans; (4) emphasizing that interviewees are not required to answer my questions if they choose not to.

1.3 Conclusion

From a theoretical perspective, my research relies on what I refer to as a postcolonial critical cosmopolitan (PCC) framework and Asef Bayat's theory of social non-movements to shed light on the dynamics of contention in politically-closed environments as well as the

examine capacity of societies undergoing conflict to retain pluralist ideals – focusing on Syria as a case study. Methodologically, my research relies on the review of primary/secondary sources and semi-structured interviews. The former approach is employed to examine documents, articles, books, interviews and other materials of prominent Syrian thinkers, activists, scholars and other 'revolutionary' figures that emerged prior to, during and after the uprising in order to trace how ideas have evolved and changed in the context of war, while the latter is used to interview members of Syrian society in an attempt to contribute a deeper understanding of the dynamism of society in time of conflict.

Chapter 2
THE HISTORY OF STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS

We are accused of terrorism:
if we wrote about the ruins of a homeland
torn, weak ...
a homeland with no address
and a nation with no names

I seek the remnants of a homeland
none of its grand poems is left
except the bemoans of Khansa

I seek a dominion in whose horizons
no freedom can be found

A homeland forbidding us from buying a newspaper
or listening to the news.
A dominion wherein birds are forbidden
from chirping.

- Nizar Al-Qabbani (1997)

2.0 Introduction

This section provides a brief history of state-society relations in Syria, from the late Ottoman to the post-colonial periods. It argues that these relations have primarily been inorganic, complicated by colonially imposed realities and a turbulent post-colonial political process (Hinnebusch 1993). This chapter highlights how situated at the heart of human movement/interactions, Syria has had a rich experience of cosmopolitanism which has unfolded over centuries (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). Under the Ottoman Empire, this cosmopolitanism flourished partly due to the policies of the Millet system, which permitted religious communities in Syria – particularly Jews and Christians – considerable autonomy, self-governance, and religious freedom (Özbek 2005). In governing its diverse regions, the Ottoman state employed locally produced political, social, and economic structures that operated in such regions before the Empire's conquest (Hanioğlu 2008). This policy allowed society-driven systems to develop and flourish organically with minimal state intervention.

In the mid-1800s, the Ottoman Empire instituted a series of reforms or *Tanzimat* that sought to reverse its decline. These reforms sought to remodel the Empire's relations with society by creating a centralized political model with universal laws and an "Ottoman" citizenship (Özbek 2005). These reforms altered state-society relations from a model where the state operated minimally and allowed various communities to govern themselves through

locally produced structures and systems, to one where the state imposed top-down policies and laws (Haddad 1994) . Hence, they were widely unpopular and resulted in mounting popular grievances against the Empire (Haddad 1994).

As will be demonstrated, contentious politics in Syrian society proliferated in response to the decline of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent colonization of the Levant by the French and British and further intensified during the early post-colonial era (Haddad 1994). Processes of contention operated in various spatial settings across society, from markets to coffee shops, parks, universities, religious institutions, and other public areas and took on multiple forms, including uprisings, revolts, strikes, and armed insurgencies (Haddad 1994). When Syria gained independence, it had one of the most vibrant civil societies in the Middle East, consisting of various political parties, organizations, and social movements (Khoury 1989). Under decades of authoritarian/semi-totalitarian rule, the post-colonial state in Syria sought to systemically eliminate all forms of formal activism while enforcing a rigid surveillance network to identify and eradicate opposition across society (George 2003). These policies succeeded in fragmenting civil society but gave rise to an array of informal processes of contention that operated through latent non-movements embedded in everyday interactions across public and private spaces, as will be argued in Chapter 4. These processes culminated in the formation of social networks and solidarities over decades under harsh semi-totalitarian conditions, which quickly activated into formal movements with the outbreak of the Syrian uprising of 2011.

2.1 The Ottoman Era

Pre-Tanzimat Politics of Ottoman Syria

The Ottoman Empire governed most of the present-day Middle East - at its height extending from North Africa to the Balkans, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian Peninsula. The Empire was perhaps the most cosmopolitan in its time, consisting of a variety of ethnic and religious groups (Öztürk 2014). In governing such a diverse population, the Ottoman state implemented the *Millet* or nations system, which granted non-Muslims the "right to organize into communities possessing certain delegated powers, under their own ecclesiastical heads" (Abu-Jaber 1967, 212). According to this system, a nation or Millet was defined based on religion rather than ethnicity, culture, language, or area of residence. Some *Millets* were, therefore, quite ethnically diverse, consisting of various ethnic/cultural communities (Hanioğlu 2008). This system permitted significant decentralization allowing communities to

govern themselves and retain their identities around their respective religious institutions.

Administratively, the Ottoman State divided its territories into *vilayet,* or provinces governed by a *vali,* or governor who was appointed directly by the Sultan. As the representative of the Sultan, the governor administered the *vilayet* and was responsible for public works, agriculture, and commerce (Shaw and Shaw 1977, Faroqhi and Frisch 2009). In governing its diverse vilayets, the Ottoman state leveraged existing administrative systems/patterns as much as possible to seamlessly integrate its vastly diverse regions into the Empire (Hanioğlu 2008). Generally, administrative patterns fell into two primary categories: The first category consisted of those provinces governed using the Timar system – a land distribution and taxation system based on various fiefs ruled by Ottoman princes, ministers, governors, and other officials that collected revenue through taxing farmers. Provinces were, to some extent, treated as autonomous fiscal units responsible for maintaining a balanced budget (Hanioğlu 2008). Ottoman authorities used this system to govern provinces such as Damascus, Anatolia, Rumelia, Bosnia, and Erzurum. The second consisted of provinces where the Timar system was not applied – where the Ottoman states collected all revenues and paid governors an annual salary (Hanioğlu 2008). Examples of provinces governed using this system include North African provinces, Basra, and Baghdad. However, administrative patterns differed from province to province - even within regions governed by the same system of land distribution and taxation (Hanioğlu 2008).

Under the Ottoman Empire, territorial Syria as we know it today consisted of several provinces or *vilayets* centred around major urban centres such as Aleppo, Damascus, Deir Ezzor and Mosul (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). These cities have been at the center of world history as corridors of human movement, trade, knowledge, and culture. Both Damascus and Aleppo are the world's oldest inhabited cities that were governed by various Empires, including the Assyrian, Roman, Persian, Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman Empires (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). For centuries, such cities were cosmopolitan hubs that facilitated intercultural exchanges between various ethnic and religious communities, resulting in the formation of hybrid cultures that share many commonalities – from food to arts and literature to language (Dabashi 2012). Under the Ottoman Empire, this cosmopolitanism flourished in Syria partly due to the policies of the *Millet* system, which permitted different *Millet* the rights to develop their own hierarchies, structures, laws, courts, schools, hospitals, and homes to support seniors/the infirm and, in some instances, private police forces, as well as exclusive jurisdiction over civil matters such as marriage/divorce (Öztürk 2014). However, the millet system had its limitations: "The Alawis, designated a heretical group, were not recognized as a millet. The Druze were also considered heretics,

but they enjoyed autonomy in recognition of their actual power in the Lebanon mountains" (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, 3).

The socioeconomic makeup of Ottoman Syria was based on the guild system, which was developed organically by society and maintained by the state (Rafeq 1991, 2002, 2008, 2009). This system helped "perpetuate the stability of [the] social and economic fabric" of Levantine society for three centuries before the opening of Ottoman economy to European manufactured goods (Rafeq 1991, 497). Through it, cosmopolitanism surfaced and became deeply embedded into the fabric of social relations. Guilds were developed by members[7] of a specific craft, cutting across various industries, including medicine, textile, butchery, weapon production, and household equipment (Rafeq 1991).[8] They operated as autonomous organizations that "upheld the division of labour and controlled the three major activities of production, services and marketing" (Rafeq 2002, 102). Each guild enacted its regulations, determined pricing, regulated membership and promotions, and oversaw production quotas and quality (Rafeq 1991). Guild-specific courts were developed to enforce compliance with regulations and adjudicate disputes. The Ottoman state accepted industry guilds' legal and regulatory authority and relied on them to raise taxes, satisfy the army's needs, and regulate economic life more broadly (Rafeq 1991, 2008). As such, they were permitted significant freedom in managing their own internal affairs without state interference. This meant that guilds effectively regulated their sector's economic activity and excluded outsiders from participating without membership (Rafeq 2008).

The guild system was highly egalitarian – members elected leaders and voted on issues that required consensus (Rafeq 2008). The head of each guild (the sheikh) was responsible for upholding regulations and ensuring that members were treated equitably (Rafeq 2008). To even the playing field among members, guild regulations discouraged and, in some cases, prevented members from forming partnerships to avoid monopolies and allow for competition based on quality rather than price (Rafeq 2008). This policy, coupled with price regulations, limited the space for immense capital accumulation (Rafeq 2008). The social makeup of guilds reflected the cosmopolitan nature of urban centers and were characterized by tolerance between various ethnoreligious groups, including Muslims, Jews, and Christians (Rafeq 2008). Guilds played a key role in integrating "religious communities within their ranks by emphasizing expertise over religious affiliation in joining the guilds and rising within their

[7] Guild membership consisted of largely of small locally owned workshops that were located in quarters or markets across urban centers. Production by such workshops was limited to fulfilling local demand within a specific neighborhood, quarter, or urban center (Rafeq 1991, 2002, 2008)
[8] Economic activity centered around local workshops that were run by masters, aided by journeymen and apprentices (Rafeq 1991).

ranks" (Rafeq 2009, 254). This was reinforced through participatory practices and promotion criteria, which rested primarily on work ethics (ability and integrity) rather than religion/ethnicity (Rafeq 2009). As will be shown in the next section, opening the Ottoman economy to Western capitalism seriously undermined the guild system and transformed socio-economic relations in Ottoman Syria, giving rise to new elite powerful merchant classes (Rafeq 1991, 2002).

Impact of Tanzimat on Ottoman Syria

In response to decades of military defeats and considerable territorial losses, as well as the growing threat of European colonialism, starting in 1840, the Ottoman state initiated a series of political, social, and economic *Tanzimat* or reforms aimed at modernizing and strengthening the Empire (Shaw and Shaw 1977). Through these reforms, the Ottoman Empire sought to integrate its "dominions into one all-encompassing modern national state" by expanding the bureaucracy, centralizing power, universalizing laws, and creating Ottoman citizenship, developing a state constitution, reorganizing the finance system, and adopting liberal free-trade economics (Özbek 2005, 76). These reforms reversed the decentralization and legal pluralism permitted under the Millet system to create universal laws that applied to all Ottoman citizens, regardless of religion or culture (Özbek 2005). However, the *Tanzimat* failed to achieve their desired outcomes for several reasons. First, centralizing power, after centuries of decentralization, was resented by various communities (Haddad 1994). Second, the embrace of capitalist economics rendered the Ottoman economy vulnerable to industrialized Europe, disrupting the traditional guild-based system of production that had operated throughout the Empire for centuries (Rafeq 1991). Third, rising nationalist tendencies across the empire undermined the attempt to create Ottoman citizenship (M. Haddad 1994).

In Syria, the policies of the Tanzimat were resented by various segments of society (Haddad 1994). Civil society flourished during this period as debate intensified among Syrian intellectuals around how to reverse the Empire's decline[9] (Haddad 1994). This debate generally reflected Syrian-Arabist[10] views - which consisted of a "constellation of proto-

[9] Syrian intellects sought to understand European political, military, and economic advancements while simultaneously challenging notions that being 'civilized' was tied with race, religion or even imperialism (Aydin 2007).
[10] Mahmoud Haddad argues that Syrian Arabism was associated most prominently it was associated with "Shukri al-'Asali, Muhammad Kurd 'Ali, Muhibb Al-Din Al-Khatib, 'Abd Al-Ghani al-craysi, Abd Al-Wahhab Al-Milihi (AL-Inklizi), Salah Al-Din Al-Qasimi, Abd al-Karim Al-Khalil, and possibly 'Abd Al-Rahman Al-Shahbanda" (Haddad 1994, 202)

nationalist" perspectives that differed in approach but shared key commonalities (Haddad 1994). Such views emerged "not as a reaction to Ottomanism, but as a reaction to the possibility of its disappearance" (Haddad 1994, 217). Syrian thinkers continued to "regard the Ottoman state as the ultimate repository of political legitimacy because it was regarded paradoxically as a bulwark against the Western colonial powers," but at the same time, displayed nationalist allegiance to territorial Syria as an entity within the Empire and aimed to achieve greater autonomy, not independence from the Ottoman State (Haddad 1994, 217). Syrian-Arabism, therefore, rejected Tanzimat attempts to create a singular definition of the Ottoman nation in favour of a pluralist and decentralized understanding of nationhood which regarded the Empire as one state with many nations - reflecting the Empire's ethnic and cultural diversity (Rafeq 1994).

The signing of free trade agreements between the Ottoman Empire and European states led to an influx of European goods across the Empire, which seriously disrupted the guild-based economy in Syria (Rafeq 1991, 2002). Local artisans could no longer compete with mass-produced European products sold at lower prices (Rafeq 1991). To increase their competitiveness, guilds from impacted industries employed techniques such as lowering costs and cutting wages to ensure viability in the face of growing competition. Despite these attempts, the overall trend was rising bankruptcies during this period (Rafeq 1991). As Rafeq (1991) argues, the Ottoman Empire lacked the infrastructure and technology to industrialize the economy and therefore pursuing free trade agreements with European states only hampered local production, resulting in a de-industrialization process in Syria and other parts of the Empire.

Disruption to the guild system resulted in the reconfiguration of social relations in Syria, as new social classes emerged, including a landlord-merchant class that profited from commerce and trade and a class of educated bureaucrats (Haddad 1994). The latter class emerged thanks to the growing bureaucracies developed by the Ottoman state as part of the Tanzimat reforms (Haddad 1994). These two classes dominated politics in late Ottoman Syria and competed for influence and power, forming "vertical" alliances with each other when required to "cement their influence over those in the lower echelons of society, as well as "to their foreign governors or rulers above them" (Khoury 1990, 215). They also formed what Khoury (1990) describes as "horizontal" alliances, with other notables, when necessary, to ensure that their interests were protected. This social structure persisted into the colonial era, intensified, and deepened by the colonial powers, as will be argued in the next section.

2.2 The Colonial Period

In 1916, when the Ottoman Empire had been drawn into World War I, Arab forces initiated a military uprising with the goal of developing an independent state that would stretch from the Arabian Peninsula to the Levant. The revolt began based on an agreement between the British government and Hussein bin Ali, Sharif of Mecca, that guaranteed British support for Arab statehood (Polk 2013). However, the British government was not serious about upholding its promise to support the creation of an independent Arab state. In the same year, the British and French governments secretly signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, dividing Ottoman provinces among themselves (Kitching 2016). The agreement allocated the French present-day Syria, Lebanon, South-Western Turkey, and Northern Iraq, while the British present-day Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, and Eastern parts of the Arabian Peninsula bordering the Persian Gulf. Hence, the revolt served British interests by significantly weakening the Ottoman Empire and paving the way for the occupation of its territories.

Backtracking on their promise to support the establishment of an independent Arab State, the French and British moved to occupy the Levant as Ottoman forces retreated/crumbled (Tibawi 1969). This was widely rejected across Syrian society, as revolts broke out in 1919 across the Levant region. More specifically, a series of uprisings and armed insurgencies formed in northern Syria, aiming to drive French forces out of the region (Tibawi 1969). The revolts were led by Ibrahim Hananu and Alawite leader Salah Al-Ali and lasted two years before French forces crushed them. Coinciding with these revolts, political elites across the Levant mobilized to create the sought-after Arab state. In May 1919, the Pan-Syrian Congress, which brought together representatives from all religious and ethnic groups, convened its first meeting to discuss the steps required for creating such a state (Pipes 1992). In July of that year, Congress passed a resolution demanding the creation of an independent greater Syria, consisting of modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Northern Iraq. The resolution also rejected the French attempt to divide the region into administrative units and political Zionism committed to establishing a Jewish state in historic Palestine (Hurewitz 1979). In March 1920, Congress proclaimed the creation of the Arab Kingdom of Syria, which was to be governed by Faisal bin Hussein, the son of Hussein bin Ali. Faisel claimed authority over several former Ottoman provinces, including Damascus, Aleppo, Dayr Az-Zor, Beirut, and Jerusalem. However, his authority did not extend beyond Damascus (Tibawi 1969).

The newly created Kingdom of Syria existed for over three months before French

forces crushed it in July 1920.[11] Immediately upon its occupation, the French carved Syria into administrative units along religious lines consisting of Alawite, Druze, Christian and Sunni regions, "obstructing the free passage of goods and people." (Khoury 1989, 57). These regions were kept isolated and governed by the French High Commissioner, who resided in Beirut (Fildis 2013). It was during this period the "concepts of Sunni 'majority' and 'the minorities' emerged for the first time", used by the French to justify their policy of dividing Syria into sectarian political units (Philips 2015). The colonial administration claimed this division responded to popular demand for self-governance (Tibawi 1969). However, it was embedded in a divide-and-rule strategy that aimed to fragment and destabilize the rising nationalist momentum in Syrian society and obstruct the formation of a Syrian national identity (Fildis 2013). The French had underestimated the influence of anti-colonial nationalism in Syria, which was more developed in Syria than any other territory occupied by French colonialism (Khoury 1989). Pre-colonial French studies inaccurately concluded that the nationalist movement in Syria was exclusively a Muslim movement bent on obstructing Western civilization and progress (Khoury 1989). However, it quickly became apparent to the French that nationalism in Syria united various segments of the population in a common struggle that threatened to undermine French rule. Divide and rule, therefore, aimed at fragmenting national unity.

In 1923, the French established the Mandate of Syria and Lebanon under authority of the League of Nations. In cementing their control over the Mandate, and in addition to the policies of partition, the French sought to isolate and destroy the nationalist movement in Syria by (1) pitting "rural areas and more politically conscious and hostile urban nationalist centers" [against each other] and (2) fragmenting the urban elite class (Khoury 1989, 60). The first was achieved through "breaking the traditional relations of dependence between urban absentee landowning class and the Syrian peasantry" by promoting "widespread peasant proprietorship" and the "development of capitalist relations in agriculture" (Khoury 1989, 60-61). These policies weakened the pre-colonial economic relations between urban elites and the countryside, on which "the upper classes of big towns (from which the nationalist leadership was drawn) depended for self-preservation" (Khoury 1989, 61). The second was achieved through French reliance on the elite class system to govern the mandate. Governing Syria directly – a country that lacked natural resources or raw materials

[11] King Faisal unsuccessfully tried to negotiate a ceasefire, but the French were determined to take the military route (Tibawi 1969). The Kingdom's war minister General Yusuf Al-Azma led an army that consisted primarily of volunteers to confront French forces at Maysalun. Severely outgunned and outnumbered, Al-Azma's army was decimated, and Damascus was brutally bombarded and captured by French forces. King Faisel surrendered and fled the city, marking the beginning of formal French occupation of the Levant (1969).

– did not make fiscal sense to the French (Khoury 1989). As Khoury (1989) explains it was more effective to rely on military/political presence while leveraging the existing elite system to govern Syrian society. More specifically, the French employed traditional local elites who occupied bureaucratic and landowning roles under the Ottoman Empire but whose aristocratic status diminished with the occupation of Syria. Such elites were from wealthy families but were powerless and unable to compete with nationalist leadership for influence in Syrian society (Khoury 1989). They did not support the nationalist wave that challenged the Ottoman State in its late years but were also not necessarily supportive of French occupation either (Khoury 1989). They presented themselves as the only qualified local leaders to take over administrative functions. Khoury adds (1989) that for some, cooperating with the French was key to regaining lost political status in society, while others deemed this cooperation necessary to create some form of order and stability.

Despite attempts to divide and rule Syrian society throughout the colonial era, the French faced strong resistance in the form of riots, peaceful uprisings, demonstrations, and armed insurgencies, to which the French responded with violence, martial law, and oppression (Polk 2013). The first significant challenge to French occupation took place in 1925. In July of that year, prominent Druze leader Sultan Al-Atrash led a rebellion against French forces (Polk 2013). News of the rebellion spread across the mandate and quickly ignited what was referred to as the Great Syrian Revolt, which spread from Damascus to Hama to Aleppo and lasted for nearly two years before it was crushed by French forces (Provence 2005). Although the revolt was not centrally planned or coordinated, it nevertheless brought together urbanites and rural dwellers, framers and workers, merchants, and political thinkers, across religious and ethnic communities with the common goal of challenging colonial occupation (Provence 2005). It also shattered the artificial boundaries and separations erected by the French government and generated cross-national solidarities in defiance of colonialism. Having said that, the revolts also revealed deep division based on personal and ideological conflicts that contributed to weaking the movement's anti-colonial struggle (Khoury 1989). The elites of the Syrian nationalist movement used the slogans of 'unity' and 'independence' "as a lowest-common-denominator appeal to rally the Syrian masses" behind their leadership (Khoury 1989, 219). However, as Khoury explains (1989) they failed to develop a shared vision that would give a tangible meaning to these slogans.

The defeat of the Great Syrian revolt ultimately led to the fragmentation of the Syrian nationalist movement, as many of its key figures were arrested or forced into exile (Khoury 1989). This left Syrians without an "immediately identifiable local leadership", as the French

military gradually regained control on the ground (Khoury 1989, 241). It was clear that the politics of confrontation did not succeed, and consequently, many elites became convinced that "in order to be permitted to return to Syria and to participate in political life, nationalists had to resign themselves to playing politics by the rules of the French High Commission" (Khoury 1989, 241). They, therefore, resorted to engaging in a process of "subtle diplomatic bargaining within the French system" to achieve a "gradual relaxation of French control" (Khoury 1989, 241). At the same time, the pressures of the Great Revolt convinced Paris to reconsider its strategy and to become more open to diplomacy rather than relying solely on "overt threat of continuous military domination" (Khoury 1989, 241-242). The French of course continued to set the rules of the political game, and within those rules, they demonstrated more openness to engage in dialogue with local elites.

Challenges to French rule persisted throughout the remainder of the colonial period but took on a more political form (Tibawi 1969, Khoury 1989, Moubayed 2018). Social movements increased during this period, as peaceful strikes, campus sit-ins and street demonstrations became more frequent and organized (Moubayed 2018). In addition, the number of newspapers increased and became an essential feature for sharing information and anticolonial perspectives (Moubayed 2018). The French responded by arresting opposition members, suppressing protests, shutting down newspapers and forcing those deemed a threat into exile. In 1927, nationalist leaders came together to begin the difficult task of forming a national opposition movement that would engage with the French to achieve the goal of Syrian independence (Moubayed 2018). In that year, they formed the National Bloc, which consisted of a wide range of parties and movements united by the goal of achieving decolonization (Tibawi 1969). Led by Hashim Al-Atassi and other prominent figures, including Ibrahim Hananu, Shukri Al-Quwatli, Jamil Mardam Bey and Abd Al-Rahman al-Kayyali, the National Bloc dominated the politics of colonial Syria, steering "the course of the independence struggle in Syria until its completion" in 1946. (Khoury 1989, 248). As one scholar argued, the National Bloc "was the most important and organized political movement in the Middle East" (Moubayed 2018, 43). Rejecting violence in the struggle for independence, the National Bloc sought to dismantle French occupation politically rather than militarily (Moubayed 2018). The experience of the Great Revolt served as a reminder that a direct military confrontation would be futile and would only result in destruction and violence on the Syrian people. Hence, the National Bloc's approach shifted towards working through the very system and institutions the French established to achieve incremental concessions until Syria fully gains independence (Moubayed 2018). This was part of a strategy that National Bloc elites described as "honourable collaboration" – one that sought to establish a

free and united democratic Syria through peaceful means while avoiding the sort of confrontations that would warrant a violent response from the French (Khoury 1989).

The anti-colonial struggle intensified in 1936. In that year, prominent National Bloc member and anti-colonial figure Ibrahim Hananu passed away after battling tuberculosis (Moubayed 2018). The National Bloc organized a funeral service in Hananu's hometown of Aleppo, bringing together over 150,000 mourners (Moubayed 2018). Anti-French "slogans were shouted" during the funeral, which led to clashes "between young Syrians and French police" (Moubayed 2018, 58). The French retaliated by arresting over 100 people, including outspoken critics and key National Bloc members. In addition, following the funeral, French force raided Hananu's home and harassed his family members (Moubayed 2018). Following these events, riots broke out initially in northern Syria but quickly spread into Damascus. The French swiftly responded violently by arresting and opening fire on participants (Moubayed 2018). As casualties mounted and the scope of protests began to increase, the National Bloc called for a national strike across Syria (Moubayed 2018). The call for a strike was met with broad participation. Students, activists, workers, and other members of Syrian society came together to spearhead widespread riots, closure of bazaars, and nationalist demonstrations, which brought the "country to the verge of a complete shutdown" (Thomas 2005, 295). From Aleppo to Hama, Homs, Latakia, Deir es-Zour, Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, and Damascus – "never had the country seen such a widespread popular movement, not even during the Great Syrian revolt. Only bakeries remained open" (Moubayed 2018, 59).

The French failed to take control of the situation militarily and were forced to negotiate a compromise with the National Bloc (Moubayed 2018). In 1936, both sides reached an agreement: The French agreed to release political prisoners, grant general amnesty, re-open closed National Bloc offices and newspapers as well as participate in negotiations to discuss Syrian independence; in exchange, the National Bloc agreed to call off the strike (Moubayed 2018). By forcing the French to make concessions, the National Bloc proved capable of rallying people across Syria in the struggle for independence, which significantly grew the bloc's national appeal Syria-wide (Moubayed 2018). In September 1936, a National Bloc delegate travelled to France to negotiate the terms of Syrian independence. This culminated in the signing of the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence, which promised "gradual independence over a twenty-five-year period" (Moubayed 2018, 60-61). As part of the agreement, "the French agreed to reunite the Alawite and Druze mountains with the rest of Syria," in exchange, the National Bloc agreed to allow the French to retain two military bases in the country as well as the right to Syrian territory and airspace for military purposes (Moubayed 2018, 61). Back in Syria, this was hailed a success in the

struggle towards Syrian independence – celebrations lasted for days filling public squares and streets across the country. It was an important milestone in the struggle against colonialism (Moubayed 2018).

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Syria's path towards independence was cast with uncertainty. The rise of Nazi Germany generated a variety of perspectives among Syrian political elite that generally reflected cautious optimism (Moubayad 2018). Moubayad (2018) argues that some of Syria's political elite saw that the emergence of Nazi Germany disrupted the balance of power and created potential opportunities for Syrian independence, while others were concerned about that a possible threat of German occupation could derail Syria's struggle towards independence given Nazi brutality and racist discourse of the supremacy of Aryan race. Some also saw that the allies and the Germans were two sides of the same coin – both colonial powers that would prey on Syria and other societies in the Global South (Moubayed 2018). The Nazi propaganda machine reached Syria and other parts of the Middle East, promising the Fuhrer's commitment to liberate Arab lands from French and British occupation (Moubayed 2018). More specifically, Berlin-based Arabic radio broadcast delivered carefully crafted propaganda to gain the region's support and incite instability in French and British occupied territories (Moubayed 2018). Fearing the proliferation of pro-Nazi sympathies in Syria, the French cracked down on public discussions/debates, censored newspapers and employed informants to keep tight control on public discourse (Moubayed 2018). The French could not afford instability and responded to all sorts of dissent with brute force.

With the occupation of France by the Germans in 1940, the Nazis indirectly controlled Syria through the German-installed pro-Nazi Vichy government (Moubayad 2018). The political and economic environments in occupied Syria were turbulent: The path towards independence appeared uncertain amid growingly complex international developments, while deteriorating economic conditions, exacerbated by the chaos of the Second World War, resulted in a shortage of essential food commodities such as grain (Moubayed 2018). These conditions culminated in the outbreak of the National Bloc-led bread riots of 1941, which Vichy French authorities sought to suppress violently - killing rioters, arresting participants, and targeting National Bloc leadership (Khoury 1989). The military option failed to yield results as riots intensified and expanded in scope, forcing Vichy French authorities to commit to allowing for Syrian independence once international developments stabilized (Khoury 1989). Vichy France ruled Syria briefly before Free France and British forces were able to recapture Syria in 1941.

By the end of the Second World War in 1945, the French deployed troops in the

Levant to reassert complete control over Syria and Lebanon (Khoury 1989). This outraged people across the mandate and sparked massive street demonstrations and riots demanding independence across Syria and Lebanon (Moubayed 2012). The French government responded violently, deploying its military to quell the riots across Syria and Lebanon and bombarding Damascus (Khoury 1989). Hundreds were killed, and thousands were injured. Fearing further escalation and unrest after enduring years of war in Europe, the British opposed French actions and called for an immediate ceasefire, which the French rejected (Moubayed 2012). In July 1945, British forces were deployed to Damascus to enforce a ceasefire, forcing French troops to withdraw from Syria and Lebanon. Finally, the French agreed to withdraw their military completely, and in 1946, Syria finally declared its independence (Moubayed 2012).

2.3 Post-Colonial Period

The politics of the newly independent Syrian state was characterized by immense political contestation among various actors (Hinnebusch 2014). The newly created state lacked a "strong territorial identity" as it was carved out of the "arbitrary partitioning of the Ottoman Empire after World War I" (Aldoughli 2021). The Syrian state suffered, therefore, a legitimacy crisis, struggling with identity questions, colonially imposed artificial boundaries, lack of experience functioning as a state, and widespread popular appeal to pan-Arabism (Hinnebusch 2014). The once united political elite, under the umbrella of the National Bloc, now collided on ideological (and personal) matters, proposing competing visions and approaches to post-colonial politics (Tibawi 1969). In addition, the number of civil society organizations and political parties significantly increased during this period, which mobilized around different social, economic, and political causes, hoping to play a role in Syrian society and politics (Tibawi 1969). Among these organizations were leftist parties such as the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party and the Arab Socialist Party, centre-right such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and centrists such as the People's Party and the National Party. Despite the ideological plurality of the emerging civil society movements and organizations, they shared a commitment to pan-Arabism. They opposed developing an independent Syria as an end goal but rather a step towards a greater Arab unity (Hinnebusch 2008, 2014). There was no consensus on how unity should be achieved or what it should look like: some favoured unity with Iraq, others with Egypt; some favoured a socialist union, and others called for unity based on Islamic values (Tibawi 1969). Despite these disagreements, what was evident during this period is that the "most successful political elites and movements were those that

championed the notion of Syria as Arab and part of a wider Arab nation even if, to a degree, they accepted its (possibly temporary) separate statehood" (Hinnebusch 2008, 264).

In 1948, Shukri Al-Quwatli was elected as the first president of the newly independent Syrian state and sought to navigate differences and gain public support and legitimacy (Tibawi 1969). Tibawi (1969) explains that although committed to pan-Arabism himself, Al-Quwatli believed it was essential to procure popular legitimacy towards the Syrian state. With Israel declaring independence in 1948, Al-Quwatli faced the first significant test to his legitimacy. The question of Palestine has been at the center of Arabist and anticolonial solidarities across the Middle East. It was the one issue that united all forces, despite political or ideological differences (Tibawi 1969). Hence, Al-Quwatli, promptly joined forces with Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq to attack Israel. This was an opportunity for the Syrian state and other Arab states to legitimize themselves to their populations by demonstrating their commitment to the Arabist cause (Tibawi 1969).

However, the failure of these states to defeat Israel posed a severe challenge to their legitimacy (Tibawi 1969). Al-Quwatli's government was sharply criticized for Syria's poor performance in this conflict, and mass protests, strikes and civil disobedience spread across the country, prompting the government of Al-Quwatli to enact emergency law and deploy the military to maintain order (Tibawi 1969). Seizing this opportunity, in March 1949, Brigadier General Hosni al-Zaim ousted President Al-Quwatli in a military coup that was carried out with the CIA's support (Curtis 2011). Al-Zaim quickly moved to rewrite the country's constitution and proclaimed himself president (Wilford 2013). Al-Quwatli was initially imprisoned but later exiled into Egypt. The coup undermined the democratic process in Syria and set a precedent for future military intervention in the political process. It left a lasting impact on the political landscape that contributed to widening the gap between state and society. The Syrian state became the site for contestation between different elites and military juntas. As this competition intensified, the Syrian state grew more oppressive and less representative of society.

Al-Zaim's presidency was short-lived: in August of the same year, he was overthrown in a military coup and later executed (Moubayed 2018). The coup was carried out by Colonel Sami Al-Hinnawi, supported by General Abid Shishakli, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and prominent politician Hashim Al-Atassi. Al-Hinnawi allowed for the return of civilian rule, although the political process remained heavily dedicated by Al-Hinnawi and his military junta (Moubayed 2018). Shortly after the coup, Hashim Al-Atassi was chosen by Parliament as President, while Al-Hinnawi assumed the role of Chief of Staff. Al-Atassi's presidency was riddled with complexities and was continuously undermined by the military's intervention in

the political process (Moubayed 2018). Al-Atassi sought to create an Arab union with Iraq – something Colonel Abid Shishakli firmly opposed. After about three months in power, in December of 1949, Shishakli staged the third coup in less than nine months, overthrowing Al-Hinnawi while keeping Atassi as President (Moubayed 2018). He also purged – arresting and imprisoning – prominent politicians and military officers who were supportive of unity with Iraq.

Shishakli preferred to govern from the shadows as military ruler, retaining Atassi as President and appointing his loyalist General Fawzi Selu as defence minister (Moubayed, 2018). For the next two years, the civilian government led by Atassi was increasingly controlled by Shishakli and his associates. It did not have the freedom to act independently – it was under direct control by the military institution (Moubayed 2018). Selu acted as Shishakli's proxy in the civilian government, with the ability to veto legislation and policies contrary to the interests of the military establishment (Moubayed 2018). This complicated Al-Atassi's goal to advance unity with Iraq, given the hostility he had faced from Shishakli and the military establishment. In November 1951, he sought to advance pro-Iraq legislation, which prompted another coup staged by Shishakli in December of the same year (Moubayed 2018). Following the coup, Shishakli appointed Selu as head of state, Prime Minister, and Defense Minister. Selu constrained political freedoms, outlawed political parties, and shut down newspapers, while a cult of personality was created around Shishakli – the country's military leader (Moubayed 2018). Shishakli appeared on the front page of the newspapers and addressed Syrians regularly. However, as his relationship with Selu deteriorated, Shishakli staged a third coup in 1953, overthrowing his longtime ally and appointing himself as President and Prime Minister. He expanded the crackdown on dissent and opposition and violently eliminated those who opposed him (Moubayed 2018).

