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Révolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria, origins and developments

Daher Joseph

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FACULTE DES SCIENCES SOCIALES ET POLITIQUES

INSTITUT D'ETUDES POLITIQUES, HISTORIQUES ET INTERNATIONALES

Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria, origins and developments

Thèse de Doctorat

Présentée à la

Faculté des sciences sociales et politiques
de l'université de Lausanne

pour l'obtention du grade de

Docteur ès sciences sociales

par

Joseph Daher

Directeur de thèse:

Professeur honoraire de l'Université de Lausanne M. Jean Batou

Co-directeur de thèse:

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Professeur affilié à l'IHEID de Genève, M. Jordi Tejel

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« **Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria, origins and developments** »



Jean-Philippe LERESCHE
Doyen

Lausanne, le 9 avril 2018

Abstract

This research aims at giving a comprehensive overview and understanding of the Syrian revolutionary process that started in mid March 2011. Previous research on the Syrian uprising has typically focused on few aspects of the revolution. This thesis presents an alternative perspective, using a historical materialist analysis to situate an understanding of the Syrian uprising in the socio-economic and political developments of the country and the wider region. To this end, the thesis begins by explaining the establishment and dynamics of the authoritarian regimes led by Hafez al-Assad and followed by his son Bashar on political and socio-economic levels. The research then analyzes the nature and dynamics of the protest movement and the organizations and sectors of society composing it during the first years of the uprising. The militarization of the uprising and establishment of Free Syrian Army (FSA) units are also observed. The implications of the Kurdish question in Syria are also analyzed. The various challenges and threats faced by the uprising from the regime and its foreign allies, Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements, and the International and regional political scenes are examined. Finally, the thesis examines at the current political and socio-economic situation in Syria and the challenges the country is facing for the future, notably in the reconstruction issue. Through this analysis, the thesis provides a holistic approach of the Syrian uprising – an analysis with important implications for understanding revolutionary processes more generally.

Résumé

Cette recherche vise à donner une vue d'ensemble et une compréhension du processus révolutionnaire syrien qui a débuté à la mi-mars 2011. Les recherches antérieures sur le soulèvement syrien ont généralement porté sur des aspects particuliers de la révolution. Cette thèse présente une perspective alternative, utilisant une analyse matérialiste historique pour situer une compréhension du soulèvement syrien dans les développements socio-économiques et politiques du pays et de la région plus largement. À cette fin, la thèse commence par expliquer l'établissement et les dynamiques des régimes autoritaires dirigés par Hafez al-Assad et suivis par son fils Bachar aux niveaux politiques et socio-économiques. La recherche analyse ensuite la nature et la dynamique du mouvement de contestation et des organisations et secteurs de la société qui l'ont composé durant les premières années du soulèvement. La militarisation du soulèvement et la création d'unités de l'Armée syrienne libre (ASL) sont également observées. Les implications de la question kurde en Syrie sont également analysées. Les différents défis et menaces auxquels sont confrontés le soulèvement du régime et de ses alliés étrangers, les mouvements islamiques fondamentalistes et djihadistes, et la scène politique internationale et régionale sont examinés. Enfin, la thèse examine la situation politique et socio-économique actuelle en Syrie et les défis auxquels le pays est confronté pour l'avenir, notamment dans le dossier de la reconstruction. Grâce à cette analyse, la thèse fournit une approche holistique du soulèvement syrien - une analyse avec des implications importantes pour la compréhension des processus révolutionnaires plus généralement.

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By dedicating this book to him, I cannot but also dedicate this book to the people of Syria, from where our family originally comes. They have suffered enormously since the beginning of the revolutionary process in March 2011, from massive destruction and displacements and grave human rights violations. My deep thoughts are with them and also with all those activists that have struggled for a democratic, social and inclusive Syria.

The changes of names of the main armed opposition groups

1) - Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), 2011

- Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL): April 2013 when the leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared that the two jihadist organizations, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISI, would now work under a single name: the ISIL

- Islamic State (IS): June 2014 when the leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the creation a caliphate

Daesh is essentially an Arabic acronym formed from the initial letters of the group's previous name in Arabic - "al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil-Iraq wa al-Sham".

2) - Jabhat al-Nusra (Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahidin al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad), 2012

- Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS): July 2016, when the leader Abu Muhammad Jolani announced that Jabhat al-Nusra is breaking its link with al-Qa'ida, although maintaining connections with it.

- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): January 2017 when JFS joined with four other jihadist groups to form a new coalition called HTS

3) - Liwa al-Islam: summer 2011

- Jaysh al-Islam: in September 2013, 50 opposition-armed groups operating mostly around Damascus announced they were merging into a new group called Jaysh al-Islam.

The names of these organizations in the text change accordingly to these time periods.

Introduction

Syria has been at the center of world news since mid-March 2011, following the beginning of a popular uprising in the country and its violent repression. The Syrian Civil War transformed increasingly through the years into a war involving multiple local, regional and international actors. The majority of observers and scholars have analyzed the Syrian conflagration through a geopolitical lens or in sectarian terms, essentializing and equating religious communities with political positions and in both cases ignoring the political and socio-economic dynamics at the root of the conflict.

For my part, I would like to study the origins and developments of the Syrian revolutionary process that began in March 2011 as a part of the other popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). These revolutionary processes are the result of the confluence and mutual reinforcement of different sites of dissatisfaction, struggle and popular mobilization. These battles are intertwined and have enabled different sectors of these societies to join forces in rebelling against authoritarian and corrupt regimes, deemed responsible for the continuous deepening of the social crisis.

A series of questions will be asked as well. How do we explain the specific conditions underlying the Syrian revolutionary process and its actors? What is the nature of the regime built by the Assad family? What were the actors involved in the uprising and how did they organized? How did the regime react to repress the protest movement? Was the opposition able to present a credible alternative to the regime? What was the role of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements? Did they constitute another wing of the counter-revolution beside the regime? How did regional and international interventions influence the uprising in Syria? I will also analyze the reasons behind the development of a peaceful uprising into an armed civil war with regional and international components. For this, I will start from the internal dynamics specific to Syria and put them into a comprehensive framework, which includes regional trends and international issues. I believe these series of questions are intrinsically linked.

It is interesting to note that activists from Syria have also asked themselves these questions. In a study led by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Dawlaty¹ with 139 non-violent activists in 2015, one of the “several factors that led to the creation of gaps within the non-violent movement, which opened the door for militarization and increased suspicion of the movement by some parts of Syrian society” was notably the fact that:

“activists suffered from the impression that the Syrian regime would fall quickly, just like Mubarak’s in Egypt and Bin Ali’s in Tunisia...When the regime showed that it was not going anywhere anytime soon, the problem of flight, withdrawal, and resorting to militarization emerged. The Libyan revolution, with its international intervention, became an attractive model for some” (Dawlati 2015: 18)

We will see throughout this study that the challenges faced by the initial large and inclusive protest movement from below in Syria had the capacity from the outset to provide an alternative to the Assad regime. We will also analyze the effects and consequences of the uprising on the Syrian state and its dynamics.

The answers to these questions are significant both in terms of the insights they offer for popular mobilizations and revolutions as particular events in history, as well as their implications for understanding the broader revolutionary processes in the Middle East and North Africa.

That said, I am aware of the specific difficulties and shortcomings that characterize the analysis of an ongoing process. The war in Syria at the time of the writing would most probably still last several years and numerous evolutions could still occur. I do

¹ Dawlaty is a nonprofit foundation that believes in nonviolence and peaceful resistance, and works towards achieving a democratic and peaceful transition in a state that upholds human rights, equality, tolerance and diversity. Dawlaty works to support of civil society to become active participants in transitioning Syria to a just democratic state. The Foundations is supported by Asfari Foundation, Kvinna till Kvinna, Sigrid Rausing Trust, Action Aid Denmark, European Endowment for Democracy, Ford Foundation, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (Switzerland). (Dawlaty 2018)

however think it is still possible to do a first analysis seeking to understand the origins and development of the revolution and counter-revolutions in Syria.

Scholarly analysis of the Syrian revolutionary process tends to be divided into four contrasting approaches.

The first approach tends to concentrate on an explanation of the uprising in Syria limited to the struggle against authoritarianism and for democratic rights, neglecting other specific factors. For example, French academic François Burgat (2013: 21) argued that the revolution takes its roots in the authoritarian and corrupt features of the regime, while neglecting the socio-economic issues. He considers these factors as not core element in the uprising.

Secondly, an important number of authors have interpreted the uprising from an one sided sectarian perspective, opposing Alawi or Shi'a populations against Sunni ones, rooted in historical conflict. US based conservative academic Fouad Ajami (2013) wrote in The Washington Post on the events in Syria:

“Alas, it was perhaps optimistic to ever imagine that the fighting between Syria’s Alawi regime and the Sunni-led rebellion would remain within the country’s borders. Syria is at once the pivot and a mirror of the Fertile Crescent, and its sectarian and ethnic fissures reproduce themselves in neighboring Arab states...The Syrian rebellion, a Sunni upheaval against an Alawi minority, has been a boon to the Sunnis of Iraq... It was a matter of time before these millennial conflicts were given new life by the Syrian civil war, which has acquired the passion of a religious calling.”

Another version, often with a geopolitical and ‘anti-imperialist’ focus, has presented the Syrian uprising as a foreign led conspiracy by Western powers and its allies in the region, or at least determined by the confrontation of various regional and international powers. This framework includes only limited acknowledgments of

socio-economic problems in the country. Egyptian scholar, Marxist Samir Amin (2012) has for example argued:

“You see, the US establishment -- and behind the US establishment its allies, the Europeans and others, Turkey as a member of NATO -- derived their lesson from their having been surprised in Tunisia and Egypt: prevent similar movements elsewhere in the Arab countries, preempt them by taking the initiative of, initiating, the movements. They have tested their experience in Libya, and they have tested it in Libya with success, in the sense that, in Libya, at the start we had no [broad popular] movement . . . against Qaddafi. We had small armed groups, and one has to question immediately . . . where those arms were coming from. They were -- we know it -- from the beginning, from the Gulf, with the support of Western powers, and the US. And attacking the army, police, and so on. And the same day, not even the next day, those very people who qualified themselves as "liberation forces," "democratic liberation forces," called upon NATO -- the French and then NATO -- to come to the rescue, and that allowed for the intervention. That intervention has succeeded in the sense that it destroyed the regime of Qaddafi... they tried to implement the same strategy immediately afterward on Syria - - that is, introducing armed groups from the very beginning. From the north through Turkey, Hatay particularly. The so-called "refugee camps" in Hatay are not refugee camps -- there are very few refugees -- they are camps for training mercenaries to intervene in Syria... And Turkey as a NATO power is part of the conspiracy in that case. And similarly with Jordan, introducing from the south, with the support -- not only neutrality but, I think, active support -- of Israel, through Daraa, armed groups in the south.”

Many authors have concentrated on the socio-economic and political changes within Syria to try to explain the roots of the uprising. In other words, these authors do not separate the political from the social, but show how they are interlinked. In this framework, Omar Dahi and Yasser Munif (2012) argue that there

“was an organic relationship between the emergence of a free market economy and coercive rule, i.e., the two processes were co-constitutive. However the neoliberal authoritarian model itself also created the possibilities for social revolt...

The rise of this ‘Authoritarian neoliberalism’ is best symbolized by the role the cousin of Bashar el-Assad, Rami Makhlouf. When the ‘invisible’ hand of the market doesn’t suit him, he doesn’t hesitate to use coercion to achieve his goals... The neoliberal practices of Makhlouf and others like him have devastated Syrian citizens’ standard of living in the past ten years. The concentration of wealth, since the time of the UAR, has never been as uneven where 5 percent of the population owns 50 percent of the wealth. At the same time, the ruling class has been enacting an important but gradual transition from the planned economy to a neoliberal economy that left more than 30 percent of unemployed and between 11 percent and 30 percent under the poverty line.”

Each of these perspectives will be analyzed in depth in Chapter 1. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that this work builds upon the fourth methodological approach which assumes that the material conditions in which societies operate ultimately determines the ideologies that emerge from them, while also theorizing the political struggles that shaped Syrian society and the ideas of the actors who lead them, not the reverse.

The need to address this uprising in depth, taking into account its main economic, social and political characteristics in a local and international arena and on a *longue durée* perspective, responds to essential heuristic requirements. This thesis will examine the origins and key developments of the Syrian revolutionary process by attempting to reconstruct the stages of its development. This will be done in

connection with an analysis of societal changes, which influenced Syria's core classes, ethnic and religious minorities, and various groups with diverse interests, without forgetting the regional and international political arena. My work is inspired by a historical materialist approach that begins by studying Syrian society and its transformations in order to analyze and explain the origins and development of the Syrian uprising. In doing so, my work will also consider external factors that favored the outbreak of protests, such as the overthrow of Tunisian and Egyptian dictators. This approach will take into consideration the impact of different economic policies – which have been implemented over decades, particularly since the 1960s – on economic and social spheres and their impact on the Syrian class structure, as well as on the country's multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic mosaic.

This analytical framework presents a valuable counter-narrative to the various other theoretical assumptions that typify much of the scholarly literature.

It is impossible to understand the Syrian uprising and its development without a historical perspective and approach dating back to the seizure of power by Hafez al-Assad in 1970. Following al-Assad's death in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad, succeeded him and rules the country until today, marking a milestone in the history of Syria. We will analyze the regime established under the era of Hafez al-Assad and its consequences on Syrian society. In 2000, Bashar al-Assad's rise to power fits, as we shall see, in its continuity; it will accelerate the implementation of neoliberal policies, despite a small period of so-called democratic opening called the Damascus Spring in 2000. This 'opening' was very quickly closed and repressed. We will then analyze the reasons *for* and the dynamics *of* the uprising, which should be studied in relation to the revolutionary processes underway in the region, and furthermore according to its specific characteristics (situation, actors, meaning). Finally, we will touch on the development of the uprising, from peaceful opposition to armed conflict and radicalization, as well as the increasing regional and international interventions in Syria influencing its path.

To this end, there are three key theoretical arguments advanced throughout this thesis. The first concerns the shifting terrain of class and state formation in Syria since the arrival in power of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 – the beginning of the era of

economic opening– and its relationship to the political practice of the state. It is argued that while neoliberal policies led to an impoverishment of significant parts of Syrian society, they have also helped enrich a layer of the country’s business community from various religious sects, from or closely connected to the ruling elite. The political practice of the state became increasingly responsive to the concerns of this layer, to which it holds close social, political and financial ties. This was reflected by its economic policies as well as its repressive behavior and attitude towards opposition members and sections of the bourgeoisie not linked to the state.

My second main theoretical argument employed in this thesis concerns the ways in which Syria evolved in a particular regional context, which had consequences on the uprising. In this regard, I draw upon materialist analyses of imperialism to show how foreign actors’ intervention influenced the nature of the uprising and dynamics regarding the Syrian state.

I will finally tackle the issue of sectarianism and its dynamics to understand its role in the uprising. Various local and regional actors involved in the uprising have made use of sectarian policies to mobilize popular constituencies and as a tool to reach their objectives.

In addition to conceiving of the evolution and the dynamics of the Syrian Uprising and its place within contemporary politics, both these theoretical arguments counteract a prevailing Orientalism within much of the study of the Arab world. This Orientalism tends to hold up the region as being beyond the grasp of social scientific frameworks typically employed to understand processes of political change elsewhere in the world.

Chapters’ outlook

This work is organized into eight main chapters. Chapter 1 outlines and assesses the various scholarly research problematics and theoretical frameworks used to approach the study of revolutions in general, and the Syrian uprising in particular. The chapter discusses these themes within the wider literature of academic analyses

of revolutions. It examines and critiques the approaches noted above and puts forward an alternative analytical framework focused on the processes of class formation and composition in Syria, as well as the impact of neoliberalism on the broader transformation of the country's political economy. This chapter also examines the understanding and dynamics of imperialism and sectarianism. It concludes with outlining how these elements can help in understanding the origins and developments of the Syrian uprising.

In the second chapter, I look at Syria's contemporary political history and subsequent political and socio-economic dynamics following Arab nationalist military coup, dominated by Ba'thist actors, in 1963 and ensuing policies led to the establishment of a new political and economic system. The roots of the authoritarian and patrimonial state take its origins with Hafez al-Assad's seizure of power in 1970. I will study the processes and policies used by the new ruler to secure his power, building a network of loyalties in various sectors of Syrian society. In this chapter, I observe the gradual repression of all forms of organized political and social opposition, while the corporatist institutions established during the first years of the Ba'th's regime served as instruments of control, repression and mobilization. The radical economic policies of the 1960s by the left wing of the Ba'th Party were ended and a progressive and controlled economic opening allowed the regime to establish clientelist connections with a section of the old bourgeoisie, in Damascus especially, and moreover, encouraged the development of a new bourgeoisie linked to the state. The transition period following the death of Hafez al-Assad and the arrival to power of his son Bashar al-Assad is then analyzed. During Bashar's era, Syria experienced the reinforcement of the patrimonial nature of the state in the hands of the Assad family through its neo-liberal policies and the replacement of sections of the old guard by relatives or close individuals of Bashar al-Assad. The socio-economic consequences of neoliberal policies are also observed. The weakening of the old system of corporatist organization, which allowed the regime to have contacts and some presence within rural and peripheral areas, while at the same time increasing the role of crony capitalists within the regime and conservative religious associations in society is also analyzed.

In Chapter 3, I analyze the nature and dynamics of the actors in the protest movement during the first years of the uprising and then in the subsequent militarization. The situation of near dual power, or at least a potential alternative to the regime created by the deepening of the revolutionary process and the establishment and expansion of local councils managing affairs locally, is observed. The inclusive message and behavior of the majority of local opposition organizations and committees were actually the most feared threat by the regime, which characterized the protest movement as a foreign conspiracy led by 'extremists terrorists' and 'armed gangs.' The gradual escalation of violence and repression by the regime's forces led to the defections of increasing numbers of soldiers and officers, but moreover of civilians taking up arms. This resulted in the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The FSA was first characterized by its plurality among the numerous groups of the FSA expanding throughout the end of 2011 and 2012. I will show how the dynamics evolved around the various opposition-armed groups as a result of the harsh repression and their division as well as their lack of organized support. Finally I will show the gradual process of marginalization of FSA networks, notably because of their increasing dependence on foreign countries, absence of any form of centralization to coordinate more effectively and of a competent and rooted political leadership able to unite the various opposition armed components on a specific political program.

In the fourth chapter, I will analyze the mobilization of regime's popular base to face the repression, especially the crony capitalists and security services. Damascus officials made use of sectarian, tribal and clientelist connections to quell the protests. The strategies of repressions and violence according to the specificities of each region are also studied, especially in regards to its sectarian components. The provision of state services and employment also permitted the regime to create a form of dependence for large sections of the population, particularly with the deepening war and the acute socio-economic crisis. At the same time, the regime had to show flexibility towards some regions that were generally more supportive of the regime, notably by paying more attention through specific policies to these areas or by providing more autonomy, or at least more political space, to their local populations.

In chapter 5, I look at the failure of the opposition in exile to constitute a credible, democratic and inclusive alternative and translate the demands of the protest movement. Divisions fomented by different foreign actors also progressively marginalized the various bodies of the opposition in exile. The subsequent rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements was linked to the weakening and division of FSA networks and those of civilian and democratic groups and activists. The inclusive message of the uprising lost its appeal among some sections of the Syrian population with the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements, seen as a threatening alternative. The role of the regime first and then of foreign actors in the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements is also studied. Their expansion was also the result of FSA networks' corrupt behavior in some regions, and the failure of the various states claiming to support the uprising to assist the FSA financially, military and politically. The intervention of regional states claiming to support the uprising also increased the divisions within the political and armed opposition groups.

In chapter 6, I analyze the involvement of the Kurdish population and Kurdish political groups in Syria in the uprising. I show the way large swaths of Kurdish youth participated alongside other sectors of the Syrian people against the regime, through the establishment of local coordination committees with nearly identical slogans. I argue that Kurdish political parties, with the exception of a few, were not initially ready to engage with the protest movement. Throughout the uprising, I will show that the cooperation between the Arab and Kurdish coordination committees and youth progressively however ceased or was very much diminished. I will analyze the reasons behind this situation, which were principally rooted in the discourses and behavior of the main representatives of Syrian Arab opposition in exile rejecting the national demands of Kurdish political parties. Secondly, the increasing influence of the "Democratic Union Party" (known by its acronym PYD), with the benevolent attitude of the Assad regime, on the Kurdish political scene in Syria increasingly, marginalized the links with other sections of the Arab opposition and connections with the uprising. The rest of the chapter concentrates on the rise of the PYD, its clashes with various armed opposition forces and finally the establishment of the "Rojava" self-administered region under its authority.

In Chapter 7, I analyze the internationalization of the Syrian uprising and the interventions, direct or indirect, of various international and regional actors within the country. The massive involvement of Damascus' allies: Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah will be observed in detail, as well as its consequences on the internal Syrian political scene and relations with the regime. The Syrian regime's increasing dependence on Russia and Iran made it more inclined to accept their political, economic and cultural influence. On the other hand, the policies of the so-called "friends of Syria": the Gulf Monarchies, Turkey and Western states, in the uprising will be analyzed. I will observe the absence of any willingness of the USA and Western countries to intervene in Syria to overthrow the regime, while the Gulf monarchies' and Turkey's political projects were characterized by competition and lack of unity. The establishment of the "caliphate" by IS had consequences on the priorities of Western countries towards Syria, which increasingly concentrated on the "war on terror" in Syria, rather than seeking ways to assist the opposition. Meanwhile, the establishment and expansion of Kurdish regions under the PYD leadership also progressively changed the Turkish government's orientation in the conflict. The Gulf Monarchies were increasingly challenged by other factors such as Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen since Spring 2015, and internal tensions and conflicts between Qatar and Saudi Arabia because of their rival policies during the MENA uprisings of 2010-2011.

In Chapter 8, I examine human and socio-economic consequences of the war on the population of Syria and its economy. The first section focuses on the human losses and results of the war on social indicators. The issue of the millions of refugees in neighboring countries and elsewhere is also observed along with the dramatic life conditions. I then analyze the destruction and changes in the Syrian economy in the years following the uprising. The war, alongside the expansion of the black market and trafficking, I argue, permitted the rise of new economic actors and strengthened armed opposition forces in some areas. Finally I look at the issue of reconstruction as a major project for the regime and crony capitalists to consolidate their political and economic power, while rewarding foreign allies for their assistance with a share of the market. Reconstruction however faced several significant challenges for the future.

Geography and demography of Syria

Syria had a population of between 21 and 24 million people prior to the uprising in the beginning of 2011. About 56 percent of the population was urban by 2010 (see Annex 1), with an annual growth rate of nearly 2,5 to 3 percent in the years prior to the uprising (Nasser and Zaki Mehchy 2012: 3; World Bank Group 2017: 21). 58 percent of the population in Syria was constituted by people below the age of 24 years in 2011 (IFAD 2011).

Arab Sunni Muslims comprised between 65 and 70 percent of the total population, while the remainder is split between various 1) Islamic minorities including: Alawi, Druze, Shi'a and Ismaili, 2) various Christian denominations and 3) ethnic minorities (Kurds, Armenian, Assyrians, Turkmens, etc...) (see Annex 2).

The Alawis represent between 10 and 12 percent of the population, numbering around 2.5 million people. In addition to the capital Damascus where about 500,000 Alawis lived, they reside mainly in the Coastal Mountain Range, in the countryside of the Latakia and Tartus governorates on the western side of the mountains, and in the countryside of the Homs and Hama governorates on their eastern side, with also a significant presence within Homs city.

Druze populations are about between 1 and 3 percent, numbering between 500,000 and 700,000. The Druze mainly inhabit in the province of Suwayda. Small Druze populations also exist in the governorates of Quneitra (mainly in five towns: Hadar, in the part of the Golan Heights that is not occupied by Israel, and the villages of Majdal Shams, Mas'ade, Baq'atha and Ein Qiniyye, in the Israeli occupied part of the Golan Heights), in the town of Jaramana close to Damascus and a very small community in the Idlib province in the areas of Harem, Abrita, Muamara al-Ikhwan, Kafr Maris and Arshin.

Ismailis, equaling about 1 or 2 percent, around 200,000, are mainly located in two governorates: Firstly in Hama, where they reside mostly in the cities of al-Salamiyah, which is considered the Ismaili capital both of Syria and of the Middle East, and Masyaf and in the surrounding countryside. There is also a small minority living in the

city of Hama. Secondly in Tartus governorate, they live in the town of Qadmus, and its surrounding countryside and in the district of Nahr al-Khawabi east of Tartus and its villages.

Shi'as make up around 0.5 percent of the population and lived mostly in Damascus, Homs and Tartus Provinces and two villages close to Aleppo, Nubl and Zahraa (Izady 2010; Khalife 2013: 5-7).

Between 5 and 10 percent of the population is estimated being from Christian denominations, with the Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches making up the largest ones. They are present throughout Syria and its main cities, with sizeable populations in Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Latakia (BBC 2011e).

The numbers of Kurds in Syria vary, depending on the sources, ranging from conservative estimates of 1.5 to 2 million, or 8 percent of the total Syrian population, to more important ones of 3 million or between 12 and 15 percent (Gauthier 2005: 97; Allsopp 2015: 18). Unlike Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, Kurds in Syria inhabit several non-contiguous regions. Before the uprising, approximately 30 percent of the Syrian Kurdish population lived in the highlands northwest of Aleppo, known as Kurd Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds). The Ain al-Arab (Kobani) region, where the Euphrates enters Syrian territory, was home to roughly 10 percent, while 40 percent lived in the northeastern half of the Jazirah governorate (See Annex 5). Significant Kurdish populations could also be found in Damascus, in *Hay al-Akrad*, originally, and Aleppo (Tejel 2009: 9-11). The numbers of Kurds in these two cities increased throughout the 20th century with their arrival from rural areas reaching 600,000.

The Turkmen are estimated to range from one to four percent of the total population. They are mostly found in the urban centers and countryside of six governorates of Syria: Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, Hama, Latakia and Quneitra. Assyrians represented between 1 and 3 percent and are mainly located in the cities of Hasakah and Qamishli, and a number of villages on the banks of the river Khabur. Estimations of Armenians varied between 0.5 and 1 percent. They are concentrated in the cities of Aleppo and Qamishli, in rural Latakia, and with a small number in Deir Zor, Damascus and Homs. Circassians composed around 0.5 and 1.5 percent of the

population and mostly inhabit three Syrian governorates: Homs, Hama and Quneitra (Izady 2010; Khalife 2013: 4).

Important foreign populations also exist, especially Iraqis and Palestinians prior to the uprising. Around 500,000 Palestinian refugees were registered in Syria in 2011 and between 1.2 and 1.5 million Iraqi refugees from the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 resided in Syria (UNRWA 2011; World Bank 2017: 13).

Methodology

This study draws upon a wide range of academic writing in the fields of politics, political economy, sociology and development theory. As the following chapter will outline in greater detail, its basic theoretical framework is based upon Marxian and other critical analyses of Syria and the Middle East. In addition to the academic literature, research for this thesis has involved a detailed textual analysis of many books, newspaper articles, reports, and written interviews of activists in Syria, as well as information taken from social networks. Although the thesis relies mostly on secondary material, my fluency in Arabic and French has enabled me to conduct interviews and consult primary material in the language of the sources and documentation used to establish the findings.

During my doctoral research, I was also able to have wide-ranging consultation (conducted in Arabic, French and English depending on the circumstances), with activists, students, members of political parties and academics from Syria or specialists on the subject. It was a valuable complement to my previous experiences in the country. Given the political environment of Syria, I was unable to do fieldwork within the country. I have however been able to do more than a dozen interviews with Syrian activists in relation to this study and I also learned from countless 'off the record' discussions with individuals and groups involved in Syria's political scene. These interviews were made by emails with the ones still in Syria at the time and skype with the ones I could not meet directly. In addition to this, I was able to do numerous discussions and meetings with several activists. These activists were in

their near totality active within the country at the beginning of the uprising, except one who was already in exile for previous political activities.

They were all nearly from the same generation, in their end of twenties and beginning of thirties at the beginning of the uprising in 2011, but came from various regional areas:

- 3 young men from Yarmouk Camps, in Damascus
- 1 man and 1 woman from Damascus
- 3 women from Damascus Province
- 3 men and 1 woman from Kurdish majority inhabited areas.
- 1 man from Salamiyah
- 1 man from Baniyas
- 1 man from Aleppo

Finally, my own personal vantage point contributed greatly towards the writing and framing of this thesis. I am a Swiss citizen of Syrian origin. I have spent long periods in Syria and in the region since my childhood. My family and close friends have been affected by the on-going events in Syria, and a large number of them have had to leave the city of Aleppo (where we are originally from), to other safer parts of the country or to neighboring states.

I have also been involved in various campaigns, activities and Syrian youth opposition networks in support of the Syrian uprising. These experiences have helped me deepen my knowledge on the dynamics within activists' opposition circle and have a wider range of information. This involvement in the Syria uprising however did not prevent me from conducting a scientific and academic research in this work. I believe we can combine both elements without losing sight of the object of research and credibly analyse without romanticization.

My interest in Syria however long predates the eruption of the uprising in 2011, but the events of recent years have helped me to corroborate and refine many of the arguments made below.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Perspectives: Understanding political mobilization and the Syrian revolutionary process

This chapter aims to survey and assess contending theoretical approaches to understanding the nature and explanations of revolutions and rebellions. In doing so, it explores the specific debates around the nature and explanations of revolutions and rebellions, while identifying various dominant approaches to the latter. I will then look at the various theoretical perspectives on the Syrian uprising mentioned in the introduction.

As explained previously, the approach of this thesis places an emphasis on the link between socio-economic and political issues, forming a materialist approach. This largely critical or Marxian-inspired approach provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the reasons and particular development of revolutionary processes that allows for a well-rounded consideration of its political, socio-economic and other facets on a local and international level.

This chapter begins by exploring the methodological assumptions and questions asked by the key scholars working within these approaches. While the focus of this analysis is the literature on the Syrian revolutionary process, it necessarily requires some discussion of the nature of revolutions and rebellions in the world more generally. I will look at the specificities of these kinds of processes in dominated countries in contrast to imperialist centers and the dynamics that they entail. The chapter concludes by laying out the main theoretical positions that will be employed in the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

The nature of the Syrian state will be studied in depth, as well as its place within the world state system. In these perspectives, it is important to locate our analysis of Syria in dependent societies whether in the construction of the state or the imperialist system. In this task, the concept of combined and unequal development is a useful analytical tool to understand and explain the particularities of the state in Syria.

1.1 Concept of Revolutions and Rebellions

The analysis of political conflicts and mobilization implying some level of social change has been an important topic for social science and has raised numerous questions. The various approaches of history and political science have studied events such as rebellion, coups, revolution from above, revolution, etc. The concept of "coup d'Etat" refers to the replacement by force of a fraction of the elite by another, while the "rebellion" is a spontaneous mass uprising against the overall policy or the specific choices of a government (Duhn 1972: 226). "Coup d'Etats" can obviously have profound political and social consequences. These are understood by the concept of "revolution from above", defined as a radical change initiated and imposed on society and involving major transformations at the level of elites, political institutions and social structure, with little or no involvement of any popular mobilization prior to overthrow of the state according to academic Ellen Kay Trimberger (1978). On his side, academic Barrington Moore (1966) argued that when the peasantry posed a threat to the interests of both the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, which consequently formed a conservative alliance against the peasantry; this alliance encouraged an autonomous, occasionally authoritarian state capable of being coopted by a fascist leader in a revolution from above. He continued by stating that "revolutions from above" focused and accelerated the pace of industrialization in these societies.

The concept of "revolution from above" is interesting for us because the Ba'th Syrian regime came to power in 1963, and can in many ways be likened to the notion of "revolution from above". Raymond Hinnebusch (2001) clearly explains this phenomenon in his book "Syria, Revolution from Above", which deals with the social and political consequences of the accession to power of the Ba'th in Syria. The main difference in Syria with the concept of "revolution from above" developed by Barrington Moore is the class alliances leading these political changes, as in Syria as the thesis will show the landed upper classes was not anymore the politically dominant actor, quite on the opposite.

Up to the events that changed the MENA region in 2011, social eruptions of the past could be seen as rebellions: the great Syrian revolt against the French mandate from

1925 to 1927, the Palestinian revolt against the British mandate of 1936-1939; or the coups that led to radical socio-political changes in the region such as the coup of the "Free Officers" in Egypt in 1952 and the coup of the Ba'th in 1963 in Syria. The Egyptian coup d'état in 1952 had led to the overthrow of a monarchy and the establishment of an authoritarian military and republican regime, while the new government undertook nationalization of foreign property possessions, a questioning of the material and political power of the sectors of the ruling class, (especially large landowners and the commercial and financial bourgeoisie) and supported a policy of industrialization and radical reforms at the social level (Achcar 2013: 17). In comparison, it is certain that the changes brought about by the events that started in 2011 have not caused as radical material consequences, with the exception of reversing the economic and political domination of family cliques in power, including Tunisia and Egypt.

Revolutions have however been the most significant form of political conflict in the twentieth century, perhaps in human history, with the possible exception of international wars. Various definitions have been provided for these political events. In a broad definition, revolution "refers to any and all instances in which a state or political regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a protest movement in an irregular, extraconstitutional, and / or violent fashion" (Goodwin 2011: 9). John Dunn (1972: 226) defines revolution as

"a fundamental and rapid change in social structures as well as in personnel, state institutions and the foundation of its legitimacy, performed outside legal channels and supported in part by a movement from below."

In Tilly's framework, revolution is a form of collective action in which the contenders fight for ultimate political sovereignty over a population and in which challengers succeed, at least to some degree, in displacing existing power holders. Tilly (1977: 154) argues that

"The revolutionary moment arrives when previously acquiescent members of... (a) population find themselves

confronted with strictly incompatible demands from the government and from an alternative body claiming control over the government and obey the alternative body. They pay taxes to it, provide men for its armies, feed its functionaries, honor its symbol, give time to its service, or yield other resources, despite the prohibition of the still existing government that they formerly obeyed. Multiple sovereignty has begun.”

On his side, Samuel Huntington (2003) offers a definition of revolution in which the state collapses and a new political group or elite capable of seizing and institutionalizing power. As he explains

“A revolution is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activity and policies. Revolutions are thus to be distinguished from insurrections, rebellions, revolts, coups, and wars of independence. A full-scale revolution thus involves the rapid and violent destruction of existing political institutions, the mobilization of new groups into politics, and the creation of new political institutions. The sequence and the relations among these three aspects may vary from one revolution to another” (Huntington 2003: 39-40)

Huntington's approach to revolution emphasized on the resentments and demands of the population and the rigidity or flexibility of political institutions, and it put forward the wide-ranging character of the changes, political, social, and ideological, that followed.

According to other more restrictive definitions, revolutions encompass not only mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental social, economic, and or cultural change during or soon after the struggle for state power (Goodwin 2001: 9). Theda Skocpol (1979: 237) defined for example social revolution as a rapid and basic transformation of a society's state and class structures,

accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below. In her perspective, social revolutions are the result of a duality of types of grievances rooted in demands in relation to the economic (property, class, and inequality) and political structures (the institutions through which a dominant group exercises power and coercion over the rest). Social revolutions derive therefore from demands for social and political changes, and it leads in significant structural transformations in both social and political institutions. This definition of social revolutions is useful to distinguish from other political conflicts and outcome.

These understandings of revolutions all imply the mobilization of large numbers of people in opposition to the existing state. In a similar approach, Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky (2008:XV), wrote:

“the most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events. In ordinary times the states, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation, and history is made by specialists in that line of business – kings minister, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But at those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new regime.”

The objective of this thesis is to explain the nature and causes of modern revolutions by picturing revolutions as complex phenomena that do not admit to any fixed categorization nor reduced causal explanations. The understanding of the eruption and development of revolutionary events has been a source of debate among scholars. I will present the various main theoretical perspectives on the subject. In my study, I will also take into consideration the argument that the nature and dynamics of revolutionary processes are different within dominated or developing countries such as Syria than in countries with developed states and institutions such as Western Europe and North America. Just as Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci had argued

regarding revolutions that the conquest of power in Western European countries would require a strategy much different from the one followed in the Russian revolution, notably because of the different role of civil society in each societies (Thomas 2009: 206-207).

1.2 Theoretical perspectives on political mobilization and revolutions

A first approach tries to analyze revolutions in relation to people's psychological incentives in getting involved in political violence or enrolling in movements opposing the state. Ted Gurr, in his book *Why Men Rebel* (1970), argued that political violence occurs when many people in society become angry, especially if existing cultural and practical conditions provide encouragement for aggression against political targets. In other words, if an individual perceives or feels a large gap between what he obtains and what he is entitled to, he will become angry; given the opportunity, he will rebel. When large sections of the population share or believe such a gap simultaneously, rebellions occur.

In this framework, revolutions are explained as the result of a situation of widespread, intense and multifaceted relative deprivation in a society that affects both masses and elite aspirants. Gurr (1970: 334-347) adds that revolutions are actualized only if leaders consciously organize the expression of mass discontent. This particular aggregate psychological approach is problematic for different reasons. Discontent among large sections of the population does not automatically translate into political violence or even revolution. This approach ignores the political and social system in which political mobilization occurs, which influences its eruption and development. In other words, shared discontent within sections of the populations is probably a necessary element, but it does not tell us why and how a revolution might erupt.

Another approach close to this explanation is put forward by Chalmers Johnson's in his book *Revolutionary Change* (1966). He argues that revolution is a conscious attempt to change basic values of a social system by means of violence. Serious revolutionary action, he argues, can occur only in a "disequibrated" social system in which the value system and the division of labor required by the political and economic environment are not synchronized. In Johnson's theory of society and

social change, value orientations and political legitimacy are the major components for explaining the emergence of revolutionary situations, the options of existing authorities, and the nature and success of revolutionary forces.

The problem with this theory is that a state can have lost legitimacy among large sections of the population, but can still remain in power. There are therefore other elements to take into account to explain the success of a revolution and / or the reasons for the resilience of a regime.

A major methodological approach to study political conflicts and mobilizations has been the theory of collective action, developed notably by Charles Tilly. The analysis of collective action contains five significant elements: interest, organization, mobilization, opportunity and collective action itself (Tilly 1977: 11). He developed this theory of collective action with its emphasis on group social organization and access to resources as a break and alternative to social psychological theories of political violence.

In Tilly's perspective around revolutions, multiple sovereignties are the decisive feature of revolutionary situations. A revolutionary situation starts when a government or a state previously under the control of a single, sovereign polity becomes the object of effective, competing, mutually exclusive claims on the part of two or more distinct polities (Tilly 1977: 153-7).