In 1954, Shishakli was ousted from power in a military coup led by former President Atassi and a coalition of political parties and forces, including the Syrian Communist Party and the Ba'ath Party (Moubayed 2018). Shishakli was forced into exile, while Atassi was restored as President. During his tenure in power, Atassi sought to garner societal legitimacy to the Syrian state, curb the power of the military and restore civilian rule to Syria while balancing between the competing visions to Arab unity.[12] Atassi was succeeded as President by Quwatli in 1955, who continued to garner legitimacy for the Syrian state while attempting to curb the military's influence in politics (Moubayed 2018). However, the emergence of Egypt's Gamal Abdul-Nasser as a popular Arabist leader following the Suez Crisis of 1956

[12] As discussed, the debate was primarily between those who advanced unity with Iraq and those who sought unity with Egypt (Moubayed, 2018).

has resulted in growing popular support for unity with Egypt in Syria. Cognizant of this support, Quwatli led efforts to unify Syria and Egypt, establishing the United Arab Republic under Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency (Moubayed 2018).

The unification of Syria and Egypt was an immensely popular decision as an important step toward Arab unity. However, Nasser's authoritarian tendencies quickly alienated Syrian elites, who saw that Syria had become nothing more than a colony of Egypt (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). Power was centralized in Egypt and embodied explicitly in Nasser's cult of personality, while all political parties were abolished, while Nasser's nationalization policies aggravated the business class (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). In 1961, secessionist forces in Syria orchestrated a coup that formally ended the United Arab Republic. Shortly after the coup, elections were held that were won by Nazim Al-Kudsi. However, his presidency was short-lived after being overthrown in a coup carried out by the Ba'athist Military Committee, led by Salah Jadid and Hafez Al-Assad in 1963. The Ba'ath Party has dominated the political landscape in Syria since its ascendance to power. The Party was created in 1947 by Michel Aflaq, Salah Al-Din Al-Bitar and Zaki Al-Arsuzi, as a secular nationalist-Arabist party, driven by the goal of uniting the Arab world (Abboud 2018). Ba'athist thought emerged during the wave of decolonization in the Middle East and Africa and contributed to the development of a uniquely non-Western approach to socialism in the global south. Described as third-world socialism, this approach rejected the Marxist class conflict thesis, combining socialist discourse around workers' rights within a broader anti-colonial ideology (Aflaq, 1947, Dabashi 2012). The Ba'ath ideology fused this type of socialism with Arabism and anti-colonialism. More specifically, in his book On the Way of Resurrection, Michel Aflaq (1947) argues that Marxism emerged out of Western experience with industrialization and capitalism. He adds that the history of the Arab nation is independent of Western experiences, and hence, the ideologies that emerged from Western societies do not meet the needs of the Arab World. The socialism he sought to create was one that channels all efforts towards the goal of creating Arab unity.

In the two-years following the 1963 coup, a power struggle ensued between classical and neo-Ba'athists within the Ba'ath party (Hinnebusch 2001). Affiliated with Michel Aflaq and Saad Al-Bitar Ba'athists who desired the establishment of an Arab federation with Egypt, while "pursuing moderate socialism and preserve some democratic freedoms" within Syria (Hinnebusch 2001, 46). Neo-Ba'athist, led by Salah Jadid and the Military Committee, prioritized "revolution in one country" over Arab unity (Hinnebusch 2001, 47). They redefined Arab nationalism to focus attention on championing the Palestinian cause, while implementing a socialist revolution that aimed to nationalized large sectors of the economy,

including banking, utilities and trade (Hinnebusch 2001). In 1966, the neo-Ba'athist successed in assuming power following the 1966 coup, orchestrated by Salah Jadid, which resulted in the overthrow and expulsion of classical Ba'athists.

In 1970, Hafez Al-Assad seized power in a military coup which he referred to as the Corrective Movement, claiming to rescue Ba'athism from Jadid's policies. Al-Assad was a pragmatist who sought to fortify his grip on Syria once and for all (Hinnebusch 2001). Outnumbered by pro-Jadid memberships within the Ba'ath Party, he appealed to Aflaq's sympathizers and to strengthen his base and justify a series of purges targeting those that opposed him. (Seale 1990). His first and foremost task was to ensure that the military establishment remained loyal to him (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). To this end, shortly after seizing power, he moved to centralize state power, assign key positions to loyalists, and implement a thorough surveillance network (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). He expanded the role of intelligence and security agencies and deepened their reach within state institutions and society (Büchs 2009). He cracked down on opposition and turned the Ba'ath party into an instrument to legitimize his power (Hinnebusch 2012). He cloaked his oppressive policies with discourse articulating Syria as a unique nation-state that was the protector of Arab causes (Philips 2013). Anti-colonial rhetoric was central to the regime's legitimizing strategy, articulating Assad as the eternal leader, the father of the nation, and the champion of Arab causes in the face of Western-Zionist imperialism (Philips 2013). This narrative was centered around several key issues - such as the Palestinian cause, Israel's occupation of Golan Heights and American/Western imperialism - to justify the regime's semi-totalitarian consolidation of power against a common enemy (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018).

By the mid-1970s, the regime grew increasingly oppressive, with semi-totalitarian elements (George 2003). More specifically, the regime implemented a complex system of public surveillance and systemically targeted opposition groups (Büchs 2009). Anyone who spoke against the regime became a target of prosecution. In addition, the regime targeted Islamist organizations aiming to curtail their presence in society (Pierret 2013). This was supplemented by a series of purges targeting those deemed a threat to the Assad regime. More specifically, the regime's primary opponent during this period was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The SMB started as a post-Islamist[13] organization that sought, in the words of

[13] Post-Islamism is rooted in a "conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains" (Bayat 2013, 8). In "this sense, post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular. Rather, it represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty" (2013) – more on this in Chapter 5, section 5.2.

its founder Mustafa Al-Sibai, to bring Islamic legislation and the existing political system closer together (Pierret 2013, Bayat 2013b). Unlike Islamist ideologies that seek to establish an Islamic system of governance, the SMB advanced a reformist agenda during its early years by working within the scope of existing political institutions and structures (Pierret 2013). It sought to do so through involvement at the grassroots levels, providing social services, and participating in democratic parliamentary politics (Ramírez-Díaz 2018). As the Syrian regime's crackdown on the group intensified, the SMB found itself in a difficult position, divided between those who were in favour of responding to violence with violence and those who called for peaceful dialogue.

By the early-mid 1970s, conservative Islamist thought began to gain traction within the ranks of the SMB. Inspired by the work of Sayyid Qutub, emerging voices began to challenge the SMB's founding message, calling for an armed Jihad against the Syrian regime (Lia 2016). Most significantly, in 1975, Marwan Hadid established the Fighting Vanguard that sought to take on the regime directly by military force(Lia 2016).. Hadid tried to convince SMB leadership to support his struggle, but they refused to do so. He accused the organization of treachery for aligning with the "infidel" Alawite regime, telling its leadership: "what I really fear is that, if God's servants take on the fight against His enemies, you will sit and watch, instead of fighting…. by ignoring God's command and abandoning your mujahidin brothers", the SMB would go to hell (Ramírez-Díaz 2018, 52). Hadid described himself as God's agent on earth", stressing that his goal was to establish "the Government of Islam" in Syria, insisting that "we will not settle for anything else" (Aljazeera 2016). He also affirmed that "if the Muslim Brothers cast me out through the door, I will get back inside through the window, and pull them into jihad by force" (Lia 2016). By the late 1970s, Hadid's armed group successfully attracted SMB members - especially in Hama – as the organizations struggled to remain unified. It was apparent that the organization's younger members were shifting towards a jihadi path, as the Hadid's vanguard began to carry out assassinations against government officials (Ramírez-Díaz 2018, 52-53). This disintegrated the SMB into two distinct branches: The first, led by Issam Al-Attar (1927-), was based in Damascus, and the second, led by Adnan Saad Al-Din (1929-2010), was based in Hama and Aleppo. Both branches opposed the regime in fundamentally different ways: the first favoured peaceful change, while the latter learned towards a violent path. Eventually, the Conservative Hama-based branch garnered the most support, pushing the SMB towards *jihadism* (Lia 2016).

In 1979, Hadid's Vanguard entered the Artillery School in Aleppo and massacred Alawite officers. The Syrian regime accused the SMB of carrying out this massacre, an accusation the now-divided SMB swiftly denied (Ramírez-Díaz 2018). In retaliation, the

regime introduced Law 49, which "imposed a death penalty on anyone, found to be a member of the SMB" and launched a wide-scale crackdown on the organization, arresting, torturing, and executing thousands of its suspected members" (Lia 2016, 551). This crackdown involved a system of collective violence "involving not only family members of suspects, but entire city quarters and towns (Lia 2016, 554). This crackdown culminated in several "large-scale massacres throughout the country. Among the most prominent was the Tadmur (Palmyra) prison massacre, where regime forces tortured and killed thousands of prisoners" (Zaamout 2017, 34).

In 1980, the SMB issued the *Manifesto and Program of Islamic Revolution* (Lia 2016). This was a call for an armed uprising, a *jihad*, against the regime of Hafez Al-Assad. It was the declaration of war the regime needed to justify a large-scale operation against the SMB. By 1981, the SMB and the Islamic Vanguard started working together closely to combat the regime (Ramírez-Díaz 2018). At the same time, the instability drove tens of thousands of people located across the country to the streets to oppose the Syrian regime's totalitarian policies. The SMB capitalized on this and tried to steer the uprisings in its direction. The Syrian regime stepped up its offensive in 1982 after it was driven out of Hama by SMB militants (Lefèvre 2013). The Syrian regime deployed thousands of soldiers, led by Hafez Al-Assad's brother, Rifaat Al-Assad, to crush the revolts in Hama. The city was "besieged and barraged with heavy fire for weeks, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths. After a period of prolonged bombardment, regime forces retook the city" (Zaamout 2017, 34, Lia 2016). The Hama massacre signalled the end of the SMB militancy against the regime. By the end of 1982, Assad emerged emboldened and more powerful than any other time. The regime successfully drove the SMB into exile, ending the organization's 40-year history in Syria (Ramírez-Díaz 2018).

The Assad regime's crackdown on unrest in the 1980s cemented its control over Syrian society and politics. The regime dismantled and outlawed opposition parties and forced its opponents into exile while violently cracking down on critics internally. In order to ensure total control over society, the regime transformed Syria into a *mukhabarat state*, governed through an "extensive intelligence apparatus to spy on citizens and foreigners, as well as to intimidate and harass them" (Schwedler and Clark 2018, 24). This *mukhabarat* apparatus included several security/intelligence agencies – that operated semi-autonomously from one another, surveilling the population but also one another. They reported directly to the regime's inner circle – the Office of National Security of the Ba'ath Party. This multi-layered surveillance network ensured that no one was immune from the reach of the regime.

Intelligence/security agencies heavily relied on informants to surveil society and to ensure that anti-government views/actions/sentiments or activities are quickly identified and prosecuted (George 2003). Informants consisted of two groups: the first were those directly employed by the state (mainly in security agencies), and the second comprised of citizen informants. Through this network, the regime's eyes are ears were everywhere. The presence of intelligence agencies was felt everywhere – in private homes, markets, streets, schools, cafés, restaurants, parks, work settings etc. (George 2003).

State-employed agents were directly employed in various roles across intelligence agencies, responsible for surveilling public spaces such as schools, hospitals, universities, government institutions, and private spaces where possible. For example, several participants (participants O-012, O-017 and O-026) in my field research, who were employed as journalists, explained that all news stories required extensive security screening and were required to undergo multiple reviews/approval levels by 'security/intelligence' offices within state-owned media. These offices ensured all content complies with regime redlines before going on live television, radio, or print newspapers. Participants O-012, O-017 and O-026 explained that as journalists, they exercised self-surveillance and cautiously avoided crossing regime red lines; having a story rejected by the surveillance office could end one's career or, at worst, result in prosecution. Similarly, a prominent Syrian actor (participant N-002) explained that he was responsible for a television program discussing social issues. The weekly script of the program was reviewed by an agent who would show up to the set to review all scripts, content, and preparations before going live.

State agents were also responsible for providing security clearances for individuals seeking approvals on government applications – such as passports, IDs, employment etc. This security review primarily focused on depriving individuals accused of political crimes of government services. As participant O-010 explained, "being convicted as a drug dealer was less of a crime than being accused of speaking politics." An individual whom intelligence agencies may have blacklisted may be subjugated to extensive interrogation before obtaining basic government services. Those accused or convicted of participating in or engaging in any political activity are less likely to be approved for government services. Several participants in my field research, who had family members arrested by intelligence agencies, explained that getting access to basic services was almost impossible.

The second and most important group of informants were indirectly employed citizen agents - consisting of ordinary people who collaborated with the regime, sometimes for monetary gains, but more likely did so in the hope of advancing their own security. Citizen agents operated in all areas of society, in markets, schools, government institutions,

hospitals, neighbourhoods, among other spaces. They could include a merchant in a busy market, a taxi driver, a schoolteacher, a coworker, a fellow worshipper in a mosque or church, a neighbour or even a family member – these agents were present in all walks of life. Having the reputation of being a state agent or with connections to the security apparatus had its perks: People were cautious around individuals with such connections and often accommodated them on various issues. For example, in a working setting, a person connected to intelligence/security agencies may be given a better office at work or allowed to leave work at their leisure. Participant O-016 explained how he strived to provide all sorts of accommodations to one of his employees whom he suspected of being an informant.

By employing ordinary people as surveillance agents, the regime established a robust and multilayered security network that deepened its grip on society by ensuring that no space was free from surveillance, from markets to schools, universities, mosques/churches, public parks, hospitals, etc. This effective surveillance method allowed the state access into areas in society that otherwise were not accessible. The extent of this access is illustrated by the experience of participant N-002, who explains that he was arrested, tortured, and imprisoned for two years after his neighbour reported him for having an anti-regime book in his own home, which the latter noticed during a routine visit. The participant explained that he was questioned about the book and accused of attempting to destabilize the regime. After being released from imprisonment, he was required to make monthly visits to several security branches, where he would undergo hours of questioning, accompanied by physical and psychological torture.

Former regime political prisoners were also forced to work as state agents as a condition of their release. Several participants (N-002, O-025) who were former political prisoners explained that they were required to undergo monthly interrogations by intelligence agencies where they would be asked about their activities since their last visit to report any violations of regime "red lines" that they may have observed. Reporting violations in these cases did not result in monetary award but served to advance the reporting person's sense of security by maintaining a good standing with intelligence agencies – to show that they are cooperative. There was also a significant risk with failing to report violations. Former political prisoners continued to undergo routine surveillance, and hence if a third entity reported them for failing to communicate any violations, they could be subjugated to torture and imprisonment again. For this reason, some former prisoners isolated themselves to avoid being put in a situation where they have no option but to report friends, family members and acquaintances. For example, participant O-023 recalled several of his close-knitted friends who were former prisoners pleading with their acquaintances not to speak in front of

them, explaining that "they will be forced to report anything they hear."

Surveillance also extended to private homes – but took on the form of self-censorship exercised within families to avoid accidental leaking of private home conservations. Haunted by the memories of the Hama massacre of 1982, parents avoided discussing political matters at home and warned their children of the consequences of doing so. According to participants O-003, O-016, O-025 and O-029, parents exercised this censorship to varying degrees to deter their children from discussing what they heard at home in public. These censorship practices were common, as confirmed by almost all participants. For example, participant O-029 recalled a time when she scribbled on a magazine cover that featured pictures of President Hafez Al-Assad and his son Basil Al-Assad. The participant explained that her mother reacted swiftly, immediately burning the magazine in its entirety so that it would not get noticed by anyone else – such as guests, neighbours, passers, custodians etc. In short, this family-enforced censorship, generations of young people were raised on the idea that they should not speak about politics – it was taboo and unacceptable.

In addition to relying on informants, the regime employed modern technologies to "track individuals' movements, access to electronic files and even detain and torture members of the opposition" (Gupta 2013, 1360). These technologies were largely imported from companies in the West: For example, using German-based Trovicor GmbH technologies, the regime's intelligence agencies have been able to intercept electronic communication and track citizens' locations (Gupta 2013). Such technology allowed the regime access to spaces/private conversations that were not otherwise accessible. The experience of participant N-002 illustrates this access. He explained how during his time in prison (as a political prisoner), intelligence officers would broadcast in his underground prison cell recordings of private telephone conversations that his wife and family members were having among one another and with their friends, coworkers, colleagues etc. This was done regularly and, according to the participant, was part of the regime's psychological torture strategy.

In 2000, Bashar Al-Assad succeeded his father as President. There was much hope that he would lead efforts to democratize Syria, ushering in the Damascus Spring – a brief period of re-awakening of Syrian civil society in the space of transition between Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad (Ismael & Ismael, 2011). During this period, "dozens of 'dialogue clubs' convened" to engage in political and social discussions and debates about the future of the country (Ismael & Ismael, 2011). These discussions culminated in the development of "Manifesto of 99" which was signed by 99 Syrian intellectuals, scholars, actors and prominent public figures urging Bashar Al-Assad to end the state of emergency and martial law, release all political prisoners, pardon all exiled citizens, establish the rule of law and to free public life

from the “constraints and various forms of surveillance imposed on it” (Al-Hayat 2000). The “Damascus Spring” period was short-lived as the regime resumed its crackdown organizations” and imposed new “restrictive press laws” by the summer of 2001 (Ismael and Ismael 2011, 254). Prospects for political reforms quickly withered as the regime decided to continue in the same direction. Within a year of Bashar Al-Assad’s takeover of power, security forces arrested those who called for reforms, thereby erasing “all hope for political and social reform” (Ismael and Ismael 2011, 254).

Under Hafez Al-Assad, Syria’s economy was largely centrally planned and controlled (B. Haddad 2011, 2013). As economic station intensified in the late 1990s, the regime began to develop a system of crony capitalism, to build up a business class that would allow the regime access to more capital (B. Haddad 2011, 2013). This was further advanced under Bashar Al-Assad who implemented a series of policies to open the economy to foreign investment and increased global trade (Abboud 2018). The goal was to adopt what the regime called a social market economy, combining between central state planning and market forces (B. Haddad 2011, 2013). However, these policies created wealth for segments of the population, but for most people, it resulted in the rise of inequality and widening the gap between the rich and the poor (Abboud 2018). This was supplemented by a rise in inflation and a decline in social services. As a result of these policies, powerful merchant and business classes emerged, primarily in large urban centers such as Damascus and Aleppo. These classes became instrumental to the regime’s ability to cement its control over the country (Abboud 2018). The embrace of neoliberal economics, therefore, resulted in uneven economic development – as the elite classes were getting richer, while opportunities for working classes continued to diminish (Abboud 2018).

Under Bashar Al-Assad, the regime continued its approach of articulating Syria as the heart of the Arab world – the one that stood for Arab causes, around Assad’s cult of personality (Philips 2013). The invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the isolation imposed on Syria by George Bush’s administration pushed Damascus to strengthen its ties with Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, forming what the Assad regime referred to as the ‘axis of resistance’ (Mahdavi 2014). Membership in this axis was instrumental to the regime’s articulation of Assadist Syria as the champion of Arab causes – in the face of rising U.S. and Israeli aggression (Abboud 2018). While Bashar Al-Assad’s policies dismantled the space for an independent civil society, the regime sought to construct a highly controlled civil society, consisting of organizations that provided public good – such as charity, support for the disabled, women's rights etc. This reflected an attempt to present a modern image of the regime (Khatib 2013). Typically, such organizations were headed by individuals affiliated with the Ba'ath party and monitored

through extensive security presence. First Lady Asma Al-Assad led the most prominent of these organizations (Khatib 2013). This was part of an attempt to project a modern image to what was otherwise an increasingly oppressive regime.

In summary, since 1970, Syria has developed into a semi-totalitarian state, governed by a regime that has exercised multi-layered control over society. This control is legitimatized through a dominate state ideology enforced using a complex intelligence network. Politics in Syria prior to the 2011 uprising resembled Eastern Europe under Communist control. As Tamara Al-Om (Al-Om 2014) nicely summarizes:

> Life in Syria pre-2011 was much like Vaclav Havel's description in The Power of the Powerless of life under a totalitarian regime which 'demands conformity, uniformity and discipline' and is only interested in serving 'people to the extent necessary to ensure that people will serve it' (Havel 1990: 43–44). In an attempt to ensure this the Syrian regime narrated a reality all of its own – far removed from reality itself – derived from its own ideology, creating 'a world of appearances' that perpetuated its power and dominance over its people. Constructing a reality that was 'permeated with hypocrisy and lies' where 'the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his or her ultimate liberation … the repression of culture is called its development … the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom' (Havel 1990: 44–45), enabling the power structures of the regime to create an inevitable societal paradigm in which its people were forced to 'live within a lie' created and enforced, directly and indirectly, by the regime itself. It was not important whether or not a person truly believed these lies; ultimately, it was whether they acted as though they did.

2.4 Conclusion

Under the Ottoman rule, the *millet* system allowed for the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic and religious communities. Major urban centers such as Damascus and Aleppo flourished and became cosmopolitan hubs that brought together various ethnic and religious communities that peacefully resided side-by-side for centuries. French and British occupation of Ottoman territories imposed new realities on the Middle East. This included the division of the Levant region along ethnic and religious lines as well as the imposition of artificial borders that separated communities and disrupted centuries of human movement and exchanges. These policies were part of a broader divide and rule strategy employed by the French to divide Syrian society and undermine the nationalist anti-colonial movement forming in the Levant. Despite these efforts, one of the most organized, coherent, and inclusive anti-colonial movements emerged in Syria, challenging French occupation throughout its duration. This movement employed a variety of tactics, including spearheading armed revolts to organizing peaceful protests, public disobedience and strikes, as well as involved significant political efforts and negotiations. Syria's nationalist movement

placed significant strain on the French and obtained significant concessions, which paved the road to independence. The post-colonial period witnessed immense political contestation as Syrians debated the future of their newly independent country. Various political parties and civil society groups, ranging in political and ideological orientations, formed around the country, seeking to play an active role in politics. However, the political process in Syria was not left alone to unfold independently. The U.S.-backed coup that overthrew the country's first democratically elected government ushered in a period of political instability and successive coups. Consequently, the gap between society and state widened as the Syrian state grew more authoritarian. With the rise of the Ba'ath party and Hafez Al-Assad in 1970, the Syrian state transformed into a politically closed semi-totalitarian state that employed severe violence to fragment civil society and eliminate all resistant elements. These repressive policies generated discontent, culminating in a series of uprisings and armed confrontations against the regime in the 1980s, which were brutally crushed by the regime.

Suppressing the uprisings in the 1980s did not eliminate contention. As will be shown in chapter 4, as the Assad regime became more repressive, cracking down on the spaces for public contestation, Syrian civil society gradually went underground, where it evolved to take on a uniquely vibrant form of defiance through the formation of communities of disconnected social inner-circles among friends, family members, and coworkers (among others). Through these social spaces, people continued to express agency: relying on humor, poetry and other artistic and discursive expressions to voice their dissatisfactions with political, social and economic conditions. People were not passive recipients of oppression but instead found ways to express agency. Cultural manifestations emerged and flourished out of these complex underground processes and played a crucial role in sustaining the emergence of the 2011 Syrian uprising.

The history of Syria's state-society relations necessitates a deeper reflection on the conventional theories/models of social movements, civil society and democracy for several reasons. First, contrary to liberal theories, civil society in Syria flourished without a democratic state. It emerged to resist colonial occupation, bringing together various segments of the population in pursuit of decolonization. Second, Orientalist arguments that articulate the Syrian crisis as an extension of deeply rooted primordial animosities between ethnic and religious groups simply did not look far into history. For hundreds of years, various communities resided side-by-side in peace, giving rise to cultural hybridity within Syria. Contemporary sectarian conflict is a symptom of a broader legitimacy/identity crisis underpinning most post-colonial states – including Syria – where authoritarian regimes have instrumentalized sectarian identities to justify and legitimize their oppressive practices

(Hashemi and Postel 2017a). Third, contentious politics in Syria has been vibrant throughout the country's modern history, ranging from intellectual opposition to Ottoman Tanzimat to societal confrontation against colonialism – and up to our contemporary time, as we have seen in the 2011 Uprising.

Chapter 3
DEMOCRACY, CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

"I will never lose hope, I will never lose hope.
It's the great Syria, not Assad's Syria."[14]
- May Skaf (1969-2018)

3.0 Introduction

This chapter engages with the literature on democratization, civil society, and social movements and their study of the Arab Spring more broadly and the Syrian Uprising more specifically. Through this engagement, I highlight the limitations of conventional accounts in comparative politics in understanding politics in the Global South and Syria in particular. I argue that such knowledge developed out of the study of politics in Western societies yet has been systemically universalized across spatial and temporal contexts – politics in the Global South is expected to unfold in a manner as prescribed by such knowledge, and failure to do so reinforces in some instances Orientalist arguments. My critique of these readings does not intend to reproduce the West-East binary or orientalism in reverse. Instead, I aim to highlight some of the limitations of conventional Western-centric knowledge, underscoring the need for knowledge production informed by multiple experiences and perspectives. I argue that the conventional literature on democratization, civil society, and social movements is bounded to a specific context with limited analytical utility beyond that context, excluding close analysis of political issues worldwide. They also contribute to the formation of hegemonic universalist approaches that undermines the voices, histories, and particularities of non-Western societies (Mahdavi 2013a).

My discussion of the conventional theories does not aim to rehash the critiques that have already been raised but rather to demonstrate how the concepts, tools and ideas that were developed by conventional readings of comparative politics have been deeply entrenched into disciplinary boundaries and have become the familiar tools that contribute to the Orientalist production of the Middle East. As will be shown, such tools continue to be applied to the study of politics in the Global South, resulting in analysis that excludes careful and detailed understandings of complex political phenomena. In the context of this project, I will show how through the application of these models, some scholars have for decades

[14] (Roberts 2018)

overlooked the possibility that uprising could take place in Syria and the Middle East more broadly. This has been attributed to the region's undemocratic political culture and lack of civil society, and complicated by politics of sectarianism (Vatikiotis 1987, Huntington 1991, Salamah and Mattei 1994, Kedourie 1994, Kramer 1992, Fish 2002, Karatnycky 2002). While challenging such approaches, this dissertation relies on a post-colonial critical cosmopolitanism approach which advances what Mahdavi (2009, 2013a) describes as "universalism from below," stressing the existence of "other forms of rationality" and knowledge, instead of enforcing singular and supposedly universal understandings.

3.1 Democratization

As this section shows, the conventional literature on democratization has largely been shaped by three dominant approaches: modernization theory, the political culture approach, and the strategic interactions models. Modernization theory emerged in the 1950s, most notably associated with Lipset (1959), Lerner (1958), Moore (1969), and Inglehart and Baker (2000). It is predicated on the assumption that democracy develops endogenous to modernization – or as an outcome of modernization (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). The Political Culture approach was developed in the 1960s by Almond and Verba (1963) in their book, *The Civic Culture*. This approach stresses the role of political culture in allowing for the emergence and persistence of democracy. Both modernization and political culture approaches articulate democratization linearly, conditioned on embracing Western paths of development/values (Fukuyama 2006). Strategic Interactions approaches emerged in the 1980s, following the wave of democratization that swept Latin America and Eastern Europe. They challenged modernization and political culture theories, stressing that democratization is largely an outcome of strategic calculations by elites in authoritarian regimes (Karl 1990).

In its initial formulation, modernization theory articulates a linear path towards democracy that can only be reached through pursuing Western-style economic development. Modernization, according to this theory, is a universal process of progressive accumulation of socio-economic transformations (those include urbanization, industrialization, and secularization) that all societies will progress through sooner or later (Lipset 1959). It is a process that involves the "gradual differentiation and specialization of social structures that culminates in a separation of political structures from other structures and makes democracy possible" (Przeworski and Limongi 1997, 158). Modernization, according to this theory, is contingent on economic development. Lipset (1959) suggests that the wealthier countries are, the more likely they are to democratize compared with less developed countries. Wealth,

industrialization, urbanization, and secularization are all brought about by economic development which promotes "a shift from traditional to secular-rational values" towards post-materialist values such as trust and tolerance which are critical for the emergence of democracy (Inglehart and Baker 2000, 49). This shift allows for the emergence of the mobile persons, who are educated, urban and active economic and political participants, and who collectively play a critical role in democratizing society (Lerner 1958). In his analysis of democracy in the Middle East, Lerner (1958) argued that growth of the population of mobile persons in the region, who are exposed to American media and way of life, could motivate traditional peoples (those who resist modernity) to modernize through developing empathy for American way of life. In contrast to Lipset's formulation, which associated modernization with inevitable democracy, Moore (1969) postulates that modernization produces different types of regimes, not all of which are democratic. He introduced the historical-structural methodology, which "sharply differed from the universal, linear approach of earlier thinkers" (Mahdavi 2012, 80). Moore (1969) identifies three routes towards modernization; those are the capitalist democratic route as was the case in the UK; the capitalist reactionary route as was the case in Nazi Germany and Italy; and the communist route as was the case in the USSR. He argues that the first route is the most stable, because it gives rise to an urban bourgeoisie that plays an important role in sustaining democracy. For him, "the presence of an independent middle class, a bourgeoise, is vital for democratization", stressing that "no bourgeoise, no democracy" (Moore 1969, Mahdavi 2012, 81). For Huntington (2006), what matters is not the form of government but rather state capacity. Using Lipset's definition of modernization, he argues that as societies modernize, new social actors and competing claims come into existence. If a polity's political institutions are not developed to absorb the impact of social modernization, this results in social frustration that may ultimately cause social instability. The degree of instability is determined by the pace of social modernization; the faster societies socially modernize, the more susceptible they are to instability and violence if political institutions are not developed to keep up with the pace of development (Huntington 2006). Inglehart and Baker (2000) expand on the work of early modernization theorists, emphasizing that economic development propels societies towards progressing forwards and embracing modern values. Industrialization, Englehart and Baker (2000, 49) observe, promotes "a shift from traditional to secular-rational values, while the rise of postindustrial society brings a shift towards more trust, tolerance, well-being and post-materialist values." This argument was reiterated by Inglehart and Welzel (2002, 145), emphasizing that "economic development does tend to bring changes in culture and social structure that make the emergence and survival of democracy more likely." It results in the emergence of rational

secular values and post-materialist quality of life demands that propel societies to overcome traditional values and become more compatible with democracy (Inglehart 2012). Scholars have continued to revive various iterations of modernization theory, emphasizing a strong relationship between economic development and democracy in democracy the success/failure of democracy around the world (Hadenius and Teorell 2005, Welzel and Inglehart 2008, Wucherpfennig and Deutsch 2009, Inglehart 2012, Gilman 2018).

Critics have raised several limitations with modernization theory: First, modernization theorists tend to suggest that poor authoritarian countries must reach a certain threshold of development before democratizing, which is not always the case (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). Later research confirmed statistically that democracy emerges exogenous to, or independent of, development but is sustained in developed countries (Przeworski and Limongi 1997). North and Weingsat (1989) confirm this observation but emphasize that development and democratic institutions are mutually constitutive. They argue that democratic institutions foster economic development, while economic development sustains democratic institutions. However, Boix and Stokes (2003) continue to observe that democracy develops endogenous to economic development and modernization. Contrary to North and Weingsat, they emphasize that economic growth and development increases the stability of a democratic system, while in authoritarian regimes it creates incentives to democratize. Put differently, they emphasize democratization is sustained by economic equality not institutions; economic equality increases both the stability of democratic system as well as the likelihood of transition to democracy (Acemoglu and Robinson 2001, Boix 2003, Boix and Stokes 2003, Feng 2003, Acemoglu, Johnson, et al. 2005). Some scholars, however, continue to observe that contrary to the economic development thesis, reliance on oil and other mineral resources reduces the likelihood of democracy (Barro 1996, Ross 2001, Fish 2002). Several other critiques have been raised with respect to modernization theory: Koelble and Lipuma (2008) have pointed out that modernization theory tends to associate 'Western-ness' with democracy while Eastern cultures are presented as incompatible with progress and modernity. Therborn (1997) argues that democratization in Europe, and in Latin America was the result of wars not modernization. To this argument, Collier (1978) and O'Donnell (1988) add that not only did modernization not translate into democratization in Latin America, but in fact it gave rise to a new form of bureaucratic authoritarianism. Modernization theories have largely been discredited, however, there is continued consensus among scholars that economic development reduces the likelihood of democratic breakdown (Przeworski, Alvarez, et al. 2000).

The political culture approach suggests that civic culture plays a critical role in fostering attitudes, such as societal tolerance and respect for participation in politics, freedom of speech

and public contestation, which are conducive to the emergence and persistence of democracy (Verba and Almond 1963). Proponents of this approach have sought to draw a relationship between political culture and the failure of democratization in the Global South (Muller and Seligson 1994). They have noted that democratization in Latin America has been hindered by its "authoritarian, traditional, elitist, patrimonial, Catholic, stratified, historical and corporate" political culture (Wiarda 1974, 210, Wiarda 1981, Morse 1974). Similarly, in the context of the Middle East, scholars have argued that Islam and Arab culture foster intolerant values, such as the subordination of women, which are incompatible with and are hostile to democracy (Lipset 1990, Huntington 1993, Salamah and Mattei 1994, Kedourie 1994, Fish 2002, Karatnycky 2002, Stepan and Robertson 2003, Hamid 2011, Potrafke 2012, Bradley 2012, Jamal and Robbins 2012, Masoud 2015, Zisser 2019). These arguments are best summarized by Kedourie (1994, 6) who argues that there is "nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world—which are the political traditions of Islam— which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government." Political culture scholars use the examples of China and Russia in critique of modernization theory showing that economic industrialization does not necessarily result in democratization (Ryabov 2012). The problem in both societies lies in the dominance of the traditional/cultural values (i.e., confusion values in China) that are incompatible with democracy (Nathan and Shi 1993, Huntington 1996).