The theory of dual power is obviously relevant to analyze revolutionary processes; applying to some extent to the Syrian case as we will see in the later chapters of this thesis. This concept of dual power was presented in an enlightening way by Leon Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution* (2008: 155):

"If the state is an organization of class rule, and a revolution is the overthrow of the ruling class, then the transfer of power from the one class to the other must necessarily create self-contradictory state conditions, and first of all in the form of the dual power. The relation of class forces is not a mathematical quantity permitting a priori computations. When the old regime

is thrown out of equilibrium, a new correlation of forces can be established only as a result of a trial by battle. That is a revolution."

The theory of collective movements is linked to the theory of social movements. A social movement has been referred to as a collective challenge to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes by some significant number of people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities (Tarrow 1994: 3-4). Social movements are different and have different objectives. Most social movements do not try to restructure national societies in truly fundamental ways, while a revolutionary social movement or a revolutionary movement is a social movement "advancing exclusive competing claims to control the state, or some segment of it" (Tilly 1993: 10). In this similar framework, the theory of resource mobilization, as developed by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, argues that "politics of conflict" vary in space and time, depending on the characteristics of political regimes and is organized both outside and within institutions. The two authors thus constructed a model of political regimes based on two criteria: democratic and non-democratic; capacity and low capacity of States.

Antony Oberschall (1973), who subscribes to the theory of collective movement, develops the perspectives that any social conflict arises from the social organization itself. He adds that

"The combination of the division of labor with super- and subordination makes up the basic configuration of social positions, strata, and classes in the social system. There is no once-and-for-all solution to the problem of distributing scarce resources among the members of a society thus constituted... Social conflict results from this clash of opposing interests" (Oberschall 1973: 33)

An important methodological approach has also been the State centered approach (Skocpol 1978; Goodwin 2001). This theoretical perspective, argues Theda Skocpol (1978:33), analyzes

“the causes and processes of social revolutions from a nonvoluntarist, structural perspective, attending to international and world historical, as well as intra-national, structure and processes. An important theoretical concomitant will be to move states – understood as potentially autonomous organizations located at the interface of class structures and international situations – to the very center of attention.”

The statist theoretical tradition indeed underlines a particular set of causal mechanisms – namely, those processes whereby states (foreign as well as domestic) shape, enable, or constrain economic, associational, and cultural, and even socio-psychological. State centered theorists argue that these mechanisms are, more powerful or causally important than (at least complementary to) a range of alternative causal processes – for example those emphasizing class conflict, civil society, culture, or social psychology.

Academic Misagh Parsa (2000) on her side argues that structural analyses (Moore 1966, Skocpol 1979) are helpful to study large scale social conflicts and revolutions by looking at states’ vulnerabilities within the world system, their internal structures, and their relations to economy and society. She however explains that neither structural model of analysis nor marxist theories of revolution based on social classes can explain the complexity of social revolutions in developing countries. In her opinion, and contrary to Marx’s theory, revolutions need broad coalitions across class lines, including capitalists, while working class militancy and an ideological shift against the capitalist class impeded these necessary broad coalitions. I will show however that in the case of the Syrian uprising a broad alliance, although dominated by one actor, was not sufficient to overthrow the regime, other elements were to be taken into consideration.

In the understanding of processes of specific conflicts and revolutions, academics Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi and Olivier Fillieule (2012) analyzes

“revolutionary situations as instances of dual power, in order to identify the sequences of action – defined here as performances, i.e., the cumulative whole of interactions between all the actors participating in a conflict – that lead to them.”

They argue that researchers should abandon the search for causes and instead concentrate their attention on situations and individual actions in said situations, and subsequently attempt to delineate the typical processes that lead to them. In their opinion, the development of revolutionary situations should not be reduced to "determinant factors" or "triggering elements", nor to a reflection on its consequences, or rather its results. They instead look at thinking on the series or sequences of action sequences, defined as channels of interaction. Revolutionary situations should be based, in their analysis, on what “actors are, do and say in situ”. They argue “macro-social facts are nothing more than the emergent consequences of individual actions, according to an ultimately Weberian reasoning” (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2012). Similarly, James Gelvin (2015: 25), in his analysis of uprisings in the Arab region, argues that people should not attribute specific factors, such as authoritarianism or social inequalities, to the study of revolution, because it “overlooks a key variable – the human element – that determines whether an uprising will or will not occur”.

Another more recent range of literature put more emphasis on culture and ideology as playing an important role in revolutions, but without neglecting political and social elements (Farhi 1990, Foran 1993 Dabashi 2012). In Farhi’s perspective (1990: 84), ideology is a "social process" involving "knowledgeable actors", which appeals to larger cultural systems: "successful ideological mobilization always manages to fuse and condense several ideological discourses into a single major theme, usually expressed in a single slogan”. John Foran (13-14: 1993) argues that, within the sociology of development, one of the elements in the eruption of a revolution is the “political cultures of opposition”:

“as far-reaching socioeconomic change engulf various sectors of the population "live" this change and interpret it in light of

and value orientations they find ready to hand, including ideas of religion, and other cultural forms rooted in their society.”

Departing from this, Foran (1993:14) explains that this influences the diverse forms of resistance's actions and the construction of social movements. Finally, the timing of revolution is determined by the emergence of a crisis with two basic features rooted in an internal economic crisis and a change within the international context providing a window of opportunity for change.

In this perspective, Hamid Dabashi (2012) emphasized the ideological feature of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa by saying that they represent

“a moment a delayed defiance, a point of rebellion against domestic tyranny and globalized disempowerment alike, now jointly challenged beyond the entrapment of postcolonial ideologies.” (Dabashi 2012: 3)

He adds:

“The Arab Spring is not a fulfillment but a delivery. This is what I mean by its being the end of postcolonialism: the Arab Spring is not final fulfillment of a set of ideologies but the exhaustion of all ideologies, a final delivery from them all. Thus the entire regime du savoir we have inherited is useless and counterproductive.” (Dabashi 2012: 252)

In this perspective, he described the unfolding events in the MENA as open-ended revolt combining a new revolutionary language and practice. He argues that these uprisings should be read more as a novel than an epic (Dabashi 2012: 63 + 230).

On his side Iranian scholar, Asef Bayat (2017: 17-18) explained that what occurred in the MENA region:

“were neither revolutions in the sense of the twentieth century experiences (i.e., rapid and radical transformation of the state pushed by popular movements from below) nor simply reform (i.e., gradual and managed change carried out often from above and within the existing structural arrangements) but a complex and contradictory mix of both. In a sense, they were “refolutions” – revolutionary movements that emerged to compel the incumbent states to change themselves, to carry out meaningful reforms on behalf of the revolution.”

He emphasized the lack of radical ideologies and groups challenging the structure of the state as a whole or neoliberalism and to suggest an alternative society in the current uprisings compared to past revolutions such as in Iran in 1979 or in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

Authors from Marxist inspirations have also analysed revolutions. Barrington Moore (1966) has characterized three types of revolutions – bourgeois revolution, “revolution from above,” and peasant revolution – leading to different political systems, which are respectively liberal democracy, fascist dictatorship, and communist dictatorship. One of the main arguments of Moore is that a strong enough bourgeoisie can weaken the economic structures of feudalism and will result in a democracy. On this latest issue, various authors have criticized the explanation on the level of power in society of the bourgeoisie as central to understanding the emergence and persistence of democracy. Goran Therborn’s (1977) works for example challenged this explanation and argues that bourgeois revolution and the emergence of capitalism has been associated with forms of governances that fall short of democracy. Therborn (1977) in his research states that no case in which a united bourgeoisie struggled for democracy on the basis of its interests, but that is was rather the result of pressure from below by working class parties for parliamentary democracy.

More recently, author John Chalcraft (2016), also borrowing some Marxist elements of analysis, try to demonstrate in his book on the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa that

“the dynamics and vectors of transgressive mobilization owe a good deal to ideas and intellectual labour, translocal appropriation, normative commitments, leadership strategies and contingent interactions” (Chalcraft 2016: 8).

He adds that is it important to consider transgression as rooted

“in the failures and weakness of hegemonic incorporation, the desiccation of sites of articulation, and the contraction of existing forms of hegemony at the level of political community as a whole” (Chalcraft 2016: 8).

These approaches are all interesting and helpful to understand some of the dynamics in social movements and the development of revolutionary situations. Authors create however artificial separations between people, society and the political system under which those people live, or on the other hand, melting everything together without understanding how they interact in dynamic ways.

I develop here an understanding of human actions interlinked to one’s society and political system, without withdrawing one’s agency.

As argued by Karl Marx (1852)

“Humans make their history themselves, but they do not do it arbitrarily, under conditions chosen by them: they make it under given conditions, directly inherited. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”

Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1999: 207) went in a similar direction, explaining that the

“subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only permanent victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately.”

In this framework, within a mode of production we do not distinguish between the economic base, and the political, juridical and ideological superstructure. This often has the tendency to analyze base and superstructure as two separate units. Rather, as argued by Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981:78), the relation between base and superstructure is

“as a continuous structure of social relations and forms with varying degrees of distance from the immediate processes of production and appropriation, beginning with those relations and forms that constitute the system of production itself.”

While not sharing all their points of research and analysis, the mobilization of these various fields and theoretical frameworks are helpful in analyzing and trying to better understand the evolution and development of the revolutionary process in Syria, especially the notion of dual power and multiple sovereignties used by Charles Tilly.

This thesis seeks to define the nature of the ongoing confrontations (insurrection, rebellion, revolution / civil war, religious war), its main actors, as well as the social, economic, and political conditions of the current situation. In this framework, I also pay attention to the features of Syria and its political and socio-economic evolution characterized by a combined and unequal mode of development. Throughout the thesis, I will look at the different forms of reactions against the uprising and its dynamics from the regime to other local and regional actors.

1.3 Syrian Uprising narratives

The understandings and explanations of the Syrian uprising have been wide and various. I will first present authors promoting reasons primarily rooted within the

country and then those looking at external factors to explain the eruption of the uprising.

a) Political dynamics against despotism

Some scholars have focused on the personality of Bashar al-Assad and his incapacity for reforms to explain the eruption of the uprising, while mentioning other political and social problems very briefly. They completely sidelined the nature of the state and the general dynamics of the society. Carten Wieland (2012) concentrated on the personality of Bashar al-Assad to explain the failure of reforms. He described a man out of touch with reality, feeling all powerfull. Bashar's involvement in the decision-making process in the regime is debated in his book, whether or not he is only a face for the *mukhabarat* (intelligence agency or secret services), who are the real agents of power (2012: 29). Wieland (2012: 13) however describes shortly after how the Assad regime underwent a process of sectarian contraction beyond ideology contributing to "a loss of soft power and the erosion of a sufficiently broad power base that was necessary especially in times of increasing challenges." Assad's power base was increasingly reduced to sections of religious minorities and the moderate Sunni merchant class (Wieland 2012: 27).

In a similar fashion, David W. Lesch (2012) also focused extensively on the personality of Bashar al-Assad and his multiple meetings with him throughout the 2000s to explain the political developments in the country. He wrote that Assad turned into "a real-life tyrant" during the uprising in 2011. In the past he was impressed by him, had high hopes of him and really believed that "he could lead Syria to achieve its full potential as a country" (2012: VII). However, he also explains that the regime was able to gather various sectors of the society (religious minorities, loyal Sunni from the business class, Sufis) under its support, which added together corresponded in his analysis to around half of the population (2012: 52). He concluded by saying that Bashar al-Assad was only able

"to do cosmetic change and engage in reform such as education, which did not threaten the cozy socio-economic and political positions of the establishment."

In addition to other elements, this analysis ignores the patrimonial nature of the regime and that Assad was at the top of this establishment.

Some authors on the other side limit the uprising in Syria to its political aspects, in other words a struggle against authoritarianism. French academic François Burgat, (2013: 21) as I mentioned in the introduction, limited the explanations of the uprising essentially to the authoritarian and corrupt features of the regime. Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorransoro and Arthur Quesnay's (2016) similarly undermine the socio-economic roots of the uprising (2016: 30), sidelining it by arguing towards the presence of activists originally from the bourgeoisie or higher middle classes. The participation of some activists from these higher strata of society in the protest movement does not eliminate the socio-economic aspect of the uprising. The idea put forward in the book, that the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia were overthrown, are also misleading and show a lack of understanding of the nature of these regimes. Burgat falls into the same pattern explaining the difference between Egypt and Tunisia and Syria based on 3 main reasons: 1) the level of repression is higher in Syria, 2) instrumentalization of sectarian division, and 3) division of the international and regional political scene. These elements are not wrong, but the explanations leading to them are to some extent limited. The differences of these regimes, in which the repressive actors and policies are linked to it and not to a separate process, is neither understood nor explained. While the instrumentalization of sectarianism is a clear aspect of the regime, the author (Burgat 2013: 25) tends to homogenize and equalize religious sects with political positions, which is problematic and should be much more nuanced.

Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorransoro and Arthur Quesnay also explained that Syrian society was completely depoliticized before the uprising, and Syria's main institutions (trade unions, Ulama, universities, intellectuals) were paralyzed by repression. Although this is true to some extent, it also has to be nuanced as Syrian society was witnessing new forms of activism throughout the 2000s led by youth in universities and other areas. They would go on to play an important role in various local coordination committees and youth movements. In addition, the authors share the perspective of researcher François Burgat, arguing that since the 1970s Islam has

become the language of protest in the Muslim world. This analysis is problematic historically if we look at the Palestinian uprising in the end of 1980s or the popular uprisings since 2011, in which Islam was not at the center of the mobilization and its main objectives (2016: 220). In addition to this, Islamic fundamentalist movements were mostly absent at the beginning of the uprisings in the region and did not play any leading role in the protest movements.

b) Sectarianism and the nature of the protest movement

Major world leaders, public intellectuals and analysts have increasingly portrayed all political tensions and mobilizations in the MENA region as conflict between religious sects combating each other for centuries, if not more. The Syrian uprising was no exception and was often presented initially as a war between Sunni and Alawi, or Sunni against religious and ethnic minorities. US President Barack Obama has spoken on several occasions of “ancient sectarian differences” as a means of explaining the conflict in Syria. These “ancient divisions”, he argues, propel the inability in the Arab world, which is “rooted in conflicts that date back millennia” (cited in Hashemi and Postel 2017: 2). Previously to the uprisings in 2011, academic Vali Nasr (2006: 82) explained that the nature of politics in the Middle East was rather rooted

“in the old feud between Shi’as and Sunnis that forge attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether and to what extent those other trends have relevance.”

Following the eruption of the uprising in Syria, these kinds of analyses continued, limiting the narrative – or at least its dynamics – to sectarian consideration. Veteran historian Patrick Seale (2011) stressed the sectarian characteristics of the conflict early on, citing the case of the city of Homs in which “mutual kidnappings, torture, beheadings and displacement of populations were taking place between the Sunni and Alawi communities.” At the same time he described the protesters as

“the rural poor, who have suffered from drought and government neglect; the urban poor and small businessmen, crushed by corrupt, crony capitalists close to the center of power; and the armies of unemployed youth.”

In addition to this, he argued that the regime still enjoyed the support of large sections of the middle and upper classes in the big cities, of religious minorities such as Alawi, Christians and Druze, of large numbers of civil servants, and also of a silent majority, fearful of suffering the fate of post 2003 Iraq. Similarly, French Geographer Fabrice Balanche (2011) described the revolutionary process in Syria as sectarian according to the geography of the revolt, arguing that only Arab Sunni populated areas witnessed mobilization with only marginal participation from Kurdish areas, and on corporatists demands relative to nationality issues.

Lebanese journalist Hazem Saghieh (2012) described the events in Syria as a Sunni revolution in response to historic changes of the 1970s and 1980s when Hafez al-Assad became president of Syria, the Iranian revolution triumphed and “Hezbollah” was established. Similarly, journalist Robert Fisk (2013) warned that the region was now in the grips of a “titanic Islamic struggle” between Sunnis and Shi’a that “now dwarfs the Arab revolutions.” Further, Daniel L. Byman (2014), analyzed the events in Syria as a sectarian civil war in which “the Alawi-led regime, often lumped into a broader Shi’a community, faces a vast insurgency drawn primarily from the Sunni majority.” The sectarian focus of the events in Syria also attempted to explain the resilience of the regime based on its “Alawi” composition.

Nikolas Van Dam (2011) analyzed the maintenance of the Assad regime with a particular accent on the sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties present in the regime. The main thesis of his book is to put forward these elements as the main reasons in the longevity of the regime, including during Bashar al-Assad’s era. Joshua Landis (2012) also characterized the regime as minoritarian, or minority rule, with the Assad family at its head. He added that patronage served “as essential glue, binding the interests of disparate social groups to the regime”. In addition to this, he also argued before the uprising that the appetite for change of the country's leadership was not that big among the people in Syria and that Bashar al-Assad “was popular among

young people” and “young people are quite proud of him” (Wikstrom 2011). This last argument, to relativize considerably, would be challenged rapidly in the following weeks after the outbreak of the uprising. Leon T. Goldsmith (2015b) writes about how the fear (rooted in various social, political and sectarian explanations) of the Alawi population affected their political behavior and influenced support for the Assad regime, leading to its consolidation and durability. Although he acknowledged the differences within the Alawi community (social, regional, tribal, etc...), he falls often throughout the book into a form of essentialism by generalizing the community’s political positions or interests as united and one. He does a similar thing with the Sunni population (Goldsmith 2015b: 88). In addition to this, the author fails to explain the dynamics of the uprising, reducing it to a spontaneous social movement with no specific objective other than a desire for change and a rejection of fear (Goldsmith 2015b: 195).

Israeli academic Eyal Zisser (2013) mixes the social and sectarian aspects together in his description of the roots of the uprising:

“The revolution in Syria, in contrast to the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, was at its base a peasants' revolt, a protest by the Sunni periphery against what was perceived as the Ba'th regime's turning its back on the country's rural population. Only later did the rebellion take on additional dimensions with jihadists joining the struggle because of the regime's "heretical" Alawi nature and because of its alliance with Shi'a Iran and Hezbollah. In the name of jihad, thousands of volunteers have streamed into Syria from all over the Arab and Muslim world.”

Sectarianism and sectarian identities are fixed and are considered primordial and essential elements of the people in most of these analyses, neglecting class dynamics, nature and policies of the state, geopolitical rivalries, etc...

Some liberal opposition personalities on the other side have not necessarily characterized the regime as Alawi, rather describing it as a authoritarian and privatized state by the Assad family, but nevertheless implementing policies favoring religious minorities, while Sunnis generally were “angry” at this situation and discriminated and being kept outside of clientelist networks (al-Hajj Saleh 2017).

In a more elaborated attempt to explain sectarian dynamics regarding the state in Syria, academic Salwa Ismail (2009: 14) has spoken of “political Alawism” in regard to Syria. She refers to a form of rule that consecrates sectarianism and rests on certain alliances and intersections of interests. The concept is meant to capture the idea that authority and rule are Alawi, but that the Alawis do not rule. Following the beginning of the uprising, veteran scholar and political activist Sadiq Jalal al-Azm (cited in Orient Net 2014) said that the solution to the end of the conflict was the overthrow of “political Alawism”. Although undisputable the important domination of Alawi personalities at the head of the regime and its coercive instruments (the military and the secret services), I will show that reducing the nature of the state or its dominant institutions to an “Alawi identity” is problematic and does not seize upon the complex networks of alliances made by the regime’s elite.

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

c) Socio-economic and political dynamics

A series of authors have put forward economic grievances that marginalized large sections of the population and eroded the Syrian regime’s political base to have been one of the most important reasons for the eruption of the 2011 uprising in Syria (Dahi and Munif 2012; Gerges 2013; Bozarslan 2015). Gilbert Achcar (2013; 2016)

described in his two books that the Syrian revolutionary process was rooted in the same reasons as the other popular uprisings in the region, in other words, despotism and authoritarianism on one side and on the other side the blockage on the development of the productive forces because of the relations of production. He argues that different elements explained its particular evolution, notably the nature of the regime and regional and international political scenes. He explained that

“the Assad regime’s offensive, and its resort to systematic, bloody repression on an increasingly horrific scale, engaged Syria inexorably on the path of a civil war.” (Achcar 2016: 13)

On a similar path, Samer Abboud (2016) provides a general analysis of the contemporary history of Syria and of the uprising with a useful macro-level analysis based in the political economy of the country. He argues that the absence of democracy and increasing inequalities are root causes of the uprising. The socio-economic and political transformations are fundamental reasons that led to the uprising in 2011 and its developments. He also explains other elements such as growing sectarianism in society. Majid Rafizadeh (2013) asserted for example

“Assad’s neoliberal policies and economic liberalization—without the political reforms to redistribute the wealth—severely exacerbated the inequality between the poor and the rich.”

He also put forward that

“while a small portion of the crony capitalists, business class, and loyalists to Assad were able to benefit from these policies, the vast majority of the population was disenfranchised. The regime attacked the worker and peasant unions in the country, viewing them as obstacles to the neoliberal policies, by not providing them with funds that they needed to continue to function.”

Dara Conduit (2017) analyzed how localized patterns of grievance were present in each conflict's most restive city in comparing Hama in the 1980s and Homs at the beginning of the uprising in 2011. The author argues that while differences existed between both periods, including the socioeconomic groups involved, the root causes of grievance were very similar. He explains

“both uprisings followed a redrawing of Syria’s social contract that marginalized a group that had previously had a stake in the Syrian state. In both cases, a new underclass was formed that became the backbone of the political unrest.”

Shamel Azmeh (2016) describes the movement of 2011 as an unorganized protest movement driven by the consolidation and institutionalization of multi-sectarian elite rule through the economic reform process that started in the 2000s, following the expiration of the “developmental rentier fix” that had ensured authoritarian stability in Syria in earlier decades. De Châtel (2014) put emphasis on the government’s failure to stem the humanitarian crisis prompted by the 2006–2010 drought, which formed one of the triggers of the uprising, feeding, in his opinion “a discontent that had long been simmering in rural areas.” She however also adds that the uprising in Syria was triggered by a series of social, economic and political factors, including, in this case, growing poverty caused by rapid economic liberalization and the cancellation of state subsidies after 2005, an increasing rural–urban divide, widespread corruption, rising unemployment and an absence of political freedom.

In opposition to this perspective, researcher Suhail Belhadj (2013: 350-351) argues that the main trigger was the eruption of the uprising in Tunisia and not socio-economic reasons. He described a positive balance sheet of Assad’s government policies, claiming that the Ba’thist state preserved Syria from a total degradation of the general condition of Syria. Economically, he cited the maintenance of some level of wealth redistribution, preventing popular households from falling into total poverty, effective management of the 2007 food crisis, and a very slight improvement in the living conditions of the middle classes. I argue that this is quite far from the reality, as social inequalities and poverty increased considerably while public services were increasingly weakened. Similarly, George Corm (2011), argues that the protest

movement in Syria did not have the same characteristics as the other uprisings because it erupted in small poor rural zones, at the exception of the poor neighborhoods in Aleppo, Damascus and Lattakia. Hama on its side was portrayed as a bastion of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). This interpretation is reductive. In Homs, demonstrations occurred on a massive scale, while protesters were prevented from reaching the centers of the main cities Damascus and Aleppo despite important protests. In addition, Syrian society shared most of the socio-economic and political problems of the region – socio-economic impoverishment and the absence of democracy.

At the same time, as argued by Gilbert Achcar (2013: 83), analysts should not confuse an aggravating circumstance with an efficient cause. For example, imputing the Syrian popular uprising only to drought years between 2006 and 2010, confuses “structure and conjuncture” to use the terms of Albert Soboul regarding the debates on the causes of the French revolution. Soboul distinguished on one side between the long-term fundamental contradictions opposing the development of productive forces to social and political structures and on the other side the cyclical variations exacerbating these contradictions (cited in Achcar 2013: 83). This is why Achcar (2013: 84-85) rightly argues that the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa are not only an avatar of the global economic crisis of 2008. The Great crisis merely played an adjuvant role to the specific structural factors of the regional explosion. Achcar continues that the profound causes of the long-term economic blockade affecting Syrian society and the subsequent uprisings are rooted in the specific modalities of the dominant capitalist mode of production in the Arab region. This leads us to the study of the nature of states in the region. Economics professor El-Mouhoub Mouhoub (2010) explained in a similar vein that behind the appearances and decent macroeconomic performance, all countries in the MENA region suffer from similar symptoms. These economies are characterized by a polarization in limited sectors, very low employment rates associated with extremely high rates of skilled migration, a rentier-based management of resources (included non-natural resources), and corruption organized by a clannish oligarchy at times including top military commanders.

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

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

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

d) Foreign led conspiracy

The centrality of geopolitical conflicts in the region has led some authors to concentrate on foreign influences and interventions as the main agents of mobilization and its roots, particularly in the case of Syria. These analyses neglect the endogenous nature of the uprising and of the protest movement. In September 2013, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2013) characterized the Syrian uprising as a “pseudo struggle... lacking the kind of radical-emancipatory opposition clearly perceptible in Egypt.” He added:

“there are no clear political stakes, no signs of a broad emancipatory-democratic coalition, just a complex network of religious and ethnic alliances over-determined by the influence of superpowers.”

Journalist Tariq Ali (2012) similarly declared in 2012 that what Syria was witnessing is “a new form of re-colonization by the West, like we have already seen in Iraq and in Libya.” In Ali’s view

“Many of the people who first rose against the Assad regime in Syria have been sidelined, leaving the Syrian people with limited choices, neither of which they want: either a Western imposed regime, composed of sundry Syrians who work for the western intelligence agencies, or the Assad regime.”

As I argued in the introduction, Egyptian economist and political activist Samir Amin (2012) also portrayed the uprising as a conspiracy led by foreign powers. In 2015, he went as far as to say that the uprising in Syria was “a false spring” on the model of Libya (2015). Fareed Zakaria (2014) echoed this version on his side that “radical Islamists” were at the core of the opposition to the Assad regime from the very beginning. We will see that this latest literature is far from reality.

On a much more nuanced and deepened perspective, academic Christopher Phillips (2016: 3) argues that the Syrian uprising “cannot be explained without a detail understanding of the international dimension”, without at the same time denying the agency of the Syrian regime and opposition actors. While rejecting any conspiracy theory, he explains however that from the beginning, the various external actors, international and regional, have been “essential in enabling and facilitating both regime and opposition actions” (Phillips 2016: 3).

I will rather look at the actors and institutions involved in the protest movement and their evolutions, who were influenced first by the Assad regime’s actions and policies, but also later on by international and regional interventions. I will deepen the analysis of a section of the literature, which puts an emphasis on endogenous dynamics,

including civilian activists, organizations and institutions. Writers Leila al-Shami and Robin Yassin Kassab (2016) examine the various youth movements and groups playing a role in the outbreak and development of the uprising, while describing the effects of militarization and the rise of religious fundamentalist forces on it.

In a similar fashion, a book edited by Sabr Darwish (2015) analyses and describes the experiences of local civilian populations in liberated regions and neighborhoods from the regime. He examines the way they organized their lives and managed their areas. Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay (2016) narrate experiences of some local councils and other local institutions, which is based on numerous interviews in northern Syria and neighboring countries with armed militants, peaceful activists and members of local councils. This work shows the attempts to establish some form of dual power challenging the authority and provision of services by the regime. The stories of political activists involved in the uprising, at the beginning and often now in exile, are very useful in observing and analyzing the social and political forces participating in the organization of the protest movement. This literature also focuses on the effects of the repressive state system and actions of the authorities (Yazbek 2012, al-Dik 2016 and al-Hajj Saleh 2017).

Thomas Pierret (2011) gives a very important role to religious clerics before and during the uprising by describing the role of Syrian Sunni Ulama as at the heart of socio-economic transformations prior to the uprising in 2011. Pierret claims that these religious clerics will ultimately decide the fate of the Assad dynasty. We will observe that their role, except in some particular small towns, was secondary and definitely not decisive at the beginning of the revolutionary process or in its development. Similarly, Haian Dukhan (2014) points to the mobilizing influence of Syria's tribes, arguing that early protests in Dar'a had been a motivator for protesters from other tribes in Homs, Hama and Deir Zor. Close to this vision and based on social movement theory, Leenders and Heydemann (2012) argued that at first, groups of protestors were

“networks centered on clan or tribal structures, circular labor migration, cross-border movements and ‘criminality’, and served as a social site relatively independent of the state’s

authoritarian surveillance, where grievances and nonconforming views on submission to Ba’thist authority could develop.”

The tribal element, although present, was not as homogeneous as presented by these authors. Various divisions existed within these structures with different positions taken by members of the same tribe. As argued by researcher Khedder Khaddour (2017c):

“However, Syria’s tribes are no longer internally unified, independent social units. Their political role has been closely linked to a central authority for generations. This fact came to redefine the way that Syrians of tribal background were organized socially and politically.”

Tribal connections were therefore weakened in Syria by the dual tides of globalization and the settling of tribal people in urban areas, but with the uprising and moreover the collapse of the state in eastern Syria tribal ties were once more strengthened. Individuals considered their tribe as a refuge and as a source of protection according to Dr. Haian Dukhan, a researcher of Syrian tribes (cited in Wilcox 2017).

Protesters and protest movements in the beginning of the Syrian uprising, at least its civilian components, acted on their own without being directly organized or ideologically inspired by particular organizations within their country or by foreign states. This echoed Wendell Philips’ words “Revolutions are not made they come” (cited in Skocpol 1978: 17).

The protest movement’s initial objective of reform very rapidly changed to demand the fall of the regime a few weeks after its eruption, while the militarization of sections of the uprising appeared progressively after harsh and violent repression from regime’s security forces. I will analyze the evolution of the nature of the protest movement throughout the years and the appearance of new military actors. These new military actors became of growing importance as a result primarily of the policies

of the Assad regime due to repression and the use of sectarianism, and the interventions of foreign powers.

The attempts to reach a situation of total dual power were prevented by the absence of a centralized and coordinated political force. The various coordination committees were able to organize sectors of the population, particularly among the popular classes, at the beginning of the protests and in the areas liberated from regime forces. These forces, however, were not an independent social and conscious force. The absence of any social actors such as trade unions or significant progressive and / or democratic political organization, worsened the situation. Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements had the opportunity to organize sectors of the population in opposition held areas as opposed to the coordination committees, as a result notably to the massive repression by the regime against democratic components of the movement, organized structure, and significant funding from Gulf private and state networks. At the same time, the regime was also able to mobilize its own popular base (different from social base defined in terms of class (Achcar 2013: 200) linked through sectarian, regional, tribal and clientelist connections to defend the regime.

The decentralization of power among various actors, which was the result of multiple factors, especially violent repression and the lack a central leadership, actually made the rise of conflicts and rivalries between various opposition actors possible. This initial situation of attempts to dual power opposing a rather inclusive opposition against regime forces, armed and civilian, progressively transformed into a multiple powers situation in Syria, with the rise of various Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces and of the Kurdish PYD who held different objectives.

1.4 Theoretical Framework of this Thesis: a materialist analysis

This thesis develops an analysis of the Syrian uprising on the basis of the materialist method offered in the set of the critical literature mentioned in the socio-economic and political dynamics part. In particular, I draw from the work of authors Gilbert Achcar (2013; 2016) and Adam Hanieh (2013), in relation to examining and analyzing the revolutionary processes in the Middle East and North Africa. I will adopt Achcar's (2013: 20) denomination of the ongoing events in the Arab region

understood as "prolonged or long term revolutionary process", which allows for the combination of the revolutionary nature of the current situations and their incompleteness. In doing so, there are several theoretical aspects that will be emphasized. First, in line with the observations made by, Achcar and Hanieh, the thesis will focus in detail on the class and state formation as root causes behind the uprising in Syria which determined in many respects the nature and aspects of the protest movement. The analysis of the nature of the state will also be crucial in order to understand the differences between other uprisings, and the Syrian regime's reaction to the protest movement. Repressive policies of the state are indeed linked to the nature of the state itself and cannot be simply separated. I will then look at the influence of the regional and international system on the revolutionary process and the protest movement in Syria through the framework of imperialism. Finally, I will analyze the concept of sectarianism and its subsequent dynamics understood as modern phenomena and not essentialist elements of the region. All these components impacted the eruption and particular development of the revolutionary process in Syria.

1.5 Understanding Class and neoliberalism

The first theoretical aspect of the thesis is to emphasize the importance of tracing the changing class characteristics of the regime's social base, and the relationship of this to the regime's political practice. Class is the key social category from which to comprehend the dynamics of any society. Class is understood in this work as a set of social relations that emerge around capital accumulation and forms of labor. In doing so, as argued by Adam Hanieh (2015):

“We need to avoid an abstract and economistic understanding of what we mean by class... What this means is that questions such as gender, age, national and ethnic origin, citizenship status, and so forth, are part of what constitutes class as a concrete social relation. In this sense, class is not an abstract category shorn of particularity and difference – difference is essential to how we understand it.”

As David McNally has pointed out, drawing upon the observations of the Canadian theorist Himani Bannerji, we need to avoid an approach that sees

“different forms of social oppression as discrete and autonomous social relations ... rather than as ‘social relations and forms [that] come into being in and through each other.’”

(McNally 2015, 143 cited in Hanieh 2015)

As Goodwin and Hetland (2013:90) have argued at a general level, tracing patterns of capitalist development is important to an appreciation of party and social movement dynamics in at least four specific ways. First, changing patterns of capitalist reproduction act to

“inhibit or facilitate the formation of new collective identities and solidarities, including both class and non-class identities. In this way capitalism shapes the very condition of existence of many social movements.” (Goodwin and Hetland 2013:91)

Second, the relative balance of power that exists between different classes “shapes the way movements evolve over time and what they can win for their constituents” (Goodwin and Hetland 2013:91). Third, within movements themselves, class divisions “may powerfully shape movement goals and strategies” (Goodwin and Hetland 2013:91). And finally, the kinds of goals and strategies developed by movements, and their ideological expressions, are “closely linked to capitalist institutions and practices” (Goodwin and Hetland 2013:91). Goodwin and Hetland’s approach provides a useful counterpoint to analyses of party politics and social movements that deny the salience of capitalist development itself. As Goodwin and Hetland have noted in their critique of New Social Movement theory and ‘contentious politics’, while much social scientific writing on social movements “provide valuable insights into the internal dynamics of social movements”, they “nevertheless tend to undermine the reality of capitalism, proletarianisation, class conflict, or political economy generally” (Goodwin and Hetland 2013:91).²

² For further discussion of these themes, see Barker, Cox, Krinsky and Nilsen 2013

Each of these four observations will be noted throughout this thesis. In particular, the analysis in the following chapters will focus on these dynamics throughout the period of economic liberal and neoliberal reforms in Syria (from the 1970s to the present day). I understand neoliberalism as a particular organization of capitalism to ensure the conditions for capitalist reproduction at a global scale and as part of a ruling class offensive, which ran through the recessions in the 1970s and 1980s and resulted in the restructuring and generation of new and expanded forms of capitalist accumulation (Cimorelli 2009). The basic goal of neoliberalism, as David Harvey has emphasized, is the development of a new

“regime of capital accumulation characterized by a minimal direct intervention of the state in the economy, limited to setting up the legal, political and military functions required to guarantee the proper functioning of markets and their creation in those sectors where markets do not exist.” (cited in Roccu 2012:72).

In the framework of neoliberalism, the State has the explicit role of guaranteeing capital accumulation, as explained and emphasized by David Harvey (2005:2):

“The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary.”

At a general level, neoliberalism – understood both as a set of economic policies and a restructuring of class power – in Syria, especially following the arrival of Bashar al-Assad, differs little from other countries in the region (Hanieh 2013:160). In this sense, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad have embraced policies such as privatization, the

opening up of markets, the deregulation of labor and other markets and cuts to social spending. I will analyze how the progressive implementation of neo-liberal policies, accelerated with Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power in 2000 following the death of his father Hafez al-Assad, impacted Syrian society. Moreover I will look at how these policies gradually favored the new emerging bourgeois constituencies of the regime on the political level. This process went hand in hand with a rapprochement with Sunni religiously conservative layers of society over the historic and older popular constituencies of the regime who were located in rural areas and more popular neighborhoods of cities.

Privatization and neoliberalism did not mean a retreat by the state but rather its redeployment in ways that modify authoritarian rule (Donati 2013: 43). These neoliberal policies actually led to a new phase of "upgraded authoritarianism" as I will show, and did not at all lead to a process of enhancing an "independent middle class or capitalists" who were supposed to challenge dictatorships and lead to democracy, a discourse promoted by academic literature throughout the 90s and onwards (Moore Henry and Springborg 2010), by international financial institutions and some Western states, especially US governments that combined the expansion of neoliberal policies with the so-called "democracy"³ promotion agenda in the Global South. The new "civil society", supposed to encourage democracy, was composed of associations and so called NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) encouraged from above, which constituted a new elite linked to business networks who were close to the regime. This emergence of the NGOs was and continues to be a part of the process of privatizing regulatory functions and social services. Neoliberal policies also strengthened religious associations, both Muslim and Christian, in Syria and their networks of diffusion, increasing their role in society at the expense of the State. The regime under the rule of Bashar al-Assad has actually continued to increase the kinds of policies followed by his father's policies, which favored the collaboration between religious associations and conservative segments of Syrian society.

As argued by Bassam Haddad (2013: 74)

³ As argued by Adam Hanieh (2013: 5) "it was a form of democracy understood in the narrow sense of regular electoral competitions, usually waged between different sections of the elite, which largely aimed at providing popularly sanctioned legitimacy for free economic market measures"

“this (neo-liberal) development is far more likely to buttress authoritarian rule than to challenge it given the mutual interests between the state and big business.”

The Chilean case provides a good illustration of the link between neo-liberal policies and political dictatorship in countries of the periphery.

This is why the "gray areas" argument of academic Michel Camau (2006), who states that in the context of globalization and its impact on the capacities of states the distinctions between authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes tend to fade should be more developed or at least sharpened. It is at the risk of falling into a generalization of all forms of state regardless of the state's democratic spaces. He argues that a macro transformation of political regimes on a global scale was taking place under the effect of a "double bind" produced by the contradictions between globalization and democratization. The globalization of markets, new communication techniques and multi-level governance reflected a movement of recomposition that undermined the sovereignty of States and, hence, that of territorially defined people. He goes on by analyzing that "old democracies" live a general feeling of "democratic deficit" and political crisis, low representation of elites in power, etc. while authoritarian regimes, under the pressure of public opinion and international donors, are obliged to give pledges of democratic openness to national and international actors -- an affirmation that can be largely challenged. Authoritarian regimes are thus subjected to forms of "pluralism by default" which undermines the criterion of political pluralism as a distinctive mode of the types of regime, therefore losing its relevance. He concludes by saying that the idea of a typology opposing – in a strictly binary mode – democratic and authoritarian regimes, seems to have fallen into disuse and reinforced the thesis of a generalized hybridization of regimes. In my opinion, there are at least two problems with his explanation.

The mechanist argument that economic globalization undermines the sovereignty of the state and brings some form of pluralism has been demonstrably false in Syria and various countries of the region, I argue it has had the effect of strengthening authoritarianism and despotism. Secondly, the possibility of a similar mode of

contentious action such as demonstrations and strikes or the presence of a social movement in a liberal democratic arena and authoritarian and despotic regimes, and their acceptance or not, still does not evade the question of the structure of the state and its institutions (elections or absence of elections, independent judicial system, etc...) and the way it influences a particular process of mobilization.

In addition to this, the implementation of neoliberal policies in dominated countries reinforces the general patterns of under-development with deep consequences in social and political structures as argued by theorists of the “development of underdevelopment” thesis to explain that contemporary underdevelopment of peripheral countries, at least a great majority, was the result of its inclusion and participation in the process of global capitalist development (Amin 1976; Gunder Frank 1970).

I will show how the acceleration of neoliberal policies following Bashar al-Assad’s rise to power actually led to a shift in the social base. This social base of the Ba’th regime in Hafez’s era was originally composed of peasants, government employees and some sections of the new bourgeoisie. At the eve of the uprising, the heart of the regime coalition was crony capitalists – the rent seeking alliance of political brokers (led by Assad’s mothers family) and the regime-supportive bourgeoisie. It was this section of the bourgeoisie that funded Assad’s re-election in 2007 (Hinnebush 2012: 101) and which expressed its support for the ruling regime through propaganda and proclamations in the first months of the revolution. These proclamations came when demonstrations in support of the Assad regime were still a pressing need for the regime. Lastly, this section of the bourgeoisie gave funding to militias loyal to the regime. This shift in social base was paralleled by disempowerment of the traditional corporatist organizations of workers and peasants and the co-optation in their place by business groups. All this while a new labor law ended what the regime’s section of the bourgeoisie pushing for neoliberal policies titled the overprotection of workers.

Linda Matar’s (2015:) argues that the class responsible for the economic development policies, which was in charge of the allocation of resources during the Hafez and Bashar al-Assad regimes, led to a crisis of capital accumulation. This crisis had dire socio-economic consequences at the expense of the popular classes

and in favor of the bourgeoisie. This specifically benefitted a network of privileges with close connections to the regime. In a similar fashion, Bassam Haddad (2012b) shows that the Syrian regime's economic policies and the development of particular economic links with selected members of the business community came at the expense of large segments of Syrian society and economic productivity. This change in the social base also led to a change in policies of the state regarding religiously conservative layers of the society, religion, women's rights, etc, which were started by Hafez al-Assad. This had consequences on the origins and the evolution of the uprising in Syria.

1.6 The State

The primacy of class therefore entails a different notion of the state than used in various frameworks of analysis, such as the state centrist approach (Skocpol 1978; Goodwin 2001), which treats it as an autonomous structure in relation to different actors of society. Skocpol (Goodwin 2001: 27) considers the state as a

“structure with a logic and interests of its own not necessarily equivalent to or fused with the interests of the dominant class in society or the full set of member groups in polity.”

Nicolas Poulantzas (1978), in contrast, developed the notion of the relative autonomy of the state. He argued that the state in a capitalist system is always a state based on the interests of a particular class, however it is at the same time relatively autonomous in relation to the dominant classes. This is because the dominant classes are not homogenous, never have been and cannot be. The division of Labor is the essence of capitalism, it affects all sectors of society, including the dominant classes that are divided in various fractions of the capital. The interests of these fractions do not always coincide. In order to reach their domination and constitute what Poulantzas calls a bloc of power, they must be able to rely on a flexible instrument, which generally under the hegemony of a particular fraction coordinates their interests. As explained by Fred Block (1980: 229):

“This insight makes clear that not all state actions can be explained as responses to the interests of particular fractions of the capitalist class, but rather many actions can be understood as flowing from the state's function as the 'factor of cohesion' in the social formation. Yet in fulfilling these functions, the state is acting in the interests of the capitalist class as a whole-hence the autonomy of the state is relative and limited.”

The relative autonomy of the state is therefore a consequence of the pluralistic and differentiated character of the dominant classes, In this perspective, capitalists and state managers are two separate entities with different interests, respectively, in increasing their capital and in sustaining the power of their state against the population subject to it and other states (Callinicos 2009: 85-86).

On his side, Timothy Mitchell (1991) argues that the separation or the boundaries between the state and society are rather blurred. The differentiation between the two entities should not be seen or understood as definite, but as

“as line drawn internally within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a social and political order is maintained.” (Mitchell 1991: 78)

Modern politics are therefore the result of the producing and reproducing of the line of difference between state and society. This perspective acknowledges the significance of state phenomenon, but refrain from ascribing to it the “coherence, unity and absolute autonomy” resulting from statist theoretical approaches. In his opinion the state should be analysed as

“an effect of a detailed process of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification and supervision and surveillance, which create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state an society.” (Mitchell 1991: 95)

On his side Adam Hanieh (2013) argues that the nature of political institutions is historically determined reflections of the class structure that has emerged in relation to capital accumulation. In other words, the state is not disassociated from the sphere of politics, which is not separated from the economic sphere. Similarly, it is a social relation or “the set of institutional forms through which the ruling class relates to the rest of society” as explained by Bertell Olin (Cited in Hanieh 2013: 14). The relationship the ruling class has with the state and its institutions is actually part of what forms it as a class; state and class must be considered as conjointly reinforcing and co-constituted, with the later determining the conditions of existence for the former. As explained by Adam Hanieh (2013:15), an analysis of the state has to be undertaken in

“an examination of the “anatomy of the bourgeois society”, that is, an analysis of the specifically capitalist mode of social labour, the appropriation of the surplus product and the resulting laws of reproduction of the whole social formation, which objectively rise to the particular political form. Seen in this manner, class formation – the ways in which class coalesce around the production, realization and appropriation of profit – becomes the central element to understanding any social formation.”

The problem with the state / civil society dichotomy is that it serves to

“conceptualize away the problem of capitalism, by disaggregating society into fragments, with no overarching power structure, no totalizing unity, no systemic coercions – in other words, no capitalist system, with its expansionary drive and its capacity to penetrate every aspects of social life.”
(Hanieh 2013:12)

To expand on the notion of the state and the means by which it dominates society, Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1999: 504) explained that the state is

“the entire complex practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules.”

Gramsci (1999: 532) developed an analysis incorporating the apparatus of hegemony in the state, in other words understanding that

“the general notion of the state includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that state = political society + civil society; in other words hegemony protected by the armor of coercion).”

Gramsci explains that the governing class did not have to rely exclusively on the coercive power of the state or even its direct economic power to rule, but rather through its hegemony, expressed in civil society and the state. The ruled are convinced and persuaded to take the system of beliefs of the ruling class and to share its social, cultural and moral values (cited in Ayubi 1995:6). The Gramscian concept of hegemony, in addition to analyzing the processes according to which political structures are approved by the system’s agents, explores the area of cultural and ideological consent and underlines the role of the state as educator.

In his understanding of the state, Gramsci observes that various levels of state development exist. He describes the “gendarme state” (based on its law and order functions) and the “corporative state” (based on its economic interests and functions) as a primary and narrow phase of state formation and development. In the absence of the development of civil society, the state remains, in Gramsci’s terms, backwards, in other words it is mainly coercive and relies on force, while enjoying limited hegemony over society (Sasson 2000:72). On the opposite, what he called the “integral state” or the “state in its totality” is not limited to the government, but incorporates some aspects of civil society and is based on hegemony and leadership (1999: 540).

The transition to an integral state involves the development of hegemony throughout society, in other words, as explained by Gramsci “relationships at all levels of the society, from the factory through to the school, that aim at the creation of a new type and level of civilization” (1999: 143). The integral state with a leading or directive class creates a particular “Weltanschauung” (worldview). Hegemony is then realized when this particular “Weltanschauung” is

“diffused by agencies of ideological control and socialization into every area of daily life to the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the broad masses to become part of the common sense.” (Boggs 1976 cited in Ayubi 1995:8)

In relation to the MENA, the researcher Nazih Ayubi (1995: 3) wrote in his book “Over-Stating the Arab State, politics and society in the Middle East”

“The Arab state is not a natural growth of its own socio-economic history or its own cultural and intellectual tradition. It is a “fierce” state that has frequently to resort to raw coercion in order to preserve itself, but it is not a “strong” state because a) it lacks – to varying degrees of course – the “infrastructural power” (Mann, 1986a) that enables states to penetrate society effectively through mechanisms such as taxation for example, and b) it lacks ideological hegemony (in the gramscian sense) that would enable it to forge a historic social bloc that accepts the legitimacy of the ruling stratum.”

The concept of hegemony is understood here in the Gramscian sense as,

“the whole range of values, attitudes, beliefs, cultural norms, legal precepts that are deeply embedded in the fabric of social relations.” (Thomas 2009:210)

According to Gramsci, these elements are a vital part of any group's ability to become dominant. Hegemony is established not simply through force but through, "the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally" (cited in Roccu 2012:44).

Anne Showstack Sasson (2000) presents Gramsci's concept of hegemony as consent alongside moral and intellectual leadership. She adds that hegemony has cultural, political and economic aspects and entails compromises between social groups in which sectional interests are transformed and a notion of the general interest is promoted (Sasson 2000:45). She explains that Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony in recognition of the changing nature of political power in the twentieth century and the political significance of civil society. The attributes of civil society, Sasson argues, were an indicator of the democratic nature of a society in which if its democratic and pluralistic potential were developed, coercive aspects of the state could diminish (Sasson 2000:103).

Lisa Wedeen, in her research on the propaganda of the Assad regime in producing power and hegemony, acknowledges the Gramscian concept of hegemony employed by some social scientific theorists. She points to the significance of "ideas, signs and images in producing dominant understandings that are taken for granted and perceived as natural and commonsensical" (Wedeen 1999: 11). This understanding of hegemony, in her opinion, while helpful in proposing ways in which images and ideas are involved in producing power, nevertheless fails to apprehend the dynamics of official rhetoric in Syria regarding the regime of Hafez al-Assad. She argues that

"The practices and language of the cult do cultivate Assad's power in ways that are "taken for granted. In other words, while the literal statements of the cult are frequently clearly preposterous, the dominance to which they refer (and which they also help to produce) is implicit in the regime's demands of public dissimulation and in people's conformity to them."
(Wedeen 1999:12)

Her research provides what Louis Althusser and others would probably call a materialist approach to rhetoric and symbols. She explains that it “focuses on the observable, material effects of the cult and on the everyday practices of domination and transgression the cult produces through its system of representation” (Wedeen 1999:12). In much the same way, Althusser and Stuart Hall argued that there

“is a dialectal relationship between practices and ideology in which practices produce ideological representations, and ideology material because it is inscribed in practices.” (cited in Wedeen 1999:12)

Before Ayubi, Abdallah Al-'Arawi (Laroui) developed similar arguments regarding the weakness of the Arab states in explaining that Arab states are all body and muscle but have little spirit and mind and no theory of liberty. He added that the state in the MENA region is only preoccupied with power and strength, and although its “body” might be strong,

“the violence of this state is in reality an indication of its weakness and fragility: the (coercive) apparatus may be powerful but the state as a whole is weak because it lacks rationality and because it lacks the necessary moral, ideological, and educational supports.” (cited in Ayubi 1995: 23)

Similarly, Joel Migdal (1988: 3-41) develops the concept of a “weak state” that is based on a model of state-society relations in which “weak states” suffer from limited power and capacity to exert social control. Politics in these “weak states” are centered around strategies of survival. State leaders and political elites are essentially interested in remaining in power. A common tactic to conserve and maintain political rule in a weak state is to manipulate social and political cleavages through a divide-and-rule strategy. This provides ruling elites with enough room to manoeuvre in the short term, at the expense of social cohesion in the long term. Weak states are therefore more likely to use and manipulate sectarian tensions and mobilizations in order to preserve their power.

In the case of Syria, I will argue in this thesis that the state under the rule of the Assad family should be characterized as a “fierce” or “weak” state for its “lack of infrastructural power” and “ideological hegemony”, which continuously diminished over time. It is not a developed state similar to Western liberal democracies and their institutions, which were able to reach forms of hegemony although challenged at some punctual occasions. The moment hegemony is defended by violence and repression means it is no longer guaranteed. In Gramsci’s terms, the Syrian state is backward, relying mainly on its coercive methods and force, while enjoying limited hegemony over society. It is in Gramsci’s classification a “gendarme state” and “corporative state”. This has led the Syrian state under Assad to firstly and above all impose its domination over society by using brutal repression and other tools such as corporatism, sectarianism, corruption, nepotism, etc...

As I will show in this text, the situation of lack of hegemony of the Assad regimes, just as in other regimes of similar backgrounds such as Egypt, signified no ideological hegemony within Syrian society. As argued by Nazih Ayubi (1995: 182),

“the lack of class hegemony and articulated nature of modes of production and of social relations also carry with them important implications with regard to ideology... Lacking real ideological hegemony of the ruling castes often resort to eclecticism in an attempt to appeal to as many symbols and groups as possible.”

The increasing adoption by the Assad regimes of neoliberal policies and the fostering of conservative religious practices and forces in society in contradiction with their original discourse regarding “socialism” and “secularism” is a proof of this lack of hegemony.

Some scholars, such as Steven Heydemann, have explained this phenomenon of ideological and political transformations as a process of “authoritarian upgrading”. They analyze the reasons why some authoritarian regimes engaged in processes of economic and / or “political” liberalization to adapt to new circumstances or

increasing opposition in order to maintain the structure and rule of the regime, without having to resort to full-fledged democratization. The outcome is an authoritarianism that is stronger, more flexible and more resilient than ever. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Lenders (2013: 5) characterize this as “authoritarian resilience”, which

“refers to attributes, relational qualities, and institutional arrangements that have long given regimes in the Middle East, conceptualized as institutionalized systems of rule, the capacity to adapt governance strategies to changing domestic and international conditions.”

In the case of Syria, they define the ruling regime as recombinant authoritarianism, which they describe as

“systems of rule that possess the capacity to reorder and reconfigure instruments and strategies of governance, to reshape and recombine existing institutional, discursive, and regulatory arrangements to create recognizable but nonetheless distinctive solutions to shifting configurations of challenge.” (Heydemann and Reinoud Lenders 2013: 7)

This is the framework in which they analyze the possibilities of regimes to adapt and change their management of the distribution of power and resources. Line Khatib (2013: 22) explains that in this perspective Syria went through two specific phases.

The first one was in the 1970s and 1980s, when the regime of Hafez al-Assad was challenged by the Muslim Brotherhood opposing his rule with a set of measures and policies that accommodated willing and politically quietist Islamic groups and their business allies. These tactical measures included an infusion of the population with state approved Islamic religiosity, so as to marginalize or even overwhelm the political and religious rhetoric promoted by the MB. These policies encouraged the state to re-appropriate religious institutions and their messages to win the religious conservative sectors of Syrian society, while trying to co-opt wide sections of the

bourgeoisie with selective economic liberalization. These two sectors, the MBs and the bourgeoisie, had been the most opposed to the Ba'thist state in the 1960s following its arrival to power after 1963. I will show that these policies opened space for businessmen and religiously conservative groups to organize, on the condition that they remained politically quietist. The secular opposition were repressed severely and prevented from organizing.

The second phase of authoritarian upgrading occurred following the arrival to power of Bashar al-Assad in the 2000s. Bashar deepened the policies of his father through accelerating economic liberalization and increasing collaboration with religiously conservative groups. At the same time, the more secular and democratic opposition continued to be repressed.

I will argue that these policies, rather than strengthening the regime, weakened the regime of Bashar al-Assad by reducing its social class base considerably. His social base was increasingly limited to the crony capitalist and bourgeois sectors of the state and the security apparatus of the regime, along with the populist corporatist structure of the state.

Two other elements are also important to take into consideration while analyzing the state in Syria in the context of a dominated country characterized by unequal and combined development: the issues of 1) the nature of the state and its apparatus and 2) the state's popular base (Achcar 2013: 200). As argued by Gilbert Achcar (2013: 200-01), the analysis of these elements is much more complicated in societies rooted in unequal and combined development than in the case of a bourgeois democratic state ruling over a modern type of civil society. The reason is that archaic social structures and categories are mixed to a modern type of social stratification and where forms of archaic dominations are amalgamated with political institutions of modern inspirations.⁴ The main archaic remnants in the MENA region that affects the nature of the political domination and of the state are tribalism, regionalism and

⁴ Gilbert Achcar acknowledges that all societies are rooted in some forms of unequal and combined development, no society is without history and none is exempt from passed vestiges. However what is meant by unequal and combined development goes way past the normality of historic evolution to describe the combination of social logics different at the heart of the contemporary economic and / or political system

sectarianism, especially the latter in the case of Syria. These factors are inherited from the period preceding the bourgeois era, which ideologically promoted a national ideal. They correspond to an era where parental and lineage structures were determinant (tribalism) and where religion was the political ideology per excellence (sectarianism).⁵ The degree of resilience and presence of these elements in the societies of the region varies according to its age and depth of modernization.

The persistence of these archaic factors explains why the theory of tribal, sectarian or regional *'asabiyya* is still very much used and considered as relevant. The explanation for the resilience of these factors should however not be found in any kind of Arabic or Islamic particularities, but is linked to the dynamics of unequal and combined development in a global capitalist system. Agents of modernization, whether foreigners or indigenous, have themselves used these archaic factors to consolidate their own powers. Lacking popular legitimacy, the various regimes of the region have generally nurtured tribal, sectarian and / or regional clienteles as guarantees against popular uprising, constituting the armature of power (Achcar 2013: 200-202).

The lack or relative low importance of regional and tribal aspects in Egypt and Tunisia, despite the sectarian discrimination directed against a small minority in Egypt, the Copts, these two countries were characterized by a horizontal social homogeneity far greater than Syria or other countries of the region such as Libya, the Gulf monarchies, etc... In both cases it was possible to gather greater sections of the population, even a majority, pushing the dominant class and the state apparatus to sacrifice their heads of state, Mubarak and Ben Ali (Achcar 2013: 205).

These elements are very important to understand the political dynamics of the uprising in Syria and the differences between Egypt and Tunisia, which saw the departure of their heads of state after a few weeks of mass demonstrations and other actions of popular resistances, such as strikes. In the Syrian case, on the other side, the peaceful popular uprising was turned into an armed conflict following the fierce

⁵ Sectarianism still exists in Northern Ireland as a relic of past colonial time, but has otherwise disappeared from the rest of Europe, while regionalism still exists.

repression by regime forces after a few months. How can we explain these differences?

Elements of understanding can be found in the patrimonial nature of the regime's apparatus in Syria according to Achcar (2013), in which the centers of power (political, military and economy) within the regime were concentrated in one family and its clique, the Assad, similar to Libya or the Gulf Monarchies, therefore pushing the regime to use all the violence at its disposition to protect its rule. He described the patrimonial state in the traditional Weberian definition as an absolute autocratic and hereditary power, which can function through a collegial environment (parents and friends) and that owns the state: its armed force, dominated by a praetorian guard (a force whose allegiance goes to the rulers, not to the state), economic means and administration. In this type of regime, it's a type of crony capitalism that develops, dominated by a state bourgeoisie. In other words the members and people close to the ruling families often exploit their dominant position guaranteed by the political power to amass considerable fortunes.

In the case of Egypt and Tunisia, political systems were closer to a form of neopatrimonialism: an authoritarian institutionalized republican system with a greater or lesser degree of autonomy of the state in relation to the rulers, who are likely to be replaced. Nepotism was present in these systems, as we witnessed through the Mubarak and Trabelsi families. A neopatrimonial system can transform into a patrimonial state with time, and with the transmission of hereditary or quasi-hereditary power, where the ruler chooses his successor (Achcar 2013: 91-98).

The military-sectarian allegiance to the regime in Syria was nearly complete in the armed apparatus to defend it, afraid of future acts of revenges for their service to the regime and knowing some sections would lose their privileges if the ruler was overthrown. In Egypt, the military complex was more worried of its own interests than the ones of the ruler and was therefore ready to witness its fall. Intra elite tensions had actually emerged prior to the uprising in 2011 in Egypt between a network close to Mubarak's family and military leadership and a network connected with it (Roll 2016).

In addition to the patrimonial nature of the state, and reinforcing this pattern, was the rentier characteristic of many of the states of the region, including Syria. Rent is defined as a regular revenue that is not generated by the work carried out or commissioned by the beneficiary. The dominant form of state rent in the Middle East and North African region was mining rent, such as oil, gas and other mineral products. The mining rent represented around 28.5 percent of GDP in 2006 in Syria (Achcar 2013: 86). In addition to this, the Assad regime benefitted, at different periods, from a strategic rent in reward for its “struggle” against Israel.⁶ Economic growth during both Assad regimes was chiefly rent-based, depending on oil export revenues, financial assistance received or offered because of a particular political position and capital inflows including remittances. This rent-based growth was also anti-developmental in many ways as I will show in the text. While strengthening the patrimonial nature of the state, it is a decisive element to understand the particular path of the Syrian uprising and the reaction of the state to the protest movement.

Therefore, most of the patrimonial states in the MENA region are generally characterized by a deeply corrupt trilateral “power elite”⁷ as explained by Achcar (2016: 7):

“a triangle of power constituted by the interlocking pinnacles of the military apparatus the political institutions and politically determined capitalist class (a state bourgeoisie), all three bent on fiercely defending their access to state power, the main source of their privileges and profits”

In this perspective, and contrary to some states especially characterized by democratic bourgeois’ institutions and forms of governances, is it not possible to speak of the relative autonomy of the state in relation to the power elite.

⁶ For example, at the Baghdad Arab Summit in 1978, which was organized to oppose the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David agreement, Syria was awarded a \$1.8 billion annual grant for a ten-year period to reward its “struggle” against Israel

⁷ As explained by Achcar the concept of “power elite” was elaborated by C. Wright Mills who designated the “triangle of power” in control of the State

1.7 Imperialism

The situation of the state in its regional and international environment is also an important element in any kind of revolutionary situation. Skocpol (1978: 30) argued for example that

“geopolitical environments create tasks and opportunities for states and place limits on their capacities to cope with either external or internal tasks or crises... also the position of one state in relation to others... a state’s involvement in an international network of states is a basis for potential autonomy of action over and against groups and economic arrangements within its jurisdiction”

Inter-state competition reflected by “the strategies, calculations and interactions rivalries in the state system” (Callinicos 2009: 82) must be included in any kind of analysis. The significance of the geopolitical arena and dynamics underlined by state centered approaches fails to explain the motivation of states to act in a particular political and economic system, the capitalist system, in which it is embedded and therefore the subsequent dynamics that it entails. The state system must be treated as an element or dimension of the capitalist mode of production. The actions in a capitalist system are “shaped by class antagonisms, competitive struggles, capital accumulation, crisis tendencies, and social and political movements” (Callinicos 2009: 83).

In this respect, the understanding of imperialism, as defined by David Harvey (2003: 26) as “capitalist imperialism”, helps us explain these dynamics:

“as a contradictory fusion of the politics of state and empire (imperialism as a distinctively political project on the part of actors whose power is based in command of a territory and a capacity to mobilize its human and natural resources towards political, economic, and military ends) and the “molecular processes of capital accumulation in space and time”

(imperialism as a diffuse political-economic process in space and time in which command over and use of capital takes primacy).”

In other words, “capitalist imperialism is constituted by the intersection of two forms of competition, namely economic and geopolitical” (Callinicos: 2009: 15). It is this dialectical relationship between these two logics that explains the current imperialists dynamics in the world.

At the same time, a central aspect of imperialism is the dialectic rivalry and unity of interests that characterizes the relationship between the major imperialist powers. I will show in the Syrian case that there has been a dual tendency of cooperation and rivalry between international and regional powers, all however in opposition to the initial objectives of the protest movement. The absence of massive oil reserves in Syria also had consequences in the behavior of the US and its unwillingness to intervene to overthrow the Assad regime, but rather concentrate on the “war on terror” against ISIS and other jihadist groups because it constituted a threat to stability for the region and regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. The US failures in Iraq in the post-invasion period of the country after 2003 also had implications regarding its policies in the region.

Another significant element is that imperialism also has consequences on class and state formation. One of the main results of imperialism has been to produce a domestic capitalist class internal to the region that has increasingly been aligned with the interests of global US-led imperialist capital (Hanieh 2013: 23). In the case of the Syrian uprising, the interventions of Iran and Russia in Syria were mainly motivated for geopolitical reasons, although economic interests deepened with their involvement in the country to assist the Assad regime throughout the years. The US under the Obama administration had also progressively abandoned important and costly military intervention in the Middle East such as the one in Iraq, which was a total failure, instead seeking cosmetic change at the top of the regimes, while keeping their structure intact.

The concept of imperialism also captures the inclination of dominant capital to increasingly drag the international market in on itself, forcibly extracting profits from all corners of the globe and as a result increasing the uneven development of the system altogether, while at the same time intensifying the interdependency of states as an essential condition for this extraction to occur. Imperialism thereby reinforces the process of “combined and uneven development” that characterizes the world market in contemporary capitalism (Hanieh 2013: 21).

In the MENA context, imperialism has been an essential and ongoing theme shaping the political economy of the region and influencing its political structures. Following the discoveries of oil reserves in the 1920s and 1930s in the Gulf region (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq and smaller Gulf monarchies), it became clear that it possessed the largest supplies and easy accessible hydrocarbons, which led to important geopolitical implications. As argued by Adam Hanieh, it conferred “on the region a potentially decisive role in determining the fortunes of capitalism on the global scale”. Similarly, David Harvey (2003: 19), explained

“whoever controls the Middle East controls the global oil spigot
and whoever controls the global oil spigot can control the
global economy, at least for the near future”

Between 1940 and 1967, US companies considerably expanded their control of oil in the MENA region from 10 percent to nearly 60 percent, while not hesitating to intervene through overt and covert operations in the region from the 1950s, notably the 1953 overthrow of the Mossadegh government in Iran, which had nationalized foreign-owned oil companies. The control over oil supplies is an important instrument to oppose any power shifts, both economic and military, threatened within the global economy (Harvey 2003: 20 + 77).

The domination of Western States, most especially the US after WWII, deepened the uneven and combined development of the region. The economic environment of the region has been dominated for decades, especially from the 1970s, by a particular capitalist mode of production, mostly rentier, commercial and speculative centered

around unproductive sectors of the economy, and characterized by short term profit seeking. Following WWII, the US supported and established strategic partnerships with Iran (until 1979), Israel and Saudi Arabia to confront Arab nationalist and progressive movements and various popular struggles, which were generally seeking greater sovereignty, social justice and autonomy for their countries. The Saudi Kingdom, in order to confront these forces, helped foster various Sunni Islamic fundamentalist movements, most particularly the MB, as a counterweight against Arab nationalism and leftist movements spreading in the region, including in the Gulf states, during the 1950s and 1960s. Arab nationalism, which had been until that period the dominant political movement in the region, was viewed by the USA as the main enemy.

The US, with the help of its allies in the region, notably Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, pumped billions of dollars into the training and arming of Islamic fundamentalist fighters and groups from 1979 onward that would be decisive in expanding the most extremist wing of the Islamic fundamentalist movements. For the United States, the support for these groups was a means to weaken its Cold War enemy, the Soviet Union.

However even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US supported the Taliban, who received arms, financial assistance and military recruits from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia with the agreement of Washington, in their conquest of Afghanistan throughout the 1990s, even welcoming a delegation in February 1997 in Washington, notably to discuss the plans of Unocal, a California oil company (later part of Chevron), to build a pipeline from Central Asia through Afghanistan. As late as September 2000, while denouncing the actions and violations of Human Rights of the Taliban as 'despicable' and its refusal to arrest and hand over Ussama bin Laden following the terrorist attacks in 1998 on US embassies in East Africa, the US assured a senior official of the Taliban in private that its policy 'has always been to try to find a way to engage the Taliban' (Mitchell 2011: 200). The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, changed however this situation and rather benevolent attitude of Washington with the subsequent USA led invasion of Afghanistan.

At the same time, the policy of the US to use “proxy” states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia to guarantee the flow of oil and protect their interests changed as a result of political evolutions in the region: the first oil boycott and price hike of 1973 initiated and organized by OPEC and then the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979. US President Jimmy Carter outlined the doctrine that Washington would not under any circumstances permit a disruption to the flow of Gulf oil. In other words, this involved the necessity to maintain the Strait of Hormuz and a permanent military presence in the region, in addition to the establishment of a Rapid Development Force to handle any emergencies (Harvey 2003: 21).

In the early 1970s, Arab regimes such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq progressively abandoned their previous radical social policies and increasingly adopted a rapprochement with the Western countries and the monarchies of the Gulf. These were the results of various factors such as military defeat in 1967 against Israel and the development of economic crises that state capitalist methods of nationalist development were unable to resolve. Moreover, Arab nationalist movements, despite some major achievements in terms of social issues, progressively fell to their own class contradictions in strengthening primarily capitalism and an emerging capitalist class, who would increasingly be integrated or at least inserted into circuits of accumulation developed by the advanced capitalist states over the region as a whole.

Since the beginning of the uprisings in 2011, regional and international actors have attempted to influence or crush the path of popular revolts. International and regional states have intervened militarily, politically and financially in various countries witnessing higher or lower levels of revolt, for common or opposing interests according to the contexts. These interventions and their dynamics occurred in the framework of imperialism and its dynamics explained above, and not according primordially to sectarian, or the will to assist “democracy” abroad. The different and multiple natures of interventions in Syria were on this account crucial for the resilience of the regime.

1.8 Sectarianism

We understand sectarianism as a product of modernity and not as a remnant of past history preventing the modernization of these countries, or as something that is essential to the people of the region. Lebanese Palestinian academic Ussama Makdissi (2000: 174) explained this dilemma well around the analysis of sectarianism and wrote the following in his book:

“Among the greatest red herrings of the history of the Middle East has been the characterization of sectarianism as an obstacle to modernity and as a symptom of a so-called arc of crisis. This interpretation has led to an increasingly frustrated path of historical inquiry, with some scholars earnestly searching backward in time for answers while the problem of sectarianism marches forward, growing ever more entrenched and even more complex. The beginning of sectarianism did not imply a reversion. It marked a rupture, a birth of a new culture that singled out religious affiliation as the defining public and political characteristic of a modern subject and citizen.”

Sectarianism is a powerful mechanism of control over the course of the class struggle through its creation of ties of dependence between the popular classes and their bourgeois and petit bourgeois leadership. In this manner, popular classes are deprived of an independent political existence and instead are defined (and act politically) through their confessional status.

I will analyze the way in which the Syrian regime, since the arrival of Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970, has used sectarianism and primordial identities as a weapon to divide the Syrians both on religious and ethnic lines. The Syrian regime has indeed not lagged behind in these kinds of policies. It has developed a double policy of repressing independent popular civic and secular organizations and political parties, only allowing alternative organizations from the regime, while reinforcing sectarian and primary – including tribal – identities throughout contemporary Syrian history in

different ways. I will analyze the policies of the regime which deepened sectarian policies these last 40 years, without forgetting that in the current uprising the regime has used these policies, such as resorting to an intense propaganda of a sectarian and fundamentalist Sunni uprising to describe the revolutionary process. At the same time, I will also observe the use of sectarianism by sections of the Syrian opposition and other foreign countries in order to build a following or mobilize constituencies on the ground.

The revolutionary processes in the Middle East and North Africa have opened a new page of history, which requires more than ever a criticism of "Orientalism" to return to a materialist analysis of events. My research will indeed also seek to challenge one of the most common explanations by a growing number of superficial observations, which postulates, without always explicitly defending it, that religion is the driving force of Oriental history, and not the political and socio-economic interests that divide these societies, and whose religious quarrels would offer a distorted reflection.

Similarly, explanations rooting or limiting the uprisings to a specific Arab culture or identity are problematic as well. French academic Bertrand Badie (2011) for example explained that the founding acts of these revolts have been against economic precariousness and against underemployment, but the social issue was nevertheless not the key element, but rather a revolt against humiliation, an appeal to dignity, to recover one's honor. He argued that these elements are old communitarian values on which the classical philosophy of the Arab world is founded. Badie's argument can be expanded to other populations in the world and not limited to the Arabs. In all kind of revolts or protest movement, appeals for more dignity can be observed.

I agree with authors who denounce the so called "Arab and / or Muslim exceptionalism " (Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003; Achcar 2013; Hanieh 2013), while I apply to these societies the same concepts used elsewhere. This perspective is similar to that of Hanna Batatu (1978: 5), who wrote that

"to reject class analysis [to which we subscribe] directly, simply because of contingent ideological associations, is inadmissible from a scientific point of view."

We will attempt to demonstrate the diverse ramifications and complexity of the Syrian revolutionary process, questioning the terms broadly used today to describe the situation in Syria, simply as a geopolitical conflict and / or religious sectarian war. These notions do not allow us to grasp events and propose an alternative analysis, centered on the concept of revolution, which should be analyzed both in its material aspects and in its ideal components.

I will argue in this thesis that Syria witnessed an evolution from a civil war to an international one with various states intervening directly or indirectly through proxies.

Chapter 2: Short history of contemporary Syria

2.1 Introduction

Syria's contemporary political history and subsequent dynamics must be understood in the framework of the political economy and the socio economic origins of class formations, in addition to regional political changes. The traditional large landowners and merchants dominated the country until the 1960s. Following Syria's independence in 1946, nationalist and leftist forces were growing and increasingly challenging the ruling classes of the country. The rise of Arab nationalism influenced the growth of these forces in the region and in Syria, including the Ba'th, and led to the unity of Syria and Egypt between 1958 and 1961 with the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR). The coup of 1961, resulting in the end of the UAR, was only a short set back before the domination of the political and economic elite of Syria was completely undermined. The Arab nationalist military coup d'état, dominated by Ba'thist elements, in 1963 and successive policies until 1970 made significant populist socioeconomic gains.

The arrival to power of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 marked the beginning of the building of a patrimonial state and of violent waves of repression against all forms of dissents within the Syrian political scene going from the Islamic fundamentalist movements to nationalist, leftists and liberal organizations.

When Hafez al-Assad passed away in June 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad succeeded him. A few hours after the announcement of Assad's death, the Syrian parliament reduced the minimum age need for the presidency from 40 to 34, thereby permitting Bashar al-Assad to occupy this position 'legally.' Within a month and a half, a referendum had been organized and Bashar al-Assad was elected with an official 97.3 percent of the vote (Perthes 2004: 7). Sa'ad Eddin Ibrahim's reference to Syria as *Jumlukiya*, which combined the Arabic's words of "republic" and "monarchy", described very well this process (cited in Stacher 2011: 198).

The patrimonial nature of the state in the hands of the Assad family and relatives was greatly strengthened through this process of accelerated implementation of neo-

liberal policies and the replacement of sections of the old guard by relatives or close individuals to Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, the old system of corporatist organizations, which enabled the regime to have contacts and some presence within rural and peripheral areas, was considerably weakened and strengthened thereby the importance of the security services in these areas. These political and socio-economic evolutions, in addition to the regional context, had consequences on the issue of sectarian tensions by strengthening them.

2.2 Ba'th led military coup d'état 1963, or a revenge on the urban bourgeoisie

On March 8, 1963, various active political groups of officers organized a new coup d'état. Authority in the new government was divided between the various military groups, but the Ba'th had the premiership and the interior ministry (Galvani 1974: 6). In the following months, the Ba'th officers were able to drive out the other groups from government, while the Ba'th Military Committee focused on taking control of the army. The coming to power of the Ba'th party, following the military coup in 1963, marked the end of the political domination of the urban bourgeoisie, originating very predominantly from the Arab and Sunni Muslim population of the country and inaugurated a new era where the new regime was dominated by social forces from the rural and peripheral areas and by religious minorities, notably the Alawis, Druze and Isma'ilis (Haddad 2012a: XIV).

The coup of 1963 may therefore, in many respects, be considered a response to the social crisis that affected the rural popular classes since independence, a reaction of the villages to the domination of the urban nobility. The rural nobility, which characterized the origin of the new ruling elite in 1963, provided the pool of qualified persons from among whom the officials were chosen, while the Command's members of the Ba'th showed no representation at all of people from the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo. The social composition of the party bases until the 1980's retained their historical character composed of lower social class, up to 70 percent, principally peasants and workers (Hinnebush 1990: 179).

The new regime engaged rapidly in important social reforms. In the summer of 1963, a revised version of the 1958 land reform law was issued (Matar 2015: 75). The Ba'th

government also stepped up the process of expropriation and distribution of land from 1965, while engaging in a large process of nationalization of some industries and taking over the country's banks (Metral 1980). The number of landholders rose from an estimated 292,273 in 1958 to 468.539 in 1970-1971, representing an increase of 60 percent. The middle class peasantry benefited the most from the Ba'thist agrarian policies of the 1960s: private holdings rose to 58.7 percent (Batatu 1998: 35 + 156).

These agricultural reforms also had the objective of broadening the social base of the Ba'thist regime, which was facing increasing opposition from the Syrian bourgeoisie and the religious conservative petit bourgeoisie sectors of the society, by strengthening and gaining the support of the rural strata from which much of the new leadership originated from, in other words medium sized and small landowners (Perthes 1995: 39).

The consequences of this process converged in the economic and social consolidation of the rural middle class, while the redistribution of land put an end to the reign of very large landowners, as opposed to the middle (sometimes even rich) peasantry, that the new regime of the Ba'th could not weaken, since it was in large part derived from it (Richards and Waterbury 1990: 177). Sections of the agricultural proletariat and the small peasantry thus significantly benefited from agrarian reforms and the expansion of the public sector, and of the army and the bureaucracy in general (Galvani 1974: 8-9). The policies of the Ba'th regime provided as well a social security system, free state services, subsidized housing, free education and health care. GDP per capita increased annually by 3 percent between 1964 and 1974 (Matar 2015: 77).

The Ba'th party leaders, as they assumed power, started to establish popular corporatist organizations in various areas of society in the objective as explained by Raymond Hinnebusch (1976:1) of extending "its organizational apparatus into the "mass base" of society to mobilize participation and support for its rule and its goals." The function of the various popular corporatist organizations in the ba'thist regime was a triple one: representation, mobilization and control (Perthes 1995: 170). On the other side, any autonomy of the labor movement and any form of left and progressive

opposition were violently repressed (Perthes 1995: 39). To face combative trade unions, the regime organized and structured its public sector the same way as the Egyptian model, employing General Organizations to supervise production in specific sectors (Richards and Waterbury 1990: 201).

The new Ba'thist state in the 1960s, and until the 1970s, expanded industrial production while acting as an engine of growth by managing the main sectors of the economy: foreign trade, banking, industry, construction and other core economic branches (Matar 2015: 59). At the same time, the building of an etatist or state capitalist economy did not mean the end of the private sector. As Nazih Ayubi (1995: 383) explained “private sectors within “socialist” (state led) regimes have managed not only to persevere, but often to consolidate, themselves side by side with state capitalism”. For example, the private sector supplied in 1972, 35 percent of the manufacturing production and 40 percent of the value added, but employed 62 percent of workers (Longuenesse 1979: 7). The state also provided supply and construction contracts to the private sector and numerous private sector benefits were earned through subcontracting, as the latter gave birth to increasing rent-seeking activities between state officials and businessmen (Matar 2015: 58).