This approach articulated secular Western values as inherently progressive and democratic. More specifically, some scholars have also argued that "Protestantism enhanced the prospects for democracy in Europe," contrasting this with Islam and Catholicism, which allegedly fostered values that hindered the development of democratic regimes in Latin America and the Middle East (Karl 1990, 2, Morse 1974, Wiarda 1974). Hence, according to this line of argument, the more exposed countries of the Global South are to Western ways of life, the more likely they will develop a political culture that fosters democracy. Several scholars emphasized this relationship, arguing that countries of the Global South that were subjugated to British colonial heritage are more democratic than others (Barro 1996, Bernhard, Reenock and Nordstrom 2004). Critical scholars have rejected these approaches pointing out that there is nothing about Islam/Catholicism, Arab/Latin American cultures that is opposed to democracy. The persistence of authoritarianism in these societies is caused by factors including but not limited to colonialism, geopolitics, foreign intervention, and global capitalism. They point out that culture is not static but is rather influenced by political and social contexts (Esposito and Voll 1996, An-Na'im 1996, Abootalebi 1999, Casanova 1996, Fayemi 2009). Similar critiques have been made by scholars of East Asia, who demonstrated

that Confucius values are compatible with democracy and played a key role in supporting democratization in multiple areas including Taiwan (Fetzer and Soper 2010). They further add that there is a need for an alternative conceptualization of democracy away from Western-centric approaches to take into account understanding/visions of democracy rooted in local cultures/values and experience (Lu and Shi 2015).

Strategic interactions approaches stress that democratization occurs when both regime and opposition soft-liners forge a mutual pact to pursue democratization (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986, Bermeo 1987, Markoff 1996, Collier and Mahoney 1997, Mahdavi 2012). This often triggered by a crisis that forces regime soft-liners to pursue this route to ensure that their interests are protected amid uncertainty (Mahdavi 2012). Democracy, in this sense, is not pursued for "normative reasons" but rather as a convenient compromise (Mahdavi 2012). This process of elite-driven democratization is ambiguous, characterized by a high degree of uncertainty that clouds political calculations and interactions between the competing forces (Przeworski 1991). Social structures and institutions place limits and opportunities on strategic calculations and determine the range of available options to the ruling elites (Karl 1990). Such approaches minimize the role of society in initiating democratization, through the emphasis that such process is spearheaded by elites in response to a crisis, but acknowledge the role of civil society (through social pressure) in speeding the transition once it is initiated (Diamond 1994, Collier and Mahoney 1997, Bermeo 1987, Mahdavi 2012).

Geddes (1999) summarizes, that strategic interactions scholars offered two approaches to explain how democratization is triggered. The first assumes that "the most important division within society is between rich and poor, and that the rich form and maintain dictatorships in order to protect their assets" (Geddes 1999, 598, Acemoglu and Robinson 2001, Boix, Democracy and Redistribution 2003). Democratization, according to this approach, begins with an economic crisis that temporarily shifts political power to the masses. The fear of popular revolution coupled with lack of capabilities to re-assert control will drive elites towards compromising (Acemoglu, Johnson, et al. 2005). The second posits "that the most important division in society is between the rulers and the ruled" where the ruling elite try to enrich themselves at the expense of the ruled (Geddes 1999, 599). According to this model, "rulers offer increments of democracy when doing so can increase the credibility of their promises to provide public goods and other policies that will increase economic growth and thus benefit both the rulers and ruled" (Geddes 1999, 599, North and Weingast 1989, Weingast 1997).

Strategic interaction scholars observe that strong authoritarian regimes can more successfully negotiate an outcome favorable to their interests (Agüero 1992). Prezeworski (1991) points out that transitions occur in military regimes after a split within the military elite. In single party and personalist regime, rival factions will be more cooperative with each other as compared with military regimes (Geddes 1999). Scholars have noted that single party and personalist regimes are typically more resilient and are more likely to be brought down by an exogenous event, rather than internal splits (Huntington 1991, Haggard and Kaufman 1995). In these regimes, splits will typically occur when staggering economic condition "disrupt the material underpinnings of regime loyalty" (Geddes 1999, 7). The strategic interactions approach has been critiqued for underestimating the role of civil society in initiating the democratization process (Mahdavi 2012a). In the context of the Arab Spring, it was the peaceful social movements that challenged the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East and resulted in the successful democratization of Tunisia.

3.2 Civil Society

Building off democratization literature, the conventional literature on civil society is embedded in a similar epistemological tradition. The literature defines civil society as the "sphere of autonomous institutions, protected by the rule of law, within which individuals and communities possessing divergent values and beliefs may coexist in peace" (Gray 1993, 157). In other words, it is the space for collective social action that is separable from government and market forces (Bellin 2004). The mainstream scholars have argued that civil society exists only in democratic states, where the freedoms of speech and association are constitutionally protected (Norton 1993). They assumed that in authoritarian states, regime oppression atomizes society so that people become mistrustful and isolated from one another, giving rise to an un-civil society (Gibson 2001, Bellin 2004).

Scholars have emphasized that civil society plays a key role in supporting the democratic transition and consolidation processes by checking state power "and encouraging wider citizen participation and public scrutiny of the state" (Mercer 2002, 7, O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986, Yashar 1998). They argued that the battle to escape authoritarianism cannot succeed without a civil society that generates a sustained demand for change. Diamond (1994, 7) contends that a vibrant civil society is "essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy". A weak, undeveloped, or fragmented civil society will result in the breakdown of the democratic consolidation process and pave the way for the return of authoritarianism (Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1995, Diamond 1997).

The conventional literature suggests that the most stable path towards creating a vibrant civil society is through embracing neoliberal economics (Norton 1993). This is because economic liberalism limits the role of the state in society and creates the space for people to mobilize and express their agencyunrestricted agency. This argument has formed the foundation of prescriptive literature stressing the need for societies of the Global South to embrace market economies in order to create the conditions that would allow for the emergence of democratic civil societies (Norton 1993). However, some scholars doubted that this could happen in the Middle East, arguing that "the state-dominated economies and the Islamist movements' intolerance would prevent the emergence of a lively and independent civil society in Arab countries" (Norton 1993, 212, Kramer 1992).

Some scholars have observed that civil society is vibrant in Western developed states in part due to the "evolutionary character of occidental Christian culture" (B. S. Turner 1984). Turner (1984) contrasts Western and Muslim states, arguing the latter failed to develop vibrant civil societies due to Islamic culture's static history and structures. He attributes the "the stationariness of Islamdom" to the "absence of private property, the general presence of slavery and the prominence of despotic government," concluding that it is for these reasons "oriental social formations possessed an overdeveloped state without equivalent civil society" (Turner 1984). Others in the same tradition have explained that in the Middle East, civil society is fragmented, corrupt, aggressive, hostile, infiltrated, co-opted, and insignificant (Norton 1993, 1995, Wiktorowicz 2000, Carothers and Ottaway 2005).

In the late 1980s-1990s, stemming out of the study of contentious politics in Eastern Europe and Latin America, some scholars challenged conventional readings of civil society, arguing that they underestimated the agency of people under politically-closed environments. George Konrad's (1984) concept of anti-politics seminally shed light on how people living under "totalitarian regimes attempt to carve out small niches of autonomy", highlighting patterns and mechanisms of contention that are otherwise unaccounted for by the dominant theories of civil society (Chambers and Kopstein 2008, 367). Building on this argument, Václav Havel (1985) demonstrated how isolated individuals engage in patterns of resistance against the state "through everyday actions, rather than through associational life" (Chambers and Kopstein 2008, 367). Both Konrad and Havel "hoped that "these small acts of anatomy and resistance… would on the long run be subversive of totalitarian rule, they did not foresee any short-term impact of the state in the communist world" (Kopstein 2008, 367).

Building on this discussion Gautier (1998) Casanova (1996, 2001) shed light on the role religion, and religious groups have played in supporting democratization in Eastern Europe and South America. Gautier (1998, 289) demonstrates how Catholic churches in

several East European countries "were influential in providing structural support for pro-democracy groups and organizations which sought to overthrow the Soviet regime." He argues that churches operated in the "harsh environment of Soviet totalitarianism," providing an avenue for "the expression and preservation of democratic values which were likewise suppressed" by totalitarian regimes of Eastern Europe (Gautier 1998, 290). The role of churches, therefore, brings into question the emphasis drawn by conventional readings of civil society on secularism, and it shows that religion and religiosity could be employed to support grassroots democratic projects. Casanova (2001) extends his argument to the study of the role Islam could play in supporting similar grassroots projects in the Middle East, criticizing the essentialist articulation of Islam as violent, backwards, and incompatible with democracy. Building on Casanova's argument, emerging literature continues to highlight the impact of religion, national cultures and traditions in forging civil societies that a play a constructive role in democratization (Hefner 2000, Cavatorta 2006, Gyimah-Boadi 2004, Fayemi 2009, Fetzer and Soper 2010, Mahdavi 2012).

During the same period, scholars more actively engaged the work of Antonio Gramsci to offer a different understanding of the concept of civil society. Gramsci (1992) rejects the separation drawn by liberal theories between civil society and the state. He argues that political society consists of political institutions, which are capable of garnering consent through coercion, while civil society is the private realm consisting of the family, trade unions, educational institutions among others that manufacture consent though hegemony (Fonseca 2016). The concept of cultural hegemony is central to understanding the dialectical relationship between the state, economy, and civil society. Gramsci explains that cultural hegemony is the ability of bourgeois class to mold the culture of a society in a manner that serves their interests and power (Fonseca 2016). Bourgeois norms that "underpin citizenship, democracy and civil society are socialized and deeply entrenched" to the point that they have formed a system of reality (Fonseca 2016, 2). Such norms are transmitted through the media, education and institutions and have become the dominant ideas and ideologies. It through achieving this sort of hegemony that the bourgeoisie can garner consent to the capitalist order through culture rather than coercion. Gramsci saw that civil society could therefore play a role in entrenching this hegemony, but it could also play a role in fostering counter-hegemonic forces.

Since the 2000s, several critical approaches to civil society have begun to emerge. For example, through her study of female actors in the UAE, Krause (2008, 5) argues that conventional readings of civil society employ the concept as both an "analytical and a normative tool" that teleologically "embraces secular liberal politics." Assuming a sort of

gender neutrality, conventional readings fall short of accounting for the experiences and agency of women resisting male patriarchy and oppression (Krause 2008). She challenges the separation between the public and private spheres, demonstrating how female actors in the UAE pursued a variety of interests oriented to the private domain, but their impact extends to the public sphere (2008). Another example: Gyimah-Boadi (2004) demonstrates that contrary to liberal theories, civil society emerged in politically-closed regimes spearheading grassroot democratic projects from below that challenged authoritarian politics across African societies. Gyimah-Boadi (2004) show how around Africa, civil society played an instrumental role in opening up politically-closed authoritarian regimes, curbing state power and authoritarian practices, enhancing democratic credibility through monitoring elections, supporting economic and material development, pluralizing information flows, and spreading projects that advocate economic and political reform. Building on the work of Konrad (1984) and Havel (1985), Asef Bayat's (2017) theory of *social non-movement* is another example of a critical approach to civil society. By shifting attention to informal everyday forms of resistance (i.e. latent, unorganized, and unstructured forms of social action), Bayat (2017, 2021) shows how the absence of open civil societies in politically restrictive states is replaced with vibrant underground societies or undersocieties, that form organically in society in opposition to the state. As will be argued in the coming section, this approach is most helpful for this project as it sheds light on informal forms of resistance through everyday interactions.

3.3 Social Movements

The literature on collective social action has progressed through several stages, consistent with the development of the field. Philosophers, such as Marx (1914), Weber (1965), Durkheim (1933, 1951) articulated collective behavior as disruptive to social and political orders, largely as revolutionary and transformative events. With the emergence of the 'collective behavior' approaches in the 1950s-1960s, the literature continued to articulate collective behavior as disruptive, as well as spontaneous, unexpected, and unstructured (Smelser 1962, Miller and Dollard 1941, Turner and Killian 1987). In the 1960s-1970s, influenced by the 'rational choice' model (Olsen 1965) and the 'relative deprivation' approach (Gurr 1970), the literature shifted away from explanations that tend to articulate collective behavior as disruptive, towards placing a greater emphasis on the role rational choice and psychological variables play in shaping collective social action. Towards the late 1970s-1980s, two schools of thought emerged in conversation with one another. The first is the

American ‘resource mobilization/political process’ (McCarthy and Zald 1973, Tilly 1978, McAdam 1982) while the second is the European ‘new social movement’ theory (Touraine 1981, Inglehart 1990). The first is concerned with studying the process of collective behavior, while the second is focused on examining the changing identity of popular contestation. I will focus my discussion on these two approaches, as they have become the most widely employed in the literature.

Classical political/sociological theorists of the 1800s, articulated collective social action primarily as disruptive, born out of societal grievances in response to social and economic pressures. Durkheim (1933) advances a functionalist approach emphasizing that pressures from industrialization results in increased competition within society that ultimately threatens its shared consciousness and functional harmony. This competition results in a condition of anomie, "which is the gap between the degree of differentiation and extent of regulation of social relations" (Durkheim 1951, Tilly 1978, 17). Anomic collective action can alter social relations, system, and collective consciousness. Weber accentuates (Weber 1954, 1965) that collective action develops out of the subjective meanings that actors assign of the "world and of themselves" (Tilly 1978, 37). The structure and action of social movements springs out of a group's initial "commitment to a particular belief system" (Tilly 1978, 37-38). A group's membership base expands if the definition(s) it advances resonate with members of society as more attractive alternative compared to the common understandings. Marx (1914) articulates a structural top-down materialist approach that is premised on the idea that class conflict has been a fundamental part of human history. Society is organized along competing social classes, in "relation to the prevailing means of production" (Tilly 1978, 13, Marx 1914). Collective behavior develops in the form of social revolutions which are spearheaded by the working class as an attempt to overthrow the capitalist system of exploitation (Tilly 1978).

Collective Behavior approaches emerged in the 1950s to explain outburst of spontaneous and unstructured collective behaviour (Jasper 1997, Della Porta 2006). Such approaches assume that social action is primarily violent and destructive, offering several models to explain its emergence (Miller and Nicholls 2013). Smelser (1962) articulates a functionalist value-added theory that emphasizes that collective behaviour will come into existence when six determinants are present: structural strain, structural conduciveness, generalized beliefs, precipitating factors, and lack of social control and mobilization of participants. When these determinants combine, they result in reactionary spontaneous and unstructured collective behaviour (1962, 5). Turner and Killian (1957) argue that collective behaviour emanates from a normative crisis trigged by collective interpretation of a precipitating event. This crisis destroys and neutralizes the traditional normative guidelines

that once determined the scope of appropriate social action, forcing participants to forge a new normative structure. The newly forged normative structure gives rise to emergent norms that are quickly imposed on the naïve and unaware subject as "part of the experience" (Aguirre, Wenger and Vigo 1998, 301-302, Turner and Killian 1987). This new normative structure will draw crowds of people with different motives and interests, giving the illusion of consistency in belief, motives, and interests (Turner & Killian 1957; 1987). Miller and Dollard (1941) argue that crowds bring together similar-minded people who would not typically voice their frustration alone but are empowered to do so by crowd dynamics. Expressing anger through crowds is attractive because it diffuses responsibility across all participants. I argue that these approaches fall short of accounting for how non-violent and structured social movements behave. Furthermore, collective social action is not necessarily spontaneous and motivated by anger but is shaped by how actors perceive themselves and the reality they operate within (Jasper 1997, 1998)

During the 1960s and 1970s, influenced primarily by the rational choice approach, the literature began to steer away from structural explanations and move towards emphasizing the agency of actors participating in collective action (Jasper 1998). The rational choice approach is a positivist model that developed out of the work of economist Olsen (1965). The use of the term collective action rather than behavior suggests the process of contention is motivated by rational actors, striving to maximize their gains (Jasper 2001). Olsen (1965) suggests that actors mobilize collectively in pursuit of rationally devised goals and interests. Collective action groups will only come into existence, when individuals are brought together by common goals/interests which cannot be attained independently, but only through collective action. A system of incentives is often created to ensure that those participating in the movement are motivated to do so, and not 'free riding' (1965). This approach lacks the sort of depth that would account for how rationality is constructed - shaped by norms, rules, and ideas (Jasper 1999). It privileges material gain and fails to delineate how contention is shaped by specific socio-economic and political conditions.

Articulated by Gurr (1970, 317), the relative deprivation approach emerged in the 1970s arguing that political violence is a "specific response to specific conditions of social existence". This emerges out of social-psychological conditions that drive people to perceive a discrepancy between their "value expectations and value capabilities" – a condition of relative deprivation (RD) (Gurr 1970, 319). More specifically, when people perceive a discrepancy between what they think they should get and what they have, they will be angry, frustrated and enraged which makes them prone to turn to violent collective behavior. The "scope and intensity" of RD directly determines when people turn to violence (Gurr 1970,

319). Material and social gains mitigate the impact of RD as well as reduce the likelihood of violence. This allows us to understand how the condition of RD impacts popular mobilization in the context of the Arab Spring, where people who were deprived of political rights and economic opportunities spearheaded these movements (Bayat 2013a). The experience of Mohammed Bouazizi is noteworthy in this regard – the young Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire after been assaulted by a policewoman for illegally selling his produce. Bouazizi's act of self-immolation ignited the uprising in Tunisia and subsequent uprisings across the Middle East. The condition of RD contributed to shaping the swift popular response of these uprisings across the region as people connected with Bouazizi's experience and struggles. Having said that, this theory is limited to a specific type of contentious behaviors, that most likely will involve violence. It falls short of accounting for non-violent forms of contention, as embedded in non-structured and disjointed forms of everyday street politics (Bayat 2017).

The resource mobilization and political process models are largely ahistorical and behavioralist theories, focused on explaining the processes of social mobilization. The former approach stresses that collective action is shaped by the interactions between "resource availability, pre-existing organization of preference structures and entrepreneurial attempts to meet preference demands" (McCarthy & Zald 1973, 1977, 1237). This approach "replaced the crowd with the organization and dismissed the psychological variables of alienation and frustration in favor of the rational actor employing instrumental and strategic reasoning" (Foweraker 1995, 16). Social movements, according to this approach, are preference structures that aim to change some elements of social structure or rewards distribution (Jenkins 1983, 529). Collective behavior is not necessarily driven out of grievances, but rather by available resources. The more resources a society possesses, the more will be available for social movement organizations (McCarthy & Zald 1973). The more resources available to social movement systems, the more there will be social movement industries and organizations to compete for these resources (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1218, McCarthy 2013). The political process model (PPM) articulates social movements as rational attempts by excluded groups to "mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through non-institutionalized means" (McAdam 1982, 37). The term, political process, was coined by Tilly (1978) but was crystalized as a coherent approach by McAdam (1982). PPM theorists emphasize four primary dimensions to understanding the emergence of social movements: political opportunities, mobilizing structures, framing processes and contentious repertoires (Tilly 1978, McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1994, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, Tilly 2006, Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Unlike earlier theories/models that focused on discussing

specific forms of collective action, i.e., revolutions, or social movements, political process theorists have coined the term contentious politics, shifting the discussion to the larger process of contentions and the many forms it takes (Tilly 1978). Contentious politics involves multiple sovereignties and is about making claims on others, and at least one of the parties involved in processes of contention is a government (Tilly and Tarrow 2015).

New social movement theory is concerned with the study of new social movements in post-industrial Western developed countries that were, unlike traditional movements, concerned with the danger of "objective problems" such as civil liberties, anti-racism, ecology, peace, heath and "international solidity with anti-imperialism and democratic struggles in the Third World" (Adkin 1998, 10, Mouffe 1988, 98). There are several competing theories/models under the umbrella of NSM theory, the most significant of which are Liberal, and post-Marxist theories (Habermas 1975, Touraine 1988, Inglehart 1997, Melucci 1996). Post-Marxist theories explain the rise of new social movements with the emergence of a growing middle class working in the public sector and white-collar jobs (Touraine 1981, 1988). According to this perspective, class struggle in post-industrial Western societies shifted from one between industrial workers and capitalists to one between technocrats and citizens (Mouffe 1988), or between a system that seeks to maximize production, power, money and information and individuals that are attempting to defend and expand their individuality (Offe 1982, Touraine 1988, Buechler 1995). NSMs are therefore a central force fighting to control the "production of society by itself" and the action of "classes for shaping historicity" (Touraine 1988, 29). Liberal theorists articulate NSMs as post-materialist "interest groups pursuing quality of life goals" (Adkin 1998, 2-3). According to this perspective, economic development in Western societies has allowed citizens to acquire enough wealth to render basic material concerns, such as economic security, basic welfare, "secondary to quality-of-life goals", such as "clean environmental, more leisure, reactional and cultural activities" etc. (1998: 3). NSM theories are significant in the sense that they bring into the analysis the historical method, however they fall short of accounting for informal, non-structured forms of mobilization (Pourmokhtari 2017, 2021).

In the 1990s, theorizing began to shift away from the empiricist disposition of traditional models, towards interpretivist cultural approaches that emphasize the role culture, norms and identities play in shaping collective action/behavior (Jasper 1997, 1998, 2001, Benford and Snow 2000). These approaches are critical of how the literature of social movements has been overtly focused on organizational dynamics of contention, while failing to account for how discontent is shaped by culture, norms, subjective evaluations, emotions, biography (Taylor and Whittier 1999, 169, Melucci 1996, Jasper 1997). They are concerned

with the process through which actors define themselves and the reality they face (Melucci 1996). They are focused on systems of meaning, subjectivities, and framing processes that shape collective actions (Jasper 1998). Framing denotes "schemata of interpretation" [that enable individuals] to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large" (Goffman 1974, Benford and Snow 2000). Collective action frames "serve to give meanings and interpretations to reality in ways that intends to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford 1988, 198). Cultural approaches allow for a more nuanced examination of collective social action across different contexts, compared to the more positivist models. However, their focus on meanings and identities largely falls short of accounting for the process of contention. As demonstrated, Asef Bayat's (2013) theory of social non-movement captures the dynamism of the relationship between identities, norms, and culture with processes of contention.

3.4 Problematizing the Conventional Narratives

The literature on democratization and civil society offers some useful insights into analyzing politics in the Global South. First, it brings to light the impact of economic development on regime and societal stability. Applied to the context of the Middle East, they show how economic conditions partly caused the Arab Spring uprising (Bayat 2017). Second, it underlines the importance of civil society in generating and sustaining democratic projects. As will be discussed, civil societies played a key role in the transnational revolutionary episodes of the Arab Spring (Dabashi 2013, Bayat 2017). In addition, the literature on civil society in Eastern Europe under Soviet dictatorships, helpfully elucidates dynamics of human agency that emerges under harsh authoritarian and semi-totalitarian conditions. This literature shows that civil society can vibrantly emerge as undersocieties, hidden from the state and its intelligence agencies.

The literature on social movements also offers valuable contributions. Culturalist theories allow the analyst to examine how culture, norms, and ideas shape actors' perceptions of themselves and the reality they operate within. The resource mobilization and the political process models highlight how resource availability allows social movements the capabilities to expand their scope and operations. They also helpfully shed light on how social movements emerge out of opportunity structures relying on repertoires of contentions to maximize their opportunities of success. The political process model has also effectively expanded how we understand collective social action, by shifting academic concern from social movements to

broader politics of contention. New Social Movements (NSM) Theory also provides helpful contributions through highlighting how NSMs are a new and flexible form of mobilization that do not necessarily form out of charismatic leaders, rigid horizontal organizations, and clear sets of ideologies. The Arab Spring social movements displayed some aspects of NSMs in terms of the organizational flexibility.

Having said that, my central argument is that much of the conventional theories/concepts on democratization, civil society and social movements do not travel well as they were developed out of a specific context reflecting specific experiences. The conventional literature on democratization continues to advance the same epistemology that was used by (neo)colonial powers to justify their oppression of the Global South. More specifically, modernization and political culture approaches articulate democratization linearly as a Western project of modernity. They present Western values as modern, superior, and democratic, in relation to the backward and uncivilized cultures of the Global South. What is absent from these models – and emerging theories - is an account of the role international factors play in affecting democratization processes in the Global South (Remmer 1992, Aideyana, Omoruyi and Ideho 2015). Not all states are equal in power, and some states are able to project more power and influence over others. Democratization processes in the Global South are never left alone to unfold harmoniously but are almost always jeopardized by external influences, ranging from regional rivalry to geopolitical competitions involving the major superpowers. Democracy in the Global South is also hindered by various other issues, including the systemic inequalities of the global capitalist system and legacy of colonialism which create unfavorable conditions for democratic transition and consolidation (Heller 2022).

The conventional literature on civil society does not leave space for indirect and informal forms of social mobilization (Bayat 2013a). It assumes that societies in authoritarian states are dead and incapable of mobilizing (Norton 1993, 1995, Wiktorowicz 2000, Carothers & Ottaway 2005). Such models condition the existence of civil society on embracing western secularism and economic liberalism. They associate secularism with democracy and progress, while religiosity is connected to traditionalism and backwardness (Mahdavi 2013a). Such articulation falls short of accounting for the role religious institutions have played in supporting democratization in Eastern Europe and South America (Casanova 2001). Trapped in an ethnocentric epistemology, they also undermine various readings/forms of modernities informed by local cultures/traditions/histories that result in multiple forms of secularisms, democracies, civil societies, social activism and contentious politics (Mahdavi 2013a, 2023). Hence, the very concept has sometimes become yet another tool to contribute to the Orientalist production of the non-European 'others' (Said 1979).

The conventional social movement literature also suffers its limitations. Prevailing models are founded on a particular understanding of state-society relations that is embedded in the logic of the market, articulating social movements as structured organizations that operate in pursuit of rationally articulated goals (Bayat 2013a). Building on the work of critical scholars, I argue that this literature is a product of its context and may not necessarily endure the test of time and geography. The battles being fought by movements in post-colonial societies often differ from those in the West. They are not *merely* against economic stagnation, or quality of life issues, but are rather oriented towards enduring colonial/neocolonial structures of domination (Ismael and Ismael 2013, Bayat 2013a, Dabashi 2013). More specifically, the rational choice model fails to account for instances where people have taken to the streets knowing that the cost of their action is too high – that they might be killed by security forces as we have seen in Syria for example. No rational calculus matters when the cost of social action outweighs any anticipated payoff(s). Relative deprivation models tend to give primacy to material rather than normative demands. In the Arab Spring, protesters called primarily for freedom, dignity, and social justice, in addition to better economic conditions (Dabashi 2012). Political process and resource mobilization models are overtly focused on the casual mechanisms that drive collective behavior. Emphasizing the role resource availability plays in allowing for the emergence of social movements, these perspectives largely fall short of accounting for the mobilization processes of those with little access to resources. New Social Movement theory is focused on a specific type of activism that emerged in post-industrial Western societies and do not travel beyond that context. Both theories describe social movements as structured, organized groups, that are striving towards attaining specific goals. This articulation falls short of explaining how social non-movements play an equally important role as will be demonstrated in chapter 4 (Bayat 2013a, 2017). Except for culturalist approaches, most of the discussed models dismiss context, failing to consider the role culture, norms, ideas, and values play in shaping how contention is experienced and articulated. Consequently, these approaches have often looked past how the Arab Spring was not merely a battle for democracy spearheaded by formal movements but instead reflects many attempts by marginalized non-movements to overcome oppression (Bayat 2013a, 2017).

While much of these conventional approaches have been criticized in recent years, as will be argued in the coming two sections, their influence remains visible in comparative politics. They have become the familiar/default concepts that we employ to examine relevant political phenomenon. Their status as familiar concepts is confirmed by their continuous reproduction in textbooks, graduate comprehensive exams, and other academic activities. I

argue that this conventional literature, is at times, founded on Orientalist assumptions about the non-European 'Others' that excludes close and thorough analysis by stripping out the relevancy of context and applying one-sided models that fail to reconcile the fact that different societies face unique challenges and trajectories (such as colonialism/neocolonialism and post-colonial conditions) that impacts their politics. Echoing Mignolo (2009), Dallmayr (2013), Dabashi (2015), Mahdavi (2023), among other post-colonial scholars, I argue that in order to produce more nuanced knowledge, we need to rethink the concepts, theories and methodologies that have come to be accepted as universal and opt for alternative models that are forged based on a critical dialogue between East and West/North and South. This dialogue should be rooted in a dignity of difference – that transcends both 'universalism' and 'particularism' and accepts the pluralistic understanding of the world (Mahdavi and Knight 2012).

3.5 Understanding the Arab Spring

Most scholars and policymakers did not predict the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings. For years, it was assumed that uprisings of such nature were unlikely to occur in the region due to the persistence of authoritarian regimes (Allam, et al. 2022). As Bayat (2013, 21) argues, Muslim and Arab societies have been articulated as "unchanging and unchangeable, frozen in [their] own traditions and history" and that these societies are exceptionally immune from democratizing, given that Islam and Arab culture foster intolerant values which are incompatible with and hostile to democracy (Vatikiotis 1987, Huntington 1991, Salamah and Mattei 1994, Kedourie 1994, Kramer 1992, Fish 2002, Karatnycky 2002, Potrafke 2012). Such arguments are predicated on the assumption that whereas in the West, church and state are separated, in the Middle East, Islam plays a critical role in shaping the politics and lives of people. This is best summarized by Gellner (1991, 506) who argues that Muslim societies "are suffused with faith and suffer a plethora of it." Islam, in this sense, is conceived as a culture that shapes everyday lives and practices of people. Scholars have also assumed that in the Middle East, civil society is monopolized by Islamists and fragmented by authoritarian regimes, as well as by clan, tribal and family loyalties (Norton 1993, 1995, Wiktorowicz 2000; Carothers and Ottaway 2005). With an undemocratic political culture, no civil society and domination by authoritarian regimes the region is destined to remain stagnant, according to mainstream theories and models.

Hence, in explaining the "anomaly" of the Arab Spring, scholars of the conventional paradigms initially put forward two key claims about the uprisings: (1) their emergence is evidence of the triumph of Western values (Harrison and Mitchell 2014); (2) they emerged as a result of "social learning by Arab citizens" —facilitated "by the rapid diffusion of ideas, discourses, and practices from one country to another and their adaptation to local contexts" (Heydemann and Leenders 2011, 647). However, as the uprisings failed to result in change, the literature reverted back to early Orientalist arguments asserting that this was inevitable due to the undemocratic values of Muslim and Arab societies (Bradley 2012, Abdo 2015, 2017, Zisser 2019). The failure of the uprisings was, therefore, evidence that the "Arab world was not ripe for a change, certainly not for democracy" (Zisser 2019, 3). Zisser explains (2019) that the problem lies in the fact that the region's political culture remains underdeveloped to allow for the establishment of democratic governance. Masoud (2015, 81) adds that the absence of toleration is most responsible for the Arab world's "inability to generate and sustain democratic self-government." Mieczyslaw P. Boduszynski, Kristin Fabbe & Christopher Lamont (2015, 125) elaborate that there is a "general lack of liberalism throughout political society" in the Middle East which cannot be overcome by "liberal groups in civil society." Other scholars have argued that the failure of the Arab Spring is an outcome of the Muslims' inherent appeal for Shari'a that causes them to support Islamists who openly promise to create illiberal regimes (Hamid 2011, 2014, 2016, Tessler, Jamal and Robbins 2012). Founded on the familiar concepts, ideas and tools that were developed by conventional theories, the discussed arguments continue to Orientalize societies of the Middle East as uncivilized, backward, and incapable of producing modern pluralist and democratic ideals. They also present Islam as a static culture that continues to hold back the region from modernizing, equating all forms of Islamic discourses with extremism while associating Western secularism with progress. As summarized by Mahdavi (2023, 5), such approaches seem to blame "Muslim public culture" for the failure/crisis of the Arab Spring, while ignoring "the structural and discursive transformations of the MENA societies, which were and continue to be evident in the popular slogans chanted by ordinary people in contemporary MENA social movements" . Hence, the utility of these approaches is limited as they are founded on the same epistemology that once served to justify the oppression of the Global South. If anything, they precisely demonstrate how some of the ongoing discussions within the literature remain predicated on Orientalist articulations of the non-European others. The problem is that these models reflect the experiences of European societies whose trajectory largely unfolded without colonial disruption, whereas the experiences of countries of the Global South had been mainly

dislocated by European colonialism and ongoing Western intervention in post-colonial politics of the region (Mahdavi 2023).

Critical research has also emerged, offering alternative explanations of the Arab Spring Uprisings. This literature challenges the epistemological foundations of conventional theories, demonstrating that the Arab Spring uprisings are evidence of *societal dynamics* overlooked by mainstream theories and models. Critical scholars have explained that the Arab Spring was born out of mounting societal dissatisfaction with political, economic, and social conditions, as the authoritarian states of the Middle East grew more oppressive, while economic opportunities diminished (Abdullah 2012, Dabashi 2012, Ismael and Ismael 2013, Gerges 2014, Mahdavi 2014). The peaceful uprisings cut across religious, ethnic, and socio-economic lines, bringing together protestors in defiance of authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East (Dabashi 2012, Bayat 2013a, Mahdavi 2014, 2023). They were spearheaded by what Asef Bayat (2013, 12) refers to as 'middle-class poor', which consisted of individuals who enjoy "college degrees, know about the world, use new media, and expect a middle-class lifestyle", yet they were "pushed by economic deprivation and marginalization to live the life of the traditional urban dispossessed in slums and squatter settlements and to undertake jobs in the largely precarious and low-status parallel economy— as taxi drivers, fruit sellers, street vendors, or messengers." The Arab Spring uprisings reflected grassroots struggle to liberate the 'nation' from exclusionary ideologies and politics and to overcome an era of "stasis, surrender, frustration and misery" (Abdullah 2012, 2, Dabashi 2012). It was not just merely a "struggle for democracy, but an attempt to create an indigenous—authentic—new politics that represents the popular will" where human dignity is respected (Ismael and Ismael 2013, 229-230, Abdullah 2012, Dabashi 2012, Gerges 2014, Mahdavi 2014). It reflected a popular rejection of the uncivil Arab State and a strong desire for "political emancipation and self-determination" (Gerges 2014, 1, Ismael and Ismael 2013). Scholars have argued that the uprisings emerged out of a major psychological, epistemological, ideological and political break "with a generally despotic, stagnant and arbitrary postcolonial political condition" (Al-Azm 2014, 284), ushering in "a new geography of liberation" which is "no longer mapped on colonial or cast upon postcolonial structures of domination" (Dabashi 2012, xviii). The Arab Spring represented a "second phase of decolonization and collective assertion of self-dignity, aiming to end the regime of knowledge production, which was fundamentally euro-centric in terms of its categories, terminologies and intellectual frame of reference" (Dabashi 2012, xii). Such "regime of knowledge production was a by-product of a colonial mindset, which was totally disconnected with the lives of common Arabs and sustained an authoritarian political

order that was oppressive, abusive, arrogant and insensitive to dignity and aspiration of its own people" (Dabashi 2012, xxiv).

The rise of sectarian conflict in several countries that experienced Arab Spring uprisings was not due to the revival of primordial animosities between Sunnis-Shias, as some scholars have concluded (Hashemi and Postel 2017). Attempts to make sense of contemporary regional conflict through the prism of a 1,400-year told schism between Sunnis-Shias lacks analytical utility (Hashemi and Postel 2017a). As Hashemi and Postel (2017, 4) masterfully demonstrate, conflict in the region is not driven by sectarianism, but rather by sectarianization – a "process shaped by political actors operating within specific context, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity marker". It is "authoritarianism, not theology" that is critical in shaping this process: where "authoritarian regimes have purposefully manipulated sectarian identities to deflect demand for "political change and perpetrating their power" (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 5). Hashemi (2015, 2016a) explains that this manipulation is an outcome of the broken politics in the Middle East, dominated by authoritarian regimes that face a serious legitimacy crisis.

In reflecting on the future of the Arab Spring, critical have offered several helpful observations. Moldovan (2020, 267) posits that the uprisings were "only one episode in a generational challenge to a failed political order." The inability of the uprisings to result in political change was not because "Arabs were not ready for democracy or because Islamists cunningly exploited the naiveté of hopeful liberals" (Moldvan 2020, 267). Nermin et al. (2022, 74) argue the Arab Spring uprising left "profound effects on their participants and the authorities they target." Echoing these arguments, Mahdavi (2023) argues that the Arab Spring is an unfinished project that will likely continue to unfold in the years to come. The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings represented the first wave of the "contemporary MENA movements" which were "not quite successful. However, the region is currently experiencing the second wave (2017–22), and most likely will witness a third and more democratic waves in the future" (Mahdavi 2023, 16). Building on this analysis, Momani and Finn (2023) explain that the non-movements of the ordinary Arab youth continue to operate across the Middle East. These non-movements play a foundational role as the mechanism for progressive change that will chart the future of the Middle East and North Africa

The critical literature, in sum, challenges cultural essentialism, reductionism, and hegemonic universalism, while helpfully shedding light on important dynamics of Arab Spring uprisings. Instead of deductively applying the conventional concepts, theories, and approaches to the study of the Arab Spring, this critical literature is concerned with understanding the uprisings from a "glocal" lens, "synthesizing the global and local paradigms

of social justice, freedom, human rights, and Islamic values" (Mahdavi 2011, 2014, 2019, 2023, 9). This dissertation builds on this literature by examining the status of the Arab Spring project in the context of violence, war, and destruction in Syria.

3.6 The Syrian Uprising

Prior to the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, the Assad regime had consolidated its power and control over society to the point that many scholars assumed that collective social action was unlikely to occur (Kamrava and Mora 1998). Prevailing concepts and tools have led researchers to conclude that without an independent civil society, the space for collective social action was non-existent (George 2003). In light of the 2011 uprising, a body of literature has emerged aiming to make sense of the Syrian uprising. Initially, some scholars were primarily concerned with understanding why the 2011 uprising occurred in the first place. One of the most common explanations was that it emerged out of sectarian tensions that are rooted in a history of primordial animosities between a Sunni majority and Alawite minority (Heydemann 2013, Burke 2013, Iglesias 2013, Abdo 2015, Sorenson 2016, Alrawi 2017, Alvarez-Ossorio 2019). The current crisis, according to Sorenson (2016, 137), resembles a "Thirty Years War" where "combatants fight through religious aspirations." In addition to the sectarian-division argument, scholars have offered a variety of explanations that trace the roots of the crisis to economic, political, environmental, and geopolitical issues. More specifically, Lesch (2012) suggests that rising youth unemployment, exacerbated by failed economic policies and a decline in social services, was the primary cause of the uprising. Gleick (2014) argues that it was caused by water and climatic conditions that deteriorated Syria's economies and resulted in increased poverty. Escobar (2012) claims that it originated out of a struggle for influence by regional and global powers over the construction of gas pipelines passing through Syria. Wieland (2013) argues that it was driven out of the exhaustion of Ba'athist politics, prompting people to challenge the regime's authoritarianism and seek an alternative political order. For Dahi and Munif (2012), the uprisings emerged as a consequence of the regime's fusion of authoritarian politics and neoliberal economics. Kahf (2013) and Lynch, Freelon and Aday (2014) claim that it was influenced by events in Tunisia and Egypt. These approaches often tried to explain the crisis through specific dimensions, falling short of capturing the multiplicity of factors contributing to its emergence.

Some social movement researchers applied the political process model (also known as social movement theory) to explain the emergence of the Syrian uprising. In so doing, they focused on explaining the mechanics and organizational structures of the uprising (Korany

and El-Mahdi 2012, Leenders and Heydemann 2012, Leenders 2012, 2013). Leenders (2012, 2013) has most notably attempted to apply social movement theory deductively to the Syrian uprising, arguing that it developed out of perceived opportunity structures, influenced by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. He adds, that "when under threat" and faced with opportunity structures, protesters collectively rose up "by capitalizing on their dense social networks" (Leenders and Heydemann 2012, 139). Strong "clan-based or tribal social structures, circular labour migration, cross-border "linkages and proliferating practices denoted as 'criminal' variably played a key role in cementing these social networks" (2012). It is for this reason, the uprising started in Dara'a specifically, given that region's dense tribal-based social networks. In addition, he adds that prior to the crisis, criminal activity was the highest in Dara'a which generated particular skills, resources and social relations that were key to the development of the uprising (Leenders 2012, 2013). Whereas Leenders's analysis focused on explaining the early mobilization of protesters, Durac (2015) applies SMT to argue that due to the lack of organizational dynamics, social movements in Syria and in other areas of the Arab Spring failed in their quest for change.

As the crisis escalated, the literature shifted towards focusing on issues of geopolitics, refugees, and military dimensions of the conflict (Huser 2016, Lawson 2016, Drwich and Fakhoury 2016). A significant body of this literature has described the crisis in Syria as a sectarian civil war - primarily between different ethnic/religious groups (Heydemann 2013, Sorenson 2016, Abdo 2017, Alrawi 2017, Alvarez-Ossorio 2019). Significant research has examined terrorism and violence in Syria, mainly focusing on the study of Islamist groups that emerged on the ground (Stern and Berger 2016, Gerges 2021). Scholarly research in this area has varied from studies that examine the ideology and threat of such groups to others focused on their tactics and operations. Research on human migration and the refugee crisis has also been abundant. Such research is primarily framed by a security dimension, examining political, social, and economic risks and opportunities of the refugee movement (Chatty 2018).

Several scholars have attempted to provide comprehensive studies that capture the dynamism of the Syrian crisis – demonstrating that it was caused not just by one or few reasons but rather as a result of the intersection of many variables and factors. Abboud (2019) employs a political economy perspective to demonstrate how decades of economic inequality culminated in the emergence of grievances that widened the gap between state and society. He recognizes the role regional and international actors have played in complicating the crisis and transforming it into a geopolitical struggle for power and influence. Daher Joseph (2018) provides a comprehensive understanding of the Syrian crisis through a historical materialist

lens, examining the development and the transformation of the crisis, and the ongoing process of regime rebuilding, offering a multi-layered analysis to make sense of the complexity of the crisis. Wendy Pearlman's (2017, 2023) documents the experiences of ordinary Syrians living under the Assad regime, during and after the uprising as well as living in conflict. Through interviewing tens of ordinary Syria, Pearlman helpfully captures realities and experiences from people on the ground. Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami's (2016) study maps out the evolution of the crisis, providing a thorough discussion of the history of Syria's state-society relations leading up to the crisis. Through relying on interview data, this study provides insight into how the uprising percolated and developed at a grassroots level. Christopher Phillips (2016) offers a nuanced examination of the dynamics of the geopolitical struggle over Syria. He rejects arguments that present the Syrian crisis as a sectarian conflict between different primordial groups, arguing that the sectarian dimensions of the ongoing conflict were imposed on Syrians (Philips 2015). In another study, Phillips (2013) demonstrates how the Syrian regime has enforced exclusionary Assadist-Arabist notions of identity for decades, which contributed to widening the gap between state and society. Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady's (2018) study offers valuable insight into how the Syrian uprising emerged as an aggregate of growing frustration with decades of Assadist authoritarianism. It shows how the Assad regime actively deployed imagined sectarian solidarities to undermine the peaceful protest movements of the Syrian uprising. Hinnebusch (1993, 2012) shows how the regime's authoritarian upgrading policies had failed to counteract the widening gap between state and society. The regime's pursual of neoliberal economics was part of its effort to present a new face to the regime, however, this policy resulted in rising economic inequality, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Joseph Daher (2019b, 1) masterfully problematizes how conventional contemporary literature on Syria has analyzed the crisis in "sectarian terms, equating religious communities with political positions and in both viewpoints ignoring the political and socioeconomic dynamics at the root of the conflict." He argues that the Syrian uprising emerged as "the result of the confluence and mutual reinforcement of various sites of dissatisfaction, struggle, and popular mobilization" (2009, 1). Gilbert Archar (2016) shows how the revolutionary project of the Syrian uprising developed at the grassroots level, where local councils were formed to replace the vacuum left by the demise of state control over the country during the early stage of the uprising. He explains how this project was overshadowed by the realities imposed from the outside on Syria as a result of the geopolitical struggle. Rana Khalaf, Oula Ramadan and Friederike Stolleis's (2014) study is one of few studies to offer an in-depth examination of civil society

groups that emerged in Syria during the 2011 uprising. Their work sheds light on the nature of these groups and activism in a time of conflict.

The critical studies discussed here contribute to a much more developed understanding of how the crisis has evolved. Building on such critical approached, this dissertation provides a closer and more comprehensive examination of the revolutionary project of the Syrian uprising and processes of contention in the society in the context of the current crisis. By focusing solely on the military dimension of the crisis, geopolitics, or the refugee crisis, I argue, the voices of the very people that have started the peaceful uprisings are left out of the equation. In Chapters 4 and 5, I demonstrate the vibrancy of societal dynamics that are otherwise overlooked by the literature, challenging Orientalist articulations and arguments that reduce the complexity of the crisis into notions of sectarian conflict.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted some of the limitations and gaps in the literature with regard to understanding the realities of social contention under authoritarian conditions. As discussed, wrapped in notions of rationality and behaviorism, the conventional literature on democratization and social movement has been focused on producing universalist ahistorical models that supposedly apply across spatial and temporal contexts. I argued that on the contrary, such readings emerged out of a specific context and do not necessarily travel across different cases and time periods. Even though such models have been critiqued, they continue to inform emerging research. As shown, some scholars have applied these models to explain the failure of the Arab Spring/Syrian uprising through Orientalist deception of politics in the Middle East region, reinforcing the discourse of Middle East ‘exceptionalism’ (Mahdavi 2023). Having said that, my critique is not suggesting that subaltern scholars are solely capable of studying subaltern politics: uncritical scholarship has been produced by scholars in both the Global North and Global South. The problem is not about where knowledge is produced, but rather about the epistemology of how knowledge is produced. The focus should be on fostering critical conversations reflecting multiple voices and perspectives that transcends both ‘universalism’ and ‘particularism’, stressing the need for a pluralistic understanding of the world acknowledging each society's unique experiences and struggles (Mahdavi and Knight 2012, Mahdavi 2013a). We need to rethink the concepts, theories and methodologies that have come to be accepted as universal and opt for alternative models that are forged through dialogue between Western and Eastern scholars informed by a “glocal” understanding of complex political issues that synthesizes local and global understandings and knowledge

(Mahdavi 2023). Such dialogue should be based around the idea of multiple modernities, recognizing that each "society moves along different paths towards modernity and represents different versions of modernity" (Mahdavi 2013, 63).

Chapter 4
CONTENTIOUS POLITICS UNDER OPPRESSION

The rulers in the third world are terrified
From the sounds of birds
From the scent of flowers
From the humming of pigeons
They imprison the sea if it speaks excessively
It is difficult for rulers in our third world
To reconcile thought
And to endorse the pen
Can a wolf befriend a sheep?
- Nizar Al-Qabbani (1994)

4.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses my research findings with regard to the following question: How was contentious politics exercised in Syria under semi-totalitarian conditions and what explains the emergence of the 2011 uprising? Through applying Asef Bayat's theory of *social non-movements* and *quiet encroachment* to the study of contentious politics in Syria, this chapter sheds light on patterns of contention that have been overlooked by conventional theories of social movement and civil society. For years, some scholars have doubted the possibility that social action could occur in Syria given the semi-totalitarian conditions that fragmented civil society. However, Bayat's approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how people – even under (semi)totalitarian regimes – express agency and push back against oppression. This chapter is divided into two sections: The first will shed light on how contention processes unfolded in Syrian society under decades of the Assad regime, demonstrating that they have taken various forms, including the formation of informal close-knit inner-circles among people across society that operated outside the regime's security apparatus, and also involved processes of quiet encroachment on public spaces by the urban dispossessed in an attempt improve their lives. The second will show how these social non-movements contributed to the rise of more structured social movement in 2011. It will demonstrate how the solidarities, identities and tactics employed for decades under oppression were drawn up to support the formation of social movements.

4.1 The Politics of Contention Under Authoritarian Conditions

As demonstrated in chapter two, Syria has traditionally enjoyed one of the strongest and most vibrant civil societies in the Middle East, which played a crucial role in mobilizing strong anti-French resistance during colonial occupation and challenged autocratic politics during the post-colonial period (Khoury 1989). In the late 1970s-80s, anti-regime protests and activism spread across the country, culminating in a series of uprisings that challenged the regime of Hafez Al-Assad. Parallel to these uprisings, an armed confrontation between Muslim Brotherhood militants and the regime forces also emerged. The regime responded to all forms of contention with extreme violence ushering in one of the most violent periods in modern Syrian history. Hafez Al-Assad swiftly deployed his military (led by his brother Rifaat Al-Assad) to quell protests and rebellions, committing several massacres, including the massacre of Aleppo of 1980, the Jisr ash-Shughur massacre of 1980, the Tadmor Prison massacre of 1980 and most importantly, the Hama massacre of 1982 – where over 38,000 people are believed to have been killed (Byman and Pollack 2007). Public contention was eventually eliminated by 1982, as the regime quickly moved to transform Syria into a semi-totalitarian *mukhabarat* state effectively dismantling and fragmenting civil society. Hafez Al-Assad was determined to bring Syria into submission, remodeling the country into a police state where all public and private spaces became monitored and surveilled by complex multi-layered intelligence apparatus. This led some observers to assume that contentious processes were virtually eliminated for good under the Assad regime (Kamrava and Mora 1998). In this section, I employ and build on Asef Bayat's theory of social non-movements, to show that contentious politics was not eliminated but was rather transformed to take on an underground form, operating through informal non-movements and quiet encroachment strategies embedded in everyday street politics across society for decades under semi-totalitarian conditions. Based on data collected from my field research, this chapter will demonstrate how Syrian non-movement primarily consisted of networks of unorganized communities of social inner circles across society. Such communities formed and survived through producing organic mechanisms of support and collective defense that allowed them to be resilient under harsh conditions. This research will also demonstrate how practices of quiet encroachment were quite common in Syria, embedded in day-to-day activities employed by the urban dispossessed to improve their lives amid growing economic hardships. The culmination of these processes and resulting cultural manifestations of resistance allowed people to forge networks and solidarities to defy and bypass the Syrian state and its intelligence agencies.

Comparing Syrian Undersociety to Egypt and Tunisia

It is important to compare the Syrian case study with the case studies of Egypt and Tunisia, which Bayat (2013, 2017, 2021) heavily relies on to articulate his theoretical model. This is because the character of autocratic politics influences the shape and form of contentious practices – it is about opportunity structures that may or may not be available for people to employ (Tilly 1978, McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1994). I argue that the Syrian regime is perhaps one of the most oppressive and brutal in the Middle East, employing many totalitarian practices in governing the country. The state influences or controls almost every aspect of life, and no public spaces are independent of the regime's presence. Whereas in Egypt and Tunisia, Asef Bayat (2017) observed that café shops, restaurants and other public spaces allowed people to come together and voice frustration about deteriorating economic and political conditions, such spaces were much more surveilled by a network of security agencies in Syria and were, therefore, not available to serve the same function.

Compared to Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, and Tunisia under Zein Al Abideen bin Ali, people in Syria did not have the same level of freedom to publicly engage in critical conversations about the regime and its officials, and they had to exercise a high degree of caution in terms of what they said in public especially around strangers. Hence, the space for critical conversations about politics and the economy was non-existent in public spaces. Citing a prominent Syrian media personality, participant 003 explained that "even complaining about the price of radish, could be turned into a political crime." Another participant (O-017) claims that "living in Syria under the Assads was just like walking through a field of landmines. There were many redlines that we had to navigate." It was apparent that Syrians felt robust state surveillance permeated public and private spheres, as all participants in my field research proclaimed, "*in Syria, even walls have ears*" - a commonly used statement among Syrians, indicative of the conditions they struggled with for decades. Participant O-023's experience demonstrates the magnitude of this surveillance: He explained that his neighbor was seated with his friend on the exit of their building, discussing when the month of Ramadan will begin. During that discussion, the neighbor commented that "they never make their mind up. They always make us fast an extra day." Participant O-023 explains that shortly after, the neighbor was arrested and tortured for months. Even though he was not criticizing the regime, his comment was somehow interpreted as such. The participant explained that parents in his neighborhood told their children this story to warn them of the necessity of being careful in terms of what they say in public.

The lack of space for critical discussion did not mean that contention processes were non-existent in Syria, as some observers have noted, but instead operated in a much more

latent and indirect form compared to Egypt and Tunisia. This is perhaps one of the limitations of Bayat's theory when applied to the Syrian case study. The undersocieties that operated in Egypt and Tunisia were visible, as Bayat (2021) argues, but in Syria there were not. In fact, they strived to remain undetected and hidden from the regime's surveillance network. Bayat (2021) stresses the centrality of public spaces in allowing for the formation of these undersocieties in Egypt and Tunisia. He argues that it is through public spaces "people speak out, pester, and complain in public – in taxis, businesses or street corners" about political, economic, or social conditions (2021, 27). He adds (2021, 51) that these activities were likely heard by intelligence agencies but were "dismissed as everyday 'bickering' or a cultural trait of the 'pitiable' but 'cunning poor' that had little to do with politics" (2021, 51-52). Syrian undersociety better resembles central and eastern European undersocieties under communist dictatorships, rather than those in Egypt and Tunisia. In discussing central and eastern European undersocieties, Konrad (1984, 198-199) observed, "the opinions that were forced out of public arena transferred to the medium of conversation from the mass media to personal ones", giving societies a "living verbal traditions and a system of a system of values" founded on networks of friendships. Similarly, in Syria, public spaces were not central in the formation of the undersociety – but it was rather private spaces that allowed people to forge disconnected and informal underground social communities. Street politics in Syria was confined to practices of quiet encroachment, rather than critical conversations of political matters. As confirmed by almost all the participants interviewed in my field research, people learned to remain quiet in public settings. Any comment - deemed unacceptable - picked up by the regime's surveillance networks will warrant a security response. As participant O-016 explained, "the state had individuals within society that worked for them and reported people. We didn't know who these people were, so we learned to be quiet." Dissent was, therefore, hidden and confined to private socially formed circles of friends, family members and other close-knitted individuals.

This takes me to my next point on the character of Syrian undersociety. Bayat (2021) observed that at the center of Tunisian and Egyptian undersocieties was the formation of *Shillas* or cliques, which are social groupings that brought together people based on common values. These *Shillas* connected people and allowed them to forge alternative norms and defiant identities (i.e., workers, sports fans, classmates, hobbyists etc.). As I argue in this chapter, contentious practices in Syria were exercised through close-knitted inner-circles rather than larger *Shillas*. This is not to suggest that *Shillas* did not exist in Syria. On the contrary, they operated and were vibrant across the county, but were kept purely as social spaces. Interview data demonstrates that *Shillas* formed by people brought together over

shared hobbies or activities such as sports, movies/film, and literature, among others. As confirmed by participants O-013 and O-023, these *Shillas* remained solely centered around social activity, where discussion of sensitive political matters was exclusively confined to what I refer to as social inner-circles – more intimate social communities formed among close-knitted individuals. Having said that, *Shillas* did serve an important function in that they brought together similarly minded individuals allowing them to form friendships, bonds, which may possibly morph into more intimate inner circles.

Contentious Politics and Syrian Undersociety: The Role of "Social Inner-Circles"

With the ascendency of the Assad's regime in 1970, and its reliance on semi-totalitarian policies, the Syrian regime effectively dismantled and fragmented civil society, leading some observers to assume that contentious processes were virtually eliminated for good – especially after the 1982 Hama massacre (Kamrava and Mora 1998). Others were hopeful that capitalist development would eventually strengthen civil society in Syria leading to democratic transition (Hinnebusch 1993). Contrary to these arguments, findings from my field research reveal that in the void left due to the fragmentation of civil society, an undersociety emerged across Syria consisting of vibrant patterns of underground contention. Interview data shows that the most important of which was the formation of informal and disconnected close-knit social inner-circles among people across society. These inner circles developed organically (for the most part) through interpersonal relationships, as social spaces between friends, neighbours, and family members (among others). They were the primary face of Syrian non-movements: through them, people formed networks and solidarities and became more aware of their collectively experienced oppression. Such inner circles provided individuals with social capital as people supported one another on a variety of matters, helping mitigate the hardships of everyday life – from discussing dissatisfaction with oppression (participant O-009), women struggling to overcome gender inequality (participant O-006), friends supporting one another financially, neighbors assisting poverty-ridden friends to steal electricity and water (participant O-025), among other examples. As participant O-022 explained, "we created our own society through friends. Those were, of course, very close friends. Among each other, we would rely on dark comedy, telling jokes and poetry. Those would only be told to people you know very very well." Inner circles did not form quickly, but in some instances took a significant amount of time for people to become conformable with one another. Participant O-002 explained that "my best friend for 25 years was within my inner circle. We never dared to get into in depth criticism of the

regime until we grew very conformable with each other." Through inner-circles, solidarities and shared identities developed, resulting in strong social cohesion among members, making their inner circles resilient even under the harshest conditions.

As relations and trust intensified among members, political spaces were created within inner social circles – which allowed members to vent frustrations about economic and political conditions. These spaces became the arenas where people could discuss what would otherwise be undiscussable in public and to forge defiant identities. As confirmed by multiple interviewees, discussing politics was limited to their inner groups, stressing that this was the only space they felt comfortable openly discussing sensitive issues (O-001, O-007, O-009, O-015, O-016, O-019, O-024, O-025, O-029, N-002). Some of the examples shared by participants include: inner-circles of merchants discussed rising commodity prices (participants O-001, O-015), university friends complained about corruption in the university system (participants O-024, O-029), childhood friends shared mutual frustrations about the lack of economic opportunities (participants O-014), friends discussed the regime's oppressive polices (participants O-008, N-002), underground student societies read prohibited literature (participant O-023), women lawyers criticized the gendered dynamics of the justice and political systems (participant O-030), family members shared their experiences of torture in regime prisons (participant O-025) – and the examples are many.

Interview data reveals that such social groups were resilient, evading the regime's security network. Their power laid in the ability of their members to develop collective defense mechanisms based on the formation of strong bonds among members and involved active processes of threat identification. These mechanisms permitted members to protect one another and ensure the survival of inner circles - the only space for people to express agency outside the constraints imposed on social or public areas by the regime's security apparatus. The former mechanism entailed forging strong interpersonal ties among members, allowing them to connect on various levels and develop resilient networks. The latter involved internal processes of identifying and communicating threats internally – the most prominent threat being foreign access to the internalities of a given inner circle. To eliminate the possibility of such access, people exercised caution around strangers out of concern that they may be associated with the regime, as the data from my field research shows.

Although social inner-circles offered members spaces to communicate more openly, people continued to exercise caution. Discussion of sensitive topics was largely limited to private spaces outside the regime's reach as several participants (O-011, O-018, 0-025) have noted. Interview data demonstrates that all participants felt a strong, yet unavoidable,

state presence throughout their everyday lives as evident in networks of informants and intelligence agencies. As boldly put by participant O-029, "there were no spaces hidden from the eyes of the state." Another participant (O-013) claimed that within her community, there was a common saying that "3 out of every 5 people are informants who write reports for the state." State presence was encountered in schools, workspaces, neighborhoods, parks, shopping centers among other public spaces, as confirmed by various participants. For example, participant O-016 shared his experience as an owner of a private hospital where he employed several employees with known associations to state intelligence agencies. He explained that he was cautious around these employees and strived to accommodate them as much as possible to avoid any type of retaliatory action.

In order to mitigate threats of state surveillance, people employed latent or indirect forms of communication to express grievances about particular issues or warn one another of immediate or nearby threats in public spaces. This took the form of hinted communication and physical gesturing employed in what Bayat describes as *passive networks*. More specifically, the majority of participants explained how they knew not to speak politics outside the confinement of enclosed private spaces within their inner circles. They would limit conversation of sensitive topics (such as dissatisfaction with corruption and harsh economic conditions) to private spaces, while in public areas, they would rely on latent/indirect forms of communication to warn one another of nearby regime agents (i.e., inspectors, police, security agents). For example, several participants (O-001, O-031 and N-002), discussed how they employed these tactics with friends, family members, coworkers, and other acquaintances to warn them of approaching strangers/state agents. This included using implied statements such as: "the place is haunted," "the German has arrived," "the children of the aunt are everywhere," "Abu-Abdo is coming," that did not mean anything specifically but served to cut off ongoing conversations that may have been risky if heard by a nearby/approaching stranger.

There were cases where people relied on the very structures developed by the regime to forge social inner circles. For example, several participants (O-028, O-030, N-002) discussed how through regime-constructed civil society organizations, they could meet, befriend, and become close with similarly minded individuals who later became part of their networks. As discussed in chapter two, the regime sought to create highly controlled state-sponsored civil society groups centered on several key causes such as eradicating poverty, advancing children rights, and women welfare, in an attempt to project a modern image of the regime (Khatib 2013). Even though such organizations were not independent, they offered individuals opportunities to connect. Participant O-030 shared her experience of

joining state-approved women's rights organizations, through which she befriended and became close with several individuals. The participant explained that as trust developed among one another, they became more comfortable in discussing sensitive social, political, or economic issues within private spaces. Another participant (O-028) explained how through joining the Lawyer's Union, he was able to connect with colleagues and eventually as they became comfortable with each other, they started to openly criticize corruption and autocratic politics of the Assad regime among one another. Both participants explained that given the limitations on forming independent organizations, joining regime constructed civil society organizations was the next best thing. It was the avenue through which people could engage in work that they deem meaningful as well as to forge connections. Both participants O-028 and O-030 emphasized that these organizations were of course heavily surveilled so forming inner circles with other participants was not achieved immediately but was only achieved after connections greatly strengthened.

Within social inner circles, vibrant cultural manifestations emerged, which were embodied in but not limited to songs, poetry, and telling jokes. These artistic expressions became an essential avenue for Syrians to discuss the harsh realities they experienced. As mentioned by some participants (O-022, O-030), the poetry of prominent Syrian poet Nizar Al-Qabbani was commonly shared within their internal networks. Exiled most of his life, Al-Qabbani was "arguably the most widely read contemporary poet in the Arab world" whose work fused political and erotic poetry (Kahf 2000). The basic axiom of Al-Qabbani's work is that *love cannot thrive under oppression and cohesion*, capturing the tragedy experienced by Arabs and Syrians under decades of oppression (Kahf 2000). In addition to *poetry*, people relied on *humor* to make light of their experiences: Several participants (O-022, O-023, O-024) explained how they would mock the regimes within their circles of trusted individuals by sharing jokes about President Assad, government ministers and agencies and the Ba'ath Party. Telling jokes was one of the most effective ways for people to vent frustrations and remain resilient under harsh conditions, as confirmed by participants O-022, O-023, O-024. As participant O-022 explained, making a joke about the regime felt like achieving a major victory. He adds that it was liberating but at the same time, there was a sense of fear in the background that ensured these emotions do not go out of control. An example of a common joke told by Syrians - as communicated by multiple participants – was meant to make fun of the succession process of Bashar Al-Assad after the death of his father in 2000. The joke tells the story of a simpleton who went down to the election center and accidentally selected 'no' to Bashar Al-Assad on the ballot. Upon returning home, and chatting with his mother, the man learns that he made a grave mistake, and immediately rushed back to the polling

station and pleaded with security officials to change his selection from 'no' to 'yes' explaining that he made a mistake. The security officials responded, "we know you made a mistake and changed the selection for you already, but don't do it again." This joke was told all over Syria and made light of what was otherwise a succession process secured through force and violence.

Due to the cross-pollination of inner circles – primarily through individuals with membership to multiple inner-circles (may be referred to as 'common individuals') – these cultural elements were transmitted across Syrian society as people told the same jokes, stories, poems, and songs across spatial and temporal settings, which challenged the regime's corruption, oppression, and tyranny. This includes commonly said statements – such as 'in Syria, the walls have ears' - which every participant in my research mentioned when describing the political situation in the country. This statement travelled across time and space as underground stories, songs, art, jokes, and poetry were developed to give meaning to it. Hence, through cultural elements, an underground culture of resistance developed and operated in private spaces among close-knit groups across Syrian society.

Quiet Encroachment and Survival Strategies

Quiet encroachment and survival strategies consist of a wide range of activities and practices of resistance employed by the powerless in an attempt to improve their lives and push back against oppression/dispossession (Bayat 2013a, 2021, Scott 1985, 2009, 2013). In his study of subaltern contention in Southeast Asia, James Scott (2009) observed that this included a range of everyday resistance tactics including sabotage, foot-dragging, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, and slander. They also included activities such as tax evasion/misreporting, squatting in prohibited spaces, encroaching on public spaces among others (Scott 2013). These routine everyday forms of resistance are often concealed with "public language of conformity" where the individuals practicing these actions may appear without independent agency (Scott 1985, 289). The goal of these everyday forms of resistance is to transform rather than overthrow systems of domination: They "follow the path of least resistance" to help the subaltern survive under difficult conditions (Scott 1985, 289). Quoting historian Eric Hobsbawm, Scott (2013, 73) argues that through these actions the subaltern work "the system to their minimum disadvantage." Scott's conceptualization complements Bayat's theory to help make sense of quiet encroachment and survival strategies employed by the subaltern in politically-closed conditions. Optically, for an outsider, these actions may appear as evidence of submissiveness, but in reality, they represent

protracted actions of survival spearheaded by ordinary people in an attempt to improve their lives (Bayat 2021). As I will show in this section, in addition to forming inner circles, ordinary Syrians actively "worked the system" and employed various survival strategies in an attempt to improve their lives for decades under semi-totalitarian conditions. As will be shown, these strategies include forging connections with high-ranking individuals, obtaining Ba'ath party membership, engaging in public display of conformity, participate in corruption, and encroaching on public spaces through building homes in unpermitted areas, fixing electricity/water lines, street vending among many other examples.

Forging connections with individuals who are associated with the state was one of the most common ways for people in Syria to advance their interests. Knowing someone in a position of power provides individuals with a critical lifeline to evade laws, avoid prosecution, and get approvals on government-related files. Several participants explained that they had acquaintances working with security agencies and relied on their support to obtain permits and licenses, admission to post-secondary, or even to get out of imprisonment. For example, an interviewee explained (participant O-30) how her friend, who was an officer in a security agency, was able to get her out of prison – even though she was accused of political activity. Another participant (N-002) shared the experience of relying on connections to find the whereabouts of a family member who disappeared after being arrested by regime forces a few years prior.

Joining the Ba'ath party was an alternative method to improve one's position for individuals who lacked connections. Many participants who joined the ruling party explained their decision stemmed out of the hope that doing so may improve their lives. In one case, an interviewee explained that he decided to join the party to avoid the repercussions after he was arrested for anti-regime activity and was required to make routine visits to security branches. Another participant (N-002) shared a similar experience: he explained that his father was arrested in the 1980s during the Hama uprising. Since his release, the family had been subjugated to routine visits from security agencies and were deprived of services or approval on permits (such as I.D. cards, university admission, birth certificates etc.). He explained that he decided to join the Ba'ath to mitigate the impact of these constraints. Hence, this was a practical approach to improving everyday life for ordinary Syrians struggling with oppression.

Displays of public conformity were common, exercised by ordinary Syrians to evade state repression. This included, but not limited to, publicly expressing loyalty to the regime/president, putting up pictures of Hafez and/or Bashar Al-Assad. These practices offered individuals a sense of security by signalling possible direct or indirect association to

the regime. Participant O-014 explained that his family displayed pictures of Bashar Al-Assad in their home to give the impression that they were supporters of the regime and avoid any issues in case they may be reported to state agents for any reason. Participant O-029 explained that praising the president in public was an effective strategy to avoid altercations with state agents. People, she explains, may therefore indulge in acts of public flattery of President Assad in an attempt to advance their security.

Data from my field research reveals that people strategically avoided the state, and its security agencies, as much as possible. The simple act of being present in public spaces is risky in Assadist Syria and people had to vigilantly exercise caution to avoid triggers that may result in unwanted consequences. As most participants explained, interacting with the state and its agents created risks for individuals. Those risks ranged from being blackmailed for bribes or being framed and arrested arbitrarily. Hence, where state agents were present, people disappeared or made themselves insignificant. Disappearance entailed removing oneself from the site where state agents are present. This was the most effective strategy to avoid any unwanted interactions with the state and its agents. For example, as participant O-014 explained "we were terrified of the state. Whenever police or intelligence came to our area, we would run away to avoid them." When avoiding state agents was not possible, people exercised caution around them by making their presence insignificant. This involved several strategies such as keeping a safe distance, and avoiding any action that may warrant their attention. For example, participant O-012 explained that when intelligence officers were encountered, "we never dared to even make eye contact with them." However, where interaction with state agents was inevitable, people quickly offered bribes to avoid escalations, according to participants O-001, O-010, O-012, O-014, O-020.