The Ba'thist state was however the scene of political rivalries between different tendencies within the party from 1963 and 1970. A new division started to appear following the defeat against Israel in 1967 and the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights. This divide was between the army controlled by Hafez al-Assad, who was Minister of Defense and head of the Air force, and the Ba'th party organization led by Salah Jadid. Within the party, most cadres, as well as the populist corporatist organizations, backed Jadid, but Assad secured support from the urban bourgeoisie, large and small, as well as from the army, while the rural base of the Ba'th party was split between the two men (Galvani 1974: 9). Jadid and his supporters gave priority to the “socialist transformation” of Syrian society, class struggle throughout the region against “reactionary” regimes and favoured cooperation with the Soviet Union and other “communist” countries. Hafez al-Assad sought on the opposite collaborations with other Arab states, rejecting the distinctions between reactionaries and progressives, and promoted some forms of economic liberalizations in favor of small and middle merchants and investors (Galvani 1974: 9; Van Dam 2017: 41).

The final break between Assad and Jadid actually occurred following the refusal of the first to support the government decision to allow the Palestinian Liberation Army (under command of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)) to intervene in Jordan during the war in 1970 between the Palestinian resistance and King Hussayn's army. The Ba'th party led by Jadid started a process to expel Assad from his positions of power, in order to dominate of the army more firmly. The decision was never implemented. The army took control over the party headquarters, on the orders of Hafez al-Assad and Mustafa Tlass. This new bloody coup led to complete control of the party and of the regime by Assad (Galvani 1974: 10).

2.3 Hafez al-Assad or the roots of the patrimonial regime, 1970-2000

Since Hafez al-Assad was made president in a referendum in 1971, he built a system based around him and in which powers were concentrated in his hands. Syria increasingly turned into a despotic presidential system with distinct patrimonial characteristics. The sphere of control of the state, and its hold over society developed considerably; new institutions were established and existing ones transformed so as to conform to the emerging hierarchical and despotic structure.

Al-Assad was able to build a strong and fierce regime, through a neo-patrimonial strategy that concentrated power in a presidential monarchy bolstered by his bloc of Alawi militaries, in which we can find many of his family members, commanding the top of the army and security forces. This patrimonial core was connected to society through bureaucratic and party populist corporatist institutions that went past sectarian and urban/rural divisions, integrating a constituency that cut through the middle class and the peasantry and represented the interests of a sizeable regime coalition (Hinnebush 2012: 97).

2.4 Patrimonialism, sectarianism and clientelism

From the seventies, Hafez al-Assad built a close network of associates to consolidate his regime. Members of Assad's own family and clan, and from the Alawi sect, had a comparative advantage in this respect. Out of 31 officers appointed by Hafez al-

Assad to lead the Syrian armed forces between 1970 and 1997 no less than 61.3 percent were Alawi, in other words 19, of which eight were from his own tribe and four others from his wife's tribe (Batatu 1981: 331). All military units as well as most security services that were in a position to stage a coup were under the command of Alawi loyalists from the President's own tribal and regional background (Perthes 1995: 181).

Palestinian researcher Batatu (1998: 215-226) argued that the increasing sectarian tensions in Syria in the 1970s, on the backdrop of the rising conflict between Islamic fundamentalist movements and the Assad regime and Syria's intervention in Lebanon, increased Assad's dependency on his kinsmen for political survival, and thus strengthened the Alawi identity / feature of the regime. The 'Alawitization' of the officer corps was particularly reinforced after the 1979 attack on Alawi-cadets in Aleppo's school of artillery by Islamic militants, and even more so, following the Hama massacre in 1982 (Seale 1988: 329; Van Dam 2011: 98-102). Since the early 1980s, Alawis constituted up to 80–85 percent of every new cohort graduating from the military academy and dominated command positions in the armed forces. Sectarian representation was especially patent in the Republican Guard, the 4th Armored Division, the Air Force Intelligence, and the Military Security, which all were critical for regime survival (Bou Nassif 2015: 7-9).

The Assad regime actually promoted a political strategy to try to link itself to the Alawi population. Recruitment in the state public sector was one of these instruments, massively targeting Alawi from rural areas who were the principal beneficiaries of public sector expansion.

Assad consolidated its power at the top of the regime using individuals linked through familial, tribal and sectarian connections. Many Alawis from the "hinterland" (dakhel), i.e. the Homs-Hama region, considered, and still did at the eve of the uprising in 2011, that the security services, were managed and dominated by coastal Alawis. Similar complaints could be heard in the army. To reach a high rank and influential position, one needed to be from a particular clan (Khaddour 2013a: 12). In a similar vein, Leon T. Goldsmith (2015a: 151-153) argued "urbanized Dakhel Alawi lacked the political connection of the coastal".

The Assad regime also eliminated any dissident voices inside the Alawi population. Hafez al-Assad targeted possible Alawi military alternatives to his rule and who had relations with the Sunni Damascene bourgeoisie, including the general Muhammad Omran, assassinated in Lebanon in 1971. Salah Jadid, who was in power from 1966 to 1970, was also imprisoned from 1970 until his death in 1993. The Assad family did not want any alternative sources of power concurrent to their own inside the Alawi population. Most of the relationships were established on a clientelist basis between the Alawi population and officials on a personal level following a variety of forms derived from mutual interests and loyalties to the family or of narrow clan (al-Sa'id 2012).

Similarly, the Alawi population did not benefit excessively from any specific economic policies favoring them against other populations from the regime according to Alasdayr Drysdale's analysis (1981: 109). He explained that the Ba'thist regime's commitment to reducing regional and urban inequalities improved life in the countryside through comprehensive land reform, extensive irrigation and land reclamation projects, and the establishment of cooperatives. He added that this was accompanied by:

“the development of a national communications infrastructure with improved rail and road links between agriculturally expanding northeast and the ports of the booming coastal region. The regime's desire to distribute industrial growth more evenly has led to the location of many of the country's new factories in such mid-sized cities as Lattakia, Tartus, Homs, and Hama instead of in Damascus and Aleppo” (Drysdale 1981: 109).

In the nineties, the scholar Hanna Batatu (1981: 341) wrote that complaints were made by the Alawi from the highlands that the bulk of peasants in their areas were destitute and were still dependent for tillage on erratic weather conditions.

More generally, the Assad regime, father and son, continuously also tried to minimize and hide all visible signs of Alawi religiosity and promoted assimilation into the Sunni mainstream. Bachar and Hafez al-Assad both performed public prayers in Sunni mosques, while Sunni mosques were built throughout Alawi majority populated areas. They promoted a policy of re-Islamizing the Alawis in order to bring them into the Islamic mainstream (Hinnebush 1996: 211). The regime did not allow any form of civil representation to form a Higher Alawi Supreme Council and there are no public religious references for the Alawi community. The Alawis, like other Islamic religious minorities, follow the same religious laws as the Sunni community regarding the law of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc...) and receive a Sunni religious education in schools, media and public institutions (Syria Exposed 2005; Said, Y. N 2012; Wimmen 2017: 73).

Sectarianism has never been a political end but remained a significant means of domination, cooptation and control for the regime.

We could also find Sunni high leaders in the Assad regime, including Chief of Staff Hikmat al-Shihabi, Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlass, Vice President Abd Halim Khaddam, and all the Prime Ministers during his rule. These and other Sunni members of the President's inner circle had not secured their positions within the regime as alibi Sunnis or in order to satisfy the Sunni majority. They were all there because they had been Assad's friends and loyal followers for a long time (Perthes 1995: 182). Sunnis were present at all levels of state institutions. Significant numbers of urban Sunnis, mainly from Damascus, were co-opted into the top ranks of the party and many non-party technocrats into the government (Hinnebush 2001: 83). That said, all these various personalities, except Rif'at al-Assad, the brother of Hafez, until his exile, draw their authority and strength from Hafez al-Assad and had no or very little power base of their own. The center of decision-making remained ultimately with Hafez al-Assad (Batatu 1981: 332).

2.5 Ba'th and corporatist organizations, evolutions into instrument of control and repression

According to Syria's 1973 constitution, the Ba'th was the leading party in the Syrian state and society. The party, however, lost all of its ideological credentials and dynamics with the arrival to power of Hafez al-Assad, who transformed it into an instrument of social control and of mobilization for the President, while being de-ideologized (Perthes 1995: 154). The organization of the party was modified with the end of internal elections by its replacement of a system of designation in a top down system decided by the regime and the security services, while elements opposing the regime policies were repressed (Seurat 2012: 59).

The post 1970s were characterized by mass enrolment in the party with the objective to broaden the popular base as far as possible and to use the party as the main instrument for extending the control of the regime on society. From a total party membership of 65,398 in 1971, it rose to 1,008,243 by June 1992 (Batatu 1998: 174). The doors of the party were opened wide, even admitting ex MB and rural notables (Perthes 1995: 155). The party was transformed into a mere framework for clientelism; ideology was substituted for patronage as the dominant cement of the regime and making the party a major front of it (Hinnebush 1990: 166). The transformation of the role of the Ba'th can be extended to other state institutions as explained by Alan Richards and John Waterbury (1990: 201):

“Assad is an organization man, mistrustful of the masses and of revolutionary adventures. He relies on the large power structure of the country: the armed forces, the bureaucracy, the Ba'th party, and the public sector – perhaps in that order. These instruments are used to control, preempt, and police, not to mobilize.”

The party maintained some enduring purpose in connecting the regime and its constituency. Firstly, it still performed individual “interest articulation”, negotiating with the bureaucracy to rectify constituent complaints, to place clients in jobs, and usually to smooth the decrepit functioning of the bureaucratic state. Secondly, the party

sustained its recruitment policies of popular elements into the elite and the necessity of the elite to maintain this base of support contributed to reduce or limit to some extent the total abandonment of statist policies, which most probably were preferred by the party constituency (Hinnebush 2001: 82-83).

The use of popular corporatist organizations was also increased considerably in the process of social control, while this trend ran parallel to the end of all independent popular organizations including trade unions, professional and civic associations. They came under the regime's authority after harsh repression.

Following Assad's coup in 1970, the trade unions were progressively denatured in order to assist the regime, rather than defending working class interests. The 1972 conference of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) characterized the role of the unions in the Ba'thist state as "political" (Perthes 1995: 174), in other words it abdicated any independent and autonomous political role for the unions and subordinated any material demand to a higher imperative: to increase production (Longuenesse 1980). The major political role of the GFTU evolved towards mobilizing their membership for constant productive efforts and to produce support for regime policies in the working class. GFTU continued to play however a social role for its membership and other segments of the population by notably providing some services, usually free or comparatively cheaper than other institutions, especially in the field of public health (Perthes 1995: 174-176).

The number of members in peasants' unions increased considerably. In 1972 their numbers reached 213,000, or 40 percent of the rural workforce. After 1973 and near the end of the agricultural reform program, the energy of the peasants was now channeled towards production rather than their own economic and political interests (Metral 1980). Peasant Unions and cooperatives increasingly served the interests of their wealthier members represented by the peasant with medium sized holdings, whereas the rural, landless peasants and smallholders were left without any organizations defending their own interests. Thanks to their position in the cooperatives, the Peasant Union and the party, middle class peasants became the leading class in the countryside politically, without becoming its wealthiest stratum (Perthes 1995: 87).

2.6 Selective and progressive liberalization

Under the new regime ruled by Hafez al-Assad, good relations with conservative Arab and Western states were encouraged while the private sector was pushed to play a larger role in the economy, and even foreign capital was invited in the country.

The regime started a process of winning the favors and support of the private sector by implementing various economic liberalization measures directly after the coup. The private sector contribution to GDP growth passed from 30 percent in the 1960s to 37 percent in 1980 (Seifan 2010: 4), while private investments grew throughout the 1970s faster than those of the public sector (Perthes 1995: 51). However, this controlled economic “infitah” did not challenge the predominant role of the State and public sector as main pillars of the economy (Matar 2015: 19). During the 1970s, the Syrian economy achieved significant growth in all sectors; real GNP increased more than 150 percent (Perthes 1992b: 210). Regarding agriculture, after an increase in production in the 1970s, the 1980s witnessed a period of stagnation. Agricultural production was increasingly unable to meet the needs of an expanding population and pushed Syria to import food supplies (Perthes 1995: 43-45).

The beginning of the 1980s marked the beginning of the fiscal crisis that erupted in 1986. The growth of the 1970s was replaced by stagnation in the 1980s; at the end of the decade real GNP was hardly superior to the 1980 figures; per capita it even diminished by about 20 percent (Perthes 1992b: 210). As the regime fell short of revenue, it responded through austerity measures and progressive, although limited, privatization and liberalization.

The regime’s strategy regarding economic liberalization was to progressively expand and shift its patronage networks to the private sector while controlling access to resources and the market in order to restrict and limit privatization to selected members and organizations. Thanks to this close intertwining of public with private interests, the state became a real machine in the accumulation of considerable resources, in particular enriching the close circles of the supreme leader, his family and his most faithful lieutenants. The informal networks and the nepotism, which bound the various sectors of the state with the business community, multiplied, giving

birth to a “new class” of bourgeois renters. This “new class” was connected to all sorts of business with the state. In wealth and influence they soon surpassed the country’s mainly petit bourgeois trade sector and remnant of the old pre-Ba’th, commercial bourgeoisie (Perthes 1992b: 214).

A new push for liberalization of the economy was made in 1991, developed under a process of reforms called “economic pluralism” (*al-ta’addudiyya al-iqtisadiyya*). Economic pluralism officially acknowledged the role of the private sector alongside the public sector. The symbol of the new liberalization process was the investment law Decree No. 10, 1991 (Haddad 2012a: 7). This decree was intended to promote and encourage national and foreign private investment in sectors of activity, which had previously been under the monopoly of the public sector (Perthes 1995: 58; Marzouq 2013: 39). The private sector, which represented about 35 percent of gross fixed capital formation between 1970 and 1985, increased to 52 percent of the total in 1989 and reached 66 percent in 1994 (Hinnebush 1997: 261).

The distribution of investment projects by economic sector licensed under Law No. 10 during 1991-2005 was however problematic as it did not serve its initial purpose to boost productive sectors of the economy: 60 percent in transport projects, 37 percent in industrial projects and 3 percent in agricultural projects. From 1991 to 2002, only 291 manufacturing projects under Law 10 were approved by the Ministry of Industry, generating no more than 13,700 jobs (Matar 2015: 123). This law actually served the interests of the “new class”, organically linked to the state, which needed to invest its wealth in the different sectors of the economy. Decree No. 10 (1991) thus constituted the springboard by means of which it was able to launder its accrued income (Haddad 2012a: XIV).

The share of salaries and wages according to the GDP diminished considerably, reaching 40 percent in 2004, while rents and profits represented approximately 60 percent (Khaddam 2013: 77).

2.7 Socio economic results of the Infitah

The transition from a command economy to crony capitalism was thus accelerated during the 1980s with the gradual abandonment of a centrally directed economy. The new liberalization policies were coupled with new austerity measures in the 1990s. Government spending as a portion of GDP dropped dramatically from 48 percent in 1980 to 25 percent in 1997 (Goulden 2011: 192). The end of the 1990s witnessed increasing socio economic problems with poverty reaching 14.3 percent in 1996-1997 (Matar 2015: 109). At the same time, inequalities were increasing in Syrian society. By the end of the 1990s and beginning of 2000, the upper 5 percent of the country was estimated to control some 50 percent of national income (Perthes 2004: 10).

There was also a gendered consequence to these policies. The total number of women in the work force had expanded in the 1980s and beyond, this increase being focused in the state controlled public economic sector. The percentage of women employed in industry in the public and private sectors increased from 13.4 percent in 1971 to 23 percent in 1981, but then decreased dramatically during the 1980s and 1990s, reaching a level of 9.8 percent in 1995. The same evolution occurred in the service sector, in which the percentage of women workers increased from 18.7 percent in 1970 to 47.2 percent by 1981, while it had decreased to 30.2 percent in 1995 (Perthes 2004: 10). In the public sector the percentage of women always had been higher than in the private sector, but this latter's size and contribution in the 2000s was much higher than the public sector (the ratio was 70/30).

2.8 No opposition allowed

Through these three decades in power, Syrian society became increasingly under the control of the regime in all its various components. The Ba'th Party was the only political organization, which had the right to organize events, lectures, public demonstrations and distribute a newspaper on the campus of a university or military barracks. Even the political parties allied to the regime in the National Progressive Front did not have the right to organize, make propaganda or have a small official presence in these institutions (Seurat 2012: 138). No immunity was granted to

university campuses in any way, either to teachers or students. Security agencies arrested students inside lecture halls and/or on campus, and expelled many (Middle East Watch 1991: 132).

Politically, the Islamic fundamentalist forces led by the MB represented the most significant menace to the regime from 1976 up to the Hama massacre in 1982 (see below). Hafez al-Assad first tried to coopt some sectors of the MB throughout the 1970s and seek some form of understanding with the movement, although combined with periods of violent repressions (Seal 1988: 188; Pierret 2011: 245; Lefèvre 2013: 87).

Alongside the repression endured by their members, the hostility of the MB was deepened through the years by the increasing domination of Alawi personalities of key regime's institutions. Leading figures of the regime, from the President to the heads of security services, were as we saw in their bulk Alawis. This was reflected in the increasing concentration of MB's attacks on the Alawi identity of the regime, rather than as in the 1960s on its "atheist" features, although it was still used to attack Assad's rule. The MB ultimately called from 1979-1980 for an armed revolt in order to overthrow the regime and establish an Islamic State (Porat 2010; Seurat 2012:145). The MB presented themselves as the natural spokesmen of the Sunni population in the country, and described and characterized their fight with Syria's rulers as a struggle between Sunni and Alawi (Batatu 1982: 13). The MB sought to generate a form of Sunni solidarity cutting across class and regional divisions.

The MB attempted most particularly to win the support of the upper land-owning class, which had suffered significantly from the Ba'thist policies of the 1960s. The networks connecting the MB and the rich landowners, who had been established in the 1950s, were revived. Rich nobles began supplying significant funding to the MB and engaged in plans with them with the objective of overthrowing the Ba'thist regime. They were also supported politically and even financially in their struggle against the regime by four main countries for different reasons: Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia (Lefèvre 2013: 50 + 129).

By the end of the 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, increasing military confrontation occurred between the jihadist group Fighting Vanguard and the regime's forces taking an intense sectarian and violent turn. The Fighting Vanguard was a faction officially separated from the MB although the boundaries were not clear between the two entities and leaders and members of both organizations shared deep relations at that period⁸ (Pargeter 2010: 82; Lefèvre 2013: 120).

The non-violent, democratic, leftist and secular oppositions also posed a significant threat to the regime throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as they had large support particularly among trade unions, professional associations, and the middle classes. These movements and organizations were composed of members reflecting the diversity of the Syrian society, including important minority elements. Following the military intervention by the Syrian regime in Lebanon in 1976, against the Palestinian resistance and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), which they condemned in strong terms, they increased their opposition to the regime by calling for greater democracy and rule of law (Middle East Watch 1991: 9). The 1980s were characterised as well by intermittent conflicts and repressions against PLO members and Palestinians more generally. The regime's jails held approximately 2,500 Palestinian political prisoners in the summer of 1990 (Middle East Watch 106-108). The leftist opposition and critics within the Ba'th party was also the target of security forces.

At the same time, crackdowns intensified against trade unionists affiliated or identified with opposition parties (Middle East Watch 1991: 14). In 1980, all the professional associations were dissolved by decree (Seurat 2012: 100). The regime then established new professional associations and appointed new leaders. Most of the professional associations were turned into corporatist arms of the state and the ruling party (Middle East Watch 1991: 19).

The turning point was however in February 1982, when the Hama uprising occurred, followed by massive and bloody repression. A general insurrection was called from

⁸ For more details see Lefèvre, Raphael (2013), *The Ashes of Hama, the Muslim Brotherhoods in Syria*, (London: Hurst); Pargeter, Alison (2010), *The Muslim Brotherhood, the Burden of Tradition*, London, Saqi Books

the minarets of the city, following an ambush by fighters of the Fighting Vanguard and the MB against regime security forces in the old city. Guns and ammunition were captured from police stations and approximately one hundred government and party representatives were assassinated (Lawson 1982). Weapons were distributed en masse and an Islamic tribunal was established (Seurat 2012: 113). Regime forces crushed the armed rebellion and the city went through a violent collective punishment. Estimates of the number killed varied from five to ten thousand and many thousands were injured. More than a third of the city was completely destroyed, leaving between sixty and seventy thousand people homeless (Middle East Watch 1991: 20; Lefèvre 2013: 120).

Following the Hama massacre, all organized Syrian opposition was almost completely crushed and did not pose a serious threat to the regime. Arrests of political activists and Human Rights defenders continued, particularly against left wing and democratic sections throughout the 1990s.

2.9 Integration of the sectors of the bourgeoisie and rapprochement with traditional and conservative layers of the society

The repression of popular organization and opposition political parties went hand in hand with the increased connection and collaboration between sectors of the predominantly Sunni urban business community through policies of economic rapprochement and controlled liberalization (Perthes 1992b: 225). Private sector representative institutions such as the Chambers of Commerce and Industry were reinvigorated in the mid and late 1980s, just when economic networks started to solidify (Haddad 2013: 84).

This was increasingly translated into the institutions of the state. In parliamentary elections organized in May 1990, two members of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce and one of the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce were elected, with one of the new deputy clearly characterizing himself as a “representative of businesses” (Perthes 1992a: 15-18). In the People’s Assembly, greater voice and space were given to businessmen or religious Sheikhs and even some traditional tribal leaders

among the non-party and independent elements. They occupied 33.2 percent of the seats in Parliament in 1994 (Batatu 1998: 277).

The regime also developed a religiously conservative discourse, in total contradiction to the so-called secular image the regime claimed to represent, since Assad's arrival to power. He multiplied the number of allegiances to Islam (Seurat 2012: 88) and during a speech to Syrian Ulama, he affirmed that the Corrective Movement was necessary to preserve the Islamic identity of the country against the Marxist drifts of his predecessors (Pierret 2011: 244). In 1973, Assad ordered a new printing of the Koran with his picture on the cover. This became known as the Assad Koran (Talhamy 2009: 566). The regime built 8,000 new mosques throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, established around two dozen institutes of Islamic Higher education and developed some 600 quasi official religious institutions in all Syrian governorates and cities to replace those that had been used by the MB for recruitment (Khatib 2011: 90). The regime was trying to encourage a conservative Islamic establishment to channel Islamic currents and legitimate the regime (Hinnebush 2001: 83).

They also started to sponsor and institutionalize alternative Islamic groups that were willing to play along with its political game. The Naqshbandi Kuffariya Sufi order under Sheikh Ahmad Kuffaro and Sheikh Sa'id al-Buti's groups became the two most prominent Islamic groups and expanded considerably in the 1970s (Khatib 2011: 90). At the same time, during the 1970s, the Qubaysiyyat female Islamic movement, established by al-Sheikha Munira al-Qubaysi as an autonomous female branch of the Naqshbandi order, was granted their first permission to establish an elementary/preschool in Damascus (Imady 2016: 73). Syrian authorities also encouraged the activities of Sheikh Saleh Farfour and its al-Fatih Islamic Institute.

The rise of the Islamic charitable sector reflected a period of détente between the Ba'th regime and the Islamic trend that started in the mid 1990s in the hope of strengthening the regime's legitimacy by ameliorating relations with domestic and regional Islamic forces. In 1994 for example, leaders of Jama'at Zayd, an Islamic organization, came back from their exile in Saudi Arabia and became a leading player in private welfare, drawing huge popularity among the Damascene middle

class and higher strata, which provided it with an important capacity to attract funds from the private sector (Pierret and Kjetil 2009: 596).

Prisoners associated with the MB and the Islamic movement's opposition were liberated by the regime and some were even co-opted by Damascus as independents in parliament such as Ghassan Abazad, an Ikhwan leader from Dar'a who brokered the return of members of the MB exiled in Jordan, won a seat in parliament (Hinnebush 1996: 211). This was happening in the background of new secret negotiations between the regime and the MB, following the election of Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni as chair of the MB in Syria in 1996. In December 1995, Damascus permitted the return of the former MB leader Sheikh Abu Ghudda to Aleppo, on the condition that he engaged himself only with religious and educational work and not with political activities. Abu Ghudda passed away two years after and Hafez al-Assad actually sent his condolences to the family, praising a man "who inspired respect during his lifetime" (cited in Lefèvre 2013: 175).

This rapprochement with religious conservative layers of society was accompanied by censorship and attacks on literature criticizing religion, while self-declared atheist writers were asked to respect the sensibilities of Muslim believers (Khatib 2011: 89).

There was also a rapprochement between Alawi and Shi'a doctrines following al-Assad's arrival to power, although historically this began in the 1930s, but increased considerably with the consolidation of the relationship with the IRI after 1979. Hundreds of Hawzaz and Husseiniya were constructed, financed and supervised by Iran, and thousands of Iranian clerics were allowed into Syria to act as teachers and guides to the Alawi population (Khatib 2011: 94). Iranian missionaries in Syria were able to convert few thousand people in the country, notably in some of the villages in the North Eastern area of the Jazirah close to Shi'a religious sites Uwais al-Qarni mosque and the Ammar ibn Yasir shrine, where they had established a base. Bachar al-Assad's ultimately put an end to this Shi'a proselytism in 2008, following criticisms of Sunni religious authorities that were demanding a halt to these activities (Balanche 2018: 14).

The regime similarly encouraged a policy of rapprochement with tribal⁹ sheikhs, whose powers had been weakened by previous Ba'th policies of land redistributions. Some Bedouin tribes were also called upon by the regime to play a role in the repression of the military insurrection of the MB between 1979 and 1982. Hafez al-Assad formed alliances with several common tribes (or *Shawi*)¹⁰ who inhabited the rural areas of the country and particularly Deir Zor, where for example the Ougeidat tribe joined the army and intelligence services in large numbers (Wilcox 2017). Bedouins were granted a kind of re-recognition as traditional leaders in the Badia of Syria,¹¹ while in the city of Aleppo, it was the Berri tribal family allied to the regime that took care of the repression against the MB, and was greatly rewarded by the regime with the control over border traffics of all kinds (Donati 2009: 299). Since the 1980s, the Minister of Agriculture was generally granted to a Bedouin, as are senior appointments to the Ministry of Interior and the Ba'th Regional Command, while some Bedouin tribal leaders also became deputies in parliament (Chatty 2010: 46). The Syrian regime allowed the leaders of tribes a greater degree of influence over local communities of tribal background and provided them certain privileges.

2.10 Bashar al-Assad's era before the uprising in 2011

Following the death of his older son Bassel in 1994 in a car crash, Hafez al-Assad began the process of preparing the succession to his other son Bashar. When Hafez al-Assad passed away in June 2000, the issue of succession was already resolved.

The death of Hafez al-Assad brought a wind of hope to Syria for change to broad sectors of the society. However, no democratic reforms were promoted, while there was an acceleration of the neo-liberal policies that took place in the decade prior to the beginning of the uprising in 2011, impoverishing large sectors of the society. The patrimonial nature of the state in the hands of the Assad family and relatives was greatly strengthened through this process of accelerated implementation of neo-

⁹ According to Khedder Kahddour (2017): "A tribe, in the Syrian context, is a sociopolitical unit based upon extended families living in a defined territory, usually entire towns and city neighborhoods"

¹⁰ According to Dr. Haian Dukhan (cited in Wilcox 2017), "the word *Shawi* comes from the fact that these tribes raised sheep and goats whereas the noble tribes raised camels. The noble tribes, of course, despised the common tribes".

¹¹ The Badia is largely populated by seminomadic Bedouin people whose main occupation is herding sheep. The Badia region refers to the large semi-arid area broadly located between Homs and Deir Zor.

liberal policies and the replacement of sections of the old guard by relatives or close individuals to Bashar al-Assad. At the same time, the old system of corporatist organizations, which enabled the regime to have contacts and some presence within rural and peripheral areas, was considerably weakened and strengthened thereby the importance of the security services in these areas. These political and socio-economic evolutions, in addition to the regional context, had consequences on the issue of sectarian tensions by strengthening them.

2.11 Despite the very short “Damascus spring”, continuation of despotism

The new ruler, Bashar al-Assad, in his first speech to parliament a few months after his “enthronement” called for “creative thinking” and recognized “the urgent need” for constructive criticism and reforms aimed at a certain modernization. The notorious political prison of Mezzeh in Damascus, a symbol of the brutal political repression of the regime, was closed, while a large number of political prisoners were released, around 600, in November of 2001 (Ghadbian 2015: 93). Human rights organizations and forums for debate also multiplied at the beginning of this new reign. The political parties of the Progressive National Front (PNF) were authorized to publish their own weekly newspapers, in addition to opening provincial offices (Perthes 2004: 20).

In early 2001, the first privately owned newspaper *al-Dommari*, owned by caricaturist Ali Ferzat, was authorized to resume publication by the regime after nearly 40 years. Pan-Arabist newspapers *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, as well as Lebanese, Jordanian and Gulf Arab titles, and small numbers of private magazines, were progressively available and allowed (Ghadbian 2015: 93). However, the country was still far from any pluralistic and free press. In September 2001, the Syrian regime adopted a new Press Law (Decree No. 50/2001), which provided the government with sweeping controls over virtually everything printed in Syria (Human Rights Watch 2010). The authorities did not hesitate to censor contents of newspapers it considered unacceptable (George 2003: 133).

The phenomena of discussion forums, which was the most salient feature of the opportunity taken by activists and opposition members to express themselves,

rapidly increased, and by 2001, there were more than 170 across the country which engaged large numbers of participants (Abbas 2013: 18).

Some youth movements, gathering university students from middle and popular backgrounds, also came out of these forums, such as the movement of activists against globalization in Syria (known as ATTAC Syria) or the gathering of young Democrats called “Shams” (Hamsho 2016). At the same time, clandestine student organizations emerged in Aleppo and Damascus, where they were the more organized. They denounced the corruption of university professors by launching boycott campaigns against them or gathering signatures, while demanding more autonomy and democracy within student associations and unions. For example, on January 27, 2004, students in Aleppo organized a protest gathering 200 persons in front of the medicine faculty to demand the autonomy of the students’ unions from the Ba’th party. Student movements also mobilized on some social issues. On February 26, 2004, a few weeks after the protest mentioned above, a second one of around 500 students demonstrated against the decree abolishing the obligation of the state to employ engineers and architects after they graduated. In response, 64 students were expelled from Aleppo University, because of their political activities, while a campaign of repression followed against the hidden student committees of Aleppo and Damascus and clandestine associations (Gauthier 2005: 103; Emancipations 2015).

These student committees also supported the Palestinian intifada, including protests, between 2000 and 2003. The regime saw with some concern the organization of actions in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada and launched a campaign of intimidation against the students who organized and took part in the various demonstrations and sit-ins, forcing them to eventually put an end to their activities. The authorities were scared that if these demonstrations continued, the protestors might slip into a domestic agenda (Abdulhamid 2005: 36; Emancipations 2015). Raed Abu Zeed (2014), a Palestinian activist in the Yarmouk camp in Damascus during the uprising that erupted in 2011, ironically explained that the first time he was imprisoned was during these protests in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada.

Syrian civil society and political organizations were thus mobilized, from the mid 2000s calling for reforms and a democratization of the state. This was the meaning of the “declaration of 99” or the “Committee to Revive Civil Society” (announced by a press release under the name of the “Declaration of 1000”), which comprised intellectuals, artists, writers, researchers and even representatives of some political parties. The “Declaration of 99”, published in the Lebanese press in September 2000, called on the authorities to put an end to the martial law, liberate political prisoners and provide political freedoms. Some signatories were even allowed to publish articles in local state-controlled press, particularly *al-Thawra*, critical of the regime (Abbas 2013: 18; Perthes 2004: 13). During the same period, some 20 deputies established an “independent Parliamentary Bloc”, while 70 lawyers published a statement demanding an end to the state of emergency in place since 1963, the independence of the judiciary and the legalization of political parties (Perthes 2004: 16). Regular protests in front of tribunals in Damascus and Aleppo were held during this period, while Kurdish political organizations multiplied actions against the regime’s policies and denounced the continuous political, economic and cultural discriminations against the Kurds in Syria (Gauthier 2005: 102-103; Tejel 2009 112-114)

The regime’s officials progressively started to counter-attack brutally at the rhetorical level through the press, accusing the opposition members of being backed by foreign countries and being anti-nationalist, and even physically, by the arrest or assaults of activists (George 2003: 48). By the end of the summer of 2001, ten of the most prominent leaders of civil society were imprisoned, and all of the forums for debates, with the exception of one, were closed (Landis and Pace 2009: 121). The state’s medias increasingly stopped using slogans such as “reform and renewal” (*al-islah wa-l-tajdid*), which had been used to characterize the new era, and instead switched to “development and modernization” (*al-tatwir wa-l-tahdith*) (Perthes 2004: 18-19).

In 2005, over 250 major opposition figures and political parties signed the "Damascus Declaration," a manifesto that called for "a democratic and radical change" in Syria based on dialogue, the end of the state emergency and the release of political prisoners. The signatories to the declaration included the National Democratic Alliance (a nationalist and left-liberal-wing alliance of five parties), the committees for

the revival of civil society, the Democratic Kurdish Coalition, the Kurdish Democratic Front, a number of independent personalities such as former MP Riyad Seif. The MB supported the Damascus Declaration, but in 2006 they joined forces with fifteen other opposition groups along with the former vice-president of Syria Abdul Halim Khaddam, who had just defected from the regime (see further in the chapter), in the establishment of the National Salvation Front (NSF). The “Damascus Declaration” did not join this new coalition, which was roundly criticized by several of its prominent signatories (Porat 2010: 4).

In December 2007, the National Council of the Damascus Declaration was established in Syria with the participation of 163 members. A few days after, the regime launched a campaign of arrest against the Declaration’s members and 12 of its leadership were prosecuted and sentenced in 2008 to prison terms ranging from three to six years (Perrin 2008; Kawakibi and Sawah 2013: 13; Sawah 2012: 10). Arrests of political activists continued until the end of the 2000s. The Damascus declaration and its leadership were increasingly poisoned by divisions and criticized by some opponents (Carnegie 2012c).

In April 2009, the leader of the Syrian MB, ‘Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, announced an end to the Brotherhood’s participation in the NSF. The Syrian Ikhwan were seeking a form of understanding and reconciliation with the regime. This process actually started a few months earlier, with al-Bayanuni’s announcement during the January 2009 Israel-Gaza war of a “suspension of resistance activities in the struggle against the Syrian regime”, and following a meeting held at this same period between Bashar al-Assad and Sunni religious leaders, including Sheik Yusuf al-Qardawi, a influential personality affiliated with the MB (Porat 2010: 1-4). The beginning of the uprising in Syria in March of 2011 ended this process with the MB that called in April to support the uprising.

More generally in the years preceding the beginning of the uprising, a new generation of young activists was rising in Syria, often not involved in traditional political parties. These activists carried out a series of community activities around social and economic issues. Between 2004 and 2006, a wave of sit-ins developed, at the initiative of these young political activists and civil society organizations, on

various issues relating to democratic and social rights. They also launched various civil campaigns, including a campaign to oppose 'honor' crimes, to cancel an amendment of the marital law that was particularly negative regarding women's rights, to confer to women the right to give their citizenship to their children, to decrease cellular phone rates, and many other campaigns for the protection of young women who were victims of rape. In these campaigns, the civil rights activists used new media (blogs, e-mails, and text messages) and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which were forbidden in Syria (Sawah 2012: 14). These campaigns were also an opportunity for young people to come into direct contact with the street and opened new channels for dialogue with the public on various issues (al-Aous 2013: 25).

Activists were also involved in social assistance to the victims of the drought that hit the Eastern region in Syria. Hundreds of thousands of people left their hometowns and villages and came to the Damascus countryside. Civil society activists started to organize the provision of food, shelter and toys and education for the children of the displaced population, risking their own safety as the regime opposed any social solidarity outside its umbrella. Young men and women challenged the regime's restriction to provide assistance and drew a development plan to help them return to their schools and home (Sawah 2012: 2).

Women's rights organizations were similarly developing their activities, particularly in the campaigns mentioned above. Al-Thara Group was the first website to engage in women's and children's rights. This website was very prominent, and attracted great interest from civil activists (see Al-Aous 2013; Kawakibi and Sawa 2013).

Large sections of this new generation of activists would play an important role in the beginning of the uprising in 2011.

2.12 The conquest of Bashar al-Assad of power over the old guard

Following Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power in 2000, a collective leadership between al-Assad and the old guards that remained from his father's era was established to share power. Bashar al-Assad's first years were concentrated on consolidating his

own power, against the clientelist networks of the old guard. To serve this purpose, he employed the large authority he disposed within the presidency to retire or liquidate the old generation, introducing his loyalists in the army and security forces and incorporating reforming technocrats into government in a tug of war with the Ba'th party leadership over appointments. In less than two years, approximately three quarters of the 60 top political, administrative and military office holders were ousted. All editors in chief of the state-run media were replaced. A few months later nearly all provincial governors and provincial heads of the Ba'th were removed. In 2002, elections for lower level party leaderships generated an important turnover among functionaries. In the same year, the government enacted a decision to retire all civil servants over the age of 60. This decree, which included 80,000 employees, permitted younger cadres to be upgraded, and provided new opportunities for new entrants. Some exemptions to forced retirement were necessary, especially in the foreign ministry where diplomats with accumulated experience were insufficient, and in the security apparatus. This reorganization provided the means for the new leadership around Assad to rapidly achieve domination over the public sector. In the new parliament of 2003, although the general political coloring was not modified as the majority share of the Ba'th party in the chamber was already fixed, 178 out of 250 deputies were newcomers (Perthes 2004: 8).

This new turn was also reflected in the increasing undermining of Ba'thists in official positions, while the nomination of liberal technocrats increased. Ghassan al-Rifai, a World Bank economist with a PHD from the University of Sussex, became Minister of Economy and Foreign trade; Muhammad al-Atrash, who held a doctorate in Economics from the University of London and served in the past as an advisor of the World Bank, became Minister of Finance; Isam al-Zaim, who has been a researcher at the National Council for Scientific Research in Paris, became Minister of Industry. Later, Abdallah Dardari, holding a Master's degree from the University of Southern California and former Assistant Resident Representative for UNDP in Syria, became Minister of Planning. Later, he was promoted to deputy prime minister for economic affairs (Hinnebush 2015: 29; Zisser 2007: 67). Within the Ba'th party, Assad organized a massive turnover in leadership and cadres that reached its summit at the 10th Ba'th party congress in 2005, when the old guard led by Abdel Halim Khaddam was cleared from power. The resignation of the first vice president Khaddam, the

second most important figure in Syria and one of the closest allies to Hafez al-Assad, was the most important change. Bashar al-Assad had marginalized him politically since the beginning of the 2000s. In the same year, Ghazi Kana'an, an associate of Khaddam and former interior minister following Syrian army's withdrawal of Lebanon in 2005, was found dead in his home, allegedly after committing suicide. Other figures of the old guard were also replaced (Hinnebush 2015: 37).