Participation in corruption was also another critical survival strategy. Corruption in Syria was so widespread to the point that it became systemic, as confirmed by all participants. Getting approvals on government paperwork or obtaining permits without paying a bribe was virtually impossible. Sometimes paying bribes was also necessary to advance one's career, gain acceptance into university, or avoid paying for violation tickets, among other examples. Participants O-001, O-002, and O-003 explained that avoiding bribery was nearly impossible. They emphasis that any government-related business required paying some kind of bribe. Interviewees across professions shared their experiences of being forced to participate in corruption. The examples are many but included: university students paid off university administration to obtain admission/paper; business owners and vendors (001, O-002, O-003, N-002, O-006, O-022) were forced to bribe intelligence and state officials to avoid their harassment; lawyers (O-028, O-030) participated in bribery in order to get their cases

scheduled or appealed – ultimately bribery also determined court rulings; detainees (O-016, N-002, N-003, O-010) bribed security/intelligence officials to avoid interrogation/torture; parents bribed officials (O-010) to get their children out of military service; the urban dispossessed bribed state inspectors to avoid being ticketed for using illegally obtained electricity lines (O-014, O-015); drivers (O-001, O-022) bribed traffic police to avoid being ticked or arrested; people (O-012, O-014, N-002) with missing/imprisoned family members bribed intelligence officials to obtain information about their missing/imprisoned relatives or secure their release from prison. Examples are many, and they shed light on how corruption became systemic in Syrian society. It was a way for people to work the system to their "minimum advantage" in an attempt to improve their lives and survive political, economic and social dispossession (Scott 2013).

In addition to these practices, encroaching on public spaces occurred regularly in Syria; this included the urban dispossessed building homes in unapproved areas and stealing electricity and water lines, street vendors occupying public spaces, and illegally selling products, among other examples. According to participant O-001, these practices reflected many attempts by people to retrieve "what the Assad regime has stolen for decades" (O-014). Another participant (O-001) claimed that every public good "that is stealable, will be stolen," elaborating that there was no incentive to protect public good given the regime's corruption. A third participant (O-030) argued, "the regime raised a generation of people who did not feel a sense of obligation or commitment to the Syrian state." These practices were widespread across Syria and constituted key survival mechanisms for the urban dispossessed, mainly the middle-class poor, a class of university-educated and trained individuals who succumbed to harsh realities of limited economic opportunities and low pay. Some were unemployed, while others were forced to work multiple or low-status jobs to ensure a decent quality of life.

The practices of quiet encroachment intensified with the neo-liberalization of Syria's economy under Bashar Al-Assad, which created a wealthy merchant elite class – often with deep connections to the regime – while life for the ordinary person became more challenging (Abboud 2018). The gap between the rich and poor expanded as economic opportunities became increasingly challenging to secure. Due to the lack of affordable housing, people resorted to illegally building homes on the outskirts of major urban centers, forming shanty districts across major urban centres including Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. A 2005 study has found that in Aleppo – Syria's largest city – about 45% of the city's inhibited area consisted of 22 major informal settlements (Hammal, et al. 2005). Another report estimated that 40% of the population of Damascus resided in informal settlements as of 2004 (Clerc

2014). This trend if not limited to Syria's largest cities but is widespread across the country. A third most recent study concluded that in total, 42% of all Syrians lived in these sort of informal communities (Kilo 2011). These settlements have expanded rapidly since the 2011 crisis (Clerc 2014).

The Syrian state has for years struggled with containing the growth and expansion of these settlements and given how common they are, it is nearly impossible to eradicate them. Such districts were deprived of essential city services and people often resorted to stealing electrical and water lines from adjacent regions to make ends meet. The Syrian state sought to crack down on these practices, as regular inspectors were dispatched to look for violations. These inspectors were sometimes given regular bribes by individuals involved in these activities to get off the hook. This became so routine that an underground market of experts for fixing electrical and water lines developed in urban centers across Syria, as confirmed by participants O-001, O-010, O-014, and O-025. Participant O-002 explained that he lived in one of these shanty districts. Unable to purchase a fully permitted dwelling (in his hometown of Homs) he resorted to buying a home in an illegally built district at a fraction of the price. Living in such a district, he struggled with obtaining basic services such as electricity and water, so he resorted to fixing electric and water lines from his neighbour to overcome this challenge. If caught, he would bribe state officials. Participant O-017 explained similar practices were common where he resided in the Damascus suburb. Unable to afford the purchase of existing homes, people resorted to building unpermitted homes on farmlands in the outskirt of his town. This practice was so common that entire neighborhoods formed in a random and unorganized fashion. He explained that people resorted to bribing state officials to evade prosecution. Another participant (O-025) explained how her family regularly extended a water hose to their neighbour's home, which was illegally built, to fill their water tank. She explained that the neighbour struggled economically and was barely making ends meet.

Quiet encroachment also took the form of unpermitted vendors occupying public spaces to sell their products. Illegal street vending was widespread in Syria. For many struggling to make ends meet, this was one way to secure income – even though it generated little money. Street vendors could be found in busy markets, intersections, or neighbourhoods where they would sell various goods – whatever they could sell. Struggling economically and unable to pay the fees and bribes required to obtain proper permits, such vendors would change locations occasionally to evade police and state agents. If caught, they would bribe their way out of a ticket. There were also cases where semi-permitted business operators resorted to illegal means to sell their products. For example, an interviewed ice-cream

producer and vendor (participant O-002) explained his struggles with obtaining permits to operate his business. After a lengthy application process that required large sums of bribes to be paid to various officials, he was approved to sell but not produce ice cream. He was forced to purchase already produced ice cream and sell it, which was not profitable. In response, he resorted to moving production equipment to his parents' home, where using illegally fixed powerlines to support the electricity requirements of his machinery, he would produce the ice cream and transfer it to his shop at night in secrecy. He was caught several times but paid significant bribes to avoid being closed down. In one of the times he was caught, he had to pay his entire season's earnings to prevent punitive actions.

In conclusion, given that there was no independent civil society and the space for the formal social movement was non-existent, people resorted to non-movement forms of contention to improve their lives and express their agency. Syrian non-movements shared similarities with those in Egypt but took on a unique local characteristic in response to constraints imposed on society by the state. Most importantly, public spaces such as parks, restaurants, cafes, mosques, and markets, among others, were not safe for people to come together and engage in open political discussions due to the risk of state surveillance in Syria. According to Bayat (2013, 2017), these spaces were at the heart of non-movement processes in Egypt - as key gathering zones for a wide array of people (including regular attendees and occasional travellers). To compensate for the lack of such spaces, Syrians forged underground informal communities of close-knit inner circles as alternative social spaces to support one another. Through strong social cohesion, such communities successfully evaded the regime’s security apparatus and survived under harsh conditions. In addition to these social dynamics, Syrians exercised the same quiet encroachment strategies employed in Egypt. These include building unpermitted homes, fixing water and electricity lines, and illegal street vending. The culmination of these "disjointed yet parallel practices of non-collective actors" allowed for the formation of solidarities and collective identities, which played a key role in mobilizing protesters in 2011, as will be discussed.

4.2 Mobilizing Non-Movements into Social Movements

One of the major limitations in the study of the Syrian uprising is a relatively underdeveloped systemic examination of the societal dynamics leading to the emergence of the uprising. Such an uprising was largely unexpected, as the regime was thought to have consolidated control over society through its surveillance network, eliminating the possibility of any opposition. So how is it that the uprising emerged and spread at the speed/scale that

it did? As demonstrated in the preceding section, under decades of the Assad regime, Syrians exercised their agency through various collective yet fragmented forms of contention to improve their lives and push back against oppression. This section will demonstrate how the solidarities, networks and identities developed out of these practices mobilized into social movements in 2011. More specifically, it will show how early protests were primarily spearheaded by disconnected and fragmented communities of inner circles – which were organically formed social spaces consisting of friends, family members, neighbours, and colleagues, among others. Within such inner circles, members formed internal defence mechanisms, encouraging members to collectively participate in protests. As people flooded streets and public squares, Syrians began discovering each other, transcending the structures of oppression and fear that, for decades, fragmented society. Through this process of discovery, societal-level identities and bonds emerged, which helped sustain the protest movement. As the uprising expanded, organizational structures developed across the country to plan protests and provide logistical support. Such structures relied on the very practices of non-movements and quiet encroachment, employed by Syrians for decades, to evade the regime and successfully coordinate protests.

The Process of Mobilization

Evidence collected from my field research demonstrates that the single and most important structure in mobilizing protest movements in Syria was the communities of informal and disconnected social inner-circles that have been forged for decades by ordinary people struggling under semi-totalitarian conditions. Through such social groupings, close-knitted individuals, including friends, family members, neighbours etc., forged networks of support and safe spaces to vent frustrations about political or economic issues. Collectively, these groupings formed underground communities that largely succeeded in evading the regime's surveillance system and allowed Syrians to exercise their agency. As the primary face of Syrian non-movements, such social groupings were instrumental in allowing people to remain resilient under decades of oppression, as well as to mobilize and join the protest movements. As will be demonstrated in the coming paragraphs, protest movements were mobilized through these social networks in a two-phased mobilization process: The first may be referred to as the pre-mobilization phase and the second is the active participation phase.

The pre-mobilization phase emerged in the months immediately prior to the uprising. This was a highly political period of deliberation and reflection as people closely followed the protest movements unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt. There was a sense of disbelief among

people as they discussed (within their inner circles) these developments and the possibility of such uprisings spreading into Syria. These discussions generally reflected a combination of hopefulness, uncertainty, and caution. According to data from my field research, some were hopeful that an uprising would soon spread into Syria; others were unsure how this would be possible given the robust security grip in Syria and worried about a violent response from the regime (similar to what happened in the 1980s). With the ousting of Tunisia's Zein Al-Abedin bin Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and the spread of protests into Libya, people became more convinced that the wave of the Arab Spring would spread into Syria. Through these disconnected yet parallel discussions across Syrian society, inner social circles were pre-mobilized as people tested the resiliency of their social networks and prepared for what may come next. This was not necessarily an intentional process but rather an outcome of discussions among people within their groups. In situations, where members of an inner-circle were not on the same page with regard to joining protests, the likelihood of their participation was low (as confirmed by participants O-021, O-022, O-023 and O-025). The opposite is also true – in situation where there was consensus about joining the protests, the likelihood for participation was high. Interview data shows examples where some inner-circles crumbled due to divergent views among members on the question of whether or not to join protests (participant O-022).

The active participation phase emerged following the killing of 13-year-old Hamza Al-Khatib by security forces. In May of that year, several school children spray-painted anti-government graffiti in the southern city of Dara'a (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). Among them was Hamza, who was arrested, tortured, and killed at the hands of security forces. Images of Hamza's body quickly spread on social media, igniting anger and calls for protests across the country (2018). The regime was defiant and refused to acknowledge that it had committed such violence, insisting that Hamza was killed by terrorist (Islamist) groups conspiring with foreign actors to destabilize Syria. Frustrated by the regime's harsh response, protests exploded in Dara'a, as people took to the street to call for freedom and social justice. The killing of Hamza al-Khatib and subsequent protests in Dara'a exposed what Tilly (1978) described as *opportunity structures* and set a precedent for more protests across Syria. Within disconnected and informal communities of inner circles, people began to mobilize and join protest movements across the country. Interviewees who participated in early protests explained how they did so through their groups of friends, family members, etc., encouraging and supporting one another (participants O-003, O-005, O-021, O-025). Participating through inner circles was deemed an effective strategy to mitigate the risks of sole participation, as the strong bonds within such groups created a safety net for people. Because

early protests were organized through such disconnected communities of inner groups, they were largely sporadic and lacked a coherent organizational structure, consisting of various cohorts of individuals that came together in more significant protest movements. As participant O-021 explained, through her group of friends – who were in the same junior high school – they staged several protests in their school's playground during the recess break. Even as kids, they knew not to include strangers in the initial mobilization but instead relied on the very social networks they forged among one another. Another interviewee (O-023) explained how, after extensive conversations among his close friends, they collectively decided to join the protests. They arranged the date and the timing, and went down together, while covering their faces to conceal their identity.

Data collected from my field research reveals that early protests were largely organized through organic gatherings at mosques – especially after Friday prayers when people typically gather in large masses, as confirmed by participants O-001, O-002, O-003, O-012, O-014, 0-015, O-016, O-023 and O-030. Some observers – such as Nir Rosen - have wrongfully explained the use of the mosque as evidence that the Syrian uprising reflected a sort of an Islamization process that emerged in response to the failure of the leftist ideologies in the Middle East (Rosen 2012). Rosen (2012) concludes, therefore, that the Syrian uprising was not secular, as religion played a key role in throughout the conflict. Such argument presents a flawed perspective for multiple reasons: First it assumes that people operate as religious subjects and any sort of personal inclination towards religiosity is associated with Islamization. Second, by overemphasising the role of religion, such argument is overshadowing the pluralism that underpinned Syrian protest movements. Third it wrongfully explains the fusing of religious terms in everyday discourse as evidence of Islamism thereby failing to account for the cultural influences of Islam on Syrian and Arab society. Fourth, such argument does not account for the complex mobilization processes of the Syrian uprising. Due to the absence of organizational structures early in the uprising, using the mosque as the starting point was naturally less risky compared to the alternatives: mobilizing any other way would have been too difficult – given the extent of the regime's surveillance network in public, private and digital spheres. Multiple participants, including those who identified as non-Muslims, confirmed that they would head to the Mosque every Friday to join other cohorts of people that would collectively march to squares and streets after the prayers. As will be argued, once an alternative (formal organizational structures) became available, the mosque no longer served as the primary space for gathering protesters.

As protests become more regular, Local Coordination Committees begin forming in each neighbourhood of cities and towns across Syria (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014).

Developed underground, these committees consisted of networks of activists who organized the protests and provided logistical support. This included identifying protest locations, coordaining with other committees across regions, recording footage of the protests and regime violence, facilitating medical assistance for those shot by regime forces, and more operational tasks such as making signs and posters. As confirmed by several interviewees (O-012, O-020), these committees were primarily led by technology-savvy young people, many of whom were university-educated and relied on modern communication technology to mobilize protests and show the world what was happening in Syria. Within local coordination committees, roles and responsibilities were divided based on members' expertise. Individuals with a computer science background or generally computer-savvy often played a crucial role in developing communication systems and managing social media pages and content. They were also responsible for figuring out different ways to bypass the regime's internet surveillance, including relying on virtual private networks (VPNs) to communicate with other activists, manage social media pages and share protest footage on the internet, as participant O-012 explained. They also played a key role in ensuring continuous internet connectivity, even when the regime cut off the internet. Individuals with a medical background provided first aid/medical support to injured protestors. Those with experience fixing electricity lines were tasked to ensure uninterrupted lighting during night protests even when the regime cut off the electricity. Individuals with good calligraphy skills were assigned to make the protest signs and posters. Hence, an entire organizational system developed around organizing and supporting protests.

Skype was the primary platform used by activists and coordination committees to communicate with one another, according to data from my field research (participants O-001, O-003, O-012, O-020, O-022). To evade the regime's network of intelligence and informants, activists relied on alias identities on devices that use VPN technology. This was a practical approach to building dense communication lines between activists across various parts of Syria that were not easily penetrable by the regime. Intelligence agencies actively attempted to infiltrate these networks by embedding informants into their communication lines, which yielded some success by exposing to the regime some basic information such as the location of protests, but largely failed to achieve the more important task of identifying individuals responsible for these committees. Identifying individuals behind alias identities was no easy task as activists relied on the same system of interpersonal relationships that embodied non-movement processes of contention in Syria for decades under the Assad regime. Even though activists between coordination committees only knew one another primarily through their alias identities, they developed inner circles founded on mutual trust the more they worked

together and successfully organized protests. Hence, it became easy for virtually close-knitted activists to quickly identify and warn each other of outsiders to the system. They succeeded in organizing protests as the regime could never eliminate them.

Interviewees (participants 0-005, O-007, O-020, O-021, O-025, O-029) described their experience joining the protests as a rebirth and liberation from shackles, emphasizing that they felt strong emotions and energy in public squares as they chanted for freedom. As participant O-007 explained such energy was addicting – he felt compelled to participate in the protests every week. For the first time, people had the opportunity to challenge the regime directly and call for change—the chants from protests echoed in neighbourhoods and public squares and were heard across urban spaces. Brought together in this journey, people quickly forged collective identities and stood side-by-side in their quest for change. People felt liberated as they connected with one another without fear. This was unprecedented – as generations of Syrians were taught that "walls have ears," where caution must always be exercised around strangers. People joined protests through their close-knit groups, and as they engaged with others, those circles expanded and morphed into larger resistance communities that brought together people of all backgrounds – united by the common goal of change. Although people called for change, they did not necessarily have a clearly articulated vision of what change entails. As one participant (O-025) explained, "we did not know what system of government we were looking for, but what we did know is that we wanted change." This is an important point that is indicative of the non-ideological deposition of the protest movements.

The 'Revolutionary' Society

Participants (O-002, O-003, O-005, O-012, O-023, O-021, O-025) also described extraordinary societal and intercommunal solidarities that emerged as the uprising brought together Syrians of all backgrounds in leaderless, non-ideological, and grassroots movements. As confirmed by multiple participants (O-002, O-003, O-005, O-012, O-021, O-025), the protests were highly inclusive, diverse, and egalitarian, incorporating members of various ethnic and religious communities across Syria. They also reflected people from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. As participant O-022 proclaimed, during the protests, "suddenly we were all united for the first time after being afraid of one another for decades." The passive networks, that once united Syrians indirectly, developed into durable structures that allowed people to quickly come together in pursuit of the goal of political change.

The protest movements, therefore, reflected a period of discovery as people engaged across social, economic, and ethnic/religious backgrounds. The element of fear that divided Syrians and kept them away from each other for a long time was overcome: The uprising shattered the wall of fear that divided people and communities as the Syrians sought to liberate themselves from oppression. As one participant (O-029) explained, "Syrians began discovering one another when they were no longer afraid of each other." These uprisings represented a retrieval of what Hamid Dabashi describes as *repressed cosmopolitan worldliness* as spearheaded by ordinary people in grassroots attempt to refine Syrian nationhood in and inclusive and pluralist manner, reflective of the country's cosmopolitan experience (Zaamout 2017).

Society became revolutionary. Those who did not participate in the protests directly played other vital roles in society: restaurants and merchants served food and water to protesters; mosques and churches gave refuge to those escaping violence; taxi drivers helped protesters flee regime forces; doctors provided care to the injured; people opened their homes to fleeing protesters. Several participants provided specific examples to highlight this revolutionism. For example, two medical doctors (O-008, O-016) explained how they sought to treat protesters shot by regime forces in secret. Providing medical care for protesters was deemed criminal and would warrant a violent regime response. They explained that they, therefore, provided care for injured protesters at night to evade the regime, and if they were caught providing this care, they would fabricate stories about how the victims were injured to protect them. As hospital care became riskier, underground field hospitals began forming to care for injured protesters. They were often run by the same medical staff working in hospitals and other medical facilities. Another participant (O-025) described her experience of escaping regime forces after they opened fire on the protest she attended. Unsure where to hide, she entered a Christian neighbourhood where she was harbored by a random family. The family sheltered her for a few days and when the situation calmed down, they called her parents to pick her up from their home. Another participant (O-023) explained how he was saved by a taxi driver, as he was escaping regime forces. The driver got him to safety and refused to take money from him, complementing his ability to do something the driver was not able to do due to his old age.

As demonstrated in this subsection, in sum, the mobilization of protest movements in Syria during 2011 started primarily through the very system of close-knit inner circles forged over decades under oppression, as opportunity structures became available. Through such dense interpersonal social networks, Syrians could bypass most of the restrictions imposed on society by the Assad regime's security agencies and develop resilient mobilization

structures. As people began engaging with one another, social networks expanded, and defiant identities quickly emerged. The same non-movement and quiet encroachment processes of contention that operated under oppression for decades were put into action to mobilize Syrians in their quest for freedom.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the research findings of this project. The first section demonstrated how contentious politics in Syria operated through informal and unorganized social non movements for decades under harsh semi-totalitarian conditions. More specifically, the analysis showed how through forming non-structured and disconnected communities of close-knit inner circles across society, people forged underground social and political spaces to connect with one another more intimately and express agency in ways that were otherwise not possible in public. Members of such social groupings developed internal defence mechanisms to ensure that their inner circles remain resilient and impenetrable by outside forces. In addition, I demonstrated how faced with increasingly harsh economic and political realities, Syrians exercised quiet encroachment strategies in an attempt to improve their lives. This consisted of various actions of encroachment on public spaces, including unpermitted street vendors occupying squares/streets/intersections to sell goods, ordinary people fixing water and electricity lines and building illegally building homes in public spaces, and participating in corruption and bribery, among other examples. I argue that through these practices of non-movements and quiet encroachments, defiant identities and solidarities forged and successfully mobilized with the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian uprising. In the second section, I argue that when opportunity structures became available, people mobilized and participated in protests through their inner circles. These structures offered Syrians effective social networks and support that minimized risks associated with solo participation in protests. As protests increased in scope and size, organizational structures developed by activists through relying on the same practices/tactics of non-movements/quiet encroachment to bypass the regime's security network and policies of cutting off utility and internet services.

Chapter 5
THE UNFINISHED PROJECT OF THE SYRIAN UPRISING

Rise from under the rubble
Like a flower of almond in April
Get over your sorrow
Since revolution grows in the wounds of grief
- Nizar Al-Qabbani (1978)

5.0 Introduction

The 2011 Syrian Uprising reflected a popular attempt to revive what Dabashi (2012) describes as a 'cosmopolitan worldliness,' which had been repressed by decades of semi-totalitarian politics (Zaamout 2020b). The uprising brought together people from all socio-economic, cultural, and political backgrounds in a grassroots attempt to liberate their country from oppression, hoping to develop a free, inclusive, and democratic Syria (Zaamout 2017, 2020). It was a remarkable display of Syrian cosmopolitanism, where the ethnic, religious, and the cultural differences that Orientalists assert are a key source of tension did not impact the uprising's inclusive and pluralist discourse (Zaamout 2017, 2020b, Daher 2019c). The uprising was evidence that Syrian and Middle Eastern societies are not static and unchanging, as some commentators have argued, but are vibrant and capable of producing egalitarian ideas and discourses. Despite its vibrancy as was evident in the revolutionary discourses during the early phases of the crisis, the cosmopolitan project of the Syrian Uprising has failed to materialize. The Assad regime has been able to re-establish its control over most of the country after over eleven years of conflict, while Syrians continue to suffer from violence, death, and economic deprivation. This raises several key questions: What impact has the escalation of the crisis had on the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society? What is left of this project? Why has it failed to materialize?

This chapter will address these questions. It will be divided into two sections: The first assesses expressions of the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society after eleven years of conflict. This is done through conducting a discourse and content analysis of data collected from my field interviews, content produced by a sample of civil society groups, elites, and social media activity from people living in Syria – in areas within/outside the regime's control. This includes examining the chants/slogans of protests that flared up even in recent years to compare that discourse with what was produced during the 2011 Syrian Uprising. Overall, the analysis shows that despite the harsh realities, the cosmopolitan project of the Syrian Uprising remains alive and vibrant across society - evident in the

enduring commitment to political change and a strong desire for the establishment of a pluralistic and democratic system in Syria. The second examines how multiple domestic, regional and international factors created unfavourable conditions that overshadowed the cosmopolitan project and prevented its materialization. More specifically, I argue that the brutality of the Assad regime and its policies of sectarianization, supplemented by regional and international interventions, transformed Syria into a battleground fought by different regional and international powers in pursuit of their conflicting interests, changing the crisis from a peaceful uprising into a complex geopolitical proxy conflict (Hashemi and Postel 2013, C. Phillips 2016, Hashemi 2016a)

5.1 Society and Pluralism

Views on Sectarianism, the Uprising, and the Future

This section examines the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society based on the findings from my field research – focusing on issues of trauma, sectarianism, and the future of the crisis. During the interviews, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions related to issues of sectarianism and the future of the crisis. These questions sought to draw both the experiences and views/opinions of participants on the aforementioned topics. Even though no questions were asked about traumatic experiences stemming from the conflict, several participants insisted on sharing their stories in the hope that they get documented. Overall, despite the harsh experiences imposed on members of Syrian society over the last decade, results show a strong commitment to peaceful political change in Syria and a desire for a pluralistic and inclusive system of governance. Data from field interviews show that issues of sectarianism are insignificant and have not impacted the everyday lives of ordinary people in society. Most participants accuse the regime of employing sectarianism to undermine their revolution.

Sectarianism

On sectarianism, participants were asked about its prevalence in Syrian politics and society before and during the Syrian crisis. Most participants asserted that they had not experienced sectarianism in society on a day-to-day level, stressing that people lived together in peace and harmony. To this point, participants shared specific stories and personal experiences of friendships and marriages formed across sectarian lines. According

to most participants[15] the issue of sect was never central in everyday discourse but was regularly politicized by the regime – especially during the uprising where peaceful protestors were described as Salafi terrorists. More specifically, participants who identified as ethnically Kurdish (O-004, O-006, O-018 O-019 and O-020) pointed out that they faced systemic discrimination exercised by the Syrian state, through being deprived of basic rights – such as obtaining ID cards and passports. They also explained that state agents often employed derogatory remarks against them if they spoke the Kurdish language in public areas. In addition, events that brought together large groups of people – such as weddings or Nowruz celebrations - required security clearance. This was especially the case after 2004 when demonstrations broke out in several Kurdish areas against the regime, as confirmed by participants O-004, O-006, O-018 and O-019.

Participants from minority communities explained how the regime systemically politicized sectarian/ethnic identities claiming to be the protector of minorities. Alawite, Christians, Druze, and Ismaili participants (participants O-008, O-011, O-013, O-019, O-024, O-026 and O-031) explained how in their context, they were exposed to this discourse which claimed that the regime protected minorities from Islamic extremism of the Muslim Brotherhood .[16] According to participants, the Assad regime attempted to create a condition of fear of the unknown in society – to force minority communities to opt for the status quo out of fear of the unknown. As several participants (O-011, O-019) explained, state media propagated the narrative that there were no protest movements in Syria in 2011 but that Islamic terrorists were targeting the country. Participant O-011, who identified as Alawite, explained that this narrative was produced and transmitted within her village through regime agents who claimed the uprising was an Islamist attempt to take over power from Alawites. She explained that it was sometimes difficult to escape this narrative in rural areas such as largely homogenous villages, but in large urban centres (such as Latakia, where she attended university), they failed to attract support. She explained that protests in Latakia were very diverse and brought together people of all backgrounds.

Violence and Trauma

[15] Participants N-001, N-002, N-003, O-001, O-004, O-005, O-006, O-009, O-011, O-014, O-015, O-016, O-017, O-018, O-019, O-021, O-023, O-024, O-025, O-030 and O-031,

[16] The regime sought to undermine the peaceful uprising by claiming that Syria was being targeted by radical Islamists who are trying to destabilize Syria for its key role in fighting against Western imperialism. Syrian state media propagated this narrative, as the regime refused to acknowledge that any peaceful protests were taking place.

The interviews revealed powerful stories of trauma that participants experienced during the crisis. These stories allude to horrific violence, including shootings of protesters, torture in regime prisons, live executions, sexual violence and rape, and bombardment of cities and towns, among others. Even though interview questions avoided issues of trauma, some participants insisted on sharing these stories, hoping that they get documented in academic research. Among these stories was that of participant, O-016, who worked as a general manager of a hospital in Dier al-Zor. He explained how injured protesters and army defectors would be provided medical care at night and in secrecy in his hospital and would be released in the morning before regime forces arrived to conduct daily routine inspections. During one of these inspections, the participant explained how the army stormed the hospital and physically and verbally assaulted staff and patients. He explained that soldiers dragged him out of the hospital, where he was forced to witness the live execution of three blindfolded men in civilian clothing, kneeling on their knees facing a wall in the hospital compound. The commanding officer executed the three men by shooting them in the back of the head. After doing so, he assaulted participant O-016 and told him, "Your life is as worthless as a dog. I will do the same to you if I feel that you are lying to me." Participant O-016 explained that he assured the officer that he was fully cooperative and stood by the army in its battle against terrorism.

Participant O-025 shared her experience trying to evacuate her severely wounded brother, who was shot in the stomach during his participation in a protest. Her brother, an army defector, was treated in an underground field hospital by fellow activists, where he underwent several surgeries. However, due to the lack of medical supplies, these surgeries failed to rectify the damage to his organs, and his condition quickly worsened and required immediate hospital care. She explained that this was not possible, especially given that her brother was an army defector. If caught by the regime, he would be executed immediately, she explained. Hence, with assistance from local activists, they were able to create a fake identification card for her brother and a medical note from a doctor who served in the underground coordination committees stressing that he had advanced-stage cancer and must be transported to Damascus immediately for medical assistance. This was a strategy to try and get her brother outside the besieged city of Homs – where he was at the time. They succeeded in getting him out of Homs and into hiding in the suburb of Damascus. She explained how they relied on several other underground field hospitals in the Damascus region, where she helped doctors perform several surgeries to remove the rapidly spreading infection in her brother’s wound but were unsuccessful. When all failed, it became clear that her brother must be transported out of the country for medical care. In so doing, she

explained how her uncle, a key organizer in Homs's coordination committees, worked with the Dara'a coordination committees to arrange for her brother's escape outside Syria. Supported by several other army defectors, she explained how activists picked up her brother at night from where the family was hiding and began a long journey to Jordan which ended with success: her brother arrived in Jordan, where he survived after spending over a month in intensive medical care. Participant O-025 and her family followed course and escaped to Jordan as they learned the regime was searching for them. They successfully escaped; however, her uncle, who helped arrange her family's escape, was killed by regime forces three months later.

Participant O-030 shared her experience of imprisonment. She explained how regime forces arrived in the apartment building where she resided and stormed every home. Men were lined up outside the building as intelligence officers thoroughly searched homes. She explained that she was arrested and taken to the security branch during this raid. Even though she had some connections through her husband, who was involved in the military, she could not avoid arrest. During her captivity, participant O-030 provided chilling stories of how she regularly witnessed young women beaten and raped by regime forces. She explained how she and fellow prisoners, the older women, consoled the victims in their prison cells and provided emotional and mental support.

Participant N-002 explained that his family had endured considerable hardship for decades since his father (who was an air force pilot) was imprisoned in the early 1980s for five years, as part of the regime’s crackdown on dissent. The participant explained that they were subjected to regular scrutiny since his father’s release, required to report monthly to security agencies to undergo intensive questioning. Shortly before the uprising broke out, participant N-002 explained that he and his father were arrested after his neighbour reported him for having an anti-government book in his home. For two-and-a-half years, the participant explained that they were tortured in some of the most horrific ways – including being tied on a cross for long periods of time, burned with a hot iron and cigarettes, tortured with electricity and regularly mounted on what he referred to as “the German chair” as well as physically assaulted and beaten. They were placed in dark underground cells for months and provided rotten/very little food. When the uprising began, participant N-002 explained that he joined the protests through this group of friends. When one of them was arrested, he was forced to escape the country, fearing that his friend may share his name under torture. After successfully leaving the country, he explained that security agents arrested his father. Using his father's cellphone, security agents called participant N-002 and demanded that he return to the country or they "will do what is required with his father." He pleaded

with the security agent but failed to secure his father's release. Months later, his father perished under torture.

These experiences, among many others, have convinced people that change is necessary. Data reveals that participants who experienced traumatic experiences were more determined that the Assad regime was illegitimate and must be removed. Such participants explained that they could not imagine a future in which they are ruled once again by the Assad regime. They emphasized that the revolutionary project is ongoing, and it is only a matter of time before change happens. Such experiences, therefore, have elevated the resilience of people who endured suffering as they became more determined that the Assad regime must be removed.

Views on the Uprising and the Future of the Crisis

On the topic of the future of the Syrian uprising, participants were asked a series of questions that sought to draw out their views on the progression of the crisis and what is likely to happen in the future, focusing on the following questions: knowing where things have gotten, do you regret that an uprising occurred? Are you hopeful for the future? Do you think the uprising is over? Has Assad won? Are people ready to be governed by the Assad regime once again? With regard to the first question, the vast majority of participants indicated that they do not regret the occurrence of the uprising. For them, it was necessary – some even said it was inevitable (participants 0-007, O-010, O-014, O-015, O-019 and O-021). The 2011 uprising was a natural reaction to mounting frustrations over decades of living under tyranny and oppression, according to participants O-014 and O-015. Even though most participants indicated that they never expected an uprising would ever occur in the first place, the cost of turning back on this project outweighed the benefits, as explained by participants O-005 and O-030. Echoing this perspective, participants O-002, O-003, O-005, O-011, O-015, O-025, N-001, O-029, O-030, N-002, and O-031 suggested that it would be unimaginable for people to accept oppression and tyranny once again after "tasting freedom."

All participants agreed that change was necessary, and that the Assad regime is illegitimate and responsible for destroying the country. However, where they departed is in their outlook on the future. Some participants (O-008, O-009, O-011, O-012, O-017, O-019) indicated the Assad regime destroyed the country to exhaustion, constraining the possibilities for future uprisings in the short term. Those participants highlighted the many traumas (physical, psychological, health, education etc.) that Syrian society is suffering due

to years of conflict and underscored the need to heal these wounds first before focusing on the long-term 'revolutionary' project. Others argued (participants O-002, O-020, O-023, and O-026) that the revolutionary project is hindered by the continued intervention of various regional and international actors in Syria, which are playing a pivotal role in prolonging the regime's time in power. As participant O-026 explains "We hope that we get to a democratic system of governance. However, the regime is backed by so many powers. The establishment of democracy in Syria would threaten other authoritarian regimes in the region." Echoing this argument, participant O-020 explains "The situation [in Syria] exited from the framework of the Syrian people towards the hands of the big states. There is an attempt to revive Assad once again, backed by Russia. The solution is out of our hands. We need to liberate ourselves from loyalties to foreign powers."

Most participants argued that the 'revolution' is not over, explaining that it may have faced serious setbacks, but it will succeed in the end, as people today are experiencing unprecedented hardship due to the deterioration of political and economic conditions. The battle for freedom will, therefore, continue until Syrians build a "democratic civil state," according to participants O-004, O-023, O-024, O-025 and O-026. Participant O-001 pointed out that "the revolution is an idea that can never be killed or die. It will always be there." Similarly, participant O-030 explained, "The revolution is a noble idea, and noble ideas never die. The revolution will persist until we achieve victory. Even if this battle lasts over 100 years, our revolution will inevitably be victorious." Participants (O-015, O-017, and O-029) who shared similar views pointed out that the battle to remove Assad from power could take 5, 10, 15 or even 20 years. Participant O-004 explained that "we don't want an Islamic Khalifate that takes us back to the prophet's time, and we don't want the oppressive Assad regime. We want a better future for ourselves and our children." Participant O-016 said, "all people are the same regardless of who they are. We all want the same thing. We want to have a good life where we are treated with dignity and freedom." Participant O-001 stresses "we want to live [in a country] where our dignity is preserved. We want a democratic and civil state. We want better economic and political conditions and freedom." Participant O-025 explained that, for the most part, "people want freedom but do not have a clearly articulated idea of what the future would look like." She explains, "We knew we wanted democracy, but we were not necessarily looking to emulate western democracy. We wanted a democratic system that is inclusive of all Syrians." Participant O-006 argued, "all militant groups on the ground will not stay. Syrians are suffocating. We need another revolution, but this time, the revolution should be better organized with strong leaders. We need more coordination. This may take years, but it's the only path. This movement should exclude

outsiders - it should be driven by the Syrian people. The regime will not stay, but we should not wait for the international community to get our freedom." Echoing these perspectives, participant O-005 claimed, "Syrians paid a heavy price for the militarization of the crisis, which came because of foreign intervention, not in response to popular will. After all our sacrifices, Syrians are not ready to be governed by the Assad regime again. I lost everything in this battle. I cannot accept Assad or what looks like Assad. We want a government that fulfils the aspirations of the people."

Almost all the participants condemned both military and political opposition groups for their corruption and violence and preoccupation with serving the interests of foreign powers rather than those of the Syrian people. Participant O-015 explained, "we need a revolution to overthrow the regime and the opposition… they don't represent Syrians." Echoing this point, participants O-024, proclaimed that the "the Salafi-Jihadi groups were created by the regime to hijack the revolution" and "that the political opposition is a total failure." Participants O-001 explained, that those groups are "serving foreign agendas" instead of the will of the Syrian people. On violence, participants were united in rejecting the militarization of the crisis. As O-016 boldly claimed, "the revolution was a peaceful struggle. Anyone who used weapons is in the wrong, no matter who they are." Overall, participants unanimously rejected subsequent militant groups that came to dominate the conflict over Syria, arguing for the need to liberate Syria from the Assad regime and Islamist groups. Having said that, some participants (O-025, O-030) viewed the Free Syrian Army more favourably in its initial iteration, consisting of army defectors who refused to participate in the regime's onslaught of protesters. While they did not support violence, they nevertheless believed that the regime's brutality forced troops to defect and resort take up arms.

Most participants believe that the regime did not achieve victory. Participants O-002 and O-029 explained, that the Assad regime advanced militarily but lost morally. Even those who used to support the regime were left no choice but to oppose it, according to participants O-011 and O-029. According to these participants, the violence employed by the regime left many scars and stories of sorrow impacting almost every Syrian city, town, village, and family. As participant O-003 claimed, the regime proved that it could "win the battle of crushing bones, but not the battle to attract the hearts and minds of Syrians." He added that the Assad regime "does not know any other language than that of iron, blood and fire." Participants O-004, O-005, O-020, O-023, O-026 and O-030 explained that Syrians are not to blame for the failure of the revolution because it was hijacked/stolen from them by external forces. More specifically, participant O-004 claimed that although he hopes Syrians will achieve their freedom, he doubts that will happen in the short term, given that the regime has strong allies

such as Russia and Iran. There was broad consensus that the biggest catastrophe of the Syrian uprising was the heavy humanitarian suffering that has been inflicted on society.

Based on the data collected from the field research, the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising remains vibrant and alive in society. There is a strong desire by people for change: People are determined to gain their freedom and overthrow the regime of President Assad. Clearly, there are significant wounds inflicted on the Syrian people, which impacted most participants, but these wounds have not translated into regret/abandonment of the revolutionary project. Overall, participants' outlook on the future can be described as cautious optimism. While the majority shared strong conviction that the uprising would succeed in the end, there was a recognition that Syrian society is suffering from significant wounds and traumas that need to be remedied.

Pluralism and Civil Society Organization

Before the 2011 uprising, the Syrian state dominated the public sphere and effectively eliminated the space for civil society. Syria had no independent civil society – only a highly controlled and state-constructed collection of social organizations that the regime employed in its propaganda machine (Khatib 2013). Independent organizations were not allowed to form or operate in Syria; hence, many formed and operated in exile for decades. In some instances, some of these organizations lacked popular appeal in society, as they were distant, unable to connect with the everyday experiences of Syrians living within the country. The outbreak of the 2011 uprising created the need and space for independent civil society organizations to re-emerge in the country. Between 2011-2012, a plethora of organizations formed – including those that developed organically within the country to perform critical functions required by society (organizing protests, providing emergency services and governance etc.) and others that were formed in exile but were able to establish a presence inside Syria. Collectively, these organizations quickly filled various roles across society, responding to the changing circumstances of the crisis. More specifically, when protests were spontaneous and unorganized, “grassroots support structures were put in place across the country” to organize and coordinate protests (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014, 9). The role of the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) is noteworthy in this regard. Developed by activists in Syria, these committees were formed across neighbourhoods, towns, and cities and were responsible for planning, organizing, coordinating protests, and sharing with the world images, videos, and other footage showing what was happening in Syria (Daher 2019d). As the crisis took a military turn, various organizations emerged to provide essential

services that alleviate the hardships imposed on society due to growing violence. This included organizations that provided medical and humanitarian assistance and search and rescue work. Among these organizations is the White Helmets, which developed as a grassroots organization consisting of volunteers to provide critical rescue work in the absence of public services (2014, 9). As the crisis further escalated, various structures were created by people within neighbourhoods, towns, and cities to provide core urban services in areas outside the regime's control. This included the formation of "Local Councils (LCs) which, although differing from one area to another in terms of their capacities, supported the functioning of all kinds of public services ranging from distributing aid, providing medical services and education, maintaining the judiciary system, to managing waste collection" (2014, 9).

This section will examine several prominent Syrian civil society organizations that emerged internally and in exile. The focus will be on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the White Helmets, the Syrian Revolutionary Network, and the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS). The analysis attempts to locate the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising by examining the content produced by these organizations. I argue that the discourse of these organizations is primarily aligned with the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising. More specifically, I demonstrate how the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's ideology is somehow compatible with pluralist ideas as embodied in the work of Mustafa Al-Sibai. The problem for the organization lies in the inconsistent application of these principles and persistent tension between hardliners and moderates. The remaining examined organizations have all been developed mainly at a grassroots level in response to the evolving realities of the crisis. Analysis of the discourses produced by these organizations demonstrates consistency with the pluralist ideas produced by revolutionaries during the early stage of the Syrian uprising.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB)

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) is an important Syrian civil society organization that has operated in exile since 1982. It was founded by Mustafa Al-Sibai a reformist Islamic thinker whose work tried to reconcile the relationship between Islam and politics (Rabil 2012). In this section, I will briefly examine the history, development, and discourse of the SMB to examine the organization's ability to produce and retain pluralist ideas. I will argue that, if/when led by moderate elements, the organization has the ideological basis for forming pluralist ideas. Having said that, the organization does tend to shift its approach in response to emerging opportunities which undermines its credibility.

The founder of the SMB, Mustafa Al-Sibai, was born in 1915 in the city of Homs, to a middle-class family (Rabil 2012). He started religious education at a young age, and by the 1930s, he travelled to Egypt to pursue Islamic studies at al-Azhar University. In Egypt, he befriended Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and was influenced by his ideas (Rubin 2010). When he returned to Syria in the early 1940s, he actively sought to unite the different Islamic parties and organizations that operated across the country under a reformist agenda (Pierret 2013). In 1945, after years of consultation and in discussion with key thinkers, theologians and prominent figures in Syria, the SMB was officially formed under Al-Sibai's leadership. Under his leadership, the SMB pursued "bottom-up Islamization", providing social, medical and education services across Syria, primarily in smaller towns, and villages initially, and later participated in democratic parliamentary politics during the 1950s (Ramírez-Díaz 2018).

In his book, *Lessons in the Proselytizing of the Muslim Brotherhood*, Al-Sibai's emphasizes that the goals of the SMB are confined to combating the impact of colonialism, putting an end to all forms of injustices against workers and farmers, and reforming and democratizing Syria's political system (Al-Dallal 2006). He adds that the SMB also plays an important grassroots role, providing social services, creating schools, scout camps, and 'fatwa' centres across Syria. Al-Sibai stresses that the goal of the SMB is to pursue reforms within existing political institutions to reform and align them with Islamic values (Al-Dallal 2006). He explains, "we do not want to overthrow our current laws. We want to bridge the gap between them and theories of Islam that are compatible with the spirit of this era in order to bring them closer together in matters of civil legislation" (Al-Dallal 2006, 11). Under his leadership, the SMB issued their formal program in 1949, stressing their commitment to abide by the "limits of the constitution" in order to preserve "the republican system", and "civil rights" (Pierret 2013, 325). The document stresses, that the "people have the right to choose their representatives through free and fair elections and should be recognized as the supreme authority" (Pierret 2013, 326). The "ideological flexibility of the pre-1963 Syrian Muslim Brothers also manifested itself through their vocal embrace of one of the most fashionable ideologies of that time, that is, socialism" (Pierret 2013, 325). In his book The Socialism of Islam, al-Sibai (2012) sought to reconcile the relationship "Islam" and "socialism", demonstrating that Islam is shaped by socialist tendencies. He calls for reforming Syria's economic system in order to mitigate the impact of class struggle and reconcile the relationship between the rich and poor (Al-Sibai 2012). He critiques both communist and capitalist projects, stressing that, unlike these approaches, Islam presents a balanced and moderate approach that reconciles issues of class politics and capital

accumulation.

The Syrian regime's violent crackdown on opposition in the 1970s, allowed for the emergence of conservative voices within the SMB, who were successful in steering the organization towards violent military confrontation with the regime in the late 1970s/early 1980s (Lia 2016). However, the reliance on violence gave the regime the justification to engage in a wide-scale military campaign to uproot the SMB and other opposition organizations from Syrian society once and for all (Lia 2016). Responding with violence, the regime committed wide scale massacres (including the 1982 Hama massacre) which effectively defeated the SMB and forced its members into exile. In addition, law 49 made membership in the SMB punishable by death penalty which succeeded in permanently keeping the SMB out of Syria (Harvard Divinity School n.d.).

Having uprooted the SMB from society, the regime remained vocal in its opposition to the organization over the last four decades, articulating the SMB as a dangerous terrorist group, conspiring with foreign powers to destabilize Syria. When the 2011 Syrian Uprising broke out, the Assad regime quickly accused the SMB of carrying out a plot to destabilize the country while refusing to acknowledge any peaceful protests were taking place. As I will demonstrate, the role of the SMB was far more limited than the regime claimed. More specifically, I show that the SMB sought to capitalize on the ongoing crisis by first supporting the peaceful uprisings and later funding/supporting armed militant groups but as an outsider to the country with no real support base in Syria, the SMB generally failed to attract popular support and to advance its power on the ground.

The SMB has come under heavy criticism from many who saw that the organization compromised its founding principles by pursuing a violent route in its confrontation with the Syrian regime in the 1980s (Lefèvre 2015). Defeated and forced into exile, the organization suffered a serious legitimacy crisis throughout the 1980s (Ramírez-Díaz 2018). It was not until the 1990s, the organization began to re-emerge as a cohesive organization – especially with the election of Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni as leader in 1996. Hailed as a moderate, Al-Bayanouni sought to revive the party along its founding principles, as embedded in the philosophy of Al-Sibai (Ramírez-Díaz 2018). In 2004, under Al-Bayanouni's leadership, the SMB published a document titled "The Political Project for Future Syria", outlining the organization's commitment to establishing a plural and democratic Syrian state that respects the rule of law and the separation of power (Syrian Muslim Brotherhood 2004). It stressed the SMB's commitment to human rights and fair and free elections. It called for a Syrian state that "recognizes the equality of al Syrians regardless of their religion, on the basis of the principles of citizenship" (Syrian Muslim Brotherhood 2004). This important document

sought to project a modern image of the SMB as a purely political organisation aiming to establish a free and democratic Syria solely through political means (Blanga 2017). This rebranding of the SMB was a pragmatic attempt to improve its standing in Syrian society and attract supporters, ultimately legitimizing any future involvement in Syrian politics.

The Syrian crisis provided the opportunity for SMB to showcase itself as a transformed movement committed to the formation of a pluralist democracy in Syria. Immediately upon the outbreak of the uprising, the SMB promptly sided with peaceful protestors and played a critical role in forming the Syrian National Council - a coalition of Syrian opposition groups (Lefèvre 2015). This was supplemented by consistent messaging stressing the SMB's support for the peaceful demonstrations against the Assad regime, calling for the establishment of a free and democratic Syria. However, the involvement of the SMB in the crisis quickly expanded as the crisis morphed into an armed confrontation between various militant groups. Around the same time the crisis was militarizing, the SMB had a change in leadership: Al-Bayanouni was succeeded by Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh, a member of the old Conservative Hama branch. Al-Shaqfeh tried to expand the SMB sphere of influence in Syria by initially supporting the various groups operating under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and later shifted that support to Islamist factions (Conduit 2019). The decision to support armed groups generated significant disagreements within the SMB, especially between the old conservative Hama and Homs branches (Blanga 2017). The debate centred around the "methods to be employed against the Assad regime": some preferred that the movement continue to play an exclusively nonviolent political role, while others pushed for supporting the armed militancy and forming new armed groups (Blanga 2017, 59). Ultimately, the SMB's conservative Hama branch succeeded in steering the SMB away from its principles as outlined in 2004. Once again, the SMB opted for violence – although this time, the movement had much less influence on the ground (compared to the 1980s) and therefore attempted to buy influence through financing various militant groups (Conduit 2019). However, this did not yield much success in expanding the SMB's power on the ground, as its financing was dwarfed by that of more powerful and financially affluent regional states (Conduit 2019). In response to this failure, the SMB tried to form its own militant group by assisting in the formation of *Hayat Duru al-Thawra* or the Shields of the Revolution Council - an "umbrella alliance of 43 groups predominantly based in Idlib and Hama provinces, which at its peak may have totalled 5,000–7,000 fighters, although it was never a major faction" (Conduit 2019, 209). The SMB funded the coalition and tried to incorporate it into its framework as an extension of its moderate agenda. However, the SMB's influence and control over the *Hayat Duru al-Thawra* was limited and eventually, the collation

itself crumbled due to a lack of support on the ground (Conduit 2019). This was another serious setback for the SMB: It failed to gain influence by supporting various militants and was now unsuccessful in forming its own group (Oweis 2012).

Officially, the SMB refused to acknowledge its role in supporting the armed militancy in Syria. In responding to such allegations, Al-Shaqfeh responded, "How can we own any brigades after thirty years in exile" (Ramírez Díaz 2018, 114). He added, "some Islamist brigades contacted us for coordination purposes before their formal announcement and the reason why they are more prone to the SMB is because we have been unfairly treated and they feel empathy towards us" (Ramírez Díaz 2018). This is contradicted by the release of an SMB statement in 2015, stressing that "defensive jihad is an individual duty for everyone capable of carrying weapons, in the light of the outright occupation of our country by the forces of evil" (Ramírez Díaz 2018, 113). In another recorded statement that was posted on the SMB's website but later taken down, al-Shaqfeh claimed that "the SMB will continue their jihad side by side to the rest of the Syrian people" for Syria to return to the time before the Assad regime, when it was "the homeland of every citizen, with no marginalization or exclusion" (Lund 2013, nn). The contradictions in these statements reflected broader problems that undermine the SMB's attempt to rebrand itself as a progressive political organization – the SMB was once again undermining its own principles.

In 2014, Mohammed Hikmat Waleed succeeded Al-Shaqfeh as the SMB's leader - the first head of the SMB from the Syrian province of Latakia" (Ramírez Díaz 2018). Waleed reiterated that the SMB is not to blame for the militarization of the crisis – insisting that the regime violence has pushed people towards military means to protect themselves. He emphasized the SMB's continued commitment to oppose the Assad regime and support the struggle of the Syrian people (Ramírez Díaz 2018). His approach parallels Al-Bayanouni – he was determined to develop the SMB as a moderate opposition group committed to a free and democratic Syria. Under his leadership, the organization published several key documents outlining its political project. In an article published on the SMB's website, Waleed emphasized the SMB's commitment to establishing inclusive, parliamentary democracy in Syria (Ramírez Díaz 2018). Whereas his predecessor, al-Shaqfeh, had been more vocal in supporting the armed insurgency against the regime, Waleed seems to opt for change through political means. This is consistent with the SMB's overall attempt to rebrand itself as a moderate opposition group representing the interests of Syrians of all backgrounds (Ramírez Díaz 2018). The changing reality of the crisis may partly explain this shift in approach: the Syrian regime has been able to re-assert its control over large parts of the country, and many of the rebel groups that the SMB once supported have been dismantled.

The role of the SMB in Syria is consequently on the decline once again.

In order to assess SMB's ideology, I employ the analytical distinction that Asef Bayat (2013b, 4) draws between Islamist and post-Islamist ideologies. The former refers to ideologies that seek to create "some kind of an Islamic order—a religious state, Shari'a law, and moral codes in Muslim societies and communities", while the latter is rooted in a "conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains" (Bayat 2013b, 4-8). Islamist ideologies emerged in a "combative conversation" with European discourse of modernity in response to the crisis of the post-colonial politics of despair and authoritarianism (Aydin 2007, Dabashi 2012). They seek to enforce top-down social, political, and economic systems that derive from specific interpretations of Islamic Shari'a (Bayat 2013b). This should not suggest that all Islamist groups are the same. While they may all ascribe to the same goal of creating an Islamic system of governance, they differ in terms of how they envision their project. Post-Islamist ideologies on the other hand are "neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic or secular" (Bayat 2013b, 8). Instead, they represent "an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty" (Bayat 2013b, 8). In applying this framework to the SMB, I argue that although socio-culturally conservative, the SMB's core ideology seems closer to post-Islamist principles that are relatively compatible with pluralist/democratic ideas as embodied in the work of Mustafa al-Sibai and key foundational documents (Pierret 2013, Ramírez-Díaz 2018). The problem for the movement lies in the inconsistent application of these principles. The SMB continues to be plagued with an ongoing struggle between conservative hardliners (associated with the Hama branch) and moderates, creating persistent tension that continues to complicate the movement's ability to adhere to its post-Islamist ideas (Lefèvre 2015). Some of the SMB's leaders, such as al-Bayanouni and Waleed, have sought to ensure the organization's actions remain committed to the pluralistic post-Islamist ideologies, but others, such as al-Shaqfeh, have steered the organization in the opposite direction.

The White Helmets

The White Helmets also known as the Syria Civil Defense developed in 2013 as a grassroot volunteer organization responsible for providing first responder medical and search and rescue work in opposition held areas of Syria (White Helmets n.d.). This organization emerged during a critical time in the crisis, as the bombardment of cities and towns intensified by regime forces and the Russian military. In the absence of public services, self-

organized groups of volunteers – from a variety of occupational backgrounds – came together to fill that void and provide critical rescue work and first aid assistance to victims of violence (n.d.). Their role became especially important as Russian and Syrian air forces intensified their bombardment of residential areas – where the White Helmets stepped in to rescue people from under the wreckage and provide the necessary medical aid. The group's work gained global fame and was nominated for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize. On its website, the organization claims neutrality and impartiality "providing support to anyone in need regardless of religion, race or political affiliations" (n.d.). A review of content produced by the organization confirms this position – the White Helmet's produced content is highly inclusive and pluralistic. The White Helmets is an excellent example of a civil society organization that developed organically by ordinary people to fill an important void in absence of an alternative. The White Helmet has been a target of a systemic disinformation campaign sponsored by Russian state-media, the Syrian regime and its allies. As Pacheco et al. (2020, 611) reveal, this campaign included the reliance on "coordinated groups using automatic retweets and content duplication to promote narratives and/or accounts" as well the employment of "distinct promoting strategies, ranging from the small groups sharing the exact same text repeatedly, to complex 'news website factories' where dozens of accounts synchronously spread the same news from multiple sites." Despite these attempts, the White Helmets continue to enjoy widespread support/appeal across Syrian society and the world for the incredible work it has provided, saving lives of ordinary people under extremely difficult circumstances.

The Syrian Revolutionary Network (SRN)

Developed in 2011, and with over 2 million followers on Facebook and over 200,000 on Twitter, the SRN is one of the most significant civil society organizations that formed during the early days of the uprising. The SRN played a key role in sharing protest footage and providing an organizational structure to support protest movements. This included naming weekly protests around key themes/demands: since the early days of the uprising, the SRN's Facebook page "posts a poll and calls on Syrians to choose among different slogans submitted by the major activist groups" (Atassi and Wikstrom 2012). These slogans and subsequent protest footage demonstrated a remarkable consistency in messaging and were indicative of a pluralistic discourse focused on the theme of freedom for all Syrians.

On its Facebook page, the group claims that it was developed by Syrian activists who came together to support the revolution (Syrian Revolution Network n.d.). The group claims

its network consists of 150 volunteer activists who served different functions including coordinated activities, manage social media pages, conduct strategic planning, provide internet/cyber security support, and provide moral guidance. The goal of the group, according to its Facebook page, is to fight for the freedom of Syria and end "the domination of the Assad regime", which has governed the country "with iron, fire and terror in one of the worst examples of oppression in the Middle East region." The group rejects any form of violence, racism and sectarianism and emphasizes the unity of the Syrian people and the peacefulness of the revolutionary project. The group is non-ideological aiming to peacefully topple the dictatorial Assad regime and supporting the development of a civil state inclusive of all Syrians, as indicated on its website.

Initially, the group's activities consisted primarily of determining the theme of weekly protests and sharing footage of what was happening in Syria. As the crisis escalated into a geo-political proxy war, the group continued to serve this function, shedding light on continued activism/protests, while also showing the world through pictures and videos the suffering Syrians endured as a result of violence. Through examining the social media posts from 2014-2021, I argue that the revolutionary discourse that underpinned the protest movements of 2011 remains vibrant and visible on the group's social media page. Social media posts over the last few years, have hailed the bravery of Syrians and vowed continued commitment to overthrow oppression. Throughout the page, there are posts that highlight the suffering that Syrians have endured – from showing picture/videos of victims of violence perpetuated by the regime and/or other militant groups. What has been remarkable in the messaging of this group, is a rejection of violence and insistence on the peacefulness of the revolutionary project. The most common phrase over the last few years has been *thwra hatta al-nasir* or revolution until we achieve victory.

The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)

Formed by Syrians in diaspora, this organization was "founded in 1998 in the United States as a professional society to provide networking, educational, cultural, and professional services to medical professionals of Syrian descent" (Syrian American Medical Society n.d.). When the uprising turned violent, and the need for medical assistance became necessary, the organization began to play an active role supporting those who needed medical help. On its website, the SAMS claims to "serve those in need with compassion, kindness, and dignity, regardless of background or religious affiliations" (Syrian American Medical Society n.d.). The organization claims to "provide essential services that emphasizes priority needs,

including the delivery of medical education, training, and financial support for physicians and other healthcare workers inside Syria and in neighboring countries" as well as establishing "field hospitals, intensive care units, dental and primary care clinics, birth and newborn care facilities, mobile medical units, and dialysis centers in opposition held areas of Syria" (Syrian American Medical Society n.d.). Participant O-009 was an active member of this society. He explained that his decision to join the organization stemmed out of the desire to help fellow Syrians who have been oppressed in some of the most violent ways. After fleeing Syria, he was able to engage on various projects through SAMS to provide support to people in areas outside the regime's control as well as the refugee community in Lebanon.

Pluralism and Elites

A review of the content/discourse of Syria's intellectual and cultural elites – especially those in exile – reveals vibrant expressions of pluralist ideas and support for the revolutionary project of the Syrian uprising. Through the experience of exile, Syria's intellectual elite have created defiant spaces to oppose oppression and call for the development of a democratic and inclusive Syria, away from tyranny, violence, and oppression of all kinds. The experience of exile did not deter the development of pluralistic ideals but rather allowed it to happen outside the oppressive machinery of the Assad regime. Cultural elements, such as poetry, entered Syria and became part of the everyday resistance culture shared across society within inner social groups. In this section, I examine the content/discourse of a sample of prominent Syrian elites to assess the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising, focusing on the work of several individuals, including Khalid Taja, Nizar al-Qabbani, Asala Nasri, Mai Skaf, and Burhan Ghalioun. I selected these individuals given their prominence within Syrian society and some even around the Arab world.

Prominent Syrian actor Khalid Taja has long criticized authoritarianism in the Arab world. He was one of the signatories to the statement of 99 in 2000, urging Bashar Al-Assad to pursue political reforms upon his inheritance of the presidency from his father (Al-Hayat 2000). In 2009, during a television interview with Orient TV, Taja predicted that a "massive explosion will inevitably happen in the Arab world" and that the tyrannical regimes of the Arab world will fall, as people grow fed up with living conditions (Taja 2019). He argued that "the authoritarian leaders will not compromise but will in fact do everything that is possible to cement their positions so that they can stay alive and in power as long as possible" (2019). "These regimes want corruption. This is the only way for them to attract loyalists" – by allowing their cronies to "fill their pockets and steal from the people" (2019). Taja expressed

dismay over political conditions in the Arab World, explaining that, “as people, we are not allowed anything. We can't speak and express ourselves. We are not allowed to ask for our rights and if we stand up for them, we’ll be accused of terrorism” (2019). He added, “people will not accept injustice forever. They will sacrifice their blood for change” (2019). Taja affirmed his strong belief that the problem in the Arab world lies with the corrupt regimes – who are to blame for everything. He criticized their use of Arabism, nationalism, Islamism, and other ideologies to justify their oppression of their populations. We “have to work on fixing the inside – we need to put all ideologies aside whether Islamism, communism, socialism or Arabism – and do something. We need to unite and rescue our homelands” (2019). He rejected the arguments of sectarianism, emphasizing that the wrong practices of some individuals should not be generalized across communities. Taja swiftly supported the 2011 Syrian uprising. He was arrested twice in 2011 and 2012 and died a week after his release from custody, allegedly after a battle with lung cancer according to some reports. (Alwsl 2015). There are reports that also accuse the regime of directly torturing and killing Taja during his time in prison.

Nizar al-Qabbani is one of the most influential poets in Syria and the Arab world (Barakat 2020). Born in Damascus in 1923, al-Qabbani graduated with a law degree from Damascus University and worked in the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in several cities, including Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul, Madrid, and London (Barakat 2020). He resigned from the foreign service in 1966, after the ascendency of the Ba’ath Party in Syria and spent most of his life in exile, initially in Lebanon, but after the assassination of his wife, he moved to Europe. Al-Qabbani is well-known for his erotic and political poetry, which are premised on the idea that love cannot thrive under oppression (Kahf 2000). Al-Qabbani’s poems resonated with people across the Arab world, capturing their experiences living under authoritarian regimes through simple yet powerful poetry. As one observer notes, “Nizar was never a poet of ideology, but rather, the poet of victims—whomever they may be and wherever they may stand. He was also against the torturer, whoever that torturer was” (Moubayed 2018).

Al-Qabbani accused the regimes of the Middle East of overshadowing the cultural pluralism of a region otherwise known for its history of progress and civilization. He criticizes criticized autocratic crackdown on Arab societies by regimes whose oppressive policies permeated almost every aspect of everyday life. In his poem “Who Killed the History Teacher,” he writes (1994)

From where will happiness come to us?
And all that happens in our life
Is a series of tyranny
Our homeland is tyranny
Immigration is tyranny

The official newspaper is tyranny
The secret police is tyranny
Marriage is tyranny
And love for a beautiful woman is tyranny

This tyranny is exacerbated by the crackdown on ideas and thought. Al-Qabbani observes that authoritarian regimes in the Global South are preoccupied with manufacturing societies governed solely by a single state-approved ideology that is personified in the cult of authoritarian leaders. Ideas terrify these regimes, according to Al-Qabbani, and hence they strive to exclude them systemically. Such regimes do not know any other language than that of guns and violence. In the same poem, Al-Qabbani (n.d.) writes:

The rulers in the third world are terrified
From the sounds of birds
From the scent of flowers
From the humming of pigeons
They imprison the sea if it speaks excessively
It is difficult for rulers in our third world
To reconcile thought
And to endorse the pen
Can a wolf befriend a sheep?

In his poem, the Journal of an Arab Executioner, Al-Qabbani mocks authoritarian leaders of the Middle East and their oppressive policies that personify states of the region around their cults of personalities as the champions/saviours of Arabism and nationalism. Countries are crafted to satisfy such leaders, while the ordinary person is crushed in this process. The nation in this sense is defined based on loyalty to the authoritarian leader and failure to express this loyalty is evidence of treachery, according to al-Qabbani. In his poem "The Journal of an Arab Executioner," he wrote (Moubayed 2017):

"O people; I have become your sultan
So break your idols and worship me"
"Thank God for his grace
For he has sent me to make history…"
"O people; I own you like I own my horses and slaves"

Oppression, according to Al-Qabbani, has its toll on people. In conditions of extreme violence, authoritarian regimes have hindered people's ability to see beauty and experience love. Tyranny has left permanent traumas on people, forcing them to forget the colour of flowers, the shape of birds, and the smell of jasmine, as Al-Qabbani writes in several of his poems. More specifically, in "A Lesson in Drawing", he wrote (Al-Qabbani 2010):

My son places his paint box in front of me
and asks me to draw a bird for him
Into the gray colour I drop the brush
and draw a square with locks and bars
Astonishment fills his eyes:
"But this is a prison, father, don't you know how to draw a bird?"
I tell him: 'Son, forgive me. I have forgotten the shapes of birds."

Al-Qabbani was also a victim of several tragedies, having lost his wife and son on separate occasions. When his wife, Balqis, was assassinated, he infamously published a poem criticizing oppression and lamenting the loss of his wife. This assassination was an attempt, according to Al-Qabbani, to silence his poetry and the life of Balqis was the price he paid. In his poem, "Balqis", he wrote (Al-Khalil 2005):

My beloved was murdered
Now you may
Have a toast on the grave of the martyred
My poem was assassinated
By God, is there on earth any nation
Except us, who commit such assassination?

Al-Qabbani challenges his readers to be critical of autocratic discourses because oppressive regimes are willing to construct narratives based on lies and deception in an attempt to justify and legitimize their actions (Al-Shahham 1989). Al-Qabbani writes (Al-Shahham 1989):

The state is good at composing words,
Excellent at the accusative, excellent at the genitive, excellent at the possessive,
Excellent at flexing its muscles.
There is no poetry worse than state poetry
No lie cleverer than state lies
Newspapers reports, commentaries.

As Al-Shahham (1989) explains, Al-Qabbani believed that the Arab world needed a revolution to overcome oppression, and decay. The cultural and literacy richness of the Arab world has been overshadowed. Political and economic structures prey on people and enforce exclusion and oppression. Revolution – according to Al-Qabbani – is the mechanism through which the decline of the Arab world could be reversed. Al-Qabbani writes (Al-Shahham 1989):

To deserve its name, Arab thought should advance like a bulldozer
to remove the ruins, debris and nails which have piled up on the
land of this region since the ages of decline. Comprehensiveness
is the first condition for revolutionary work. Revolutions cannot

be by instalments. Like nuclear explosions, revolutionary
explosions must take place instantaneously and comprehensively, or
else the revolution will turn into another kind of bureaucracy and
become an ancient Ottoman rifle which discharges bullets by instalments and kills by
installment.

As discussed, Al-Qabbani's poetry was shared within inner-circles across society for decades – and not just in Syria, but across the Arab world. During the Arab Spring uprising, his poetry heavily appeared in pamphlets and posters used by protesters in Syria (Moubayed 2018). Al-Qabbani's poetry expressed what many others were not able to express publicly, mocking the oppressor and lamenting lost freedom and social justice. Nizar's work does not propose a normative vision of post-authoritarian politics, as it is more focused on criticizing the conditions tyranny and its consequence on society. As Ahmed (2020) argues "as long as injustice and repression continue to exist, so will the timeless poetry of Nizar Qabbani be just as relevant."

Asala Nasri is a Syrian singer who is well-known across the Arab world. Living in Qatar, Asala, has been one of the earliest vocal supporters of the Syrian Uprising. In 2011, she came out in support of the uprising, indicating that "We are people asking for our most basic rights; we want a country we belong to, can be proud of, that we own a small part of. We don't feel that it belongs to one person because a country cannot be owned by a single person and cannot be named after one person" (Albawaba 2011) She also released several songs supporting the uprising – one of which attacks Assad directly. More specifically, in her song "If thrones could speak" she attacks Assad with the following message: "every throne has been smashed, learn your lesson. Knowledge will not be of any use to you; the people have stopped listening to you, the killings will not benefit you" (Albawaba 2011). The song continues "we kept quiet about injustice; don't say you didn't know when injury knows. I want to give you honest advice; staying won't work. We were oppressed and oppression made us learn" (Albawaba 2011). Asala remains vocal in her criticism of the Assad regime and support of the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people.

Burhan Ghalioun is professor of sociology at the Université de Paris III Sorbonne University and the former chair of the Syrian opposition Transitional National Council. He has been a long-time critic of autocratic politics in Syria and around the Middle East. In 1976, Ghalioun published a pamphlet titled "A Manifesto for Democracy" where he emphasized the need for Arab societies to democratize, explaining that the failure of Arab nationalism was caused by the "absence of the ideology, traditions, principles, and philosophy of democracy. The nationalist movements had failed because elite powers were functioning separate from the people" (Hanano 2011). In an interview with Souria Houria, Ghalioun (2011) argued that

the Syrian uprising was a struggle for independence, spearheaded by ordinary people in pursuit of liberation. He emphasized that this is a project that united Syrians of all backgrounds in pursuit of change stating that "We need to believe in the future, we need to believe no matter what, we are going to win." He concludes "My hope is for Syria to be liberated from these oppressive forces… [and] enter history as a free and liberated Syria." In another interview he claimed that Syrians "want freedom, peace, equality, rule of law, and salvation from an era in which the rule of law was destroyed by the regime of the Ba'athist sect" (Ghalioun 2011). He stressed that Syrians want a "a democratic system that respects freedoms, rights, as well as people as individuals" (Ghalioun 2011).When asked about sectarianism, he responded "I do not believe that Syria is threatened by sectarian strife because there is no Syrian group who believes in a sectarian solution or who has deep sectarian leanings" (Ghalioun 2011). He reasons that if "we look at the revolution's slogans and the behavior of revolutionaries, we see that they have resisted all sectarian incitements. This confirms that the Syrian people want unity, freedom, and a civilian state" (Ghalioun 2011). As an academic, Ghalouin (2004) has been consistent in his rejection of arguments that attribute the persistence of authoritarianism in Syria and the Middle East to religion or culture. Their persistence, he explains, is due to the "lack of any turnover or renewal of elites. Shielded from any contestation or even contestability, the existing powerholders of the Arab world have turned into a kind of hereditary aristocracy. They act as if they are the legitimate proprietors of whole states, whose resources and even populations the rulers may use according to their whims" (Ghalioun 2004, 127). The position of such regimes has been strengthened by support from Western states which allow them to remain resilient and more oppressive, according to Ghalioun (2004).