In removing these elements, Assad considerably curtailed the difficulties for his new reforms, but also undermined influential and powerful interests with clientelist networks that included key sections of society in the regime. The army and security forces were not spared from these turnovers as they were key institutions to secure Bashar's power. As hostile figures of the old guard had been dismissed before his father's death, Bashar was able to designate their successors. Old-guard military barons and intelligence bosses, including Alawi generals Ali Aslan and Adnan Badr Hasan, Shafiq al-Fayyad, and Ibrahim al-Safi were ousted from the Central Committee, while Maher al-Assad, brother of Bashar, and Manaf Tlass, a close friend and associate of Bashar and son of former Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass, saw their membership renewed (Hinnebush 2015: 29 + 38).

Bashar al-Assad also appointed family members in senior positions of the army such as his brother Maher, the defacto commander of the 4th Armored Division; his cousin, Zou al-Himma Shalish, in charge of units responsible for the security of Bashar and his family; another cousin, Hafez Makhlof, who headed unit 251 in the General Intelligence and was widely believed to be the real commander of that service; yet another cousin, Hilal al-Assad, was commander of the Military Police in the 4th Armored Division; and Assad's brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat, the strong man in the intelligence apparatus until his death in 2012 (Bou Nassif 2015: 17).

Although some old generation figures from the era of Hafez al-Assad still played a role in the regime of Bashar, this was the most important change in the membership of the political elite since 30 years. A new generation was taking over within almost all spheres of state power. According to researcher Volker Perthes (2004: 9) this turnover was necessary because:

“From the president’s perspective, such a thorough renewal and rejuvenation of the political and administrative elite was necessary not only to gather support for his ideas about reform, but also to increase, albeit gradually, the number and weight of people within the institutions of power who owed their position, and thus their loyalty, to him, - not to his father or to the old regime”

2.13 Weakening state institutions and corporatist organizations, while primordial identities and tensions rose

In addition to the Ba’th party apparatus, Assad also weakened workers and peasant unions, because they were viewed as obstacles to neoliberal economic reform. New members with antagonistic aspirations entered the Ba’th party, while its decline as a recruitment channel to top office and reductions for cadres resulted in a diminishing role of the party in society. The weakening of the Ba’th was witnessed at all levels in the country. Political mobilizations were no longer the prerogatives of the Ba’th but were privatized. For example, in 2007 during the referendum to confirm the presidency of Bashar al-Assad, it was mostly the networks of Rami Makhlouf and of other rich tycoons close to the regime that mobilized regime supporters. A similar scenario occurred in the mobilizations in 2008-2009 against the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip (Donati 2013: 47-48). In 2010, Assad, in a new move to consolidate his power, disbanded the second rank branch and sub branch leaderships, further undermining the apparatus on the eve of the uprising against the regime (Hinnebush 2012: 100).

Accelerated privatization policies created tensions between the regime and the various popular corporatist organizations. The Lattakia Maritime Transport Trade Union, with the support of the GFTU (controlled by the Ba’th party), protested transferring the management of the container terminal to a private French-Syrian company, leading to the intervention of the security services. The private entrepreneurs were finally victorious in obtaining from the bureaucracy the handing over of the management, but they had to absorb the port personnel, who had gone on strike for three weeks (Donati 2013: 50). The regime increasingly starved the

various populist corporatist organizations of funds and attacked their powers of patronage, but with dire consequences. As explained by Raymond Hinnebusch (2012: 98-99)

“this debilitated the regime’s organized connection to its constituency and its penetration of neighborhoods and villages. The gap was partly filled by the security services, which however were underpaid, corrupt and lax, moreover, Assad curbing of their ability to dispense patronage and legal exemptions, such as tolerance of smuggling, reduced their ability to coopt societal notables such as tribal elders, symptomatic of this was the mid decade outbreak of several localized sectarian / tribal conflicts (between Bedouin and Druze in Suwayda, and between Alawis and Isma’ilis in Masyaf), which manifested an erosion of the regime. Where citizens would once have gone to local party or union officials for redress or access, increasingly they approached tribal, sectarian and religious notables.”

As argued by Ammar Abdulhamid (2005: 37), regarding the 2005 clashes between Alawi and Isma’ili populations in the town of Masyaf

“despite the fact that at the heart of all these issues lie some well documented socioeconomic grievances, the fact that the rioting took place along sectarian and ethnic fault lines is pretty telling.”

Previous sectarian tensions existed in some mixed regions as a result of the regime policies and repression of the end of the 1970s and 1980s. In the coastal areas, the neo-liberal policies following the arrival to power of Bashar al-Assad in 2000 exacerbated competition among popular classes over dwindling public resources and increased social inequality. This competition took on some occasions sectarian colors. Alawi popular classes occupied strong positions in the security sector and in the army, which helped them access professional and material advantages,

particularly in the public sector, and to the benefits of systemic corruption in the public sector as a result of regime patronage policies. The Alawi population was over represented in the state apparatus. A study from 2004 showed that 80 percent of employed Alawis worked in the military, state led industry or the public sector. In the governorates of Lattakia and Tartus, the proportion of the working population employed in the civilian public-sector were more important, respectively 54,6 percent and 39,5 percent, than the national average, 26,9 percent. In comparison to other religious sects, the Alawi were far more represented in this sector. In Lattakia, of the male workforce, 81 percent of Alawi was employed in the public sector, compared to 57 percent of Christians and 44 percent of Sunnis (Balanche 2015: 91-92). During the first phase of the uprising in 2011, protesters in mixed Sunni-Alawi cities, such as Baniyas, Lattakia, and Tartus, actually raised this issue demanding the rectification of alleged pro-Alawi sectarian biases in employment in state industries and public administrations. Youssef Abdo (2018), former employee at the Afforestation Development Office project in the governorate of Tartus, stated in an interview for this thesis:

“Among around 60 employees in the Afforestation Development Office project affiliated with the Tartus governorate in the village of Derdara, the quasi totality were Alawi, except me (Sunni) and one Christian. A similar sectarian disproportion was present in the offices of the Directorate of Agriculture in Tartus. Although these areas were in far majority inhabited by Alawi population and could explain a majority of Alawi employees, there was however a recruitment system of “wasta” linked to familial and tribal connections favoring Alawis in the office. This system of recruitment based on wasta favorising Alawi was less extreme in the mixed areas of Tartus and Lattakia’s governorates, although the number of Alawi employees were generally more important”

This situation led some sections of the population to perceive the Alawi population as a whole as inextricably connected to experiences of unfair privilege and quite often to

abusive practices, such as protection rackets or the extortion of bribes for access to public services.

This over representation in the public sector did not reflect however a privilege socio-economic position in society; a growing number of Alawis were left outside the circle of communal privilege. Alawi popular classes suffered just like others during the liberalization of the economy, the end of subventions and high inflations. The Alawi Mountain was the second most impoverished region after the North-Eastern regions populated mainly by Kurdish people. In a report of the ICG in 2011, it was stated

“the Alawi countryside remains strikingly underdeveloped; many join the army for lack of an alternative; members of the security services typically are overworked and underpaid. Young members of the community for the most part joined the security apparatus solely because the regime offered them no other prospects. Ordinary Alawi rarely benefited, from high-level corruption, least of all under Bashar.” (ICG 2011)

The increased patrimonial nature of the state and the weakening of the Ba’th party apparatus and corporatist organizations rendered cliental, tribal and sectarian connections all the more important. This trend manifested itself throughout the country, and not only on the coast. In the city of Aleppo, the regime continued to sustain its connections to two tribal leaders to exercise its control and domination, in addition to other networks. The Berri tribal family, which collaboration with the regime went back to the 1980s, managed the security apparatus of the city and benefited as well from border traffic, while the Shahada had a more political role and a seat in parliament. In Raqqa, tribal families allied with the Assad regime benefited from the privatization of state farms in the Jazirah in the 2000s (Donati 2009: 299). The number of tribal clashes however increased in Bashar al-Assad’s years as a result of neoliberal policies impoverishing even more rural areas, while partly as well because the patronage systems developed between Hafez al-Assad and the rural communities were weakened (Wilcox 2017).

In the case of Suwayda, mainly inhabited by the Druze population, the regime managed the region by compromises with local notables. The governor, the heads of the army and security services were from other Syrian provinces to avoid collusion with the local population, but the key positions in the governorate administration, directions of state bodies and the party cell in Suwayda were vested to members of large Druze families. After a period of deprivation in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of public investments from the state, a member of the Atrash family was for example appointed in the 1990s to head the powerful ministry of Local Government, which resulted in a boom of public investment for the region of Suwayda, including improved services and the creation of thousands of administrative jobs. The state also relied on the religious elites, especially the three "al-Aql" sheikhs who are the highest religious representatives of the Druze community. These civil and religious elites provided the interface between the regime and the Druze population (Roussel 2006: 148; Balanche 2018: 15).

Similarly, the efficiency of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) was weakened considerably in the years following Bashar's arrival to power. Its funding fell considerably, its enrichment activities in Lebanon were lost after its withdrawal from Lebanon 2005, and its arms and equipment fell far behind those of Israel. The combat preparedness of the SAA constantly deteriorated throughout the 1990s and fell to a dramatic level on the eve of the 2011 uprisings. The neglect of the armed forces was made even more problematic considering the preferential treatment and status extended on the all-Alawi special combat units such as the Republican Guard or the 4th Division (Bou Nassif 2015: 13-14). The Fourth Division, headed by the Bashar's brother Maher al-Assad, constituted the hard core of army units, together with the Third Division and the Republican Guard (Abbas 2011). More generally, the units controlled by Assad's kin, especially the Republican Guards, 4th Division, and 11th Division, also enjoyed generous funding, special training, advanced weaponry, privileged status, and access to top leadership (Kattan 2016).

According to the study of Hicham Bou Nassif (2015: 11), "Sunni officers suffered from more discrimination in the military under Bashar al-Assad than under his father." They explained that Hafez al-Assad's control over his generals was stronger than his son's. The regime became more decentralized under Bashar al-Assad, with several

powerful military barons maneuvering for power and battling to position their Alawi followers throughout the different sectors of the armed forces. Consequently, the Sunnis' portion of prominent appointments in the military decreased even more in the decade prior to the uprising (Bou Nassif 2015: 11).

In short, seeking to strengthen and consolidate its power within the regime he inherited, Assad continuously weakened the regime and the state's institutional capacities to preserve its connections and power over society.

2.14 The acceleration of neoliberal policies

The accelerated implementation of neoliberal policies would also be an instrument of Bashar al-Assad to consolidate his power. Unlike his father, Bashar also allowed the World Bank and the IMF to intervene in the process of economic liberalization (Matar 2015: 111). In 2005, the Ba'th party at its tenth regional conference, adopted the "social market economy" as a new economic strategy. In other words, the private sector would become a partner and leader in the process of economic development and in providing employment instead of the state (Abboud 2015: 55). The aim was to encourage private accumulation principally through the marketization of the economy, while the state withdrew in key areas of social welfare provision, aggravating already existing socio-economic problems.

The attraction of foreign investment and Syrian funds held outside of the country by nationals and expatriates, especially in the service sectors, was fundamental in this new economic strategy. Legislative Decree (LD) No.8 was ratified in 2007 to promote more investment in the country and became the main legal framework behind private investment, supplanting the old Investment Law No. 10 of 1991 (Matar 2015: 112-113). In addition to this, the Syrian Investment Agency (SIA), a new investment authority, was established, which took the place of the Investment bureau that had been functioning since the beginning of the 1990s. Foreign direct investment climbed from \$120 million in 2002 to \$3.5 billion in 2010. Investment inflows drove a boom in trade, housing, banking, construction and tourism (Hinnebush 2012: 100). Only 13 percent of all foreign and domestic investments throughout the 2000s were

in manufacturing areas, while the rest were in services and tourism (Abboud 2015: 55). Manufacturing production contributed to 4.4 percent of the GDP in 2011, primarily concentrated in textiles, knitwear, processed food, chemicals, and pharmaceutical products. The average size of manufacturing establishments in 2006 was around 4,8 workers per establishment in Syria (Matar 2015: 12).

The financial sector developed similarly considerably with the establishment of private banks, insurance firms, the Damascus stock exchange and money exchange bureaus throughout the 2000s. The first measure to liberalize the banking sector was taken in 2001, granting the right for the establishment of private banks for the first time after 40 years of a state controlled banking system. The ruling elites and the commercial bourgeoisie, such as Rami Makhlouf, Nader Qalal, Issam Anboubas and Samir Hassan – rather than competitive market competitors – were actually the major shareholders of many private banks. The rebirth and development of private banking was essential for the state bourgeoisie. It allowed them to operate their bank accounts and conveniently transfer their money deposits outside the country. Formerly, they had to smuggle or relocate their wealth into the dollar and accumulate it in Lebanese private banks (Matar 2015: 117).

The opening of private banks also increased the regime's access to growing pools of investment capital in the Gulf monarchies that were produced by the rise of oil prices (Donati 2013:38). By the end of 2011, more than 20 private banks existed parallel to the specialized public banks,¹² and they accounted for 27 percent of total banking assets worth \$40 billion (Butter 2015: 7),

The Syrian regime also progressively eliminated trade barriers with the implementation of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), signed in 2005, along with bilateral agreements with neighbors Turkey and Iran. Trade liberalization witnessed a more significant increase in the importation of foreign products rather than the export of Syrian products. Exports grew by 34 percent between 2005 and 2010, while imports saw a surge of 62 percent during the same period (Seifan 2013: 116). Trade liberalization, especially the treaty with Turkey and the export of massive

¹² The Real Estate Bank, the Agricultural Cooperative Bank, and the Industrial Bank

Turkish products, did play a negative role in the dislocation of productive resources and in the termination of many local manufacturing plants, particularly those situated in the suburbs of main cities where many protests in 2011 initially began (Matar 2015: 115).

The share of the private economy continued to rise, contributing to up to 65 percent of the GDP (and more than 70 percent according to other estimates) in 2010, while it was also the biggest employer. Approximately 75 percent of the labor force in Syria worked in the private sector (Achcar 2013: 24). Despite increased liberalization of the economy, the average investment rate between 2000 and 2007 did not exceed 21 percent, similar to the rate in the 1990s (Matar 2015: 21).

Neoliberal policies satisfied the upper class in Syria and foreign investors, especially from the Gulf Monarchies and Turkey, at the expense of the vast majority of Syrians who had been hit by inflation and the rising cost of living. During this period, the regime also significantly reduced taxes on the profits of the private business sector, both groups and individuals, from 63 percent in 2003 to 35 percent in 2004, and then for a second time in 2005 to range between 15 and 27 percent. These measures were implemented, despite the fact that tax evasion was already very prevalent; reaching according to some estimates 100 billion Syrian pounds in 2009 (Seifan 2013: 109). The small and medium-sized enterprises, which made up more than 99 percent of all businesses in Syria, were also mostly negatively affected by marketization and the liberalization of the economy (Abboud 2017).

Economic growth was chiefly rent-based, dependent on oil export revenues, geopolitical rents and capital inflows including remittances. The Syrian economy was increasingly rent based, the share of productive sectors diminished from 48.1 percent of the GDP in 1992 to 40.6 percent in 2010 (Marzouq 2013: 40), while the share of wages from the national income was less than 33 percent in 2008-2009, compared to nearly 40.5 percent in 2004, meaning that profits and rents commanded more than 67 percent of the GDP (Marzouq 2011).

These liberalization measures were accompanied by the diminution of subsidies, the halting of public sector employment expansion, and the reduction of its role in internal

investment. Social security spending in the 2000s was reduced considerably by the cutbacks to the pension system. Spending on healthcare and education had not risen in accordance with population growth. The share of the education sector and health, in percentage of the GDP expenses, was approximately 4 percent and 0.4 percent before 2010. In this context, the regime had embarked on the gradual privatization of schools, in particular universities and colleges. In a similar fashion, the government encouraged the privatization of the health system, notably by trying to transform medical units into independent economic units that depend on their own resources by remunerating services (Marzouq 2013: 49-50). This process was accompanied by the reduction of the quality and quantity of public health services, which forced the people to turn to the private sector in order to enjoy basic services. Subsidies were also removed on key foods items as well as on gas and other energy sources. Price liberalization meant that products essential to everyday life were increasingly unaffordable for most low-income families (Abboud 2015: 55).

2.15 Land ownership, coming back to feudalism

Meanwhile, the ownership of land was increasingly concentrated in a small number of hands. A frontline of a Syrian satirical newspaper put it well in 2006 “ after 43 years of socialism, feudalism returns” (Cited in Goulden 2011: 192). In agriculture, the privatization of land took place at the expense of several hundreds of thousands of peasants from the northeast, particularly following the drought between 2007 and 2009 in which one million peasants received international aid and food supplies, while 300,000 persons were driven to Damascus, Aleppo and other cities. This social catastrophe should however not be perceived as the consequence of a simple natural disaster. Even before the drought, between 2002 and 2008 Syria had lost 40 percent of its agricultural workforce, dropping from 1.4 million to 800,000 workers (Ababsa 2015: 200). The sector’s share of employment fell from 32.9 / 30 percent in 2000 to just 14 / 13.2 percent by 2011, while shares of employment in services and industry increased respectively to 55.3 and 31.4 percent (Nasser and Zaki Mehchy 2012: 3; The World Bank 2017: 9)

The liberalization measures regarding agriculture under Bashar al-Assad took place from the end of 2000 with the privatizing of state farms in the north after more than

four decades of collective ownership. The real beneficiaries of these privatization processes were nevertheless investors and entrepreneurs able to unlawfully rent these former areas of the state, according to researcher Myriam Ababsa (2006: 224). Former owners were able to recover a portion of their properties, but above all a class of entrepreneurs and investors close to the regime built massive fortunes, in benefiting of the irrigation subsidized by the state on fertile lands and leading to the creation of large latifundia estates (Ababsa 2006: 229). At the same time, the growth and intensification of the exploitation of the land by big agribusiness companies facilitated the corruption of the local administration, which accompanied the agricultural crisis.

Other laws benefiting landowners at the expense of peasants also diminished the workforce in agriculture. A new agrarian relation law was voted on in 2004 (law 56) that allowed landowners to terminate all tenancy contracts after 3 years, permitting them to expel peasants from the land they had been working on for two generations in exchange for meager indemnities (often not paid), and replacing them with temporary contacts. Implemented in 2007, this law resulted in the expulsion of hundreds of tenants and workers, especially on the coast in Tartus and Lattakia (Ababsa 2015: 200). Peasants and farmers also suffered from the reduction or elimination of subsidies on fuel and basic food needs (ICG 2011: 23).

In 2008, 28 percent of farmers were exploiting 75 percent of irrigated land, while 49 percent of them had only 10 percent, which was evidence to the inequalities within this sector (FIDA 2009: 2). Small farmers with land on the outskirts of cities were actually selling their smallholdings for increasingly large amounts, as funds from abroad (particularly the Gulf) poured into the country. Between 2004 and 2006, property prices in Syria as a whole increased by some 300 percent (Goulden 2011: 192).

2.16 Neoliberal policies and despotic upgrading

The neoliberal policies and deepened processes of privatization created new monopolies in the hands of relatives and people associated with Bashar al-Assad and the regime, either through familial ties or through public or governmental

positions or posts in the military and security service. Rami Makhoul, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad and richest man in Syria, represented the mafia-style process of privatization led by the regime. His economic empire was vast including telecommunications, oil and gas, as well as construction, banks, airlines, retail, etc (Seifan 2013: 113). Makhoul was also the main shareholder of Cham Holding Company (see below), while holding more than 300 licenses as an agent for big international companies (Sottimano 2016). According to different sources, he controlled directly or through indirect means nearly 60 percent of the Syrian economy, thanks to a complex network of holdings (Leverrier 2011).

The Assad Makhoul could include external actors into their *asabiyya*¹³ (group solidarity or social bond) such as Muhammad Saber Hamsho, who is still a significant Syrian businessman in the country. A few years prior to the uprising in 2011, he became a powerful political and economic figure as a result of his association with Maher al-Assad, the brother of Bashar, following his marriage with the sister of Maher's wife. He was "elected" as deputy in Parliament in 2003 and 2007, while Hamsho Group was present in wide areas of the economy, from IT equipment to tourist infrastructure (Donati 2013: 40). Before the uprising in 2011, many other examples of ancient state bourgeoisie transforming into private bourgeoisie existed such as Mustapha Tlass and sons, the sons of Abdel Halim Khaddam and the sons of Bahjat Sulayman. The sons of Tlass were the owners of MAS Group (a chain of different commercial and semi industrial companies and also involved in real estate), while the sons of Sulayman owned the United Group (an important advertising and marketing company) and the sons of Khaddam owned Afia, one of the country's largest food firms, which produced food conserves, olive oil and bakery products (Matar 2015: 110). The role of the new businessmen issued from the state bourgeoisie and the high officials became prominent in the economic life of Syria, increasingly taking some positions occupied by the old and traditional bourgeoisie.

According to an analysis made by the economist Samir Seifan, from the list of the 100 most important businessmen in Syria published by the Syrian economic

¹³ This notion originates in the work of the 14th century scholar from North Africa, Ibn Khaldoun, and implies a particular 'social bond' that connects tribal and familial groups across a region. Khaldoun's concept was later developed by Middle East scholars to encompass group solidarity based on social networks constructed through family and personal relationships (Roy 1996:6).

magazine *al-Îqtisâd wa al-naql*, he came up with the following conclusions: 23 percent were children of high officials, or are their partners or acting as their “facades” or “interfaces; 48 percent were new businessmen, but for the majority they had close and corrupted relationships with the security services; 22 percent were from the traditional bourgeoisie from before the nationalizations policies of the sixties, which for some also had corrupt relationships and partnerships with the leaders of the state, and seven percent of whom had their main business activities outside of Syria. In terms of religious sects, the percentage was the following: 69 percent were Sunni, 16 percent Alawi, 14 percent were Christians, 1 percent Shi'a, while there was no presence in this list of Druze, Isma'ili or Kurds. It is important to note that among the 10 wealthiest businessmen in Syria, a majority were Alawis and mostly closely linked to the Assad family, such as Rami Makhoul. In regional distribution, the wealthiest sections of businessmen were first from Damascus, then Aleppo, Latakia and finally from the cities of Homs and Hama, while there was not a single businessman from the eastern region of Raqqah, Deir Zor and Hasakah (Seifan 2013: 112-113).

The regime thus expanded its predatory activities from the control over “rents derived from the state” to a position that permitted it to dominate “private rents” without any transparency. These new incomes also enabled ruling elites to establish a network of associates, whose loyalty they bought with market shares and protection (Donati 2013: 39-40).

From 2005, the number of business associations increased, mostly in the form of joint ventures between local business people and foreign countries, and were generally controlled by businessmen with close links to the regime (Haddad 2013: 84). The entrepreneur Imad Greiwati, who emerged during Bashar al-Assad's era, led the Chambers of Industry, which was established in 2006 (Donati 2013: 41). The elections of the Chambers of Commerce in 2009 also reflected the increasing influence of businessmen with close links to the regime. This was embodied by the appointment by presidential decree of the Damascene entrepreneur Bassam Ghrawi, who was close to Bashar al-Assad as secretary general of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce. He also occupied the position of secretary general of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce (Donati 2013: 41).

The creation of holding companies (al-Cham controlled by Rami Makhlouf and Muhammad Sharabati and al-Sourya and later the Syria Qatari Holding Company) constituted another step in the renewal of the regime's networks in the business world. The holding companies were the instruments for the state bourgeoisie to conduct private business with the new commercial bourgeoisie. Al-Cham had seventy members, including mostly entrepreneurs close to the regime and families of the Syrian business bourgeoisie, and capital of \$350 million. *Al-Sourya* had a capital of \$80 million and involved young entrepreneurs (a total of twenty five), especially the "sons" of former regime's and Ba'thist officials, gathered around Haytham Joud, the nephew of a prosperous Sunni entrepreneur from the city of Lattakia who was connected with the regime during Hafez era (The Syria Report 2016s). *Al-Sourya* holding also established the Syrian Business Council, which consisted of a network of 280 businessmen who took advantage of their privileged positions to consolidate and expand connections with the Syrian diaspora and Arab business communities. The involvement and participation in Syrian's economy of these foreign actors (especially from the Gulf) reinforced the regime's position, while the line between public and private players was blurred by the regime's manipulation.

The previous agreement between the regime and business community deepened as the members of these two holdings secured capital, networks and political support for the regime. In return they enjoyed economic benefits from the market expansion, took the most profitable projects and benefitted from the regime's political protection. Outside of this entrepreneur network linked to the regime, other businessmen who were not close or connected with the regime also sought to benefit from the expansion of the market and neo-liberal policies. They were tolerated, as long as they did not challenge the regime politically, because of the investments they carried out in the less lucrative sectors and because they brought in foreign partners whose capital was sought after by the regime (Donati 2013: 42).

For example, the Sanqar family, despite their wealth and links to regime power (Omar Sanqar was close to Hafez al-Assad and an independent MP in parliament between 1990 and 1998 (Wieland 2012: 170)), lost their lucrative license contract to import luxury cars, including the brand Mercedes, to Rami Makhlouf. Ammar Qurabi, chairman of the national organization and UAE-based satellite channel Orient TV,

had to close Orient TV's Damascus bureau after a bid to forcefully buy out the channel by Rami Makhlouf. The first opposition held conference after the beginning of the uprising in July 2011 was actually funded by Ali and Wassim Sanqar, and Ammar Qurabi (Williams L. 2011b). Such maneuverings by the crony capitalists against the assets and contracts of other sections of the bourgeoisie were not rare, illustrating the precarious and dependent status of this elite segment vis-à-vis the regime (Abboud 2013: 2).

This economic liberalization did not lead to a process enhancing an “independent middle class of capitalists” supposed to challenge dictatorships and lead to democracy promoted by an academic literature in the 90s. The new “civil society”, supposed to encourage democratization, was made up of associations and so called NGOs (more Government NGOs) that constituted a new elite linked to business networks close to the regime. Syria Trust for Development, an umbrella association set up with the sponsorship of Asma al-Assad in 2007, symbolized this process (Kawakibi 2013: 172). This was far from contributing to the spread of a civic democratic culture. They participated in the blockade of the emergence of an autonomous civil society. The rapid growth in the number of development GONGOs went hand in hand with the repression of activists (Donati 2013: 44).

The researcher Salam Kawakibi explained that these GONGOs had three main purposes. The first was to replace the state as provider of social services in the framework of increasing neo-liberal policies. Secondly, these GONGOs served the objective of establishing new corporatist structures to satisfy emerging social groups and to tie them to the regime by providing them with both material (employment) and moral (doing good) benefits and to establish their own network of clientele in order to broaden the “popular support” for the regime towards a more liberal one. Lastly, these GONGOs could attract important sources of foreign funding (Kawakibi 2013: 173-176).

Similarly, new “private” media was far from creating a space for open and democratic debate. Syria’s most influential media tycoons, who were a collection of wealthy businessmen with close connections to the regime’s political, military and business establishment, included Rami Makhlouf, Majd Bahjat Sulayman, Bilal Turkmani (son

of Defense Minister Hassan Turkmani), Muhammad Saber Hamsho, Aktham Ali Douba, and steel tycoon Ayman Jaber. Rami Makhlouf established the al-Watan newspaper. Majd Bahjat Sulayman, owner of Syria's largest media empire, was the executive director of Alwaseet Group, and chairman of the United Group for Publishing, Advertising and Marketing (UG). Ayman Jaber and Muhammad Saber Hamsho, alongside a number of other Syrian businessmen, established Dunia TV and Sama satellite channel. Aktham Ali Douba, the son of the former head of Syrian intelligence, formed the *al-Riyadiya* newspaper and magazine with a clear monopoly on advertising in the field (Iqtissad 2015b).

This was part of the regime's strategy to shift its social constituencies towards the higher liberal classes. This form of crony or mafia capitalism, in which economic opportunities were dependent on loyalties to the regime, alienated and marginalized some elements of the bourgeoisie that were not connected to the regime and therefore did not constitute a strong element of support for the regime. No deal or large venture was actually possible without crony capitalists linked with the regime.

2.17 Role of the Private sector and religious charities

The responsibility of social services to ease rising inequalities was given increasingly to private charities, and therefore bourgeois and religious conservative layers of Syrian society, especially religious associations. In 2004, of 584 charitable organizations, 290 were registered Islamic organizations, of which most were active in Damascus and its suburbs. They were based in local mosques and poor neighborhoods. Of the more than 100 charitable organizations in the capital, approximately 80 percent were Sunni Muslim before the uprising in 2011 (Pierret and Selvik 2009: 601). They operated a network that served about 73,000 families with a budget of approximately \$18 million (Khatib 2011: 119).

Neoliberal policies strengthened religious associations, both Islamic and Christian, in Syria and their network of diffusion, increasing their role in society at the expense of the state. In 2009, out of 1485 associations, 60 percent were charities, the vast majority of them religious (Ruiz 2013: 30). Bashar al-Assad continued a strategy of fostering Islamic conservative sectors just like his father. Islamic orders of the

Kuftariyya and the Qubaysiyyat, mentioned before, largely maintained their activities in the same way. The first association established by students of al-Qubaysi, Jam'iyyat al-Nada al-Tanmawiyyah (the Nada association for development), was formalized in 2005 (Imady 2016: 75). At the eve of the uprising, the Qubaysiyat owned around 200 schools, according to religious personality and former MP Muhammad Habash. The support for the Qubaysiyyat reached a peak when one of their members was appointed as an official religious advisor of the Minister of Awqaf (Ministry in charge of religious endowments), in early 2008, when "an Office of Women's Religious Instruction" was established (cited in Kannout 2016: 28).

The most successful and notorious Islamic association was the Jama'at Zayd, which as we saw above had deep and rooted relations with the Damascus Sunni bourgeoisie, conducted by the Rifa'i brothers. (Pierret and Selvik 2009: 603). Despite having a tone opposed to the regime, the association did not hesitate to collaborate on some occasions with the authorities before 2011, never officially becoming a supporter. The Zayd movement was allowed by the Ministry of *Awqaf* (to raise funds for its charitable project at the exit of Friday Prayer (Pierret and Selvik 2009: 608) and obtained the control of new mosques at the expense of others and some of their members were able to reach important working positions in various official religious institutions (Pierret 2011: 115).

The regime boosted during this period its use of Islamic symbolism and vocabulary in an attempt to build up legitimacy and popularity among pious Sunni Muslims. This was used considerably to mobilize the support of large sectors of Syrian society against a hostile international political scene and threats against Damascus after the USA and UK military invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the isolation Syria faced following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (Pinto 2015: 158-59). The new ruler promoted, as explained by researcher Lina Khatib (2012:33), the idea of *takrees al-akhlak wa nashr thaqafat al-tasamuh, wa isal al risala al-haqiqiya lil-islam* (diffusing morality, spreading the culture of tolerance, and communicating the true message of Islam) in many of his addresses, interviews and conference presentations. He increasingly presented himself and the Syrian regime as patrons of moderate Islam against "Islamic extremism", and therefore effectively legitimizing the Islamic discourse engulfing the country. He projected the image of a leader faithful to

Islam and a guardian of the Islamic religion in Syria. The state controlled media thus commonly reported Bashar al-Assad's participation in religious holiday prayers in mosques across the country, while images portraying him as a pious Muslim proliferated throughout the country (Pinto 2015: 158).

This was accompanied by a continued policy of *détente* started by Hafez al-Assad at the beginning of the nineties towards opposition Islamic fundamentalist groups through the release of political prisoners, the tolerance of Islamic publications and movements as long as they refrained from political involvement. In 2001 for example, Sheikh Abu al-Fath al-Bayanuni, the brother of the former head of the MB, was authorized to come back after 30 years in exile, and his son, a rich businessman, participated in the creation in 2010 of the first sexually segregated mall in Syria (Pierret 2011: 115). In 2003, Assad lifted a long-standing ban on religious practice in the military barracks (Khatib 2011: 116). In 2006 the military academy welcomed religious authorities to lecture cadets for the first time since the Ba'th's accession to power in 1963. (Khatib 2012: 34). Assad also offered moderate Islamic groups and pro-regime clerics an unprecedented level of access to the state-run broadcast media (Moubayed 2006).

In 2006, the state issued a decree increasing the number of official Islamic institutions in Syria – that numbered in the thousands – by endorsing the establishment of a Sharia faculty at the university of Aleppo, in addition to the existing one at the university of Damascus (Khatib 2011: 117).

Prior to the onset of the revolution, the country disposed of around 976 Islamic schools and institutes and over 9,000 active mosques, of which some 7,000 were said to be uncontrolled by the Ministry of *Awqaf* (Khatib 2011: 162). Since the middle of the 1990s, Islamic groups had been able to ally themselves with Syria's influential and affluent business class, though also with religious Syrians who became wealthy through their time working in the Gulf States. As a result, the groups were more able to provide services in both well off and less well off districts. Regarding education, almost 200 of the country's 400 (approximately) private educational institutions were said to be influenced by Islamic groups. In Damascus, this meant that as many as 25 percent of school students were taught by teachers with an overtly religious agenda,

and moreover had to take extra curricular classes – not controlled by the State – about Islam (Khatib 2011: 137-139).

These policies coincided with censorship of literary and artistic works, while promoting a religious literature filling the shelves of libraries and Islamizing the field of higher education (Pierret 2011: 115). Feminist activists and groups were publicly accused by religious conservative movements close to the regime of heresy and of seeking to destroy society's morality, of propagating Western values, the notion of civil marriage, the rights of homosexuals and lesbians, and total sexual freedom (Al-Aous 2013: 25). For example, on April 11, 2005, pro regime Sheikh al-Buti "waged a violent attack on women's rights and feminist activists, describing them as "dirty agents," "traitors," "dwarfs" and "slaves whose masters seek to eradicate the Islamic civilization from its roots" (cited in al-Hallaq 2013b).

This Islamic revival benefited Islamic groups that recruited new members, especially among the youth. Their capacities to recruit were boosted by being the only message besides that of the regime that was allowed in the public sphere and at the same time by the funds arriving from the Gulf region, the welfare associations, the provision of social services and voluntariat work. The regime's strategy of encouraging "quietist" or unchallenging Islamic conservative sectors in society led to an expansion of Islamic schools and charities, conservative clothing and mosque attendance. Islamic intellectuals and businessmen were incorporated into parliament, among them influential personalities before the uprising such as Sheikh Muhammad Habbash, while official acknowledgement was provided to the Qubaysi movement that preached Islam among upper class Damascene women (Hinnebush 2012: 105). In the April 2007 legislative elections, all main lists of independent candidates in Damascus were constituted by a majority of businessmen accompanied by a religious figure (Pierret and Selvik 2009: 601). The regime of Bashar al-Assad also engaged in a coordinated effort to construct alliances with the intertwined business and religious elite of formerly oppositionist Aleppo: it nominated the Aleppo mufti Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassun as the new Grand Mufti of Syria and Aleppo benefited from his alliance with and economic opening to Turkey, which brought in new investments (Hinnebush 2012: 105). Sheikh Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassun came from a

well-known family of Aleppo Sheikhs and had many followers in the Sunni bourgeoisie of the city (Pinto 2015: 162).

The researcher Raphael Lefevre (2013: 156) describing this rapprochement with Islamic conservative sectors of the society wrote “in the first ten years of Bashar al-Assad’s rule, the regime did more to accommodate conservative Syrian Muslims than at any point before”.

This policy of accommodation with Islamic conservative sectors of society did not mean that all of them were politically incorporated into the regime. The regime sought to control these movements by repressing some and favoring others. Some sought accommodation with the regime by establishing links with the security services or the Ministry of *Awqaf*, and were allowed to spread their networks, at the risk of losing credibility among the public.

At the same time, prominent figures within the Islamic movement such as Sheikhs Salah Kuftaro and Sariya al-Rifa’i (as well as some of the latter’s followers) had become more critical of some of the features of the state, especially following Bashar’s arrival to power. For example, Salah Kuftaro, who preached to thousands of followers at the Abu Nur Mosque in Damascus and operated one of the largest Islamic charitable foundations in the country, called for an Islamic Democracy in Syria and pointed out the failings of secular Arab regimes in leading their country. Their attacks particularly concentrated on the secular aspects of the regime and secular groups and personalities (Khatib 2012: 45; Moubayed 2006).

Similarly at this period, the regime facilitated the presence of some jihadist movements in Syria, whose influence increased particularly in the country after the US and British war on Iraq in 2003. Islamic fundamentalists and jihadist groups started advertising and recruiting in the country’s urban centers looking for men to fight for the resistance against the American and British intervention in Iraq (Lister 2015: 34). It was estimated in 2008 that Syrian nationals represented the third largest contingent of foreign jihadist fighters and constituted the highest number of jihadist prisoners at the Iraqi Camp Bucca jail. The country also served as the entry point for 90 percent of all foreign insurgents travelling to Iraq as of December 2008 (Lefèvre

2013: 148). A rapid and vast foreign fighter recruitment and facilitation network in Syria was established for the express objective of supplying the jihadist insurgency in Iraq (Lister 2015: 36). At this period, Syria's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaru, issued a Fatwa making it *fardh ayn* (religiously obligatory) for all Muslims, both male and female, to resist the occupying forces using any possible means, including suicide bombings (Lister 2015: 39).

The Syrian regime's collaboration with jihadists served a particular geopolitical purpose, including the US normalizing their relations with the Syrian regime, and diverting jihadists into a war against foreign occupiers in Iraq. However the progressive halt in the collaborations / and or complicity with jihadists to help them travel to Iraq from 2008, Syria became the target of jihadist attacks. It also led to a revolt of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist members in July 2008 in the Sednayya prison, close to Damascus, and for the first time in several years, Syrian security services started a campaign of repression and arrest of existing jihadist networks within the country (Lister 2015: 44-45). The danger of jihadist networks was real, more than 8,000 jihadists had actually travelled through Syria to Iraq after the US war on Iraq in 2003 until 2011 (Khatib 2011: 189). These networks and experiences from Iraq would serve and favor the development of jihadist networks following the beginning of the uprising in Syria.

This provoked repressive measures by the regime regarding other sections of the Islamic sector. In 2006, the director of Damascus *Waqf*, Muhammad Khaled al-Mu'tem issued a decree that banned religious lessons from Syria's mosques, with Quranic lessons reduced to once or twice rather than being given on a daily basis. (Khatib 2012: 48). In August 2008, the Minister of Religious Endowments, Muhammad Abd al-Sattar, enacted two important decisions regarding the charitable activities in Syria. Firstly, the regime forbade charities and mosques to hold the *mawa'id al-rahme* ('charity tables') during Ramadan. The objective was to prevent merchants, rich businessmen and religious men who funded these events from using these public celebrations for their own benefit (in terms of notability, visibility, publicity, etc...) as well as from the will to stop collective mass gatherings. Secondly, at the end of 2008, anyone working in a clerical role such as imams or prayer leaders at mosques and teachers at religious institutions was compelled to step down from

any official post he might hold in a charitable institution. This decision was taken to prevent any religious Sunni figure from holding too much political capital. Christian associations were still allowed to remain legally under the patronage of the Church and some of them even presided over Christian religious leaders (Ruiz de Elivra 2012: 23-24). Finally, the regime did not hesitate, as a measure of coercion, to dissolve a charity's board of directors.

The regime continued to try to limit the autonomy and influence of some Islamic groups that had taken increasing importance in the previous years. In June 2009, Salah Kaftaru was imprisoned on charges of embezzlement, and only two months earlier, his brother, Mahmud, was arrested for thirteen days (Imady 2016: 79-80). In 2010, a verbal decree was enforced banning around 1,000 *munaqabat* women (women with a full face veil or niqab) from teaching. A few days later, *munaqabat* were also forbidden from registering as students at the university level (Khatib 2012: 30). The culmination of these measures was to come with Decree No. 48, enacted on April 4, 2011. The Decree proclaimed the creation of al-Sham Higher Institute for Religious Sciences (*Ma'had al-Sham al-'Ali li-l-'Ulum al-Shar'iyya*), while effectively nationalizing three religious colleges, once funded and administrated by associations presided over by religious scholars (Imady 2016: 79-80).

This led to a general situation in 2011 with the development of protests in which the Ulama of Damascus independent from the regime were at their lowest point organizationally and lacked a large popular base, leaving them unable to play a crucial role in the growing protest movement.

2.18 Socio-economic consequences of the neoliberal policies

Bashar al-Assad's political rule and economic policies led to an unprecedented impoverishment of society and inequalities in terms of wealth continued to increase, despite a Gross domestic product (GDP) growing at an average of 4.3 percent per year from 2000 to 2010 in real terms, but benefiting only a small strata of economic elites (World Bank Group 2017). GDP more than doubled passing from \$28.8 billions in 2005 to around 60 billions in 2010 (Statista 2018). In 2003-2004, 20 percent of the poorest accounted for only 7 percent of total expenditure, while 20 percent of the

richest were responsible for 45 percent of total expenditure. In 2007, the percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line was 33 percent, which represented approximately seven million people, while 30 percent of them were just above this level (Abdel-Gadir, Abu-Ismaïl, and El-Laithy 2011: 2-3). Even the regime controlled Syrian General Federation of Trade Unions deplored in 2009 that

“the rich have become richer and the poor poorer... low income earners who make up 80 percent of the Syrian population are looking for additional work to support themselves” (Hinnebush and Zintl 2015: 293)

The labor force participation rate for people aged 15 years and above actually declined from 52.3 percent in 2001 to around 42.7 and 43,5 percent in 2010. This was a direct result of the failure of the neo-liberal policies of the regime, which was unable to absorb potential entrants to the labor market, especially young graduates. The Syrian economy created only 400,000 net jobs between 2001 and 2010, at an annual growth rate of 0.9 percent, which resulted in a decline of the employment rate from 47 percent in 2001 to 39 percent in 2010. The diminution in the labor force participation rate took place in both rural and urban areas but was sharper in rural areas (Nasser and Zaki Mehchy 2012: 3; SCPR 2016b: 35; World Bank Group 2017:9).

Women suffered massively of this evolution with a labor force participation rate of women aged 15 and above that decreased from between 21 and 20.4 to 13.2 / 12.7 percent between 2001 and 2010, one of the lowest rates in the world. The male participation rate also diminished from 81 to 72.2 percent during the same period. The general unemployment rate was estimated by 2010 at around 25 percent, rather than the official 8,6 percent announced by the state (Nasser and Zaki Mehchy 2012: 3-10; World Bank Group 2017: 9-10). The youth unemployment rate was 48 percent in 2011 (IFAD 2011).

The economic liberalization also had consequences on the labor market. The informal sector was, prior to the uprising, a significant contributor to the Syrian economy. It was estimated to contribute about 30 percent of employment, and about

30-40 percent of gross domestic product, according to estimates in the 10th five-year plan, which would suggest that the informal sector was at least as productive as the formal sector. In Syria, the informal sector employed 48 percent of the poor in rural areas and 31 percent of the poor in urban areas in 2003-2004. It was noteworthy that more than 50 percent of informal sector workers were between the ages of 15 and 29, revealing the decreasing opportunities available for Syrian youth during the liberalization periods (ILO 2010: 3).

Poor neighborhoods around the cities actually expanded considerably, while the urban real estate speculation unleashed by the influx of gulf capital together with an end to rent controls drove the cost of housing beyond the means of middle strata (Hinnebush 2012: 102). This pushed many Syrians into marginal areas of cities where they were often forced to live in illegal housing. This situation led to a housing crisis, a short fall of around 1.5 million formal homes according to the Syrian Economic Center in 2007 (cited in Goulden 2011: 188-190), with sections of the population becoming homeless or living in informal areas (Hinnebush 2012: 102). For example, between 1981 and 1994 the informal sector met 65 percent of new housing needs in Damascus and 50 percent for the country as a whole (Goulden 2011: 188).

The regime's solution to the informal housing crisis was also to outsource the problem to the private sector, as it did increasingly with the rest of the economy. But the private sector invested in luxury housing targeting rich classes of Syrians (within the country and the diaspora), foreigners, and tourists, and was not interested in solving the housing crisis. Investments in luxury tourist and residential developments attracted significant volume of investments, around \$20 billion in mid 2007, while the estimates to upgrade all the country's informal housing to a decent level were of \$24 billion (Goulden 2011: 192). The failure of this solution pushed the regime to engage in a process (Law 33 in 2008) of granting property rights to informal residents in exchange for a fee to local authorities, which was largely unsuccessful.

The estimates of what proportion of the population lived in informal housing varied, usually fluctuating between 30 to 40 percent. They may have been as high as 50 percent (Goulden 2011: 188). In Aleppo, 29 informal settlements (out of a total of 114 neighborhoods registered by the municipality) occupied about 45 percent of the city's

inhabited area and were home to an estimated total population of 2.5 million (Ahmad 2012: 8). These neighborhoods, in addition to often being poorly constructed and therefore dangerous to live in, lacked medical services, with few public health facilities (Goulden 2011: 201).

2.19 Regional inequality

The proportion of poor was higher in rural areas (62 percent) than in urban areas (38 percent). Poverty was more widespread, more rooted and more marked (58.1 percent) in the northwest and northeast (the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Deir Zor and Hasakah), where 45 percent of the population lived (FIDA 2009: 4). In addition to this, just over half (54.2 percent) of all unemployment was found in rural areas (IFAD 2011: 1). Before the beginning of the popular uprising, the geographic concentration of business was as followed:

Governorates distribution for micro enterprises (less than 5 workers)

- Damascus and Rural Damascus: 27.36 percent
- Aleppo 21.72 percent
- Homs 9.93 percent
- Hama 6.06 percent
- other governorates 34.93 percent (10 other governorates)

Governorates distribution for small enterprises (between 5 to 14 workers)

- Damascus and Rural Damascus: 29.40 percent
- Aleppo 41.55 percent
- Homs 5.89 percent
- Hama 4.70 percent
- other governorates 18.46 percent (Seifan 2013: 57)

The most impoverished areas of the country were the areas mostly populated by Kurds, such as in the Jazirah, despite producing two thirds of the country's grains (70 percent of wheat) and three quarters of its hydrocarbons (Ababsa 2015: 201). The Jazirah was the region with the highest level of poverty, hosting 58 percent of the country's poor population before the occurrence of the 2004 drought. In 2010, the

impact of four consecutive droughts since 2006 had been dramatic for both small-scale farmers and herders. These repeated droughts resulted in significant losses for the population in the northeastern region, particularly in the governorates of Hasakah, Deir Zor and Raqqa. In the affected regions of the Jazirah, the income of these groups dropped by as much as 90 percent (United Nations 2011: 5).

2.20 Conclusion

The establishment of the modern patrimonial state occurred under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad. He patiently built a state in which he could secure power through various means such as sectarianism, regionalism, tribalism and clientelism, which were managed on informal networks of power and patronage. This came alongside harsh repression against any form of dissent. These tools allowed the regime to integrate, booster or undermine groups belonging to different ethnicities and religious sects. This translated at the local level by the collaboration of various actors submitted to the regime, including state or Ba'th officials, intelligence officers, and prominent members of local society (clerics, tribal members, businessmen, etc.), in managing specific locality. As argued by academic Heiko Wimmen (2017: 70):

“These officials would provide their loyalty and material proceeds to the leadership in return for franchises of authoritarian power. Thus the main currency in this system of dispersed rule, and the key to accessing privilege and resources, was not so much sectarian affiliation but rather loyalty to the regime and usefulness for its maintenance of power”

The coming to power of Hafez al-Assad also opened the way for the beginning of economic liberalization, in opposition to previous radical policies. One of the aims of the economic liberalization, in addition to securing capital accumulation, was to build a large constituency including sectors of the bourgeoisie and of the state bourgeoisie. However economic liberalization was constrained by the interest of Syria's core constituencies in maintaining a major role for the state in the economy.

Bachar al-Assad's arrival to power in 2000 considerably strengthened the patrimonial nature of the state with a particular increasing weight of crony capitalists. The accelerated neoliberal policies of the regime led to an increasing shift in the social base of the regime constituted from its origins of peasants, government employees and some sections of the bourgeoisie, to a regime coalition with at its heart the crony capitalists – the rent seeking alliance of political brokers (led by Assad's mother's family) and the regime supporting bourgeoisie and higher middle classes. This shift was paralleled by disempowerment of the traditional corporatist organizations of workers and peasants and the co-optation in their place of business groups and higher middle classes.

Large sections of those left behind by the liberalization process, particularly from villages to medium sized cities, would be at the forefront of the uprising. The absence of democracy and the growing impoverishment of large parts of Syrian society, in a climate of corruption and increasing social inequalities, prepared the ground for the popular insurrection, which thus needed no more than a spark. Full of confidence, Bashar al-Assad declared in an interview with the "Wall Street Journal" at the end of January 2011 and following the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia:

"Despite more difficult circumstances than in most Arab countries, Syria is stable. Why? Because you must be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people." (Wall Street Journal 2011)

The Syrian leader was very wrong to believe that his regime would not be included in these waves of protest, as he would gradually find out.

Chapter 3: Popular uprising and militarization

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyze the rise of the protest movement in Syria, characterized in the beginning by its inclusive and democratic message and considerations. I will examine the way in which it progressively managed large swathes of territory as the regime withdrew and / or was expelled from them. The discourse and practices of the coordination committees, youth networks and groups within the protest movement were the biggest challenge and threat to the regime, which deemed all opposition activists and demonstrators as Salafist armed groups in an attempt to discredit the protest movement and scare off the population. We will observe the means of organization and resistance of the protesters in order to diffuse their message and challenge the regime. The beginning of the uprising witnessed the birth of many youth and civilian organizations, composed of diverse ethnic and sectarian groups, while actions of civilian resistance multiplied.

The social forces of these uprisings brought together different groups in society. On the one hand were the popular classes who wished to change their material conditions and willed more democracy. On the other were some limited parts of the bourgeoisie and higher middle classes who could perceive their interest in the promotion of a liberal state, free of the tutelage of the reigning families who have seized political power and the growing economic benefits arising from it. As put by Hinnebush (2012) “the social base of the uprising was those excluded from or only precariously incorporated into the regimes’ new coalition”.

Damascus took from the beginning the strategic decision of harsh repression against the protest movement. This situation led to a rising number of defections among conscript soldiers and officers refusing to shoot on peaceful protesters and increasing numbers of civilians taking up arms, while at the same time initial unorganized and punctual armed resistance was starting to emerge towards the end of May and start of June 2011 in some localities against the security services. In the following months, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established, as well as a myriad

of other brigades. Armed resistance against the regime was nearly generalized at the end of 2011, creating new dynamics in the uprising.

The militarization was mainly the result of the violent repression on the local Syrian population opposing the regime; sections of it resorted to weapons to defend themselves. The first constituted armed opposition groups often had a purely local dynamic and served to defend their hometowns and areas from aggressions by the armed security services. In this chapter, I will analyze the multiplication of armed opposition groups falling under the FSA network, which never acted as a single and unified institution, and which was characterized by its pluralism in the first years of the uprising. This dynamic changed through time as we will see, with the establishment of larger groups, foreign interventions and the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist armed groups.

This chapter will demonstrate that Syria was witnessing a revolutionary situation with attempts by various opposition groups to challenge the sovereignty of the regime and create their own.

3.2 The internal dynamics of the uprising, first sparks...

At the national level, starting in January 2011 a few events such as graffiti, small demonstrations and other actions of dissent against the regime occurred before the beginning of the first massive demonstrations, encouraged greatly by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and the subsequent overthrow of their dictators. During this same period, many human rights advocates and activists had to face a series of tactics of intimidation and the close monitoring of their emails, blogs and so on, as well as of their telephone conversations. Some of them were warned not to leave the country (Williams L. 2011a).

These campaigns of intimidation, arrests and repressions by security forces against activists and demonstrations in support of the uprisings in the region were occurring, while at the same time official newspapers in Syria (*al-Thawra*, *Tishrin*, and *al-Ba'th*) were celebrating the uprisings. Official media especially praised the overthrow of

Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, stressing that his departure greatly troubled Israel with which Egypt signed a peace treaty in 1979 and state television broadcasted live the protests of the Egyptian people (Orient le Jour 2011a). This showed once again the attempts of the regime to divert popular aspirations by the use of foreign political events and to promote their own narrative while not letting other television networks, such as al-Jazeera, occupy the whole media space.

The regime was feeling the pressure of the people from below by increasing its repression and surveillance against activists, while also by trying to implement some social measures and withdrawing some unpopular policies. Ministers were told to listen to citizen complaints, and local officials displayed uncharacteristic interest in popular needs (ICG 2011: 5). The regime announced in mid-February the creation of a "National Welfare Fund" of \$250 million. Long awaited, the fund was intended to help some 420,000 families, while increasing by 72 percent the heating allowances for public servants and pensioners (about 2 million people). In the beginning of March, the Syrian regime also took a series of measures to bring down prices of basic foodstuffs (Orient le Jour 2011b).

On March 8, Bashar al-Assad rushed to the province of Hasakah to announce the launch of the Tigris River diversion project to develop the northeastern region of Syria affected by the droughts of the last few years, after more than three decades of delays. The project cost USD 3 billion and was expected to irrigate large tracts of land, develop agricultural production and create jobs for thousands of people (Yazigi 2016b: 2). In mid-March, the regime ended the lucrative monopoly over airport taxi services that a regime crony had enjoyed (ICG 2011: 5).

These measures would however not be enough, because as previously mentioned, the country was facing a structural economic crisis, not a punctual one. This crisis was associated with the absence of democratic rights and scenes to express one's criticism and contention. At the same time, scenes of massive demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt inspired many young Syrians.

On March 15, more than one hundred protesters demonstrated in the *suq al-Hammidiya* and Hariqa in the heart of the capital chanting slogans calling for

freedom and an end to the emergency laws. The demonstration was dispersed by security forces and six protesters were arrested (BBC News 2011a). It was the first time the slogan “Allah, Syria and Freedom” was chanted, as a response to the slogan of the supporters of Bashar al-Assad “Allah, Syria and Bashar”. On the day after, March 16, members of the families and relatives of a number of political prisoners organized a rally in front of the Ministry of the Interior to obtain their release, gathering approximately 150 people. Thirty-four of them were arrested (BBC News 2011b).

It was in the same week that the true spark of the beginning of the uprising was triggered in the southern city of Dar'a, which quickly became a symbol of the popular resistance in the country. On the night of February 22, 2011, a few school students scribbled slogans on the school wall in Hay al-Arbeen district, inspired by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt: "No teaching, No School, Till the end of Bashar's Rule", "Leave, Bashar", "Your turn is coming, Doctor" and the famous “the people want the fall of the regime.” The children were spotted by security forces and were arrested with other young students (Evans and Al-Khalidi 2013). On March 18, the boys' families and several hundred local citizens demonstrated throughout the city of Dar'a demanding the liberation of the children, a crackdown on corruption and the implementation of real democratic reforms in the country (Daraafree Syria 2011; SyriaFreePress 2011a). On the same day, protests in different areas of Syria were witnessed such as in the small town of Baniyas, located on the Syrian coast near Tartus, with protesters notably chanting “Sunni, Alawi, we all want freedom” (Shaam Network S.N.N 2011a; Darwish 2016d, Abdo 2016). Similar demonstrations erupted in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, Raqqa, Qamishli and Hama.

Demonstrations in some localities also raised other specific demands, although continuing to work under a general umbrella of reforms and freedom. Residents of Baniyas, for example, requested the cancellation of regime measures that discriminated against female employees of the education ministry wearing a niqab. In Dar'a, resentment concentrated on a number of officials who were seen as particularly incompetent, brutal or corrupt and the 2008 decree that subjected land sales in cities close to border areas to the approval of security officials, who ran a large-scale extortion scheme (ICG 2011: 5). Demands of protesters in mixed Sunni-

Alawi cities, such as Baniyas, Lattakia, and Tartus, were also directed at the alleged pro-Alawi sectarian biases in employment in state industries and public administrations and the need to rectify it, as mentioned in the previous chapter (Balanche 2011; Abdo 2018). In Homs, the first demonstration at the Khaled Ibn al-Walid Mosque was initially to condemn the local governor, who had been the target of increasing criticisms in the past years notably because of his corruption, arbitrary land expropriations, suspicious real estate contracts and especially his urban project “Homs Dream” (Wikommen 2017: 78-79), which would have forcefully displaced populations, mostly popular classes, from some areas of the city’s center, to make place for expensive commercial malls and building for higher strata of the society.

The 18th of March 2011, was the first day of the Syrian uprising, called the “Friday of dignity”, in tandem with the Friday of the same name in Yemen. The events in Dar'a marked a turning point of the situation in Syria, like the “Friday of Rage” on the 28th of January in Egypt.

Protests expanded in the next days to other cities of Southern Syria, and the first demonstrations appeared in Homs where about 2,000 protesters gathered in front of the Khaled bin al-Waleed mosque (The New York Times 2011; Orient le Jour 2011c). In the following weeks, several offices of the ruling Ba'th party in various cities were torched by protesters, while portraits of Bashar al-Assad - and his father Hafez - were torn apart (42maher 2011a). On Friday March 25, slogans to overthrow the regime were chanted for the first time (Tansîqîyya madîna Nawa 2011; 42maher 2011b). A few days before, the local mobile telephone agency belonging to Bashar al-Assad's cousin, billionaire Rami Makhlouf, was burned down. This attack was a clear symbol of the corruption and the nepotism of the regime, while protesters chanted “We'll say it clearly, Rami Makhlouf is robbing us” (Shadid 2011). On March 27, in a rare act of defiance in the People’s Chamber, which is usually constituted by loyalists of Bashar al-Assad, Dar'a MP Youssef Abou Roumiye accused the security forces to have opened fire "without mercy", and criticized the president for not coming to the region to apologize (Abazeed 2011).

Protests continued to grow and the first general strike since the beginning of the uprising occurred in the city of Dar'a on April 5, to protest against the continuation of

the repression (Orient le Jour 2011e). On April 1, 2011, the third Friday of the Syrian uprising, protests became increasingly more organized and powerful. Massive demonstrations occurred in various cities in the following months, such as Hama in June. Meanwhile attempts to transform the center square of Homs to an Egyptian Tahrir Square was not possible following the violent repression by the regime's security services, murdering numerous protesters during their expulsion from the square that gathered between 10,000 and 20,000 demonstrators (The Guardian 2011; Free Syrian Translator 2011; Silent whisper2009 2011). Similarly, other efforts to reach the center of the city in Damascus were repressed by the regime's security forces. The Syrian uprising would then extend gradually in the following months to all regions of the country – despite or because of the massive repression deployed by the regime. Indeed, it was this violent and growing repression by the security services that would progressively radicalize the protest movement, which moved on from demanding reforms to demanding the fall of the regime.

The outbreak of the uprising in the city of Dar'a was symbolic because it was known as a bastion of the Ba'th and number of senior dignitaries of the party originated from there including: vice-President Faruk al-Shareh, tribal leader Mahmoud Zoubi as Prime Minister from 1987 to 2000, Sulayman al-Qaddah as head of the Ba'th Party between 1985 and 2005 (Lister 2015: 15). These men embodied the bankruptcy of the state and its elites, who had for years abandoned to their own fate the rural classes and the outlying cities they themselves came from, to the benefit of policies promoting the bourgeois classes and higher social stratas of Damascus and Aleppo. This tension between the center and the peripheries of the country fully justifies a “materialistic” approach seeking to specify the “internal” causes of the Syrian revolution.

3.3 Social classes in the uprising

On the eve of the uprising in 2011, the domestic Syrian business community consisted of three main components: the bulk of small and medium-sized enterprises, which constituted more than 95 percent of all registered enterprises in the country; the crony capitalists, who formed an organic part of the regime; and the

“dependent” business elite, who owed their wealth and power to connections to regime’s circles of power. In addition to this, there was an “external” business elite comprised of Syrians outside of the country, whose wealth was mainly accumulated outside of the Syrian market (Abboud 2013: 2). The business community was therefore not only stratified along economic lines but along political lines as well, with many in the upper echelons of the community enjoying close access to the regime while the majority of smaller companies and enterprises remained on the peripheries of economic gains and political power (Abboud 2017).

At the beginning of the uprising, the sections of the bourgeoisie without connections to the regime, adopted a more passive attitude of ‘wait and see’, especially in Damascus and Aleppo. Large sections of this sector of the bourgeoisie might have wanted the uprising to succeed in the beginning, while maintaining a rather authoritarian and neo-liberal regime. They were nonetheless reluctant for their majority to participate or get involved in the protest movement, except through ambivalent means that did not put them under the spotlight (Abbas 2011), although some did participate directly. In the summer of 2011, in the city of Deir Zor, a strike was launched by the traders in support of the uprising. The strike led to a violent repression by the security services. The crackdown resulted in protests by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the city, which issued a statement denouncing the actions of these services and concluding with: "Long live Syria free! Glory to the martyrs!". As explained by economist Jihad Yazigi (2013), the fact that these positions were taken in secondary cities of the country was not surprising given the relative decline of these urban centers, as well as the physical and political distance of their elites from Damascus and Aleppo which had largely benefited from the economic liberalization of the previous decades. Some sections of the Syrian bourgeoisie and wealthy elites in exile established the Syrian Business Forum, openly aligned with the opposition. They supported efforts on relief and humanitarian aid while playing a political role within larger opposition politics. In Damascus and Aleppo, the vast majority of the bourgeoisie seemed more inclined towards the Assad regime (Abboud 2017).

Businessmen, regardless of their political positions, were the targets of both armed groups linked to the regime and armed opposition forces. At least 100 businessmen

were kidnapped from March 2011 and October 2012, while scores of factories were set ablaze after their owners refused to pay extortion fees. The case of the Aleppo business community was emblematic for this with several significant events before the capture of sizeable regions of the city in the summer 2012 by various opposition armed groups. In December of 2011, two fires destroyed the German-equipped textile plants of the Olabi family, known for their close relations with the regime. A few weeks before the July 2012 armed opposition offensive, the body of ice cream factory owner Ibn Nayef was found. He had refused to heed a call by armed opposition groups for a general strike. The prominent Alweis business family lost two of its members in what appeared to be revenge killings for failing to pay protection money. A third member, Jihad Alweis, owner of big milk production plants in the city, escaped an assassination and then left the country. A gang kidnapped the general manager of Aleppo Cables Co, Muhammad Mustapha Jweid, from his home in September 2012; he was beaten up and released three days later (al-Khalidi 2012).

Some events changed the passive support of some sections of the bourgeoisie towards the uprising pushing them to desire the return of stability under the rule of the regime, notably the looting of Aleppo's industrial zones, (Sheikh Najjar, which contained 1,250 companies and employed 42,000 people (AFP 2014) and Layramun, where at least 1,200 factories were looted and destroyed (Barfi 2016)). These events followed the conquest of eastern parts of the city by various opposition-armed groups in the summer of 2012. The bourgeoisie of Damascus were scared that a similar fate would fall on their institutions and properties if opposition armed forces would take over large areas of Damascus.

The rise of the IS and jihadist fundamentalist movements from 2013 might have also pushed most of these sections of the traditional bourgeoisie and the higher middle-class strata of Damascus and Aleppo to wish for the regime to remain, despite its crimes and unpopularity. In 2015, following the fall of the city of Idlib in the hands of various opposition armed groups led by the coalition of Jaysh al-Fateh, dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, Idlib witnessed the systematic looting of public and private properties. In an interview on an opposition-affiliated radio, Ghazwan Qronfol, the head of the Free Syrian Lawyers Assembly, explained that members of the armed opposition groups stole hundreds of passenger cars and looted the private

homes of many residents of the city, in particular those considered wealthy. Other activists also reported that public assets stolen included the warehouse of the agricultural directorate of the city as well as the equipment of the Olive Bureau, the body in charge of monitoring the country's olive sector, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Agriculture. Machinery and equipment at the Idlib Spinning Plant, a large factory employing thousands of people, was also looted (Sarâj al-Dîn, Mû`min 2015; The Syria Report 2015e). This new case of wide looting demonstrated for large sections of Syrians in regime held areas the case of the incapacity of the opposition to administer regions outside of the regime's domination. In addition to the prevailing lawlessness, the city also faced systematic bombing from the Syrian air force, and later on of Russia, as soon as it fell outside the hands of the regime (see chapters 4 and 7).

With the deepening of the war, many business elites also decided to leave Syria and transfer large sections of their capital outside of the country. Researcher Samer Abboud evaluated total withdrawals from Syrian banks to around \$10 billion by the end of 2012. The majority of this money was reinvested in neighboring countries. Some investors transferred their activities to Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, after the Syrian regime permitted them to move their equipment out. Thus, major industrial facilities, or parts of them (such as those held by Nestlé, which had sustained a fire; the Bel Group, a French cheese producer; and Elsewedy Cables Syria), were relocated (al-Mahmoud 2015). Syria's neighbors benefited from the considerable cash injections flowing from the establishment of new companies and production plants by Syrian businessmen, as well as joint ventures with local partners.

The majority of this segment of the business elite, those who left the country, were not connected with the new networks and opportunities provided by the war economy, while their old networks that ensured their access to power in the past were now challenged or disappearing. According to researcher Samer Abboud (2013: 6), there was already evidence that some members of these elite were becoming marginalized in Syria, by being silently dismissed from the executive boards of various companies or other positions of nominal leadership and power. Syria's two main holding companies, Souria and Cham, which represented forms of

economic collaboration between the two segments of the crony capitalists and other sectors of the business elite, saw the replacement of several board members.

The most important component of the Syrian uprising was that of economically Sunni marginalized rural workers, urban employees and self-employed workers, who have borne the brunt of the implementation of neoliberal policies, especially since the coming to power of Bashar al-Assad. The geography of the revolts in Idlib, Dar'a and other middle sized towns, as well as in other rural areas, show a pattern of being all historical strongholds of the Ba'th party, and which benefited from the policies of agricultural reforms in the sixties (Seifan 2013: 123). There has been a continuous impoverishment of rural areas since the 1980s and the droughts from 2006 accelerated rural exodus, as we have seen in the previous chapter. This situation was exacerbated by an annual population growth rate of around 2.5 percent that affected particularly small to mid sized towns in rural areas, in which population often multiplied by five to ten times since the 1980s. Public services provided by the state in these towns did not increase, on the opposite they often even diminished with the neo-liberal policies, leading local populations to witness a deterioration of living conditions (Baczko, Dorransoro and Quesnay 2016: 46-47). Author Suzanne Saleeby (2012) argued similarly that the initial protests were based on the largely economic erosion of the Ba'th-peasant social contract. In the main towns of Damascus and Aleppo, the geography of revolts was nearly similar to their socio-economic divisions.

The Damascus suburbs and towns surrounding the capital, where protests were important since the beginning of the uprising, were called the poverty belt, while the map of opposition-held neighborhoods in Aleppo from the summer 2012 was nearly exactly that of the impoverished working class Sunni neighborhoods: densely packed, poorly planned and relatively recent urban growth (Stack and Zoepf: 2011; Kilcullen and Rosenblatt 2012). Western Aleppo, on the other hand, with its better service provision, was composed mostly of middle class public employees, some sections of the bourgeoisies and some minorities.

Except the Kurdish and Assyrian areas (see chapter 6), the minority mid-towns and rural inhabited areas did not witness similar mass mobilizations as these above mentioned areas, although forms of dissent and protests did occur for example in

Salamiyah (Darwish, S. 2016b), composed in majority of Ismailis, and Suwayda, populated in majority of Druze (Ezzi 2013). Many activists of Christian background were also engaged in anti-regime activities in the country. They faced however some difficulties in the Christian neighborhoods of Damascus, where they were more cautious. They generally worked in partnership with like-minded activists from across the city and their zone of action was not restricted to any specific zone (Sabbagh 2013: 80).

Another important segment of the uprising, which was more “cosmopolit”, was the university students, young graduates and sectors of the lower and middle class persons in major cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, Deir Zor, Suwayda, Hasakah and Raqqa¹⁴. The number of students in further and higher education increased massively since the 1970s, enrolment figures for Syrian tertiary education raised from around 7 in 1970 to 26 percent in 2010 (The World Bank 2018). This meant that students represented a significant and distinct social force within society. Students were not directly exploited in the way that workers are, but with the mass expansion of education they are not a privileged section of society as well. They would be a particular important section of the protest movement at the beginning of the uprising. The Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS) was actually established on September 29, 2011 to struggle against the regime and struggle for a civil and pluralistic democracy treating equally all citizens. They grew in numbers rapidly and most Syrian universities with activists established a branch (LCC 2011a, Syria Untold 2013b; Hassaf 2016). They faced the repression of the official pro-regime student unions members and of the security services. In July 2012, university students were a quarter of all the individuals killed in the protest movement since its eruption in mid March 2011, according to the Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS 2012).

3.4 Political tendencies at the beginning of the uprising

The actors in this protest movement came from several components. In the first place, there were activists involved in the various struggles against the regime before

¹⁴ Syria had five government universities in 2011: Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Latakia and Deir Zor, with regional branches in Dar'a, Suwayda, Idlib, Tartus, Hama, Hasakah and Raqqa.

the uprising of 2011. Great majority of them were secular democrats belonging to all communities, including ethnic and religious minorities. Some of these activists played an important role within the grassroots committees and in the development of peaceful actions against the regime, which were mostly composed of young individuals from lower and middle class layers, often graduates and users of social media. The Syrian grassroots civilian opposition was indeed the primary engine of the popular uprising against the Assad regime. They sustained the popular uprising for numerous years by organizing and documenting protests and acts of civil disobedience and by motivating people to join the protests. The earliest manifestations of the 'coordinating committees' were neighborhood gatherings in locations throughout Syria. Committees would typically begin with about 15 to 20 people and then often expand to include hundreds (Khoury D. 2011:3; Abi Ajm 2011).

These gatherings slowly developed internal structures and several coordination committees played a particularly important role on a national level, particularly the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU), UFSS and the Local Coordination Committees (LCC). The cadres of these coordination committees were generally highly educated and globalized male and female youth, including some human rights activists and lawyers. Some local coordination committees were not affiliated with any higher coalition, which did not prevent them to coordinate actions with other coordination committees in neighboring areas.

These kinds of organizations also progressively provided humanitarian assistance for those suffering from the increasing destruction caused by the regime's forces, especially in providing relief to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). They also documented human rights violations in the country from the regime's forces and all armed groups. They also issued numerous statements on political stances very much followed in the activist networks in the first years of the uprising, while in the case of the LCC also publishing a newspaper called 'Freedom! Here we Come' (*Tli'na A' Horriyeh*) (Abi Najm 2011; Carnegie 2012e). Other coordination committees and youth groups were also formed at the beginning of the uprising, particularly gathering together numerous youth activist networks, who increasingly also collaborated through coalitions in various campaigns and civil actions.

The regime specifically targeted these network of activists, who had initiated demonstrations, civil disobedience actions and campaigns in favor of strikes, because of their qualities as organizers and a democratic and inclusive rhetoric and message, which undermined the propaganda of the regime that denounced a conspiracy of armed extremist and sectarian actors. Large numbers were imprisoned, killed or forced into exile. They played an important role in the ongoing revolutionary process by trying to articulate between the various forms of popular resistance to the regime. By early 2012, there were approximately 400 different *tansiqiyyat* (the coordinating committees) in Syria, despite intensive campaigns of repression by the regime's security forces (Khoury D. 2013: 3).

Similarly, they were groups of protesters who opposed the regime in which religious clerics played a significant role in certain neighborhoods and areas. Political thoughts varied considerably among sheikhs that had joined the uprising, from Salafist to more liberal trends (Hossino 2013).

Finally, elements of the more "traditional" opposition were also involved in the protest movement, among them some Kurdish political parties, left-wing groups, nationalists, liberals and Islamic networks. Many former activists or political opposition members acted in an independent manner in various local coordination committees and new structures established within the uprising rather than through political organizations.

3.5 Protest movements on the ground

The various coordination committees constituted the dynamic of the uprising through their organization of the popular resistance against the Assad regime, taking many forms such as the organization of protests, campaigns of civil disobedience and of strikes, while increasingly having to play a humanitarian role and providing other needed services as well with the militarization of the revolution. In 2011 and 2012, an upsurge of civilian activities was witnessed in neighborhoods, villages and cities liberated from the regime forces, while demonstrations were attended by large numbers of participants. Protesters and activists would describe the activities alongside protests as carnivals of the revolution. The relative absence of regime

forces allowed civilian activities to spread, (including discussions, debates, seminars and meetings), and connecting as well with their counterparts in different Syrian cities (Darwish 2016b). Experiences of self-organization in areas freed from the regime's security forces, even on a temporary basis, also started to appear.

Successful campaigns of general strikes and civil disobedience in Syria between mid December and December 30, 2011 paralyzed large parts of the country (LCC 2011b; LCC 2011v). The movement was called "The Strike of Dignity" and was composed of numerous movements, such as the LCCs and other organizations (Syria Untold 2013d). Regime security forces responded violently against attempts of shopkeepers to participate in the strikes (al-Jazeera 2011). In May 2012, following the massacre of Houla, a general strike held by Damascene merchants paralyzed the major commercial districts in the capital, including Hariqa, Bezouriyeh, and Medhat Pasha. Security forces attempted to forcibly open stores but the merchants and locals stood in defiance (Strategic Research and Communication Centre 2012). At this period, many flash mobs were organized as well as demonstrations in public spaces, which had not known important prior mobilizations. The slogan "Stop the massacre! We want to build a Democratic and Civil Syria" which was raised for the first time by a young female activist standing alone in front of the parliament in Damascus, was brandished by youth groups activists throughout the country following her arrest by the security services. Universities continued to be centers of resistance and the scene of numerous demonstrations, notably Aleppo university that became known as the "university of the revolution" because of the high participation of students in the protest movement.

In June 2012, the LCC in Syria organized a new campaign under the slogan "freedom is my sect", which concentrated on rejecting sectarianism in the uprising and the attempts to turn the Syrian revolution into a sectarian trap. In August, the LCC launched a new campaign called "A Revolution of Dignity and Morals", focusing on the principles and goals of the Syrian revolution that all persons opposed to the Assad regime is committed to, including civilians and opposition armed groups.

In November 2012, the campaign "Syria first, we are a moral alternative to the regime" was launched throughout the country by various coordination committees

and political parties. The various groups then gathered to form the coalition "Syria gathered for all" to unify its work and activities, with two main priorities: First, to raise and spread the slogans and spirit of the campaign in all the demonstrations throughout the country; and second, to contact FSA factions in order to involve them, make them participate and adhere to the campaign (Syria Untold 2013a). In November, in the same framework, the LCC launched the campaign "No to treason" to encourage unity among the opposition groups (Eagar 2014).

At the end of 2012, despite the increasing militarization of the uprising and the growing presence of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces, civilian and popular resistance remained important throughout the country. Their actions were continuing to challenge peacefully the authority and official discourse of the regime, who presented them as "extremist terrorists." On Friday December 21, the LCC (2012 cited in Syria Freedom Forever 2012) in Syria was able to document 291 demonstrations throughout the country. The year 2013 continued to witness civil and peaceful actions and campaigns.

The military advances of the pro-regime forces and the recapture of large bands of territories through the years, particularly from 2015 diminished the areas in which democratic groups could be active. The protest movement was facing the continual and brutal repression of pro-regime forces and massive interventions of its allies against activists and protesters, and on the other side the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces increasingly undermined the democratic and inclusive roots of the uprising. All this in the background of a worsening and dramatic socio-economic situation. From 2014, youth movements and coordination committees were weakened, which resulted in a diminution of peaceful activities and weekly protests. There were however upsurges, at some occasions, of civilian activism, proving false the vulgar dichotomy of choosing between the regime and Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces.

This was especially the cases in two instances in February / March 2016 (AFP 2016a; al-Khatieb 2016) and December 2016 / January 2017, which witnessed massive popular demonstrations following partial national truce and / or ceasefire. In

March 2016, more than 100 point of protests were recorded according to various opposition figures (Orient Net 2016).

Tensions between Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements on one side and democratic groups and activists on the other side continued to increase throughout the uprising. Civilian resistance multiplied actions of resistance against the authoritarian practices of the various salafist and jihadist organizations (see chapter 4).

3.6 An inclusive discourse

The large majority of the protest movements in the first years emphasized their inclusiveness and challenging sectarianism, shouting slogans such as “the Syrians are one” and for democracy. At the same time, since the beginning of the uprising, some small sectarian groups were present and developed alongside the increasingly bloody repression of the regime within the protest movement trying to promote an exclusive sectarian discourse. Some demonstrators in Dar’a and Lattakia at the start of the protest movements, and later on in Hama as well, chanted for example “No to Iran No to Hezbollah, We want a muslim who is afraid of God” (Shaam Network S.N.N 2011b; Tansîqîyya al-Lâziqîyya 2011; No Iran 2011). Despite debates on the real understanding of this slogan,¹⁵ this chant was seen by many, especially Shi’as and Alawis but not only,¹⁶ as a sectarian anti-Shi’a one and implied that Assad as an Alawi was not a true Muslim. Few months later, in October 2011, in a neighborhood of Homs, the slogan “No to Iran and no to Hezbollah” was accompanied by “we want King Abdallah” of Saudi Arabia, demonstrating the problems with this slogan (Sadam al-Majid 2011).