Prominent Syrian actress Mai Skaf has been one of the most outspoken critics of the Syrian regime who has been described as a key icon of the Syrian revolutions (Davison 2018). Mai joined street protests in 2011 and was imprisoned by the Assad regime. After being released, she fled the country to France where she continued to spearhead activism in support of the uprising (Davison 2018). In a 2015 interview with Orient TV, she insisted that the regime will fall inevitably (Skaf 2015). Mai, who has been raised in Christian family, rejected claims that protests were driven by sectarianism motivations. She explained that she joined "the brave young people" during protesters in Damascus, who sacrificed their life for freedom, where no sectarian discourses existed (Skaf 2015). She claimed that the regime sought to intimidate minorities by consistently propagating the narrative that the regime is protecting them from the massacres of Islamists. This narrative was shared directly with her during her experience under integration by the Assad regime. She explained that an

intelligence officer told her that "we are defending minorities from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists" and asked her to rethink her position (Skaf 2015). During the interview, Mai stressed that despite the regime's attempt to politicize sectarianism identities, sectarianism has never been and will never be part of Syria's social fabric: "Syrians are one people and will always be that way once the regime is removed." In explaining the origins of the uprising, Mai argued that the "revolution is a project driven by ordinary Syrians in pursuit of freedom for all of Syrians." She adds, "The revolution is against tyranny. It is a revolution of dignity. We will rebuild our country away from Assad – a democratic and free state that is home to the Syrian nation of with all its diversity and background." Days before dying from a heart attack at age 49, Skaf wrote on her Facebook page: "I will never lose hope, I will never lose hope. It's the great Syria, not Assad's Syria" (Roberts 2018). These last words summarized the legacy of Mai's activism.

The discourse/content presented here, demonstrates the vibrancy of pluralism in the work/discourse of Syria's intellectual and artistic elite. Although the sample examined here is limited in size, it nevertheless represents a larger pluralist discourse produced by Syrian elites over decades. The space for expressing such ideas is non-existent within Syria, and therefore exile offered elites alternative spaces to express these ideas through literature, music, poetry, and academia. Artistic expressions in particular managed to make their way back into Syria, as they were exchanged with communities of inner circles, as people lamented the conditions of tyranny they struggled with under for decades. These works provided people with literary tools to better make sense of oppression, while offering hope for emancipation. When Nizar Al-Qabbani criticized autocratic leaders, he also stressed that tyranny has overshadowed the richness of Syrian and Middle Eastern societies. He expressed a nostalgic narrative for a time when Syria – and Arab countries across the Middle East – were at the center of human progress and civilization. Through this depiction, the work of Al-Qabbani, among others, provided a sense of hope for the future, assuring readers that nations of the Middle East could liberate themselves from oppression and tyranny. These artistic expressions played an important role in shaping revolutionary discourse: Jokes, poetry, songs and other artistic expressions that for decades were transmitted through Syrian undersociety, and when the uprising began, they surfaced and helped shape the revolutionary discourse. They offered, in some instances, a comedic relief that minimized the pain of the regime's brutality against ordinary people, and in other instances inspired people to persist with their struggle towards emancipation (Wedeen 2020).

Pluralism and Contention Under Authoritarian Peace?

The political situation has only worsened for Syrians since 2011. Aided by Iranian and Hezbollah support on the ground and Russian airpower, the Assad regime and its militias have reestablished control over most of Syria through a military campaign that succeeded in defeating opposition groups across the country (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018).[17] In cementing control over areas retaken from the opposition, the regime moved to reconstruct its security network and to employ the same mechanisms of surveillance and violence to identify and suppress any suspected dissent (Abboud 2018). A recent report by the Human Rights Watch concluded that as of 2021, "security forces and government-affiliated militias continue to arbitrarily detain, disappear, and mistreat people across the country, including children, people with disabilities and older people, and returnees and individuals in retaken areas who have signed so-called reconciliation agreements" (Human Rights Watch 2022). Additionally, another report concluded that regime forces continue to "quietly and methodically organize the killing of thousands of people in custody" in a human liquidation process that involves unimaginable torture, "enforced disappearance and extermination" employed largely against "ordinary citizens who are thought to oppose the government" (Amnesty International 2017). These "practices have been widespread" and carried out systemically "in furtherance of state policy" (Amnesty International 2017). There are over 75,000 people that are thought to be in regime prisons – although their fate is unknown (Amnesty International n.d.). The regime continues to show no reluctance in using disproportionate violence to crush any form of dissent, including collective social action. Most recently, regime forces besieged Dara cutting off access to "bread, fuel, electricity, and healthcare services", and displacing at least 38,000 of the city's 58,000 citizens following anti-government protests that took place in the town (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Economic conditions in Syria have also deteriorated beyond repair. According to the World Bank, Syria's economy has shrunk by more than 60% since 2010 (The World Bank 2022). The country's total GDP declined from US$60 billion in 2010 to approximately US $23 billion in 2019. In addition, despite state intervention, the Syrian lira depreciated by over 5000%, from SY £46.85 to SY £2,511.97 to the U.S. dollar from December 2010 to April 2022 (Daher 2019e, FX Exchange Rates 2022). Hyperinflation has severely impacted affordability, skyrocketing out of control, as the cost of food and other vital staples continues to climb. Access "to shelter, livelihood opportunities, health, education, water, and sanitation have all worsened dramatically since the onset of the conflict" (United Nations 2022, Daher 2022).

[17] As part of its takeover strategy, the regime forcefully displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians from recaptured areas in the suburb of Damascus (among other regions) into rebel-held areas in Idlib, leaving behind entire towns across Syria emptied and severely destroyed.

The impact of these conditions has been felt across society: Extreme poverty affects more than 50% of the population (United Nations 2022). According to U.N. figures, in 2021, "nine in 10 Syrians now live in poverty, with 60% of the population at risk of going hungry — the highest number ever in the history of the Syrian conflict" (United Nations 2021). Socio-economic conditions have also been severely impacted as the middle class shrunk to 10-15% of the population, compared to 60% before the ongoing crisis. Economic conditions are expected to deteriorate further in the coming years as more people will require humanitarian assistance. The UN estimated that "in 2022, 14.6 million people will need humanitarian assistance, an increase of 1.2 million from 2021" (United Nations 2022).

Despite the harsh political and economic realities, the cultural manifestations that emerged from the pluralist revolutionary discourse of the 2011 Syrian Uprising continue to operate vibrantly across society - expressed in many forms, including music, literature, and art. This allowed for the emergence of a resilient revolutionary culture that continues to shape the discourse of contentious politics in Syria. The influence of such revolutionary culture is particularly evident in the chants, songs, and posters deployed in ongoing protests in areas within and outside the regime's control. This discourse is particularly evident in the protests that regularly mobilize in northern regions of Syria that are outside the regime's control. These protests have garnered hundreds of thousands of people and are especially massive when coinciding with critical milestones and timelines of the uprising – such as its anniversary.[18] A review of footage from these protests, posted on the Syrian Revolutionary Network Facebook page from 2017 to 2021, reveals this continuity in discourse: The same chants, songs and slogans that called for freedom, social justice, dignity, and unity during the 2011 Syrian uprising are deployed in these protests.

This discourse is not exclusive to areas outside the regime's control, where the space for collective social action is more available. It has also resurfaced in protests that occurred in regions re-taken by the regime. The regime's successful takeover of most of the country has constrained but not eliminated the momentum for protest movements within Syria. Sporadic protests continue to occur across different cities and towns, where the same slogans and songs that once echoed in public squares across Syria in 2011 continue to be deployed. More specifically, in June 2020, February 2022,December 2022, August 2023 protests mobilized in the Druze-majority city of Sweida where protestors condemned corruption and poor economic conditions and called for freedom and democracy (Amnesty International

[18] Most recently, in March 2022, tens of thousands took to the streets across Idlib and the suburb of Aleppo, committing to the revolutionary project (TRT World 2022). Protesters called for freedom, social justice, democracy, and regime change. They also chanted slogans in solidarity with the Ukrainian people amid Russia's invasion.

2020, Chehayeb 2022, BBC 2022, Suleiman and Hezaber 2023). In January 2019, March 2019, March 2021, March 2022, and August 2023 multiple protests broke out in Dara'a (Middle East Monitor 2019, Alrifai and Zelin 2021, Ertel 2023). Analysis of the protest footage demonstrates a continuity in the pluralist project of the 2011 Syrian uprising.

In addition, there has been an increase in virtual processes of contention exercised by Syrians across all segments of society to express frustrations with the political and economic conditions. Starting with elites, in recent years, and for the first time, prominent actors and actresses residing in regime-controlled areas of Syria have been vocal in criticizing the regime's oppressive politics and deteriorating economic conditions. This is a new trend that is often accompanied by Facebook hashtag campaigns supporting these artists – including from people residing in Syria. Among artists that expressed these views is prominent Syrian director and actor Ayman Zidan who recently wrote on Facebook "I can no longer stand life here. Everything around me weighs on my soul, I am tired. Life in this wounded country has become unbearable" (Makki 2022). Some have been more vocal in criticizing deteriorating living conditions. Syrian actor Firas Ibrahim posted on Facebook "in Russia, for example, the temperature reaches -40 degrees Celsius, and no one complains about the cold." He adds, "so cold is not to blame… The guilty are me, you, and all of us, who accept the lack of all means of heating and remain silent so as not to disturb with our innocent and sincere objections the people who have no sense of conscience!" (Asharq Al-Awsat 2022). Some have more directly criticized the regime. For example, during an interview with Damascus-based, prominent Syrian actor Abbas Al-Nouri claimed that upon gaining independence, "Syria set a fine example of democracy in the region with its multi-party politics and free elections" (MacDiarmid 2022). He adds, "Freedoms in Syria have been removed since the military came to power and overthrew democracy, the constitution and culture" (2022). He emphasizes that "Since 1963" - the year the Ba'ath Party took over power - "there is no longer any role for citizens. The state can delete the name of a poet from existence just because he has a difference of opinion with him" (Syrians for Truth and Justice 2022). On the same day, a hashtag Facebook campaign proliferated in support of Al-Nouri and "received a response from hundreds of Syrians who re-posted the hashtag", including Syrian actors/actresses/artists Shokran Mortga, Reem Zeno, Ayman Zidan, and Samih Choukaer (2022). Al-Nouri later apologized for his comments and thanked "President Assad for his role in the country, where would we be without his efforts and that of the Syrian Arab Army" (MacDiarmid 2022). These activities are evidence of mounting frustrations among the artistic elites that are no longer concealed in the same way they were for decades prior to the uprising. All the artistic elites identified here were once vocal supporters of the

regime – whose support could have been genuine or out of fear of the regime. Nevertheless, the rising trend is that the artistic community is increasingly growing frustrated with the Assad regime.

Ordinary people are also using social media platforms to voice their frustration with deteriorating conditions. Overall, analysis of virtual social media activities demonstrates that people residing in rebel-held territories are deploying direct and consistent anti-regime/revolutionary discourse, while others living in regime-controlled areas are relying on hinted/latent and indirect forms of communication to do the same. In assessing patterns of virtual social contention, my research focused on two recent events that triggered outrage in Syrian society: (1) the leak of a 2013 video showing regime forces committing a massacre in the Tadamon neighborhood of Damascus; and (2) the release of prisoners by the Syrian regime in May 2022 who were in terrible health and psychological conditions. The first event occurred in April 2022, when a leaked video dating back to 2013 showed Syrian intelligence officers humiliating and forcefully pushing blindfolded and tied civilians into a hole, executing them from behind, and setting their bodies on fire in the Tadamon district of Damascus. The video shows civilians pleading for their lives as regime forces celebrated their killing. This generated outrage in Syrian society, as social media activity quickly intensified in reaction to the video. A Google Trends analysis shows the fourth-highest rising searches between April 26-May 9 in areas within and outside the regime's control, as people were accessing the related content. In addition, several hashtag campaigns[19] connected to the Tadamon massacre trended in Syria, generating tens of thousands of posts (Google Trend 2020). A review of social media posts and comments associated with these hashtags reveals that people residing in areas outside the regime's control expressed direct criticism of the regime's brutality and the need to overthrow Assad. For people living in regime-held areas, posts/comments were less frequent and cautious – avoiding direct criticism of the regime. They took the form of emojis or written communication to express sorrow or sadness without directly attacking the regime. The most common statements include: "Allah alone is sufficient for us, and he is the best disposer of affairs for us," "God is Great, and/or "we have no power/strengthen without Allah." These expressions are commonly used in Syrian/Arab cultures in situations of tragedy.

To divert attention away from the Tadamon massacre video, in May 2022, Assad announced a general amnesty for people who did not commit "terroristic crimes" (Middle

[19] Hashtags include: #التضامن #مجزرة #مجزرة_حي_التضامن #مجزرةالتضامن #مجزرة_التضامن

East Monitor 2022). A total of 240 prisoners were released due to this decree from the notorious Sednaya Prison – while tens of thousands remain in prison. Social media activity significantly increased as tens of thousands of posts trended under a number of hashtags[20] relating to the release of prisoners. Posts ranged from those by family members looking for information about the whereabouts of imprisoned loved ones[21] – whether dead or alive - to pictures and videos of released prisoners in terrible health and psychological conditions (See Appendix E for top trending photos). With regard to the former, Facebook pages – such as the "Sharing Names of Prisoner and Missing" (which has over 100,000 followers), were set up by activists to help people looking for information on loved ones who went missing after being arrested by the regime. Analysis of these posts demonstrates that most of these posts were from people anxious for information on missing siblings, parents, spouses, children, cousins etc.

Several images were widely shared under the trending hashtags that symbolized Syrians' struggle both as prisoners in regime prisons and as family members desperate for information about missing loved ones. Appendix E provides some of these pictures: Figure 1 shows family members of detainees displaying photographs of missing relatives to a newly released detainee hoping for information on their fate; Figure 2 shows a group of prisoners in horrible physical conditions – seated in a room centered by the picture of Assad in the background, forced to chant affection and gratitude for Assad's amnesty that secured their release; Figure 3 shows thousands of "Syrians waiting at the Al-Ra'is Bridge in Damascus for relatives they hope would be among those released from prison" (Ghazi 2022); Figure 4 shows a newly released detainee in poor physical and mental health and conditions, suffering memory loss after years of torture (Yusef 2022). Comments on posts showing the pictures in Appendix E were more directly critical of the regime from people living in Assad-held areas of Syria. They included comments such as but not limited to: "this is very brutal", "may Allah break their arms," "monsters do this," "they are heartless," "may Allah rid us of them," and "we have no power/strengthen without Allah."[22] Comments from people residing in areas outside the regime followed the same critical pattern outlined in the first example.

In areas within and outside regime control, the proliferation of social media activity in Syria reveals mounting frustration within Syrian society with political and economic conditions. People are finding ways to express their agency using new avenues. For those

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[20] Hashtags include: السجناء #للمعتقلين #صيدنايا #بدنا_ياهم_كلهم #حرية #بدناالمعتقلين #بدناياهون_بدناالكل #ياحرية #لاماخلصت_الحكاية #معتقلون #مفقودون#

[21] A Google Trend analysis shows a shift in search queries away from the Tadamon massacre. The term 'Sednaya' moved to the top three trending searches as people were now preoccupied with searching for the names of those who died in custody and those who were released/to be released from prison, hoping for information about missing family members.

[22] لا حول ولا قوة إلى بالله; الله يخلصنا منهن; الله يكسر أيديهن; الوحوش بتعمل هيك

residing in regime-held areas, this criticism has largely been more indirect, compared to those living outside regime-held territories who have more directly criticized the regime and called for its overthrow. Having said that, social media activity that emerged in response to the release of prisoners from within government-held areas has been more critical of the Assad regime. This is a significant trend to keep monitoring as it may be evidence that people are reaching a breaking point which will only intensify contentious processes.

5.2 Failure to Materialize: The Pluralist Project of the Uprising

The evidence presented in the preceding sections demonstrates the vibrancy of the cosmopolitan project of the Syrian uprising in society. This raises the question: if this project was and is still vibrant, why has it failed to materialize? What explains the proliferation of sectarian groups within the country? What explains the rise of Jihadi-Salafism in Syria? The crisis should not be understood as a sectarian conflict driven out of primordial animosities between Sunnis and Shias, as some observers have noted (Heydemann 2013, Burke 2013, Iglesias 2013, Abdo 2015, Sorenson 2016, Alrawi 2017, Alvarez-Ossorio 2019). This simplistic and limited view does not go beyond the surface of what is otherwise a complex crisis involving all major superpowers. This section employs the PPC approach to examine why the cosmopolitan project of the Syrian uprising failed to materialize. It will demonstrate that multiple domestic, regional and international factors created unfavourable conditions that overshadowed the cosmopolitan project. This includes the brutality of the Assad regime and its policies of authoritarian sectarianization, supplemented by regional and international interventions which transformed Syria into a battleground fought by different regional and international powers in pursuit of their conflicting interests (C. Phillips 2016, Hashemi and Postel 2017a). Through this intervention, various Salafi-Jihadi groups developed across the country, advancing conflicting ideologies while appointing themselves as representatives of the revolution. These groups, I argue, only overshadowed the emancipatory disposition of the revolutionary movement. They emerged as a symptom of the crisis and should not be viewed as an extension of the uprising. As will be contextualized in this section, Salafi-Jihadism emerged as a reaction to the contradictions of post-colonial politics across the Middle East, stagnating economic conditions, and continued Western/U.S. imperialism in the region. Funded by regional and international actors, the crisis in Syria offered Salafi-Jihadi groups a fertile ground to put their respective projects in action.

Regime Violence and Sectarianization

Since the early days of the crisis, the Assad regime employed a deliberate policy of sectarianization[23] to undermine the protest movement and dismantle the support of minority communities for the uprising (Hashemi and Postel 2017b, Khatib 2018). When peaceful protests broke out, the regime responded immediately by claiming that the country was being targeted by Salafi-Zionist terrorist groups carrying out a conspiracy to destabilise Syria (Wieland 2013, Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). The regime was adamant in keeping up with this narrative, refusing to acknowledge that any peaceful protests were taking place - essentially casting all peaceful protesters as Jihadi terrorists. As the crisis escalated, the regime employed this narrative further by "inciting Allawi and other religious minorities to back the regime in its battle against Sunni fundamentalism" while at the same time presenting itself as the "only entity capable of preventing civil war and of maintaining sectarian stability" (Rifai 2018, 245). As discussed earlier in this chapter, several participants (O-008, O-011, O-013, O-024, O-026 and O-031) who identified as members of religious minorities have indicated that this narrative was shared within their communities by regime officials who also emphasized that the fate of Syria's minorities lies with the fate of the regime. Participant O-011, who identified as Allawi, explained that within her village, regime agents tried to persuade people that Alawites will be massacred if the Assad regime falls, and that the country was being targeted by the Muslim Brotherhood. Several other participants (O-008 and O-031) who identified as Ismaili explained that this narrative was reinforced and shared through community leaders within their communities but failed to deter people from participating in protest movements.

Despite its attempt to divide Syrians and polarize sectarian identities, the regime failed to undermine the popular appeal of the uprising. From its humble beginnings in Dara'a, protests spread quickly around Syria, bringing together hundreds of thousands of people from all backgrounds who mobilized peacefully to call for freedom, social justice and dignity. The uprising was "characterized by genuinely spontaneous, geographically widespread and community-based protests" (Bartolomei 2018, 228). Activists and protesters responded to the regime's sectarianization of the crisis by emphasizing "the cross-sectarian and peaceful nature of the Uprising while developing a strong nationalist and anti-sectarian discourse which framed events in Syria as a popular national Uprising against an oppressive regime under which all components of Syrian society had equally suffered" (2018, 228). As I argued in earlier research, the ethnic, religious, and cultural differences/tensions that were argued to

[23] Coined by Hashemi and Postel (2017a, 4), sectarianization is a "process shaped by political actors operating within specific context, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity marker".

have held back the region from progress appeared insignificant and did not impact the uprising's and pluralist discourse (Zaamout 2020b). Where things begin to complicate is when violence intensified and when sectarianization took a regional dimension. Before discussing this militarization, it is important to provide some context as to why it began in the first place. I argue that the Syrian regime's reliance on extreme violence forced the militarization of the crisis (Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami 2016). Since the early days of the uprising, the regime has relied on torture, rape, sexual violence, systemic liquidation of prisoners, the use of chemical and highly destructive weapons in targeting residential areas, forced starvation of rebelling cities and towns, massacring civilians in close range using knives or ammunition, severing body parts, and burning prisoners, among many other methods and tactics to suppress dissent (Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami 2016). This violence was carried out largely by pro-regime gangs, *the Shabiha,* who deliberately employed sectarian patterns of violence in targeting civilians (Jasser 2014). While claiming to be a victim of sectarianism, the Syrian regime is largely responsible for sectarianizing violence. Several massacres made headlines worldwide – even before the militarization of the crisis – including the torture and killing of 13-year-old Hamza Al-Khatib in 2011, which sparked the uprising; the assault on Jabal al-Zawiya where over 100 people were killed by government shelling (Friedman 2012); the killing of over 700 people when government forces stormed the town of Daraya in 2012 (Michaelson 2022); the extermination of all 108 residents – mostly children and women - in the village of Al-Houla carried out by knife in 2012 (Musa 2020); the torture, and massacre of 288 civilians in the Tadamon neighbourhood of Damascus in 2013 (Shahhoud and Üngör 2022); the chemical weapons attack on the Ghouta rebel-held regions killing over 1,500 residents in 2013 (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2021). These are only a few of an extensive list of other massacres committed by the Assad regime since the crisis began. The brutality of the Assad regime has been unmatched in the Middle East – in no other state in the region had civilians suffered this scale of violence and destruction, making the militarization of the crisis inevitable as soldiers and officers defected, refusing to take part in the killing of Syrians.

The militarization of the Syrian crisis unfolded over two stages. The first occurred between 2011-2012, as defectors from the Syrian military formed informal and dispersed resistance groups across the country. Defectors "consisted of soldiers who had been ordered to shoot protestors, and very often did, lest they themselves were shot by the intelligence officers at their rear" (Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami 2016, 85). As Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami (2016, 85) explain, a "combination of guilt, horror and fury propelled many to escape when they could, but perhaps most were killed in the attempt or hunted down in the following days."

These defectors typically managed to take "one weapon with them; sometimes, they managed to break weapons out of stores. In every case, they had to be prepared to fight to resist capture. Those who sheltered them had to face the fury too" (Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami 2016, 85). The first of these defectors was lieutenant colonel Hussein Harmoush who formed the Free Officers Brigade – the first militant rebel group. This small group consisted of dozens of army defectors and operated solely in northern Syria. Several months later, as defections increased, the Free Officers Brigade was replaced by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was formed jointly by Colonel Riyad Al-Assad and lieutenant colonel Harmoosh (Philips 2016). The FSA quickly merged as the most significant rebel force during the first phase of militarization, not as a unified army but rather as "a collection of militias, some mobile, most are local and defensive", unified by the goal of "destroying the regime and establishing a democratic state" (Yassin-Kasseb and Al-Shami 2016, 84-85). Initially, these militias confined their operations to protecting protesters from regime violence, but as the crisis escalated, they took a more offensive approach (C. Phillips 2020).

Regional/International Intervention

The second phase of militarization began around late-2012, expedited by the intervention of regional and international actors, transforming Syria into a battleground over geopolitical interests (Hinnebusch 2020). As Phillips (2016, 2020) masterfully demonstrates, any understanding of the crisis in Syria is incomplete without considering how the international dimension shaped the character of the crisis and forced its continuation. Global/regional powers were not passively drawn into the crisis but were rather the primary participants that shifted the crisis into an armed confrontation for power and influence, carried out by their respective proxies (Phillips 2016). Regionally, Iran and Hezbollah intimately supported the Assad regime, while Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed the opposition (Hinnebusch and Rifai 2021). This involvement accompanied a process of "sectarianization from above", employed by these players in an attempt to legitimize their intervention in the crisis (Hinnebusch and Rifai 2021). In Iran, a sectarian narrative was deployed, attributing the "nonviolent Syrian protests of 2011 to Salafist "terrorists" supported by Riyadh hellbent on toppling Iran's key regional ally in Damascus" (Hashemi and Postel 2017b, 7). This narrative drew on classic Shi'a themes of persecution, martyrdom, and sacrifice" around the "threat of the destruction of Shi'a shrines in Syria" (Hashemi and Postel 2017b, 9). On the other hand, Turkey, Qatar and especially Saudi Arabia "portrayed the

conflict as part of a broader struggle to defend Sunnis against the Shiite axis in the region" (Hinnebusch and Rifai 2021).

Beyond these narratives, the crisis had geopolitical significance for these regional actors (C. Phillips 2020). For Tehran, the Syrian regime has been a key partner in the so-called axis of resistance and a reliable ally since the Iraq-Iran war, and its survival is therefore critical for maintaining Iranian regional influence and power across the Middle East (Mahdavi 2013b, Hashemi and Postel 2017b). For the remaining regional actors, regime change in Damascus would constitute a significant blow to Iranian power and influence and would result in a possible reconfiguration of the regional balance of power in their favour (Wehrey, et al. 2009). It is important to mention that even though Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE shared the same objective of wanting to remove Assad, they also departed on various other strategic issues (C. Phillips 2020). Consequently, a rivalry played out on the ground between Saudi-UAE and Turkey-Qatar. This meant that each side supported their own proxies, which effectively dismantled the unity of the opposition. On the ground, Iran and Hezbollah organized "a transnational Shi'a militia movement from among the poor and devout Shi'a communities of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq" to fight in Syria (Hashemi and Postel 2017b, 8), while Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar "sponsored proxies from the Sunni community, notably Muslim Brotherhood militias by Qatar and Turkey and Salafists by Saudi Arabia; but also Qatar and Turkey at times flirted with Salafi jihadists such as Al-Qaida avatars, Jabhat A

l-Nusra and Islamic State" (Hinnebusch and Rifai 2021).

Internationally, the involvement of global superpowers in the crisis determined how the conflict spanned out. Russia, China, and the United States had conflicting interests in Syria. For Russia, Syria was of crucial geopolitical significance given that the country is home to Russia's only Mediterranean naval base and a key ally since the cold war (Chance 2016). Hence Putin's Russia was unwilling to compromise the security of the Assad regime and employed political and military means to ensure its survival (C. Phillips 2020). China, on the other hand, had no interest in intervening directly in the crisis but, at the same time, did not want a change in regime that would allow the U.S. and its allies to expand their influence in the region (Houlden and Zaamout 2019). By aligning its use of the veto power at the UN Security Assemble with Russia, China vetoed almost every resolution that attempted to condemn, sanction, or penalize the Assad regime (Nichols 2019)

The U.S. position is perhaps the most complex: Given the disastrous outcomes of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, President Obama came into office committing himself to a new Foreign Policy, leaning away from direct military involvement in conflicts around the world (C. Phillips 2020). In the case of Syria, Obama refused to take on a more active role on the

ground, despite internal and external pressures to do so (C. Phillips 2020). He was aware that powers like China and particularly Iran and Russia and groups such as Hezbollah from Lebanon had committed extensive resources to ensuring the survival of the Assad regime, and he was not interested in involving the US in a geo-political competition with these powers. Rhetorically nevertheless, President Obama had repeatedly made it clear since the crisis began in 2011 that Syrian President Bashar Assad had no future in Syria (C. Phillips 2020). Despite his insistence that Assad must step down, Obama avoided direct involvement[24]. This paved the way for Putin's Russia to emerge more confidently, taking on a more active military role in support of the Syrian regime while also frustrating regional U.S.-allies such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, who, for their particular geo-political interests were determined to topple President Assad through any means necessary. In so doing, they sporadically armed and supported various groups declaring hostility to Assad (C. Phillips 2020). This contributed to the division and radicalization of the opposition paving the ground for the emergence of the various separatist and Islamist groups (such as ISIS, Fattih Al-Sham Front or Al-Nusra formally, and the YPG and YPD etc.) driven by specific political aspirations contrary to those sought by protestors during the early phase of the crisis (Achar 2013, 2016). The FSA was soon replaced by these organized, better-equipped, foreign-funded rebel groups that formed across the country. As Achar (2013, 185) argues, the "regime's increasingly blind, deadly violence and the accumulation of sectarian massacres perpetrated by its special forces or its shabbiha" provoked "reactions of the same general sort from Sunni fighters, who are, moreover, being egged on by the Saudi Wahhabis' sectarian propaganda." It paved the ground for the emergence and wide spread of the "ultraconservative Salafist ideology to form" across the country (Gerges 2016, 15).

It was clear by 2014 that the dynamics of the crisis transformed into an armed confrontation between various combatants including a the Assad regime and various rebel groups serving foreign interests, including separatist Kurdish nationalists, Sunni Islamists, and Shiite militants. At the height of the crisis more than 1,000 independent militias formed, "often centered on a particular individual, region or ideology" (Phillips 2020, 2). "Personal and ideological difference, particular over the role of Islam and Jihadism" exacerbated conflict between these militias and contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition (Phillips 2020,

[24] Following the 2013 chemical attack on rebel-held Ghouta, which left over 1,400 deaths, President Obama came close to authorizing the use of force against the regime of President Assad. He previously warned the Syrian government that the U.S. would not stand idly by if Assad resorted to the use of chemical weapons. He stressed that this was a 'red line', not to be crossed, for the United States (C. Phillips 2020). However, despite the threat of the use of force, Obama increasingly became reluctant and began to seek alternative exit strategies. In this case, he successfully reached a compromise with Russian President Vladimir Putin: Syria would give up its chemical weapons and in exchange, the US will not carry out the anticipated strike (C. Phillips 2020).

2-3). The Jihadi groups that emerged in the Syrian crisis were not new of course, but emerged out a legacy of oppression and contradictions that defined the post-colonial politics of states in the Middle East (Dabashi 2012). Syria served as the ground for these groups to re-emerge and advance their respective political projects. Such groups advanced exclusionary political projects that were radically incompatible with the cosmopolitan project of the uprising (Zaamout 2020b). They contributed to the revival of reactionary post-colonial ideological formations (third-world socialism, Islamism, nationalism) that emerged in a "combative conversation against a colonial modernity" and dominated post-colonial politics of the region for decades (Dabashi 2016, 195, Zaamout 2017). Such groups appointed themselves as the representatives of the Syrian revolution while legitimizing their projects by invoking sectarian identities. These militant groups "do not have a legitimate political claim on the people of Syria" and they are nothing more than counterrevolutionary forces who fulfilled the regime's self-proclaimed prophecy – claiming to fight Islamists (Zaamout 2020b, 6). Syrians are the victims in this conflict. While there is no denying that sectarianism became a key feature of the conflict, this is not a reflection on Syrians themselves, but these were rather realities imposed on them against a turbulent geopolitical context. The cosmopolitan project of the Syrian uprising has not been eliminated but once again silenced. It will continue to exist and will reactive "in moment of large-scale social crisis – such as coups, revolutions etc. – when the nation retrieves and reactivates its aesthetic intuition of transcendence" (Dabashi 2012, xix). As argued in the preceding section of this chapter, we are already seeing signs of its resurfacing through the sporadic protests that continue to happen in different parts of Syria, rising trends of people criticizing the regime on social media, and the rise of elite criticism of the regime – from those living in Syria. The coming section will briefly contextualize Jihadi-Salafism in order to odder a better understanding of how it emerged.

Understanding the History and Rise of Jihadism

Since the 1960s, the failure of Arab nationalism to deliver on its promise of uniting the Arab world, in addition to economic stagnation, and the emergence of increasingly authoritarian secular Arab regimes – which continued to draw on exhausted Arabist discourses to legitimize their oppressive practices – widened the gaps between state and society across the region and created the need for alternative projects that would offer hope for emancipation (Khashan 2021). This generated reactionary Islamist-Jihadism as a political thought that was largely influenced by the work of Sayyid Qutb. Scholars regard Qutb as the "Father of Salafi Jihadism", whose political thought laid the ideological foundation for

contemporary Salafi Jihadism (Manne 2016). Writing in the 1960s, Qutb posits that the Muslim Umma has regressed into a condition of Jahiliya – defined by ignorance, barbarism, and spiritual darkness. Salvation out of this condition could only be achieved through violence: that is, by forming an Islamic vanguard that would militarily remove the oppressive regimes of the Middle East and develop an Islamic system of governance (Manne 2016). Qutb argued that preaching alone is not sufficient for conquering Jahiliya, stressing the necessity of armed struggle in establishing God's religion in the world (Manne 2016). Qutb's early thought was not as radical, but some scholars have argued that his experience of imprisonment and torture in Egyptian prisons played a key role in radicalizing his thought (Esposito, Rahim and Ghobadzadeh 2018). Qutb's work became central in influencing Salafi-Jihadi groups that emerged throughout the 1980s, including in Syria with the radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood movement as argued in Chapter 2.

The war in Afghanistan was the arena that allowed Salafi-Jihadi thought to be put into action during the 1980s and to develop at a global scale (Riedel 2014). Within the context of the Cold War, the U.S. sought to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet quagmire – to embroil the Moscow in an unwinnable war that would drain its military and resources (Riedel 2014). In so doing, the CIA led one of its most important covert operations – Operation Cyclone – where the U.S. played an instrumental role in forming, funding, and arming the Mujahedeen movement in Afghanistan to take on the Soviets militarily (Mandaville 2017). The movement quickly attracted significant support and followers from the Middle East and was articulated positively - President Jimmy Carter described the Mujahedeen as freedom fighters resisting Soviet aggression (Riedel 2014).

The defeat and withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan in 1989, was hailed as "victory" against the Soviets in the context of the US-USSR cold war rivalry, but this victory had the consequence of emboldening Jihadi-Salafism as an ideology (Riedel 2014). The conflict brought together similarly minded individuals and offered them the space and time to form a transnational Jihadi agenda that would extend beyond Afghanistan. Their focus in the 1990s was to take on regimes of the Middle East and establish Islamic caliphates (McLean and McMillan 2009). During that period, continued U.S. imperialism in the Middle East, rising authoritarianism, oppression, economic stagnation, and inequality, as well as the failure of Arab nationalism culminated in a legitimacy crisis for many Arab states (Mahdavi 2013a). This created a fertile ground for the emergence of Salafi-Jihadism out of the remnants Al-Mujahedeen movement throughout the region. Among these groups is Al-Qaida, which expanded its operations across the Middle East in the 1990s-2000s (Gerges 2011).