¹⁵ Academic Joshua Landis explained that the slogan “We want a Muslim who is afraid of God” was used by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 1980s to discredit the Syrian regime and by Saddam Hussein against Iraqi Shi’as. In reaction to his explanation one internet user answered “someone who is said to be “afraid of God” in the wider context of Syrian society means someone who is virtuous and morally righteous, not necessarily religious. This phrase is quite often used in marriage context, i.e “I would like to find my daughter a young man who is afraid of God”. The underlying logic behind this meaning stems from the belief that anyone who fears God, will not be able to commit the sins that evoke his wrath, hence will always be morally righteous”. The internet user is quite right on the meaning of “Afraid of God” on its own, but it becomes or is understood as sectarian when combined with Iran, Hezbollah and Muslim in the same sentence.

¹⁶ Many Syrian websites and individuals and groups on Facebook from diverse religious backgrounds showed these videos of protesters chanting this slogan as a proof in their sectarian motivations.

In June 2011, in the town of Halfaya, in Hama's countryside, protesters waved Turkish flags and chanted "Our constitution is the Koran, end Hezbollah and Iran... our leader is Adnan." They were mentioning the Salafist Adnan Arour, based in Saudi Arabia after he fled Syria following the Hama Massacre in 1982, who had a relatively important audience among some sections of the opposition (Shaam Network S.N.N 2011c). He became famous at the beginning of the uprising for his numerous appearances on two Saudi-owned Salafist satellite channels, which devoted most of their airtime attacking Shi'a Islam, widely watched in Syria. He opposed the regime, but by promoting a sectarian discourse against Alawis (Economist 2012). The slogan raised by the protesters of Halfaya was clearly a Sunni sectarian language unappealing for the majority of the Syrian population.

That being said these kinds of scenes were the exception in Syria during this period, while the dominant discourse was for the unity and freedom of the Syrian people and against sectarianism.

The use of religious spaces, symbols and vocabulary was present in sections of the protest movement. In the protests and demonstrations, political slogans demanding freedom, justice or the end of the Assad regime were associated with the chanting of *Allahu Akbar* (God is great) and *La ilah illa Allah* (There is no god but God). Protestors used to gather or start the demonstrations in mosques because these were the only spaces where they could gather and organize out of sight of the security forces, contrary to urban spaces (Pinto 2017: 125). This did not prevent the local grassroots organizations from being particularly attentive to the sectarian issue and to have an inclusive message for all Syrians. Faced with the attempts to divide the protest movement along sectarian and ethnic divisions by the regime, activists on the ground reacted by displaying slogans and chants promoting the unity of the Syrian people and organizing campaigns in this perspective.

Slogans such as "we are all Syrians, we stand united" were being repeated constantly in the demonstrations and various social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. In Dar'a at the beginning of the uprising, a placard was at the entry of the Mosque saying "No to Sectarianism we are all Syrians." In demonstrations on Friday,

the 8th of April, in the northeastern city of Qamishli, Kurdish youths chanted: "No Kurd, no Arab, and Syrian people are one. We salute the martyrs of Dar'a." In addition, the most prominent chant raised in the Rifa'i Mosque in Damascus on April 1 and in the demonstration in Damascus University was "One, one, one, the Syrian people are one!", which would become one of the most used slogans of the uprising throughout the years. Most of the protests emphasized the unity of Syria and its diversity with chants such as "Not Sunni nor Alawi, we want Freedom" (Wieland 2015: 231) or "No to sectarianism, yes to national unity" (Kalo 2014). In opposition to the constant accusations by the regime against the demonstrators of Sunni sectarianism and of being all Salafists, the protesters rejected them by stressing the involvement and participation of religious and ethnic minorities. For example a banner in a demonstration in Zabadani in April 2011 said "Neither Salafi, nor Muslim Brotherhood... My sect is freedom". They often used irony through placards to refute regime's propaganda. In another case, in Baniyas in April 2011 one placard was reading "Was the martyr Hatem Hanna a Salafi Christian?" in reference to a Christian protester killed by the security forces (Pinto 2017: 128).

At the same time, solidarity between different religious sects and towns was witnessed from the beginning of the uprising amongst activists and youth organizations. The city of Salamiyah, the majority of which is inhabited by the Isma'ili population, welcomed around 20,000 displaced individuals from Hama during the summer of 2011. These individuals were mostly composed of Sunni residents, because of the repression of the regime's security forces against the city. The position of the displaced Hamwis in Salamiyah was actually a form of political struggle: the fact that the displaced Hamwis, in their quasi totality from a Sunni background, found refuge in Salamiyah, full of religious minorities, and the fact that it was the activists of Salamiyah who broke the siege on Hama, demonstrated this solidarity built from below of the protest movement (Darwish 2016b, Anonymous C 2017).

To a similar extent, Palestinians from Yarmouk Camp joined initially at the beginning of the protests "demonstrations and rallies in several neighbourhoods of Damascus such as Midan, Hajar al-Asswad, al-Qadam (neighbourhoods near the Yarmouk camp) or a bit further in Douma and Harasta", as explained by activists from the

camps Tareq Ibrahim (2014) and Abu Zeed (2014). They added as well that before the Yarmouk camp became the target of regime's forces, the neighbourhood welcomed "displaced civilians from nearby targeted areas" and humanitarian assistance was organized for them by the youth of the camp.

Feminist activist Razan Ghazzawi explained similarly that Damascus areas and province witnessed a

"Pic of participation in 2012 of women from religious minority backgrounds and to a lesser extent non veiled Sunni women, as they were considered less suspect by regime's authorities than conservative veiled Sunni women, and therefore not searched at military checkpoints. These women took advantage of this situation to smuggle in different areas suffering from regime's sieges and repression medication, food and other necessary items, as well as smuggling out activists, etc...

At the end of 2012, regime started to notice that women from minority backgrounds and non veiled Sunni were playing an important role in support of activists and opposition held areas and started to impose more security restrictions and control much more systematically at checkpoints everyone".

Other initiatives of various groups and youth organizations throughout the country made a special point to reject sectarianism and support the revolution. One activist stated that in this period the non-violent movement

"made each one of us (protesters) feel that she became Syrian again. We felt at home in each city where we held demonstrations... Our loyalties were unified and we all belonged to one family: the Syrian Revolution." (Dawlati 2015: 19)

3.7 Rise of media revolutionary mediums

In this period, a surge of free newspapers in the country was witnessed, especially in liberated areas. Before the uprising, Syria had only three government controlled-national newspapers, state radio and state TV, with the objective of strengthening the legitimacy of the Ba'thist regime. This media organization pre-empted real public discourse (Issa A. 2016: 5), as other private media were controlled by personalities linked to the regime. The phenomenon of citizen journalists expanded considerably; through time, video activism was evolving into a homegrown journalistic scene with tiny local papers and online radio stations broadcasting openly in the liberated areas and underground in those under Assad's control (Eagar 2014). By the end of 2011, Syrian Media Action Revolution Team (SMART), which was originally a support network for journalists activists and then became a news agency, was distributing equipment (satellite modems to connect to the Internet, telephones) and taught writing and production via Skype. The organization trained nearly 400 activists in journalism (Morin 2016) and was mostly supported financially since 2012 by a mixture of private donations and NGOs (Eager 2014).

Villages and cities experiencing revolts established a number of smaller local newspapers, such as Oxigen run in the city of Zabadani; while some were able to reach wider audiences across the country, including *Enab Baladi* (Local Grapes) paper from Daraya and Damascus established at the end of 2011 by a group of 30 intellectuals and activists, including 14 women,¹⁷ or *Souriatna* (Our Syria) managed from Istanbul. The UFSS established a magazine titled "The Voice of the Free," in which students' writing, creative illustrations and posters were published. etc... (Dahnoun 2012; Foreign staff in Zabadani 2012, Syria Untold 2013b, Culebras 2015a). Similarly, numerous local radio stations were established by activists within and outside the country, for example Radio Fresh was set up by the activist Raed Fares in Kafranbel, Idlib countryside, running as a media center and a magazine published four times a year. "Sawt Raya" based in Istanbul, was founded by Alisar Hasan along with a group of Syrian journalists broadcasting news and programs (Culebras 2015b). ANA Radio was established in early 2012 with the aim of

¹⁷ In June 2016 Enab Baladi consisted of a weekly printed newspaper of 7000 copies and a website, which is visited by 250,000 people every month. (Free Press Unlimited 2016)

increasing citizen journalism within Syria by ANA New Media Association—the network behind the station (Beals 2013). Individual citizen journalists multiplied throughout the country and also played an important formation role for other citizen journalist such as for example journalist Zaina Erhaim (Frontline Club 2016).

According to Syrian Media Action Revolution Team (SMART), in September 2014 there were about 500 print journals and about 20 radio stations (Eagar 2014), while researcher Issa Antun (2016:3) estimated as many as 298 newspapers being circulated in different parts of the country during various periods of the uprising.

Journalists were the target of the regime because of their role in informing the world of the crimes and exactions of the security services. Between mid-March 2011 and the end of April 2014, the Violation Document Center in Syria (2014), a network of Syrian opposition activists documenting human rights violations perpetrated since the beginning of the uprising, documented the death of 307 journalists by the fire of the regime's forces and militias. Syria became almost the world's deadliest country for journalists, according to the 2017 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (2017), in which it is ranked 177th out of 180 countries.

3.8 Women's participation or challenging patriarchal codes and structures

These first two years also saw important participation from women in demonstrations and activities in relation to the uprising. Women have been instrumental to the civil disobedience movement since its earliest stages (Syria Untold 2014c; Anonymous A).

The activities of women and women groups were wide and diverse. Some women's organization and committees coordinated almost daily women only demonstrations and organizing themselves in grassroots cells to deliver assistance and relief to the families of the detainees, and those killed in the region, or to FSA soldiers. Some groups, such as Syrian Women for the Syrian Intifada (SANAD) supported grassroots' activists who lost their work because they were fired or because of their political stances, or forced to remain in hiding upon learning they were being wanted by the regime. They raised funds from and supported activists in continuing their

work in aid, media or securing medicine (Ghazzawi 2014; Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015: 11, Anonymous A; Anonymous B). They also engaged in work promoting coexistence and rejecting sectarianism. They participated in several grassroots initiatives, from emergency and humanitarian assistance to the publication of local newspapers for example in the case of Douma and Daryaa *Enab Baladi*, mentioned above (Syria Untold 2013g).

On Women's Day, March 8, 2012, the female activists of the youth movement Nabd issued a statement that read:

“We, the revolutionary women of Syria, address the regime on Women's Day saying: Our revolution will continue until we have each and every single one of our usurped rights, like a woman's right to nominate herself for the presidency and to grant her nationality to her children” (Syria Untold 2013f)

Women also started to organize their own groups and movements within the opposition bodies, in which they were marginalized. In a study of women's peace activism by the Badeal foundation, the authors of the report noticed the significant rise in the number of women's group since 2012, with the establishment of 11 groups in just one year. Initially, these groups focused on various forms of emergency aid, but gradually became more specific to women's rights, including programs empowering women on the economic and educational levels, documenting human rights violations, especially those involving women, and raising awareness of gender based violence (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015: 11). Significant groups of women activists played an important role in their localities and regions such as Women's Coordination Committee of Salamiyah” (see Tansîqîyya Salamîyya 2011; Syria Untold 2014f; Darwish 2016b;) the movement of the Daraya Free Women's initiative (Abd Al Hak 2011; Syria Untold 2013h), Syrian Women for the Syrian Intifada – SANAD (Ghazzawi 2014) or other women's organizations in Douma (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015) and Qamishli (Darwish 2016a).

Another important element in the involvement and participation of women in the uprising was the issue of breaking social codes and overcome traditional barriers.¹⁸ Female activists often agreed that the beginning of the revolution opened the door for women to challenge restrictive social conventions, whether those conventions were legal, familial, religious or social (Dawlati 2015: 39, Anonymous A).

In some areas however, this was made more difficult for security reasons but also because of religious conservative trends. Women revolutionaries were for example given mandatory male protection, while some demonstrations were segregated from men, or they were simply prohibited from participation (Kannout 2016: 37). Women in the uprising also encountered other difficulties. The prominent revolutionary and human rights activist and one of the founders of the LCC, Razan Zaytouneh explained that a LCC activist told her the coordination committee had a bad reputation in his town because people said the LCC was led by women, which undermined the position of its activists in front of the people there. She argued “women’s roles were distinguished, but only one Committee is led by a woman, which is natural since it is Daraya’s Women Assembly” (cited in Kannout 2016: 42). The lack of women in the local LCCs was exemplified in a survey distributed to the LCC units throughout the country regarding the numbers of female members among their activists. Razan Zaytouneh explained the results of the survey:

“Only 16 Committee responded, and the result speaks for itself [...] all the rest of the Committees have no female members at all. The ones that had more than 4 members were those of Shahba, Jdeidat Artouz, Hanano, Misyaf, Hasakah, and Inkhel! LCCs with 2-4 female activists were those of Ariha, Atareb and Al-Sanamayn, while those with 1-2 female activists were Kafrouma and Zabadani. The rest: zero women.” (cited in Kannout 2016: 42)

¹⁸ The women of Zabadani explain in a video for example that their demonstrations were not only against the political regime, but also against the traditions and costumes of a conservative society that the revolution helped them overcome. The women of Zabadani were able to break social norms and overcome traditional barriers, to be a vital part of the Syrian uprising (Kayani WebTV 2012).

Women were clearly left out from decision-making positions such as in representation in local LCCs, despite the fact that four out of eight members of the LCC's Executive Bureau were women.

There was also a gendering of role assigned to women in the activities within the protest movement, despite their deep involvement in the uprising in various fields. Feminist activist Kannout (2016: 43) explained that this was

“justified by comments of the sort of women’s inclinations are different than men’s, so they better do what men leave behind or what requires a “feminine touch”.... such as banner preparation, medical relief, distribution of food baskets, and cooking for the rebels”.

Women’s associations also raised the issue of representation of women in local councils within the country and activism in society. On November 30th, 2016, the opposition-controlled areas of Damascus countryside in collaboration with a women’s council in the Eastern Ghouta, organized the region’s first women’s conference. The conference highlighted the importance of female participation in developing a comprehensive program in which all classes of society and its civilian and intellectual sectors can resist any local truces or reconciliations that do not meet the demands and aims of the uprising, while some participants raised the necessity of breaking barriers and attitudes preventing a more active role of women in politics. During the conference, elections were also held for members of a women’s council on the province-wide level for the Damascus countryside (Souriatna 2016). The Women’s Bureau of the local council of Douma notably proposed increasing female representation on the council, which was constituted of 25 representatives who were all men. They suggested that some amounts of seats should be reserved for women within the local council, while arguing for the need for women to move from executive to decision-making roles (Enab Baladi 2016c).

On the political scene, a group of Syrian women activists and organizations established the Syrian Women Coalition for Democracy, to fight against their underrepresentation in the political sphere and make their voice heard and in favor of

democracy. The coalition convened its first seminar in Cairo in late October 2012, in collaboration with the “Women and Democracy Forum”, to establish the Syrian Women’s Forum for Peace. On January 14, 2014, the coalition launched the “Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy”, in collaboration with a number of feminist and political organizations (Syria Untold 2015b).

The participation of women, just as the protest movement, however diminished throughout the years with the violent repression of the regime, increasing militarization of the uprising and rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces.

3.9 Organization of the protest movement

By the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012, regime forces started to withdraw or were expelled by opposition armed groups, from an increasing number of regions. In the void they left behind, the grassroots organizations began to evolve into ad hoc structures of local government, in which on many occasions LCC activists were the main nuclei of the local councils. In some regions, liberated from the regime’s armed forces, civil administrations were also set up to make up for the absence of the state and take charge of its duties in various fields, like schools, hospitals, roads, water systems, electricity, communications (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014: 9). Omar Aziz (2011), a 63-year-old anarchist activist who was arrested in October 2012 and died under torture in a regime jail in February 2013, was the first to call for the establishment of ‘local councils’ in October 2011. Most probably in Damascus and its province his ideas and call for self-governing councils were inspirational for some activists, but it was mostly the result of the reality of the ground and the need for activists and local populations to organize society politically and cooperate with armed opposition groups.

According to researcher Rana Khalaf, the first Local Council was established in the city of Zabadani in the end of 2011 with the main objective of coordinating between civilians and armed opposition groups. This then developed into a prototype of local governance emulated throughout the opposition controlled areas of the country (Khalaf R. 2015: 46). Local councils developed rapidly as well in the countryside of Damascus in the beginning and middle of 2012 for example in Douma (see Local

Council of Douma 2016, Khaddour 2015a: 10)), which was inhabited by more than half a million persons originally although the numbers diminished through the years.

Similar examples of effective local councils existed in the north of the country as well such as Manbij, in the north-east of Aleppo Governorate, (see Munif 2017; Zaman al-Wasl 2013a; Khoury D. 2013: 5) and Raqqa (see Syria Untold 2013bc Arhim 2013, Syria Untold 2013i), until both cities fell under the occupation of the city by ISIL forces in 2014. The province of Aleppo and the city, where the armed insurgency found itself with several million individuals under its control following the regime's forced expulsion from these areas between mid 2012 and beginning 2013, also witnessed the expansion of local councils and self-governance (see Dorransoro and Quesnay 2013; Zaman al-Wasl 2013a; Chouikrat 2016).

This did not mean that there were no shortcomings in the local councils, such as the lack of representation of women, or of religious minorities in general. Many female activists, notably from Aleppo, stated that they were not able to hold decision-making positions in their local councils or authorities because they were women (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015: 32). In a research on civil activism in Syria in 2014, female participation was attested as weak. Four reported a female representation of up to 17 percent; the women concerned ranging in age from 31 to 44 years. These four Local Councils were located across the Hama, Raqqa and Aleppo areas (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014: 20). The lack of women's participation continued to be the case in most of the Local Councils throughout the uprising. According to a study conducted by Omran for Strategic Studies (2016: 16) between January and May 2016 on 105 local councils (out of 427 in all Syria), the percentage of female members was only 2 percent.

Other problems existed as well. Huda Yahya (2017), an activist from Idlib countryside, although describing local councils as mini-governments replacing the state's institutions concerned with the provision of public services to civilian population, for example argued that:

“these councils have shown some forms of disorganization, undemocratic practices, representation of families and

underrepresentation of women. They have also failed to win the trust of the citizenry”

In addition to this, councils were far from well-established everywhere in opposition held areas and were at different stages of development, depending on their security situation, access routes to border areas, length of time since their establishment and existence of other competing structures or spoilers (Khalaf R. 2015: 46). Civil councils were also not always completely autonomous from military groups, relying often on military groups for resources (Darwish 2016e: 2) or the council members were also largely selected according with the influence of local military groups (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2016: 158).

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

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

The head of the Local Council of Kafranbel Ahmad Barhum al-Hosni for example explained that members of the local council were selected by consensus among families, city dignitaries and activists (Yahya 2017).

Another problem that was encountered in the selection of the council’s representatives was the need for particular professional and technical skills. For example, in the government of Idlib province, one of the conditions to be elected was to be a university graduate. This condition allowed higher classes to monopolize the representations of these councils (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2016: 282).

Despite these limitations, local councils were able to restore a minimum level of social services in their regions and enjoyed some level of legitimacy. The role of local councils continued throughout the years, despite the multiple threats and deepening of the war, in various opposition-controlled territories. According to the estimates provided by the Local Administration Council Unit in March of 2016, the estimated 395 valid local councils in the opposition-held areas included 6136 local council members and they were distributed as follows: 113 LCs in Aleppo (1850 members), 112 LCs in Idlib (1700 members), 45 LCs in Rif Damascus (892 members), 40 LCs in Homs (380 members), 35 LCs in Hama (664 members), 35 LCs in Dar'a (523 members), 6 LCs affiliated with the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Hasakah (32 members), 6 LCs in Lattakia (50 members), 3 LCs in Qunaytra (35 members) and 10 local council members in Damascus (Yazigi 2016b: 10).

Their numbers however diminished considerably after the fall of Eastern Aleppo in December 2016 and of Eastern Ghouta in April 2018, because of the military advances of pro-regime forces capturing opposition held territories, and the attacks of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist armed groups against civilians councils replacing them with their owns.

3.10 Organization of the political opposition

The establishment and formation of political opposition alliances in Syria very much followed the inheritance of previous schisms. After the beginning of the uprising in the country, figures such as Burhan Ghalioun, Michel Kilo, Hussein al-Awdat, Aref Dalila, Habib Issa, Abdul-Aziz al-Khair, and Hazem Nahar called on all opposition parties to unite despite political and personal differences in order to develop a common vision. The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCBDC) was established in Damascus in June 2011, bringing together fifteen political parties and several independent figures.¹⁹ Members of the NCBDC were committed to three principles: “No” to foreign military intervention, “No” to religious and sectarian

¹⁹ At its inception, the NCBDC encompassed opposition figures and parties from leftists and Arab nationalist backgrounds, in addition to the Syrian Union Party and two Kurdish leftist movement, including the “Democratic Union Party” (known as the PYD) (Carnegie 2012a)

instigation, and “No” to violence and the militarization of the revolution (Amir and Fakhr ed Din 2012; Carnegie 2012a).

A few months after, the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was first called the “National Salvation Council” in its first meeting in Istanbul in mid-July 2011, was established in Istanbul on October 2, 2011. The SNC was formed by a coalition of groups and individuals, including signatories of the Damascus Declaration (2005), the Syrian MB, various Kurdish factions, representatives of the LCC, etc. The coalition was initially supported massively by Qatar and Turkey, which respectively funded and hosted on its territory the SNC. The new coalition was also welcomed by Western powers and Gulf Monarchies. It became the main point of reference for countries backing the opposition, while some important businessmen opposed to the Assad regime supported it financially from the beginning such as Ihsan Sanqar and Ammar Qurabi (Williams L. 2011b). On April 1, 2012, over 100 countries in the “Friends of Syria” group recognized it as “the umbrella organization under which Syrian opposition groups are gathering” (Carnegie 2013a). The SNC very early on adopted a critical position towards internal opposition groups such as the NCBDC and Building the Syrian State led by opponent Louay Hussein, because they advocated for negotiations and dialogue with the regime and refused external interventions.

The SNC was criticized since its establishment for being dominated by a large Islamic component, including the Syrian MB and a second Islamic bloc consisting of the “Group of 74,” mostly former Brotherhood members including many businessmen. With nearly one-quarter of the council’s 310 seats, the MB was indeed the largest and most coherent faction within the SNC (Carnegie 2013a) and was supported by Qatar and Turkey. Doha actually facilitated the access of MB’s members to its channel al-Jazeera. The MB also controlled two of the SNC’s central offices, in charge of military affairs and humanitarian assistance, which provided them millions of dollars of donations to constitute and / or strengthen their own support networks in Syria (O’Bagy 2012a: 16; Phillips 2016: 110). Building on exile structures, the Islamic fundamentalist movement was rapidly able to play a central role in the SNC (Becker 2013: 2). The SNC was divided from within between

competing interests and policies, strengthened by the foreign actors' intervention in the council, while it lacked any legitimacy on the ground.

In February 2012, 14 leftist and democratic organizations and political forces, with a mix of veteran opposition activists and youth, established a coalition called *al-Watan*.²⁰ For the vast majority they were active on the ground and played a significant role in the protest movement. The coalition was created with the objective of participating in the revolution and reinforcing it in order to overthrow the regime and build a civil and democratic state (Abi Najm 2011). The organizations belonging to this coalition were targets of the regime's repression early on. The coalition disappeared because of the severe repression of the majority of its members and the impossibility to organize, although some organizations were still operating in some regions throughout the uprising.

The relations between the LCC and the SNC gradually deteriorated, and on May 17, 2012, the LCC issued a statement accusing the SNC of betraying "the spirit and demands of the Syrian Revolution" and marginalizing its representatives. The LCC announced its formal withdrawal from the SNC on November 9, accusing the council of being under MB's control and of failing to reform into a truly representative structure (Carnegie 2012e), although the head and two members of their bloc in the SNC opposed the decision (Carnegie 2013b).

On November 11, 2012, the SNC joined the broader and new opposition coalition of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (known as the Coalition), and was awarded 22 seats out of 63 in the coalition's governing political council. About half a dozen other SNC members were also given seats as "independent national figures" or representatives of minorities. The Coalition was established at the Doha meeting as a response to increasing pressure from the United States and other Western states for the formation of a Syrian opposition coalition that was more diverse and inclusive than the SNC. The main goal was to

²⁰ 1) Harakat Ma'an for a free and democratic Syria. 2 The National Gathering 3 The National Bloc in Syria. 4 Citizenship Movement. 5 Coalition of Syrian left. 6 The National Committee Democratic Action in Jaramana. 7 Vision for Change. 8 The Revolutionary Left in Syria. 9 The Support Committee of the Syrian revolution. 10 Helem (Dream). 11 The Gathering "al-Tarîq". 12 The National Initiative in the Jabal al-Arab. 13 Cadres of the Communists in the Jabal al-Arab. 14 Civil Enlightenment Movement.

create a coalition that would be able to win more widespread international recognition and, along with recognition, increased financial and material support. This new coalition included representatives from the LCCs and had initially the support of large sections of the FSA (Carnegie 2013b).

This would not last very long. In the spring and summer of 2013, criticisms were growing from within the protest movement against the Coalition. The Revolutionary Movement in Syria, a coalition of various local committees within Syria, representing the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the LCCs in Syria, the Syrian Revolution Coordinators' Union, and the Supreme Council for the Leadership of the Syrian Revolution issued a statement in May 2013 declaring that

“The revolutionary forces that have signed this statement will no longer bestow legitimacy upon any political body that subverts the revolution or fails to take into account the sacrifices of the Syrian people or adequately represent them. We consider this statement to be a final warning to the SC, for the Syrian people have spoken” (LCC 2013a).

The coalition repeated the same mistakes as the SNC for failing to win internal support within Syria whether from civilian activists or opposition armed groups.

At the same time, soon after its foundation, the Coalition established many structures in Turkey with the purpose of assisting local councils: the Assistance Coordinating Unit (ACU), whose objective was to provide humanitarian aid inside Syria (December 2012); the Local Administration Council Unit (LACU), which aimed to help standardize the local councils under a unified framework (March 2013); and with the formation of the Syrian Interim Government (November 2013), its 'Ministry of Local Administration, Refugees and Humanitarian Relief' created the General Directorate for Local Councils (March 2014). All these units were however politicized and polarized according to personal interests and partisan agendas, and were backed by rival regional sponsors, particularly the Saudi Kingdom and Qatar. Therefore, at the height of regional rivalries in 2013 and 2014, these structures mostly operated in

competition with each other, seeking to secure their presence and impose their influence on local councils inside Syria through financial support (Favier 2016: 11).

Criticisms on the dominating role of the MB were also still very much present. For example, Mustafa Sabbagh, a former SNC member who was elected as the coalition's secretary-general, had deep ties to the MB although he was listed as an “independent” member of the SNC. Sabbagh was part of the SNC’s military bureau and reportedly one of its most important distributors of MB funding to the Syrian opposition during the early stages of the uprising (O’Bagy 2013: 25). The nomination of Ghassan Hitto as the exiles’ prime minister of the coalition, a personality chosen by Qatar and close to the MB confirmed this trend (Karouny 2013), and led several figures to suspend their membership in the coalition. The MB with the support of Qatar and to a lesser extent Turkey continued to dominate this new opposition coalition.

From May 2013, Qatar’s domination over the Syrian Coalition was however progressively terminated in favor of Saudi Arabia. This was the result of several failures, notably the resignation after five months of President’s coalition Ahmed Khatib complaining of external interventions preventing him of working and the increasing frustrations of Western powers with the new opposition body of being able to create links within Syria (Phillips 2016: 122). The “final straw” in galvanizing the Western powers behind the move to rein in Qatar by promoting Saudi leadership was the appointment in mid-March of Ghassan Hitto, an ally of Qatar and seen by many as the man of the MB (Karouny 2013, Lefèvre 2017: 75). In early May, a 12-member delegation from the Syrian coalition visited Saudi Arabia, for an unprecedented two-day official meeting. Prior to this meeting, Saudi authorities had consistently declined to meet the opposition, despite repeated requests before. In this meeting, Riyadh called on the coalition’s delegation to expand its membership significantly, notably to include minorities (Hassan 2013a). At the end of May and after a week of tensed meetings, the Syrian Coalition announced the inclusion of 54 new members to the initial 63, nearly entirely backed by Riyadh (Phillips 2016: 122), including independents such as Ahmed al-Jarba, tribal leader and future president of the Syrian Coalition, new representatives of the revolutionary movement, largely from the

Islamist spectrum, and fifteen from the FSA and a liberal bloc led by opposition figure Michel Kilo (Becker 2013: 2).

Even the MB, feeling most probably the wing of change against them, did not want to appear opposing Saudi Arabia and sought good relations with Riyadh. Syrian Brotherhood deputy leader Mahmoud Farouq Tayfour travelled to the Saudi Kingdom to meet with the Saudi foreign minister, Saud al-Faysal, in one-to-one talks. According to sources close to the opposition, Mr Tayfour gave assurance to the Saudi minister that "Syria's Brotherhood will definitely not be like Egypt's Brotherhood" (cited in Hassan 2013a).

These changes were also the results of regional developments at the detriment of Qatar and therefore the Syrian MBs were under growing pressure to accept these evolutions. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani gave up his post as emir of Qatar to his son in late June 2013 and more than a week after, on July 3, the Egyptian defence minister and head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, announced the removal in a military coup of Muslim Brotherhood member and Qatari ally President Muhammad Morsi, following mass protests against Brotherhood rule and demanding the resignation of Morsi. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, rushed to congratulate the Egyptian military and pledge \$12 billion to Egypt in the wake of Morsi's ouster in 2013 (Khan and Lebaron 2015).

On July 6, the Syrian Coalition with its new members elected a new pro Saudi executive with at its head Ahmad Jarba,²¹ a tribal leader from the Shammar clan of northeastern Syrian province of Hasakah known for its close links with Saudi Arabia. Jarba defeated businessman Mustafa Sabbagh, a point man for Qatar as mentioned earlier. The previous pragmatic decisions of the Syrian MBs towards the Saudi Kingdom allowed for the election of Mr. Tayfour as one of the vice-presidents of the coalition (Reuters 2013). On July 8, Ghassan Hitto resigned as prime minister of the coalition to be replaced by September by pro Saudi personality Ahmed Tu'mah (Phillips 2016: 123).

²¹ Al-Jarba was one of the original members of the Damascus Declaration, and was imprisoned at least twice by the Syrian regime for his political activity.

In January 2014, most of the Brotherhoods members of the Coalition actually voted in favour of Saudi candidate Ahmed al-Jarba when he ran for a second time as president of the coalition. The pragmatism of the Syrian Ikhwan movement even permitted the party to be spared of the consequences of Saudi decision to designate the MB's organisation as a terrorist organization. Thousands of Syrian members of the Brotherhoods continued to live in Syria, while Saudi authorities did not oppose or raise any objection to the election of Muhammad Walid, a Syrian surgeon practicing in Jeddah before he moved to Istanbul following his nomination, as new leader of the Syrian MB. After his election, he thanked Saudi Arabia for "protecting" the Syrian Brotherhood in their exile and for "supporting" the Syrian revolution. He also equated the Kingdom to a "strategic powerhouse for all Muslims in the world", supported its policies against Iran and its military intervention in Yemen (Lefèvre 2017: 75-76).

Ahmed Jarba's term expired in July 2014 and he was succeeded by his confidant Hadi al-Bahra. Bahra's nomination was apparently the result of a power-sharing agreement that left the Coalition's presidency under Saudi's control but gave the Qatari faction the position of secretary-general and one of the three vice-presidents (Oweis 2014: 2).

In an attempt to unite various sections of the opposition for future negotiation with Assad's regime, Saudi Arabia organized the "conference for the unification of the opposition" in Riyadh, in December 2015, which gathered civilian and armed opposition groups and personalities to establish a joint document and select a negotiation team to go and negotiate with the Assad regime for a political transition. The High Negotiations Committee (HNC) was established in this conference composed of 34 members. The Coalition had 9 representatives and another five were drawn from the NCBDC, while nine others were listed as independents. Ultimately, eleven members were selected from the armed opposition groups, from the FSA's networks and Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Muhammad Alloush of the Jaysh al-Islam (Lund 2015e).

The HNC attended and participated the various peace talks in Geneva during the year 2016 and 2017, but they were unsuccessful because of the regime's intransigent refusal against any transition in which Bashar al-Assad would not be

included. The various military victories of the Assad regime since 2016 weakened the HNC even more, while empowering the will of the regime to not negotiate on anything. In the peace-talks of Astana in Kazakhstan in 2016 and afterwards, sponsored by Russia, Iran and Turkey, the HNC was not even invited. Only some armed opposition groups, led by Muhammad Alloush leader of Jaysh al-Islam, were represented.

In the autumn of 2017, HNC, under Saudi Arabia's increasing pressure, included the "Moscow" and "Cairo" platforms²² to unite even more widely the opposition in negotiation talks with Assad's regime.

The divisions within the oppositions continued and were even exacerbated by foreign powers throughout the years, especially the Qatari and Saudi rivalry. Regional actors actually prioritized their own interests rather than putting their efforts to rend the opposition more effective.

3.11 Militarization and establishment of FSA's networks

From the first days of the revolutionary process, the regime dealt with the demonstrations with great violence. The Syrian regime's reaction to the first protests was very harsh, resulting in the violent killing of around 100 persons in the first week after the first protest in Dar'a (Orient le Jour 2011d). Security services continued on this path and gradually escalated the repression against protesters throughout the first months, while arresting political opponents. This would be the main tool to destroy the uprising. In the beginning, the regime tried to coopt some sections of the opposition, or at least calm them, through various symbolic measures and openings. These attempts did not change the strategic decision taken by Damascus to continue the harsh repression against the protest movement.

This situation led to a rising number of defections among conscript soldiers and officers refusing to shoot on peaceful protesters, while at the same time initial

²² The Moscow and Cairo platforms each comprise a handful of activists and are named after the cities where they first convened. They do not control territory on the ground or have strong links with armed groups engaged in the war.

unorganized and punctual armed resistance was starting to emerge towards the end of May and beginning of June 2011 in some localities against the security services. In the following months, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was established, as well as a myriad of other brigades. Armed resistance against the regime was nearly generalized at the end of 2011, creating new dynamics in the uprising. The militarization was mainly the result of the violent repression on the local Syrian population opposing the regime; sections of it resorted to weapons to defend themselves. The first constituted armed opposition groups often had a purely local dynamic and served to defend their hometowns and areas from aggressions by the armed security services.

The first instance of significant armed rebellion came in June, when local militiamen, probably in coordination with Syrian army defectors, killed a large number of regime security forces in Jisr al-Shughour, a northern town at the foothills of the mountainous Turkish border (Halliday 2012a: 11). On June 9, 2011, as regime security forces closed in on the rebellious Jisr al-Shughour, the Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush announced that he and his companions, around 150 soldiers, were defecting from the army to “protect the unarmed protesters who demand freedom and democracy”, adding: “peace, peace, no divisions, one, one, one, the Syrian people are all one” (freedom for syria-Antakya 2011)”. They announced the creation of the Free Officers Movement.

In July 2011, defecting Air Force Colonel Ryad al-As'ad announced – from a refugee camp in Antakya province in Turkey – the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), explaining its mission as protecting the revolution and the Syrian people in all its components and religious sects (Ugarit NEWS Channel 2011). There were an increasing number of desertions from the army, in particular of ranking soldiers refusing to fire on peaceful demonstrators. The reluctance of soldiers to fire on peaceful protests provoked many mutinies and desertions. In late September 2011, As'ad announced the unification of the Free Officer's Movement and the FSA, following reports that emerged of Harmoush's kidnapping by regime security services somewhere near his sanctuary in Southern Turkey.²³ In the autumn of 2011, more

²³ Syrian state media aired an interview in mid-September in which Harmoush recanted his previous statements, saying that the opposition was indeed “armed gangs” murdering people. He went on to

and more activists started to embrace and support the nascent FSA and the need for help from foreign actors. On Friday 9th of September 2011, protests were held in the name of “international protection” and on October 28, under the slogan “establish a no fly zone” similar to the one imposed in Libya and the “Buffer zone is our demand” on 2 December (ICG 2012b: 2; Phillips 2016: 84). In December of 2011, the FSA established official relations with the exiled political opposition, the SNC, formalizing its status as Syria’s main armed opposition (Lister 2016b: 6).

The members of FSA units generally originated from the majority component of the uprising: marginalized (informal and formal) workers of the cities and countryside (Darwish 2016b; Darwish 2016c), members of the popular classes who had suffered from the acceleration of neo-liberal economic policies since the arrival in power of Bashar al-Assad and of the repression of the regime security forces. The armed opposition was made up of defected soldiers from the Syrian army, but the vast majority were civilians who had decided to take up arms (Halliday 2012a: 13; Solomon 2012b). Some brigades were loosely gathered under some common umbrella, such as the FSA, but most were locally organized and only active in their hometowns. Lacking unity and centralization, they coordinated on specific battlefields, but rarely on political and strategic decisions. They were generally gathered along village or extended family lines, with little ideological cohesion. Fighters tended to be conservative and practicing Sunni Muslims from popular neighborhoods in rural and urban areas but were not motivated by a particular religious fundamentalist ideology linked to al-Qa’ida or other Islamic fundamentalist movements, as claimed by the Assad regime’s propaganda (Jaulmes 2012; al-Jazeera 2012, Legrand 2016:1). In addition to this, some of the names adopted by a few opposition armed groups in the summer and autumn 2011 with a religious Sunni connotation such as Khalid Ibn al-Walid, who was the Muslim Arab conqueror of Syria in the 7th century, or Umar Ibn al-Khattab battalion in Deir Zor, were actually a

say that the first people to contact him after his defection were the MB and exiled former Syrian vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam, both statements that bolstered the regime’s argument that a foreign conspiracy was responsible for unrest in Syria. The consensus among political and armed opposition members was that Harmoush was responding to threats or torture, and he was revered as a hero despite this damaging interview. Harmoush was sentenced to death and executed in January 2012 (Halliday 2012a: 15).

reflections of the social milieu of their members, who were usually rural, socially marginalized and where practice of religion was common.

This said, the FSA was initially characterized by its variety of political opinions and to some extent ethnic and sectarian compositions. The Kurdish Salah al-Din Brigade fought in Aleppo and northern Syria, initially defending a democratic program for all Syrians without discrimination. Its Captain, Bewar Mustafa, declared in the beginning of 2013 that "We believe in democracy, equal rights for all, and representation... This is automatically against sectarianism. We are the FSA for all Syrians" (Hossino 2013). The "National Unity Brigades" (Kata'ib Al-Wahda Al-Wataniyya) were established in the countryside of Damascus in 2012 and had democratic and inclusive aspirations. The spokesman of this group declared in the first line of a statement "Religion is for God, and the homeland is for all", while adding "the National Unity Brigades operates for the sake of a civil, democratic state for all ethnicities and social identities". To the question "Who arms and supports you?", the speaker of the group answered:

"Patriotic individuals who don't want recognition. We reject any support that is politicized or that is not patriotic, no matter how big. And everyone who supports us shares our dream of a civil state" (Darth Nader 2012a).