The attacks on the twin-tower in New York in September 2001 signalled a transformation in the trajectory of global jihadism. This was one of the largest attacks on U.S. soil since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The U.S. and its allies swiftly responded by invading Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, accusing governments of both countries of harboring Al-Qaida. Contrary to this accusation, Al-Qaida did not operate in Iraq, and there were no links between al-Qaida and the regime of Saddam Hussein (Gerges 2021). The invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent U.S. dismantlement of Iraqi state institutions, implementation of de-ba'athification policies and the formation of a sectarian-based political system aggravated Sunni populations and created the conditions that propelled the rise of Al-Qaida (Gerges 2021). The group relied on sectarian discourses to legitimize its activities and played a key role in fighting U.S. occupation and participating in conflict against Shia populations until it was dismantled in 2006, after the U.S. succeeded in killing the group's founder Abu-Mos'ab Al-Zarqawi. The defeat of Al-Qaida mitigated a symptom that emerged out of the underlying economic, social, and political problems stemming from the U.S. invasion of Iraq but did not address those problems which only worsened and intensified, paving the ground for the emergence of the more extreme Islamic State (ISIS) as will be argued in the coming paragraphs (Gerges 2021).

When the Arab Spring uprising broke out, peaceful protests spread into both Iraq and Syria. These uprisings reflected popular attempt for freedom, social justice, and dignity in spontaneous and grassroots demonstrations. The demise of state institutions in both countries, and the intensification of regional/international funding and intervention allowed many Salafi-Jihadi groups to form out of the chaos (Gerges 2021). These groups, which prominently included Ahrar Al-Sham, Ansar Al-Sham, Jaysh Al-Islam, Harakat Nour al-Din Al-Zenki, Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State (ISIS) ranged on the ideological scale as I demonstrate in an earlier publication (Zaamout, 2021). In 2014, ISIS emerged as an offshoot of Al-Qaida, quickly replacing the group with a more radical Salaf-Jihadi agenda that put into action its plan to establish a self-proclaimed caliphate led by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (Gerges 2021). ISIS employed former Ba'athist officers who served in the army of Saddam Hussein but were excluded and marginalized for years in post-Saddam Iraq. These highly trained and proficient officers employed military tactics that were unmatched by other militant groups and were instrumental to ISIS's quick rise across Syria and Iraq (Gerges 2021).

Salafi-Jihadism emerged out of a complex history of "broken politics" in the Middle East (Hashemi 2016b, 16). It is a symptom of broader problems stemming from stagnating political, economic, and social conditions which have been aggravated by neocolonial practices of U.S/Western states that allowed for such ideology to form and play a key role in politics of

the Middle East (Gerges 2021). Salafi-Jihadism is a reactionary ideology that has radicalized over the years, as the structural problems that created the conditions for its emergence in the first placed worsened and intensified (Dabashi 2012). The legitimacy crisis facing post-colonial states in the Middle East, and rising economic inequality, poverty and oppression will continue to create the conditions that will allow Salafi-Jihadi groups to emerge from – perhaps with different names and/or agendas.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter focused on addressing two primary questions: What is left of the cosmopolitan project of the Syrian uprising? Why has it failed to materialize? With regard to the first question, I demonstrated how the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising remains vibrant in Syrian society as evident in the sporadic protests that continue to occur in areas controlled by the regime and more organized protests in areas outside the regime's control. Analysis of chants, posters, and songs emanating out of these protests reveals continuity in the pluralist discourse that emergence out of the 2011 Syrian uprising. In addition, based on data collected from my field research, I demonstrate how interviewees shared a strong desire for a democratic and pluralist Syria, away from authoritarianism and Islamism. Views on the future reflected cautious optimism: While the majority expressed strong beliefs that the uprising would succeed in the end, there was a recognition that Syrian society is suffering from significant wounds and traumas that need to be remedied. My research also examined the discourse/content of a sample of civil society groups operating in Syrian society both internally and in exile. Analysis of these groups demonstrates that their discourse is largely aligned with the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising. Lastly, through examining social media activity, I demonstrated how in recent years, Syrians are increasingly taking to social media to express discontent with deteriorating economic and political conditions. For people residing in areas outside the regime’s control, this included direct criticism of the Syrian regime, while the criticism of those who resided in areas under government-control was expressive through indirect/latent communication. These realities are evidence of brewing processes of contention there are being expressed more visibly and in different ways - alluding to the fact that contentious politics remains vibrant in society and evolving to take on different forms despite all that has happened on the ground.

In answering the second question, I show that contrary to the orientalist readings, the cosmopolitan project of the Syrian uprising failed to materialize, not because of the culture of

ordinary people but rather by the intersection of a multiplicity of domestic, regional, and international dimensions that transformed the crisis into a geopolitical proxy conflict over power and control. Domestically, the brutality of the Assad regime in suppressing the demonstrations and reliance on top-down sectarianization discourse, forced the militarization of the crisis as defectors from the Syrian army formed armed resistance groups that initially were confined to protecting protests but later escalated into taking on the regime more directly. This militarization was rapidly expedited due to foreign intervention: Regionally, Iran and Hezbollah backed the Assad regime, while Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE sought to remove Assad by forming, funding, and arming various militant groups. Internationally, Russia committed political and military support to prop up the Assad regime, while China provided political support. The U.S. and Western states opposed the Assad regime and made it clear that it had no future in Syria but were less willing to play an active role on the ground. Through this quagmire, the militarization shifted as states that opposed Assad engaged in sporadic arming of various militants, allowing for Salafi-Jihadism to rise as the most prominent force on the ground, replacing the so-called moderate rebels. I show that these groups emerged out of a complex history stemming from the post-colonial condition, economic stagnation, and Western/U.S. imperialism that allowed Salafi-Jihadism to emerge since the 1970s and flourish in Syria amid foreign funding and chaos.

CONCLUSION

What began as a peaceful uprising, spearheaded by ordinary people hopeful for change, has transformed into a geopolitical proxy war. Syria today is suffering many wounds. A large segment of Syria's population continues to live in refugee camps, with no access to basic services such as health and education, faced with systemic racism in places such as Lebanon and Jordan in particular. Internally the country is devastated from a socioeconomic perspective. Poverty is at an all-time high, as inflation continues to rise. This is further aggravated by lack of basic commodities such as food, fuel, medical supplies, and electricity. Despite the regime's claim of rebuilding, entire towns and large segments of major cities are uninhabitable, left in ruins. The Syrian tragedy continues to unfold, manifesting into new realties of hardship as people struggle to make ends meet and the gap between state and society is widening.

This dissertation examined the dynamics of Syrian society in the midst of this crisis, focusing on two primary questions: How was contentious politics exercised in Syria under semi-totalitarian conditions and what explains the emergence of the 2011 uprising? What impact has the escalation of the crisis has had on the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising in society? In addressing these questions, this dissertation brought back the critical study of Syrian society to the forefront. *Chapter 1* sketched the research approach, outlining that it employed what I refer to as a post-colonial cosmopolitan framework and Asef Bayat's theory of social non-movement and methodologically relied on the review of primary/secondary sources and semi-structured interviews to examine the politics of contention under harsh conditions and assess the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising. *Chapter 2* delved into a discussion of state-society relations and showed that Syria's civil society has historically been vibrant, playing a pivotal role in the battle for independence from colonial occupation. With the rise of the Assad regime, this civil society was systemically fragmented and dismantled through violence. *Chapter 3* discussed and problematized conventional theories, approaches and concepts on democratization, civil society, and social movements and argued that such conventional literature developed largely out of the study of politics in the West and does not adequately travel across spatial and temporal contexts. To produce more nuanced knowledge, we need to rethink the concepts, theories and methodologies that have come to be accepted as universal and opt for alternative models forged through critical dialogue between Western and non-Western scholars. This dialogue should be rooted in the dignity of difference – that transcends both 'universalism' and 'particularism' and is informed by a "glocal" synthesis of local and global understandings and knowledge (recognizing multiple

forms of modernity) (Mahdavi 2023). *Chapter 4* demonstrated how societal processes contention in Syria operated largely through communities of informal close-knit inner circles, formed among people across society as social spaces that also created avenues for social agency that operated outside the regime's security apparatus. In addition, I also shed light on the characteristics of quiet encroachment strategies employed in Syria by people across the country in an attempt to improve their lives. This included building homes on unpermitted lands, embezzling water and electricity lines, participating in non-genuine displays of conformity, taking part in corruption, and engage in strategic avoidance of the state. My analysis shows how the solidarities, identities and tactics employed for decades through underground non-movement forms of contention mobilized into formal protest movements in 2011. *Chapter 5* showed how the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising remains alive and vibrant across society as evident in the enduring commitment to political change and a desire to establish a pluralistic democratic system of governance across Syrian society, as observed based on my examination of interview data and primary/secondary sources. I explained that the failure of this project from materializing was due to several factors. Internally, the regime's harsh violent response to peaceful protests and deliberate instrumentalization of sectarian identities contributed to the early militarization of the crisis. With the intervention of regional and international actors, the crisis quickly morphed into a geopolitical proxy war for power and influence.

Contributions to Political Science/Middle East Studies

This dissertation makes several empirical and theoretical contributions to existing literature. First, it contributes to a relevantly understudied area of research – the study of contentious politics in Syria. In so doing, it sheds light on patterns of social agency embedded in non-movements forms of contention which helps inform theory-building on contentious politics in politically closed environments. Second, I build on Asef Bayat's (2013, 2020, 2021) theory of social non-movements, by highlighting the unique characteristics of Syrian contentious politics. Bayat developed his theory based on the study of authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia. I extend his analysis to examine contention in Syria, a semi-totalitarian regime. Third, I challenge the continued Orientalist articulations of Middle Eastern politics by research that reduces politics of the Middle East to notions of sectarian conflict (Lewis, 1976, 2003; Huntington, 1993, 1996), or by those that the Syrian uprising and subsequent crisis represent nothing more than the continuation of a historically rooted sectarian conflict (Abdo 2015, Zisser 2019), or others that explain the Arab Spring as an Islamist extremist project

aiming to redraw the geography of the region (Bradly 2012). The Syrian case in particular has been widely referenced as evidence of these phenomena. Such perspectives present societies of the Middle East as static, uncivilized, backwards, and incapable of producing modern pluralist and democratic ideals. Contrary to these explanations, I show that the Syrian crisis begin as a peaceful uprising, driven by grassroots for a pluralist and democratic Syria. The uprisings were overshadowed by the transformation of the crisis into a geopolitical proxy war, that drew all regional and international powers. I show that despite the escalation of the crisis in Syria, pluralist ideas that surfaced during the Arab Spring continue to exist vibrantly in society. This finding offers important insight into the capacity of societal processes to generate pluralist ideas even when faced with severe constraints.

Limitations/Further Research

In this dissertation, I highlighted how cultural manifestations of resistance which took various forms, including telling jokes or poetry, emerged, and transmitted among Syrians through private spaces among close-knit individuals, evading the regime's security network. This is an important topic to explore further as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of human resiliency under harsh conditions. While this research provides a general examination of this resistance culture, more in-depth research is required to fully examine its nuances and how it has evolved since the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian uprising. This resistance culture continues to develop and take on new forms. Social media in particular is playing a critical role in shaping this resistance culture. Whereas previously, it was constructed largely through interpersonal relations. More recently, in addition to these relations, social media is allowing for the formation of broader passive networks by connecting people from across the country who are engaging in virtual forms of non-movements, relying on symbols, jokes, hinted communication to express dissatisfaction with an increasingly harsh political and economic conditions (Bayat 2022).

Further research is also required to assess how contentious processes are proliferating in the realm of social media. The theory of social non-movement does an adequate job highlighting how everyday acts of resistance through the formation of passive networks, but more research is required to highlight emerging patterns of virtual contention. Findings from this field research demonstrated how people residing in areas controlled by the regime are more actively relying on social media platforms to criticize the regime and economic conditions indirectly. As conditions deteriorate further and as internet connectivity becomes more common, it is expected that these platforms will be employed more rigorously as a key feature

of non-movements practices of contention in Syria and around the Global South. Additional research on this topic will offer constructive contributions to the study of comparative politics, transforming how we think and reflect on contentious practices in an increasingly digital world.

The Politics of Contention in Difficult Times

Emerging research on Syria continues to default to the aforementioned Orientalist arguments, emphasizing that the escalation of the crisis is evidence that the Middle East is exceptionally immune from progress - stuck in endless cycles of violence. Beyond these essentialist arguments, emerging critical theoretical perspectives offer scholars new frameworks to better understand politics in the non-Western world. In the context of this project, I employed Asef Bayat's theory of social non-movements, which exposes vibrant patterns of informal and non-structured forms of contention that operate through everyday street politics in politically closed environments where the space for organized social action is limited/non-existent. This theory helps us understand how the powerless exercise power over state/public structures to improve their lives. In applying this theory to the Syrian context, I showed how people have exercised various patterns of contention - the most important of which was the formation of communities of informal and disconnected close-knit inner circles that allowed Syrians to forge underground spaces where they could express agency in ways that were otherwise not possible. The role of inner circles is rising in prominence as deteriorating economic and political conditions continue to drive people to leverage and expand their support networks to cope with the hardships of everyday life.

Non-movement politics of contention can take many forms - which differ from context to context and even from time to time – based on emerging realities, circumstances, and opportunity structures (Tilly 1978). People will continue to exercise the same methods of contention discussed in this dissertation but will also employ new strategies and approaches as deemed possible. For example, as access to social media expands, non-movements in Syria are more actively employing the digital sphere to forge virtual passive networks that push back against oppression/dispossession in all its forms. This trend is expected to grow in Syria and other parts of the world as internet access expands. As long as oppression and tyranny persist, people will continue to resist using whatever means possible. This resistance could take on an indirect form through the practices of quiet encroachment geared towards improving quality of life or a more direct form through protests/social action. The continued deterioration of economic and political conditions in Syria will further drive people to intensify these efforts as they struggle to make ends meet and as the future grows uncertain and life

in Syria becomes unbearable. While Syrians continue to suffer many wounds, these wounds are not healing but only becoming worse as the regime insists on using all methods of violence at its disposal to cement its control over society. The culmination of these actions would result in change, even if it were slow (Bayat 2017).

Limitations on the Materialization of the Pluralist Project

As shown in this dissertation, the pluralist project of the Syrian uprising remains vibrant in society. However, its materialization is restricted by the growingly complex internal and international political realities. Internally, Syrian society is wounded, fragmented, and exiled. Poverty and inflation have reached an all-time high, worsened by a severe shortage of basic commodities (electricity, fuel, wheat, etc.). The U.N estimates that nine out of 10 Syrians are living in poverty, struggling to survive the perilous realities of everyday life (United Nations 2021). Living under these harsh conditions, more and more Syrians are attempting to escape the country in dangerous journeys through the Mediterranean Sea, hoping to reach Europe. These journeys have often ended in tragedy as small boats in poor condition, carrying more migrants than capacity permits, continue to sink into the sea, cutting short the lives of young people, families and children hoping for a better future. Picture of the four-year old Alan Kurdi whose body was found washed up on the shores in Turkey in 2015 shock the world, but he is one of hundreds of victims that continue to suffer the same fate in harsh journeys to escape Syria. This has become a regular occurrence, to the point that news coverage has shifted elsewhere away from these tragedies.

In addition, an entire generation of young people have now lived in conflict all their lives. Some have been in refugee camps since 2011, deprived of food, shelter and education (The World Bank 2022). Such individuals have been victims of human exploitation and trafficking, forced to rely on desperate measures in an attempt to improve their lives, including taking low-paying jobs, and/or working in harsh and unsafe conditions (UNICEF 2022). During my experience traveling in Istanbul, I was surprised by the number of children as young as 6 years old, working as street vendors, selling small accessories while others resorted to begging often to support their families. As economic conditions deteriorate in states where many Syrians have fled (such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey), anti-Syrian racism and discrimination is on the rise. Syrian refugees have become scapegoats, targets of hateful discourse and violence. These conditions are only exacerbating deep physical and mental health traumas, leaving behind scars on a deeply wounded Syrian society.

Internationally, continued regional and global geopolitical rivalries are prolonging the regime's ability to maintain its grip over the country. The conflict in Ukraine, has escalated Russian-Western rivalry and both sides are expected to reinforce their geopolitical positions across the world. It is now more important than ever for Russia to maintain the geopolitical balance in Syria, especially in light of the strategic losses suffered in Ukraine. This is not to suggest that a democratic project is being prevented from emerging in Syria from the outside, but rather a reflection on the fact that even when democratic projects are spearheaded internally, they will continue to face a harsh military response by a regime that has been emboldened by its allies. Data from this dissertation demonstrates that society is capable of generating democratic ideas internally. What is required for the materialization of these ideas, therefore, is to create the necessary conditions to allow for their emergence. Violence delays – but does not eliminate - this project by forcing it to operate underground. Unless geopolitical conditions shift, the prospects for change in Syria will continue to face serious setbacks.

The Syrian opposition has also been weak and ineffective. Despite forming an umbrella coalition – the Syrian National Council – the opposition has failed to form a coherent front capable of guiding Syria toward a democratic transition. It has quickly lost its legitimacy and popular support, plagued with personal and ideological rivalries, ongoing conflicts/disputes, and occasional accusations of corruption. As demonstrated, interview data showed that Syrians do not trust the opposition - some have indicated that the next revolution should also overthrow opposition groups. The opposition undermined its commitment to supporting the peaceful voices calling for change by pleading for foreign intervention and supporting armed militants. In addition, the SNC quickly became susceptible to foreign influence – advancing the geopolitical interests of its funders. The SNC could have played a more constructive role in engaging diplomatically with various regional and international powers to try and align views as much as possible in the hope of supporting democratic transition and de-escalating violence. The conflict could only be resolved when all competing actors are brought to the same table to discuss a path forward that would allow for meaningful change for the Syrian people. This is not an easy task, given how the crisis has quickly escalated, but it is nevertheless a more practical approach than pleading for foreign intervention. The opposition should have confined its focus on amplifying the voices of people within Syria to an international audience – to show the world the cosmopolitan disposition of the uprisings that brought together people of all backgrounds hoping for a better future. Due to its failures, the opposition has increasingly lost popular support. Therefore, the opposition has to do the following: first, to regain popular credibility; second, to show commitment to peaceful political

change; and third, to diplomatically align international views and perspectives as much as possible.

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Appendix A

SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS WHERE RECRUITMENT ADS WERE POSTED

Facebook Group Name	**Number of Members** *As of April 13, 2022*
The Gathering of Syrians and Arabs in Turkey	88k
The Gathering of Syrians and Arabs in Kilis	16.2k
The Gathering of Syrians in Gazi Enatap	36.4k
Syrian Community in Germany	461k
Syrian Forum in France	69k
Syrians in Edmonton	4k
Syrians in Calgary	2.1k
Arab Community in Canada	101k
Canadian Syrian Center	5.5k
New and Academic Syrians	0.51
The gathering for independent and free Syrians	21.2k

Appendix B
INFORMATION SHEET

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Information Sheet

Study Title: The Spirit of an Uprising: The Question of Pluralism in Syrian Society

Research Investigator	**Supervisor**
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My research examines how conflict changes the space for pluralist ideas in societies undergoing conflict, focusing on Syria as a case study. Syria was one of the states that witnessed mass protests in 2011, spearheaded by ordinary people of all ethnic, religious, social, and economic backgrounds who mobilized peacefully in grassroots and leaderless protest movements that called for freedom, social justice, and dignity. The Syrian regime of President Assad responded with horrific violence that included the use of live ammunition, torture, sexual violence, indiscriminate shelling of cities and the use of chemical weapons to ultimately crush protests. What began as a peaceful uprising nine years ago has now escalated into a proxy war that has largely destroyed and depopulated the country. Global powers fueled the escalation by supporting various factions, overshadowing the voices of ordinary people who mobilized peacefully to reject state domination during the Syrian uprising.

Given that Syrian society has been displaced, cities destroyed, and the country trapped in cycles of violence, scholarly attention has shifted away from Syrian society to focus on questions of security, geopolitics, and the refugee crisis. My research shifts this focus back, offering a unique window through which to examine how the pluralist discourse of the Syrian uprising has been impacted by the current realities of violence and destruction. While the emancipatory project of the Syrian uprising has been eclipsed by the gruesome realities of war, the extraordinary episodes and moral resources generated by the uprising, and post-uprising experience, have become part of the popular consciousness, and will serve as a foundation in shaping post-conflict reconciliation. It is, therefore, imperative to shed light on these voices and to understand how they have evolved.

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ورقة المعلومات

عنوان الدراسة: روح الثورة: مسألة التعددية في المجتمع السوري

الباحث	المشرف
نور الدين محمود زعموط جامعة ألبرتا، قسم العلوم السياسية مبنى هنري مارشال توري. ادمونتون، ألبرتا	الأستاذ الدكتور مجتبى مهدوي جامعة ألبرتا، قسم العلوم السياسية مبنى هنري مارشال توري. ادمونتون، ألبرتا

يدرس بحثي تأثير الصراعات (مثل الحروب الأهلية أو الجيوسياسية) على الأفكار التعددية في المجتمعات المتأثرة، مع التركيز على سوريا. كجزء من احتجاجات الربيع العربي، شهدت سوريا ثورة شعبية حاشدة جمعت جميع أطياف الشعب السوري (العرقية والدينية والاجتماعية والاقتصادية) في مظاهرات سلمية دعت إلى الحرية، الكرامة والعدالة الاجتماعية ابتداء من عام 2011. تجسدت الثورة في الأصوات السلمية التي تحدت القمع والاستبداد، مستوحاة من الأمل في بناء مستقبل أفضل للشعب السوري. رد نظام الرئيس الأسد بعنف مروع شمل استخدام الذخيرة الحية والتعذيب والعنف الجنسي والقصف العشوائي للمدن واستخدام الأسلحة الكيماوية لسحق الاحتجاجات الشعبية. مع استمرار النظام في استخدام العنف المروع لقمع الأصوات السلمية المطالبة بالحرية، بدأت الأزمة في سوريا تتخذ منعطفًا عسكريًا. ما بدأ كانتفاضة سلمية قبل عشر سنوات، تصاعد الآن إلى حرب بالوكالة تقودها قوى ودول عالمية في صراع على النفوذ والسيطرة دمر إلى حد كبير من البلاد وأخلاها من سكانها طغيا على أصوات الذين حشدوا سلمياً لرفض هيمنة الدولة خلال الانتفاضة السورية.

تحول الاهتمام الأكاديمي بعيدًا عن المجتمع السوري للتركيز على مسائل الأمن والجغرافيا السياسية وأزمة اللاجئين نظرا الى تحول الازمة السورية. يغير بحثي هذا التركيز إلى الوراء، مسلطا الضوء على المجتمع السوري، مما يوفر نافذة فريدة يمكن من خلالها دراسة قدرة الاحتفاظ بالأفكار التعددية في المجتمعات التي تمر بظروف قاسية. بينما طغت الحقائق المروعة للحرب على مشروع التعددية الذي جسد الثورة السورية، سيُظهر بحثي أن مثل هذا المشروع لا يزال نابضًا بالحياة في المجتمع السوري وانه سيؤثر على الحركات الاجتماعية في سوريا في السنوات القادمة. لذلك، من الضروري إلقاء الضوء على هذا المشروع وفهم كيفية تطوره مع تصاعد الأزمة.

Appendix C
LETTER OF CONSENT

Department of Political Science
10-16 Henry Marshall Tory Building
Edmonton, AB T6G 2H4

Letter of Consent

Study Title: The Spirit of an Uprising: The Question of Pluralism in Syrian Society

Research Investigator	Supervisor
Noureddin Mahmoud Zaamout University of Alberta Department of Political Science 10-16 Henry Marshall Tory Building Edmonton, AB T6G 2H4 Email: zaamout@ualberta.ca. Telephone: 1-587-228-5074	Professor Mojtaba Mahdavi University of Alberta Department of Political Science 10-16 Henry Marshall Tory Building Edmonton, AB T6G 2H4 Email: Mojtaba.mahdavi@ualberta.ca Telephone: 1-780-431-4990

Background and Purpose
I am a PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. I am seeking your participation in my study titled "The Spirit of an Uprising: The Question of Pluralism in Syrian Society". This study seeks to gain a better understanding of the experience of Syrians as the crisis evolved from a peaceful uprising into a complex geopolitical war.

Study Procedure
I am looking for your participation in an approximately ninety-minute interview session. The interview will be conducted virtually via video meeting platforms, Zoom, or Skype for Business, depending on your preference. Prior to the interview, I will ask for your permission to record the interview. If you do not consent to recording the interview, I can record your responses by writing them down. Your opinions and perspectives are important for this study. Interviews will involve a number of prepared questions, but I welcome your input and feedback on the discussed subject matters. During the interview, you will also be asked basic details related to your age, religious identity, level of education, and level of income.

Benefits
No money will be exchanged for your time which is considered voluntary – you have no obligation to participate. Participants will not benefit from taking part in your study.

Voluntary Participation
Your consent is very important: You are not required to answer questions that you are not comfortable answering. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point during the interview. You are also free to withdraw (without penalty) from the study within 20 days after your interview. If you withdraw, all the information you provided during the interview will be removed from the study and destroyed. You will be provided with my contact details (email address and a phone number) which you can use to inform me if you wish to

withdraw from the study. You can contact me through the email and phone number provided at the top of this document.

Confidentiality & Anonymity
The information collected for this study will be used for my PhD dissertation, as well in academic conference presentations and publications. This interview will be recorded and stored digitally on a secure laptop computer and on Google Drive.

Digital files and any written notes will be available only to me and my supervisor (whose contact information is provided above.

You will not be identified by your name, the name of your workplace, or other information which can be used to identify you directly. Rather you will be identified using a letter or number, for example "participant A or B".

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615 . This office has no direct involvement with this project.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I provide verbal consent.

Verbal Consent

Participant name:
Consent obtained by:
Date and time of consent:

REB ID Pro00107444

Department of Political Science
10-16 Henry Marshall Tory Building
Edmonton, AB T6G 2H4

استمارة موافقة المشاركة

عنوان الدراسة: روح الثورة: مسألة التعددية في المجتمع السوري

الباحث	المشرف
نور الدين محمود زعموط	الأستاذ الدكتور مجتبى مهدوي
جامعة ألبرتا، قسم العلوم السياسية	جامعة ألبرتا، قسم العلوم السياسية
مبنى هنري مارشال توري. ادمونتون، ألبرتا	مبنى هنري مارشال توري. ادمونتون، ألبرتا

الخلفية والغرض

أنا طالب دكتوراه في العلوم السياسية بجامعة ألبرتا في إدمونتون، كندا . أرجو منكم التكرم بمشاركتي بما لديكم من معلومات تفيدني في البحث الذي أقوم به وهو بعنوان "روح الانتفاضة: مسألة التعددية في المجتمع السوري"، وستستخدم هذه المعلومات في الدراسات الأكاديمية ومنشوراتها. تسعى الدراسة للحصول على فهم أفضل لتجربة السوريين مع تطور الأزمة في سوريا من انتفاضة سلمية إلى حرب جيوسياسية معقدة.

إجراءات الدراسة

وأنا لذلك أطمع في تكرمكم بالموافقة على مقابلتي في جلسة قد تستغرق تسعين دقيقة. سيتم إجراء المقابلة افتراضيًا عبر منصات اجتماعات الفيديو مثل السكيب او الزوم - حسب المناسب لك. قبل المقابلة، سأطلب إذنك لتسجيل المقابلة. إذا كنت لا توافق على تسجيل المقابلة، يمكنني تسجيل ردودك عن طريق كتابتها. آرائك ووجهات نظرك مهمة لهذه الدراسة. سيتخلل المقابلة عدد من الأسئلة المعدة مسبقاً، لكنني أرحب بملاحظاتكم وتعليقاتكم على الموضوعات التي ستتم مناقشتها. وأُريدكم أن تعلموا أن آراءكم ووجهات نظركم مهمة لهذه الدراسة. أثناء المقابلة، سيُطلب منك أيضًا التفاصيل الأساسية المتعلقة بعمرك، وهويتك الدينية، ومستوى التعليم، ومستوى الدخل

فوائد المشاركة

أرجو منكم التكرم بملاحظة أن الوقت الذي ستمنحونني إياه لن يكون له عائد مادي، بل كرماً وتطوعاً منكم. لن يستفيد المشاركون من المشاركة في هذه الدراسة.

مشاركة طوعية

موافقتك مهمة للغاية: لست مطالبًا بالإجابة على الأسئلة التي لا تشعر بالراحة في الإجابة عليها. لك الحرية أيضًا في الانسحاب (بدون عقوبة) من الدراسة في غضون 20 يومًا بعد مقابلتك. في حالة الانسحاب، ستتم إزالة جميع المعلومات التي قدمتها أثناء المقابلة من الدراسة وإتلافها. سيتم تزويدك ببيانات الاتصال الخاصة بي (عنوان البريد الإلكتروني ورقم الهاتف) والتي يمكنك استخدامها لإعلامي إذا كنت ترغب في الانسحاب من الدراسة. يمكنك الاتصال بي من خلال البريد الإلكتروني او ورقم الهاتف المقدمين أعلى هذا المستند

السرية وإخفاء الهوية

سيتم استخدام المعلومات التي تم جمعها لهذه الدراسة في أطروحة الدكتوراه الخاصة بي، وكذلك في عروض المؤتمرات الأكاديمية والمنشورات. سيتم تسجيل هذه المقابلة وتخزينها رقميًا على كمبيوتر محمول آمن وعلى جوجل درايف. ستتوفر الملفات الرقمية وأي ملاحظات مكتوبة لي وللمشرفي فقط - الذي تم توفير معلومات الاتصال الخاصة به أعلاه. لن يتم التعرف عليك من خلال اسمك أو اسم مكان عملك أو أي معلومات أخرى يمكن استخدامها لتحديد هويتك مباشرة. بل سيتم تحديد هويتك باستخدام حرف أو رقم، على سبيل المثال "المشارك أ أو ب"

تمت مراجعة خطة هذه الدراسة للتأكد من التزامها بالمبادئ والتوجيهات الأخلاقية المحددة من قبل مجلس أخلاقيات البحث بجامعة ألبرتا. لطرح الأسئلة المتعلقة بحقوق المشارك والسلوك الأخلاقي للبحث، اتصل بمكتب أخلاقيات البحث على (780) 2615-492. هذا المكتب ليس له دور مباشر في هذا المشروع.

بيان الموافقة

قرأت هذا النموذج وتم شرح الدراسة البحثية لي، كما أُتيحت لي الفرصة لطرح أسئلتي وتمت الإجابات عليها. وقد تم إعلامي بمن عليّ أن أتصل فيما يتعلق بالمقابلة. أوافق على المشاركة في الدراسة البحثية الموضحة أعلاه، وسوف أتلقى نسخة من نموذج الموافقة هذا. كما سأتسلم نسخة من نموذج الموافقة هذا.

الموافقة اللفظية

اسم المشارك:

تم الحصول على الموافقة من قبل:

تاريخ ووقت الموافقة

REB ID Pro00107444

Appendix D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TEMPLATE

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Name	
Age	
Ethnicity	
Religious affiliation	
Gender	
Education	
Hometown	
Profession	
Economic Class	

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe life in Syria prior to the uprising?
2. What were you doing for a living?
3. Where did you reside in Syria?
4. Did you feel that you were free to express your opinion?
5. Were people comfortable to express their dissatisfaction with socio-political and economic issues?
6. What were your initial thoughts about the uprising when it took place?
7. The regime had claimed that it was been targeted by Islamists and foreign conspiracies, did you believe this narrative?
8. After decades under the Assad regime, did you ever expect an uprising to occur in Syria?
9. In your opinion, what drove Syrians to rise against the regime? Was it justified?
10. Was militarization inevitable?
11. Were mistakes committed during the uprising? What went wrong?
12. Who do you blame for the militarization of the conflict?
13. Knowing where things have gotten to, do you regret that an uprising occurred in the first place?
14. Are you hopeful for the future?
15. Do you think the uprising is over? Has Assad won?
16. Are people ready to be governed by the Assad regime once again?

اسئلة المقابلة

أسئلة ديموغرافية

الاسم	
العمر	
الأصل العرقي	
الانتماء الديني	
جنس	
التعليم	
مسقط رأس	
المهنة	

اسئلة المقابلة

كيف تصف الحياة في سوريا قبل الانتفاضة؟
ماذا كنت تعمل؟
أين كنت تقيم في سوريا؟
هل شعرت أنك حر في التعبير عن رأيك؟
هل كان الناس مرتاحين للتعبير عن عدم رضاهم عن الوضع الاجتماعي والسياسي والاقتصادي؟
ما هي أفكارك الأولية حول الانتفاضة عندما حدثت؟
لقد ادعى النظام أنه تم استهدافه من قبل الإسلاميين والمؤامرات الأجنبية، هل صدقت هذه الرواية؟
بعد عقود من حكم نظام الأسد، هل توقعت حدوث انتفاضة في سوريا؟
في رأيك، ما الذي دفع السوريين إلى الانتفاضة ضد النظام؟ هل كان مبررا؟
هل كانت العسكرة حتمية؟
هل ارتكبت أخطاء أثناء الانتفاضة؟ ماذا حصل؟
من الذي تلومه على عسكرة الصراع؟
في ضوء الوضع الحالي، هل تأسف لحدوث انتفاضة؟
هل انت متفائل بالمستقبل؟
هل تعتقد أن الانتفاضة قد انتهت؟ هل فاز الأسد؟
هل السوريون مستعدون ليحكمهم نظام الأسد مرة أخرى؟

Appendix E
Released Prisoners

Figure 1 Families of detainees display pictures of their relatives to a newly released detainee hoping for information on their fate (Yusef 2022).

Figure 2 Pictures shared by regime media outlets, showing a group of to-be-released prisoners forced to chant for Assad (Malas, al-Mahmoud and Mourad 2022).

Figure 3 "Dozens of Syrians wait at the al-Ra'is Bridge in Damascus for relatives they hope would be among those released from prison" (Ghazi 2022).

Figure 4 Newly released detainee in poor physical and mental health and conditions, suffering memory loss after years under torture (Yusef 2022).