Two battalions, Oussoud al-Ghouta and Oussoud Allah, were linked to Arab nationalist and socialist political parties in Douma where they had a historical presence in competition with Islamic fundamentalist movements (al-Dik 2016: 190-191). Among religious minorities, involvement in the armed opposition was present but very limited and most often on an individual basis.

In a survey of the opposition carried out by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and Pechter Pools of Princeton in June of 2012, most of the armed opposition fighters favored a democratic system or process. The survey displayed that 40 percent preferred a transitional government in Damascus, leading to elections, while 36 percent declared that they wanted a constitutional assembly, as in post-revolutionary Tunisia, leading to elections (cited in Hassan and Weiss 2015: 181).

By early 2012, the armed groups of the FSA were actually demonstrating increasing effectiveness, and were able to remain in control of key regions near the capital Damascus and central Homs. The FSA soldiers achieved these victories by forcing the regime to fight in many locations at once, stretching the security forces thin and pushing increasingly the regime to prioritize some areas. Successes of FSA brigades resulted in its constant growth, pushing the Assad regime to increase its use of force considerably, by making use of its artillery in 2012 (Halliday 2012a: 11). By March 2012, around 60,000 Syrian soldiers had defected (Lister 2016b: 5).

3.12 Civilian and armed protest movement, collaboration and problems

The violent repression by the regime against peaceful demonstrators and against the leaders of the protest movement (killed, arrested or forced into exile) provoked a general radicalization of the uprising and helped to empower activists who were more inclined to armed resistance. More and more groups of citizens took up arms to defend their demonstrations and their homes against the *Shabihas*, the security services and the army. Some military brigades were established and composed of previous civilian activists (Darth Nader 2012a; Darwish S. 2015: 68-69; Darwish S. 2016c).

Similarly, among the various coordination committees, which were previously determined to continue their peaceful struggle, many shifted their position with the increasing militarization of the uprising and the violent repression of the regime. In mid-2012, the SRGC called for foreign military intervention and was now actively supporting military groups inside Syria such as the various FSA groups with logistics, funds, and intelligence on the ground (Carnegie 2012f). The LCC increasingly provided logistical and technological support to FSA groups as well as intelligence regarding regime activities and the Syrian army's movements and whereabouts, while continuing to focus its work on peaceful resistance to topple the regime (LCC 2012a).

In August 2012, the LCC launched a new campaign called "A Revolution of Dignity and Morals", focusing on the principles and goals of the Syrian revolution that all

persons opposed to the Assad regime is committed to, including civilians and opposition armed groups. A code of good conduct was made at the initiative of the LCC for the FSA battalions, which notably included an article demanding respect for international law and opposition to sectarianism. This statement of good conduct was signed by a large number of armed opposition groups (LCC 2012b), but would progressively fade away with the continuation of the war throughout the years. In a similar attempt, Farzand Omar, a cardiologist and human rights activist from Aleppo, launched the National Coalition to Protect the Civil Peace in late 2012 to unite secular civil society groups and aid organizations with secular-minded armed opposition brigades. He brought together FSA democratic forces such as Salah al-Din Brigade, the National Unity Brigades that operated at this period in parts of Idlib and Hama, and small Christian brigades that existed near the city of Qamishli with their counterparts in aid organizations, schools, and grassroots movements (Hossino 2013).

The initial relation between the grassroots activists and the armed opposition depended generally on the dynamics between FSA units and local councils.

Several reasons existed for the tense relationships between activists and FSA battalions in some areas. Firstly, the FSA's fighters lack of roots with the local population when originating from other regions. This was quite clear in the case of Aleppo province, where there was a flagrant difference in the way the revolution progressed in Aleppo city and the countryside. In the countryside, there was greater support for the uprising since the beginning and LCCs were very rapidly established to organize revolutionary activities. As soldiers defected from the regime's army, LCCs from their hometowns provided them with safety (Khoury D. 2013: 6-7). In contrast, in Aleppo city, support for the uprising was more hesitant and conflicting, partly because the regime, until mid-2012, retained very solid control of security over the city and partly because large sections of Aleppo citizens were mostly unwilling or hesitant to openly oppose the regime. This is with the exception of large section of Aleppo university students who protested against the regime since the first days of the uprising.

The armed opposition groups that captured the areas of Eastern Aleppo were composed of about 80 percent fighters coming from the Syrian countryside (Solmon 2012a). The rural and urban divide in Aleppo was very deeply rooted in historical justifications. Many bourgeois and middle class Aleppo urbanites used to characterize the protesters in the first demonstrations at the university and rural Aleppo as “Abu Shehata” (derogatory term meaning literally “Men wearing slippers” referring to the social (below) class of the protesters) or as not originally from the city, but rather from rural backgrounds and other parts of Syria. At the same time, sections of the rural armed population saw the Aleppo city as wealthy and elitist. Illustrating this situation, one opposition fighter declared “in Aleppo they only think about trade, about money” (Solmon 2012b). Both in Damascus and Aleppo, these areas shared similar characteristics in that they were relatively religiously conservative, a predominantly Sunni Muslim working class population with transplanted villagers long ignored by the regime and deprived of services and economic opportunities (Stack and Zoepf 2011; Kilcullen and Rosenblatt 2012).

In some cases, the areas controlled by FSA battalions were often characterized by lawlessness, while some of these groups got involved in theft and robbery. Throughout the year of 2012, in the demonstrations held by local coordination committees and other civilian activists, a growing number of placards criticizing the FSA could be seen, with messages such as: “the gun that has no culture kills and do not liberate”, “The FSA, correct you path”, “Our mistakes are more dangerous to our revolution than the bullets of the regime”. Moreover, activists and LCCs focused on various demands, including unification of the FSA, calls against sectarianism and calls to preserve the objectives of the revolution. The campaign for “a revolution of dignity and morals” launched by the LCC and supported by a large number of local grassroots organizations, at the end of August and the beginning of September 2012, focused precisely on these themes (LCC 2012c). In some cases, activists complained of sectarian attitudes of some individual fighters. In Aleppo, activists from the Alawi sect working with the Kurdish-Arab Fraternity Coordination Committee were subjected to sectarian harassment carried out by armed opposition factions linked to FSA (Syria Untold 2014b).

For numerous activists the increasing militarization weakened considerably the protest movement.

There were however many examples throughout Syria of successful cooperation between the civilian and armed opposition, especially when the armed opposition was submitted to the local councils. The establishment of a rudimentary legal system in the city of Aleppo for example was the result of an agreement by the main military units to form a superior court in Aleppo, the Tribunal of the Legal United Court (*Mahkamat Majlis al-Qudha al-Muwahad*) and some civilian associations. The new code of law was the code of the League of Arab States, based on Sharia. A consensus was formed among all the players in the new legal system around adopting Islamic Sharia law as the basis for the new framework. Yet, most of judgments combined a mixture of customary and Islamic laws without implementing the punishments (the *hudud*) established by sharia. The reference to Sharia served above all to legitimize sentences in the eyes of the population according to researchers Adam Baczko, Gille Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay (2013). The work of the tribunal in Aleppo, and others elsewhere, were however increasingly undermined by the various opposition-armed forces.

In the town of Daraya, the FSA factions were under the direct authority of the Local Council and any military operation had to be coordinated with it. The city also disposed of only one financial treasury, which managed the donations and financial assistance given to the city. The local council was in charge of distributing the funds, which were allocated to various services such as the support of the FSA factions, relief and humanitarian operations and the distribution of daily aid to the besieged population in the city. The Local Council also ordered them to avoid any kind of human rights violations and any extremist sectarian discourse or behavior (Dawlaty 2015: 33). Daraya was often mentioned as an example of collaboration between the Local Council and armed opposition groups.

3.13 Attempts of unification of the FSA... but divisions and competitions

In end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012, provincial military councils connecting local groups to the national FSA leadership started to emerge, which represented a new level of operational coordination within Syria's armed opposition movement. The military councils in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Dar'a, and Damascus experienced mixed success: they were not able to win the support of every major armed opposition group operating in the country, but at the same time they did command a critical mass of the opposition battalions operating under the umbrella of the FSA. In some cases, the development of military councils took place in concert with the growth of civilian councils, which coordinated the activities of local activists organizing protests throughout Syria. They were able at some points to coordinate political and military arms of the uprising inside the country (Halliday 2012b: 10-17).

Throughout the uprising the various FSA units were however never able to unite formally and act as a single organization despite various attempts from local and foreign initiatives. The journalist Nir Rosen explained the situation faced by the armed opposition groups:

“The FSA was indeed a name endorsed and signed on to by diverse armed opposition actors throughout Syria, who each operated in a similar manner and towards a similar goal, but each with local leadership. Local armed groups have only limited communication with those in neighboring towns or provinces - and, moreover, they were operating long before the summer.” (Al-Jazeera 2012)

Another element preventing unity and centralization was the lack of organized support and funding. For example, in the case of Deir Zor, it was reported,

“the first operations of the FSA were funded through social networks, relying heavily on donations, for example, or the use of savings. Many weapons and ammunition were taken from Assad's army” (Darwish S. 2016c)

The Syrian armed opposition was not well armed nor well funded. Fighters bought their weapons locally on the black market, from arms dealers and smugglers from Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. They also seized weapons from security forces in attacks on regime arms depots. Sometimes they even purchased them from corrupt officers within the security apparatus. Otherwise, most of the fighters armed themselves and funded themselves as individuals or small groups (Al-Jazeera 2012).

On the other side, the lack of willingness of Western states to support the FSA armed groups was still very much present in the beginning of 2012. In a late February 2012 interview with CNN, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, declared that it was "premature to take a decision to arm the opposition movement in Syria, because I would challenge anyone to clearly identify for me the opposition movement in Syria at this point" (Halliday 2012a: 9).

In the first "Friends of Syria" meeting in Tunis in February 2012, the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, described the arming of the FSA as an "excellent idea", while Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, called for the creation of an Arab force to "open humanitarian corridors to provide security to the Syrian people". On their side, US and western's officials were more cautious and still not ready for this option, although President Obama declared that the US and its allies would use "every tool available" to stop the slaughter of innocent people in Syria. They however did not precise the tools. The Saudi delegation unsatisfied with these responses walked out of the summit citing "inactivity" among the member states gathered. At the same time, the SNC increasingly dropped its initial objection to arm FSA units (Chulov and Weaver 2012) and in March 2012 announced the establishment of SNC military body to oversee and organize armed opposition groups within the country under a unified leadership (Reuters Staff 2012). The bureau however never became functional and was the first attempt of a series of failed ephemeral "joint" commands to try to be a centre of organization and centralization of funding for the armed opposition groups.

This position worsened the situation of FSA groups on the ground who were obliged to seek support and funding elsewhere, especially from the Gulf monarchies, which would have significant consequences in furthering a process of islamization of the

uprising and of the armed opposition groups. As described by Steven Heydeman (2013: 5):

“In the case of the US and Europe, the political risks thought to accompany direct engagement with the armed opposition or participation in any form of military action, including the creation of safe zones, has led Western governments to cede leadership and influence to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey in providing financial, political, and military support for the opposition – even though they have done so in ways that directly undermine Western interests in preventing sectarian radicalization and political fragmentation on the ground.”

The preference of religiously conservative Gulf funders was also reflected in the attitudes adopted by the armed opposition brigades. In June 2012, a small group of militants took the name of the Kuwaiti Salafist Sheikh (Hajaj al-Ajami) that had provided them with significant funds. This situation did not only generally strengthen salafist factions, but pushed other armed opposition groups and fighters to join these religious fundamentalist brigades in order to be provided with essential weapons and ammunitions. Some FSA groups increasingly started to adopt symbols, rhetoric and facial hair affiliated with Salafism in order to receive funding (ICG 2012b: 10). Following the Summer of 2011, symbols traditionally associated with Islamic militancy had come to the fore.

An emblematic example of this process was the case of the FSA-aligned Faruq Brigades, which began in Homs as a movement of army defectors phrasing their propaganda in a non-religious military and nationalist vocabulary. The group then switched to a black logotype over crossed swords, and several unit leaders grew salafi-style chin beards (Lund 2012: 11). This transition was symbolized by Abdul Razzak Tlass, a highly popular mid-level leader of the Faruq's brigade, who grew facial hair in a style associated with Salafis in an effort to please his Gulf funders (ICG 2012b: 5). In another case one opposition fighter from the town of Qusayr in Homs province explained that his group was given money on conditions that they all "grew beards" as is in keeping with Islamic religion (Sherlock 2012a).

Many opposition members actually denounced the role played by Islamic groups, from hardline Salafists to the exiled Muslim MB, in bankrolling many battalions that shared their religious outlook (Solmon 2012a). Mulham al-Drobi, a member of the Brotherhood's executive committee, said in May 2012 that the Syrian MB opened its own supply channel to the armed opposition groups, using resources from wealthy private individuals and money from Arab Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar (DeYoung and Sly 2012). The Revolutionary Shields Commission represented at one point in 2012 one of the prominent factions supported by the Syrian Ikhwan, while other groups throughout the country were established by the MB (Sherlock 2012; Abu Rumman 2013: 25). Voices criticizing the behavior of the MB among FSA groups increased at this period. In April of 2013, the joint command of FSA issued a statement denouncing the attempts by the MB to monopolize and hijack the revolution (Syria Direct 2013).

This created a situation in which competition existed and increased among FSA units as they fought for resources. A fighter described these circumstances the following way: "When it comes to getting weapons, every group knows they are on their own... It's a fight for resources" (Solmon 2012a). Organizational cohesion suffered increasingly because of this competition and of the variety of financiers with different agendas. Infighting between Syrian armed opposition groups surfaced more consistently by April of 2012 (Halliday 2012b: 28). By acting independently and often through multiple independent channels relying on personal contacts, regional states (Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia) contributed towards the decline of the FSA from its true potential, despite their supportive intentions, according to analyst Charles Lister (2016c: 8). He added

“there was never a centralized policy put into place to avoid the chaotic situation that followed, when Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia each threw in money and weapons in the hope of backing the best proxies.” (cited in Young 2017)

3.14 Failed attempts to centralize and unify opposition armed groups

After numerous failed attempts at unification, including the February 2012 higher Revolutionary Council and the September 2012 Joint Command, armed opposition commanders from the FSA established a new centralized leadership body called the Supreme Joint military Command Council, or the Supreme military Command (SMC), on December 7, 2012, bowing to the intense pressure from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The participants elected a 30-member SMC, which then selected the chief of staff, Gen. Salim Idriss, by consensus. The agreement for the new unified command structure was the product of three days of intensive talks among more than 260 rebel commanders with the presence of foreign official actors from the United States, Britain, France, the Gulf Monarchies, and Jordan. In exchange for unification, the main supporters (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar) of the various armed opposition groups linked to the FSA declared they would funnel money and weapons through the new military council rather than playing favorites among the groups. (Macfarquhar and Saad 2012). The foreign backers expressed three main goals behind the creation of the SMC: to unite forces in the country to prevent anarchy; to sideline external elements and limit their influence over the fate of the Syrian people; and to prevent extremist elements from taking over centers of power in the country. The SMC represented the convergence of international interests, and especially an agreement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as the armed opposition groups most important backers, to channel their support through one organization (O'Bagy 2013: 16-18).

The SMC was officially operating on behalf of the Syrian Coalition. The Coalition and the SMC co-signed a document stating that the organizations' goal was the overthrow of the regime in Damascus and the dismantling of the security apparatuses. The SMC kept close relations with the Coalition in the hope of receiving better support and resources by cultivating its relationship with it as it was recognized internationally. A few months after the establishment of the SMC, at the end of February 2013, the Obama administration officially announced it would provide food and medicine with U.S. advisers supervising the distribution to Syrian opposition fighters with the SMC via the Coalition. The CIA used SMC-linked channels to begin ferrying in small-scale lethal supplies, with a variety of Croatian-made weapons first

appearing in the country in January 2013. This assistance fell short of the arms capability requested, and a spokesman for the Damascus Military Council declared he was deeply disappointed that the assistance package did not include arms (DeYoung and Gearan 2013; Lister 2016b: 8). In addition to this, Qatar and Saudi Arabia's continued to bypass the SMC and fund directly groups on the grounds for their own political interests. Their competition and rivalries therefore continued to increase divisions among the armed opposition groups.

The SMC was however never able to be an effective force and progressively fell apart as a result of internal disputes between and within the General Staff and the SMC, particularly after Idriss was expelled as head of the General Staff in February 2014, an event he described as "a coup." A new leadership was appointed the following month (and Idriss would eventually make a comeback as minister of Defense in the Syrian Interim Government) but the exiled opposition officers continued to conspire against each other. In June 2015, the Syrian Coalition's President at the time, Khalid Khoja's new leadership ordered the SMC to be dissolved (Lund 2015c).

Already before the dissolution of the SMC, since 2013, Western and regional states supportive of the opposition had already started establishing military operation commands in Jordan and Turkey to coordinate the provision of finance, weapons, logistical supplies and intelligence to 'vetted' FSA groups. Each was composed of military officials from more than a dozen countries. While the command center in Jordan (known as the MOC (Military Operations Centers)) had operated independently of the SMC, the facility in Turkey (the MOM (Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi)) had worked primarily through General Idriss. From October 2013, regional states led by Saudi Arabia first and then Qatar and Turkey, supporting Syrian opposition armed groups collaborated with the U.S. (specifically, the CIA) to facilitate a series of mergers of smaller factions into larger ones. These larger factions would be capable of operating on a provincial or cross-provincial level.

This merging process between FSA affiliated groups was supported by the US, but this did not materialize into any dramatic larger provision of arms and weaponry,

although these groups had relations with Washington. Instead, as explained by analyst Lister (2016c: 14)

“these relations had largely been sustained by noticeable levels of external support from Turkey and Gulf States, at times overseen or permitted by the U.S. It was thus regional states that filled the vacuum left by a lack of determined American effort”

The marginalization and fragmentation of FSA’s networks, submitted to different local and foreign influences, did not prevent throughout the following years new initiatives to try to form a “national army” by uniting various opposition armed forces, from FSA units to Islamic fundamentalist movements such as Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, but excluding jihadists (Jabhat al-Nusra and IS) and YPG Kurdish forces. FSA organizational unity remained even more difficult as regional states, especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia, maintained their continuous competition with each other with the aim of gaining influence over the various armed groups.

The weakening of FSA forces therefore continued and they were increasingly becoming proxies for foreign states and / or fell under the domination of Islamic and jihadist fundamentalist forces.

3.15 Marginalization of FSA’s networks

From the middle of 2015, most of the non jihadist and non salafist armed opposition groups had been marginalized in the military struggle against the regime, firstly by repression of Assad’s forces and foreign allies, Russia and Iran and secondly mostly as a result of pressure from their regional backers demanding them to deescalate the fight against Assad regime’s forces to be able to concentrate on other enemies instead. Finally, the domination on the military field and attacks of jihadist and salafist armed groups participated in the general weakening of autonomous FSA forces.

The main foreign backers of the armed rebellion established, as mentioned earlier, the Jordan-based MOC and the Turkey-based MOM to support a selection of FSA factions. Their assistance had been limited, irregular, and with strings-attached. Each state created and developed its own channels to individually support armed factions outside of these operation centers, without coordinating with other countries. Throughout the uprising, foreign backers increasingly pressured local FSA groups to target other secondary armed groups in peripheral military confrontations to serve their own interests, rather than the Assad regime. This participated in the loss of local legitimacy for the FSA groups, and to its marginalization at the benefit of the regime as well as salafist and jihadist forces (Legrand 2016: 1-2).

Jordan and Turkey more and more used local FSA and armed opposition factions, composed of thousands of fighters, to protect and to guard their borders. This situation facilitated significant gains by regime forces in some regions and provided an opportunity for Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist factions to present themselves as the only ones still fighting on the battlefield. The MOC suspended payment of salaries on several occasions to Southern Front rebels to pressure them to fight various jihadist forces. Meanwhile, in the end of summer of 2016, Turkish troops alongside armed opposition forces, ranging from FSA units to Islamic fundamentalist forces, launched a military campaign within Syrian borders to prevent the influence of the sister organization of the PKK in Syria, the PYD (See chapter 7) to extend all along its borders.

Turkish military intervention showed the changing priorities of Ankara regarding Syria from regime change to a “counter-terrorist” strategy against PYD and IS focusing on its security priorities, while including its Syrian armed proxies in service of an agenda not related in opposing the regime. Ankara even asked some armed opposition forces to withdraw from Eastern Aleppo, under siege by pro-regime forces, to join its military campaign. As explained by Lebanese analyst Fidaa Itani (2016) in the case of Eastern Aleppo in the summer of 2016:

“the Turks made a deal with the Russians and the Iranians that can be summarized as Aleppo (for the latter) for Jarablus (for the former). Afterwards, Turkey ordered the Syrian

factions to withdraw from Aleppo to join its army in Jarablus battle against IS. This fact left eastern Aleppo without experienced fighters; only local fighters remained, fighters who used to guard a calm frontline in the city. More than 4000 experienced fighters left Aleppo alone.”

The Turkish military intervention in Syria came shortly following the normalization of relations with Russia, which seemingly guaranteed Turkey's "no objection" from Russia, practically turning a blind eye to the intervention (Harmon Center for Contemporary Studies 2016: 4-5). Similarly, in the offensive against Afrin in January 2018, Turkish military launched an air and ground offensive, dubbed « Operation Olive Branch », on Afrin province located in northwest Syria with a Kurdish majority population and controlled by the PYD and its People's Protection Units (YPG), with the assistance of thousands of soldiers of Syrian armed opposition groups, both from former FSA and Islamic fundamentalist groups, with the collaboration of Russia that withdrawn its forces from the areas targeted by Turkish forces (The New Arab 2018a).

On its side, Washington facilitated the supply and assistance of weapons to some FSA factions if they concentrated on fighting IS, such as the Southern Front in the region of Dar'a and various FSA factions in the Tanf area, a Syrian border-crossing with Iraq that is close to the Jordanian border (Oweis 2016: 6) (al-Khalidi 2017b).

Meanwhile in mid February of 2017, the domination of Salafist and jihadist forces and the marginalization of FSA forces in Northwestern Syria led the CIA-coordinated military aid for FSA vetted armed opposition forces in these areas to be frozen. The halt in assistance included salaries, training, ammunition and in some cases guided anti-tank missiles (Al-Khalidi, Perry and Walcott 2017). In September 2017, after regime troops, backed by Iranian militias and heavy Russian air cover, regained a string of border posts with Jordan that it had abandoned in the early years of the conflict, two FSA groups, Usoud al-Sharqiya and Martyr Ahmad Abdo, were ordered to end fighting the Syrian army and Iranian-backed militias in southeastern Syria by their backers from the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and neighboring states that

support them, which included Jordan and Saudi Arabia. They were asked to pull out of the area and retreat into Jordan (al-Khalidi 2017c).

The Israeli state similarly supplied small local armed opposition factions, such as the “Knights of the Golan”, near its border with cash as well as food, fuel and medical supplies since 2013, in order to create a zone free of the IS and to prevent pro Iranian and Hezbollah forces from areas that could be used to transport weapons to military bases in southern Lebanon and the Syrian side of the Golan. In total, there were roughly 800 opposition fighters across more than a dozen villages in the Syrian occupied side of the Golan Heights (Jones 2017).

The marginalization, fragmentation and infighting between FSA’s networks and more largely opposition armed groups, including Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces, while submitted to different local and foreign influences, also made it less and less popular in many areas (Enab Baladi 2018a). In various areas outside of the control of the regime and the IS, particularly in Idlib, Damascus countryside and Aleppo provinces, local councils and activists launched various campaigns between 2015 and 2017 to stop internal infighting, to put an end to the authoritarian practices of armed opposition groups against civilians and that these forces don’t meddle into civilian affairs. Similarly, they often demanded armed opposition groups to evacuate their military headquarters and to transfer the ammunition depots far from civilian communities for the protection of the people and their property, and in order not to turn the city into a battleground (SMART News Agency 2016b)

3.16 Conclusion

Protesters were inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt and saw an opportunity to launch a similar one in Syria following the events in Dar’a. The repression of the regime against the protest movement and the lack of opening from Bashar al-Assad opened the door for a radicalization of the discourse of protesters from reforms to the fall of the regime. During these first two years of the revolution, coordination committees were successful in organizing national campaigns across Syria through their activists and other youth groups and networks in their areas (villages, neighborhoods, towns and even cities). Although, each region remained

isolated from each other to a certain extent, (mostly as a result of the repression of the regime) messages of solidarity were exchanged between them.

Different forms of opposition or at least passivity existed to the protest movement in the country rooted in various social, economic and political reasons. In Aleppo, the rural and urban opposition was for example clearly the main criteria of separation during the uprising. The protest movement was perceived, at least by some sections of the middle class strata and businessmen of Aleppo, as led by rural and religiously conservative people challenging their wealth and life style. The shelling by armed opposition forces on West Aleppo, including civilians and non military infrastructure, only strengthened their unpopularity in these sections of the population, although eastern regions of Aleppo were suffering far more bombings and killings from the regime and Russian air forces. To some extent a similar dynamics was happening between rural Damascus and central Damascus.

Secondly, the religious minorities, particularly Alawis and to a lesser degree Christians, were also rallied or maintained passive by the exploitation of their fear of Salafism and jihadism and / or of political vacuum in which they could be easy targets.

They were problems with the protest movement and the multiplication of coordination committees. No united leadership representing the protest movement, coordination committees and youth organization was set up, which was “the biggest mistake” and would have “prevented the movement from fracturing” according to a study on more than 100 nonviolent activists (Dawlati 2015: 25). The political opposition formed in exile was unable to play this role for various reasons as we will see in chapter 5, ranging from internal division, growing corruption, and interventions of foreign states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey). The high level of repression against activists and members of coordination committees, especially killing and forced disappearances, weakened considerably the human resources of the uprising and isolated even more activists who survived in their villages, neighborhoods and regions. A section of these activists got involved in the emerging local councils, which played an important role in the Syrian uprising in managing their areas, despite as mentioned some limitations and flaws.

The dominant message from the protest movement in its demonstrations and statement was inclusive, democratic and unthreatening for a majority of Syrians, including minorities, which challenged the rhetoric of the regime of being the only barrier against extremism.

The uprising was progressively transformed into an armed conflict because of the violent repression from the first days of the protest movement of the regime's forces. A process of increasing militarization occurred as a result of mass defections among conscript soldiers, while increasing numbers of civilians were also taking arms to defend their local communities. Despite some initial victories, the lack of organized and continuous political support to FSA networks made them unable to oppose the regime's forces and its allies Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and other pro-regime militias. They lost ground and suffered a process of marginalization with the rising influence of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements.

The intensive and murderous repression of the regime and the militarization of the uprising also had negative consequences on the local coordination committee and civilian institutions in general, despite the collaboration in some cases between these forces and armed opposition factions linked to the FSA. Some have criticized the militarization of the revolution among the opposition because it has led to dependence on foreign support, increased Islamization and subsequent disaster, while on the other side advocates of this process argue that only armed resistance could topple the Assad regime. Opposition activist, Rateb Sh'abo (2016), although critical of the militarization of the uprising stated clearly the dilemma Syrian opposition groups:

“It is clear that the ‘decision’ to militarize the Syrian Revolution has resulted in an everlasting disaster... Having said that, it is equally obvious that maintaining a peaceful revolution against a regime obsessed with its own survival, which viewed the battle against political change as a an existential one, is practically impossible. This is to say that the fierce debate and the war of certainties that persisted around the revolution

between the defenders of militarization on the one hand, and those weeping over peacefulness on the other, had little meaning.”

In conclusion, the failure to constitute an independent organized social and political force with some forms of centralization, let the space for other internal and external actors to intervene and instrumentalize some sectors of the opposition, armed and civilians, at the detriment of the protest movement. Despite these limitations, a revolutionary process was opened in Syria, as witnessed by the intrusion of large popular masses on the political scene, challenging radically the rule and structures of the regime.

Chapter 4: Regime's mobilization of its popular base, repressions, and adaptations

4.1 Introduction

The regime understood very fast it was facing a revolutionary situation, as defined by Charles Tilly (1993 cited in McAdam Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 197)

- appearance of contenders, or coalitions of contenders, advancing exclusive competing claims to control of the state, or some segment of it
- commitment to those claims by a significant segment of the citizenry
- incapacity or unwillingness of rulers to suppress the alternative coalition and/or commitment to its claims

The regime responded to this revolutionary situation by presenting it as a foreign conspiracy seeking to nurture a sectarian civil war. In a speech in January 2012, Bashar al-Assad identified the demonstrators with the al-Qa'ida terrorists of 9/11 (cited in Pinto 2017: 127). At the same time, since the first days of the uprising, the regime repressed violently the protest movement and especially targeted the peaceful, non-sectarian and democratic activists. Many of them were arrested and tortured to death in prison; others had to flee the country out of fear of the repression. The protest movement progressively moved towards more radical positions by calling for the overthrow of the political system as a result of these violent repressive reactions of the security forces. Regime's security forces in the cities also wanted to prevent at any cost the meeting and unity of the Syrian people regardless of their sects by violently repressing demonstrations and preventing occupation of spaces in cities similar to the Tahrir square in Cairo, in Egypt.

This strategy of repression was not new, for example in June 2007 when seven students from various religious backgrounds, including two Alawis, were sentenced to prison terms for online dialogues about political reform. The two Alawi were the most severely punished with 7 years sentence compared to five years for the others.

A comment by the arresting officer was revealing of the threat represented by democratic and non-sectarian opposition, he reportedly explained that, “these youths are more dangerous than al-Qa’ida, because they come from all sects” (Winter 2007).

Just as in the 1970s and 1980’s, the analysis by French academic Michel Seurat on the domination by the security services on the Syrian political system was still very much current. Prior to the beginning of the uprising in mid March, news was leaked that Bashar al-Assad had formed a Special Committee to study the possibility of protests spreading to Syria, and how to thwart them. The committee arrived at the conclusion that the reason for the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian heads of states was the failure to crush the protests at the moment of their outset. This option indicated that the “security” option had been the preferred option even before the mass protests had started, according to researcher Hassan Abbas (2011).

The experiences learnt from Egypt and Tunisia by Damascus was part of what scholars Heydemann and Leenders (2014) called “authoritarian learning”, in other words learning mechanism that takes place within an authoritarian regime and translates into the adoption of ideas, practices, frames or policies from other countries. For the Assad’s leadership the main lessons of Egypt and Tunisia were the lack of intense and direct repressive measures against the protesters at the beginning of the demonstrations, but the reaction of the Assad’s regime to the protest movement was also rooted in the regime’s structure and its previous experiences. The patrimonial nature of the state facing a large protest movement also explains the reaction of the regime, as argued by Eva Bellin (2012: 129)

“If the coercive apparatus is patrimonially organized rather than institutionalized, it is likely to be less receptive to the idea of regime change because it is more likely to be “ruined by reform.”

The power elite knew very well that even a small democratic opening could threaten their own power.

This said, other elements also helped in the resilience of the regime. The changes within the structure of the Assad regime, especially following Bashar's ascension to power, forced the regime to rely on a limited social basis, much smaller than in the 1970s, with no national mass popular organizations assisting it in the repression and therefore relying on sectarian, tribal and clientelist links to mobilize its popular base through various informal and patronage networks. The crony capitalists affiliated with the regime first mobilized people to demonstrate in favor of the regime, but moreover played an important role in the development of pro regime militias by funding them to make up for the lack of manpower in the regime's army. However, the security services played the most important role in establishing and expanding militias fighting in favor of the regime. Finally, an aspect often undermined in the literature is the role of the state and its continued provision of services. The provision of services and employment allowed the regime to maintain a key economic and social role among large sections of the population in a deteriorating socio-economic political context ravaged by war. Throughout the war, the state remained the largest employer in Syria.

4.2 Mobilization of popular base

a) Crony capitalists

No mass defections by crony capitalists and businessmen close to the regime occurred; they played an increasing political role. They first funded the regime's orchestrated mass rallies and public relations campaigns (Haddad 2012b), while private media owned by these businessmen linked to the regime defame the protest movement and promoted the regime's propaganda (Abbas 2011; Iqtissad 2015a). Later on, they were increasingly involved in the funding of militias to defend the regime (see below) and in funding and donations in favor of militiamen, soldiers of the SAA and secret services men such as such as medical treatments or offering weddings. Rami Makhlouf for example through his Telecommunication company Syriatel organized mass weddings for soldiers of the SAA and members of pro-regime militias, especially in the coastal areas (Eqtissad 2017b).

Early sanctions by various international and regional states did not encourage Syria's integrated elite to abandon the regime, with the exception of a few individuals such as Manaf Tlass. No individual under sanctions allied himself or joined the opposition. The sanctions actually incentivized some businesspeople to become more integrated with the regime, as economic opportunities arose during the conflict. The integrated elite, from all sects, remained firmly entrenched in Syria (Abboud 2013: 3; Younes 2016).

The Assad regime punished the businessmen who openly supported the uprising by confiscating their properties or bringing spurious legal charges in newly established 'counter-terrorism' courts (Kattan 2014). Firas Tlass, who fled the country after voicing his support the Syrian opposition, saw his various assets seized by the Syrian regime (The Syria Report 2014a). In August 2014, Tlass's company MAS was formally transferred to state ownership (al-Iqtisadi 2014b). The regime also seized the assets of businessmen who had direct relationship with Bashar al-Assad, but did not demonstrate their support to the regime as expected from them. Imad Ghreiwati, one of Syria's most influential business personality mentioned in a previous chapter, for example saw his assets and of his family seized by the state. He has been residing in Dubai following his resignation in 2012 from his position as the head of the Syrian Industrial Federation and the Damascus Chamber of Commerce (Baladi News 2017). Similarly, the assets of Mouaffaq al-Gaddah,²⁴ one of the biggest Syrian investors in the UAE, and who was previously provided with government land in Damascus for free, were seized in 2014 by the regime under the accusation of "funding terrorists organizations" and of "participating in bringing in weapons in Dar'a" (The Syrian Observer 2013; al-Iqtisadi 2014a). These businessmen have never made any official statements opposing the regime or in support of the uprising.

b) Weakening of the army, but still useful

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) was not ready to engage or answer to the eruption of the uprising in March off 2011 as a result of decades of corruption, which had

²⁴ Al-Gaddah is a businessman who built his wealth in the United Arab Emirates and returned to Syria in the mid-2000s as the economy opened up. He invested, in particular, in several real estate projects in the upscale Yaafour district outside Damascus (Syria Report 2016t).

deprived it of its combat and operational professionalism. The SAA was weakened considerably during the uprising, various estimations pointing out that its numbers fell from between 220,000 and 300,000 to as little as between 80,000 and 100,000, while more than 119,000 pro-regime forces have been killed by beginning 2018, including 62,000 members of the SAA (Davison 2016; Balanche 2016b, al-Masri 2017; Zaman al-Wasl 2018b).

Security forces were in charge of identifying potential defectors and to impose compliance with orders. Commanders suspected of potentially defecting, even among significant positions, were directly suspended at the first sign of suspicion. Manaf Tlass was for example discharged from command of his Republican guard Brigade and even put under house arrest before he defected. No major military units actually defected with their leaders. The security apparatus also enforced compliance with orders, by killing or imprisoning and torturing soldiers who failed to follow orders to shoot at demonstrators (Halliday 2013: 13). This explained partially why most of the defections occurred on an individual basis or in small groups, leaving the ranks with or without their weapons. Thousands of soldiers and officers were detained as they were suspected of harboring sympathy for the revolution. According to some testimonies, up to half of the losses suffered by the SAA were the results of murders perpetrated by soldiers loyal to the regime (Bassiki and Haj Hamdo 2016).

Bashar al-Assad even acknowledged in July of 2015 that the army's regime had a shortage of manpower and had to abandon some areas in order to better defend what he called "the important regions of Syria that the armed forces hold onto so it doesn't allow the collapse of the rest of the areas" (cited in Bassam, Al-Khalidi, Perry 2015). In other words, he was referring to Damascus, Homs, Hama and the coastal area around Lattakia. It was in this speech that Assad spoke for the first time publicly about Iranian military support, saying Tehran's role was limited to the provision of military experts, while similarly crediting Hezbollah for its important role. Desertions and lack of will from the Syrian youth to die for a corrupt regime explained the hardships faced by the regime's army in recruiting new soldiers. A lot of young men actually deserted for Europe or foreign countries after having received their call-up papers or being ordered to report for reserve duty. From March of 2012, local Syrian media outlets were reporting that the regime decided to ban all Syrian males aged

between 18 and 42 (and even older sometimes up to 50) from travelling abroad without seeking the permission of the military recruitment department as a mean to prevent them from leaving the country and escaping military service (The Syria Report 2012a; We Are All Syria 2017).

Throughout the years, propaganda for the army in state media, recruiting posters all over Damascus and recent amnesty for deserters and draft dodgers did not change anything. The regime continued to lack manpower and this situation was increasingly problematic, especially following the recapture of new areas in 2016 by pro-regime forces and its allies.

Faced with this problem, the regime through the voice of the General Command of the SAA announced in November 2016, the establishment of its first official volunteer-based military force, the Fifth Assault Corps, aimed at “fighting terrorism,” and which would be deployed alongside other army units and foreign allied forces. The populations targeted for recruitment were civilians who were not already drafted for military service, army deserters and government workers. The Fifth Corps provided recruits a monthly salary and case settlement for those who had previously deserted their military posts. Volunteers with government jobs were offered yearlong contracts and continued to receive their government salaries and benefits, in addition to their Fifth Corps salary. These conditions were particularly enticing for large sections of Syrian youth who were facing high unemployment and rising inflation. At the same time, the regime employed massive propaganda tools to promote the Fifth Corps, such as leaflets in regime-produced bread bags, advertisements in state television and in newspapers, and religious calls to foster recruitment. The Ministry of Awqaf actually ordered the head imams of mosques in regime-held areas to mobilize the youth to join the Fifth Corps. On December 20th, 2016, the imam of the Grand Umayyad Mosque in Damascus publicly exhorted young Syrians to join the Fifth Corps during a televised Friday prayer (al-Masry 2017).

Syrian militias, the Lebanese Hezbollah units, Iranian and Iraqi volunteers and Private Military Companies performed the military confrontations and combats against opposition-armed groups, rather than the SAA; only a fraction of these forces could reliably be deployed in offensive operations, between 30,000-40,000 soldiers.

These units consisted largely of 'elite' forces, such as the Republican Guard, Special Forces, and Fourth Armored Division that recruited heavily among Syrian Alawis (Kozak 2017). On this issue, Bashar al-Assad relied like his father on a limited number of military units mostly composed of Alawis and often led individuals with family or tribal connections to the ruling family to repress the protest movement and insurgency.

According to a Russian military expert, Syria's General Staff had no coherent short-term or mid-term strategic plans. Assad's generals did not believe their troops could bring the country to order without military assistance from foreign states. They did not have any projects to large-scale operations, given the ostensibly high combat capabilities of the illegally armed groups, lack of ammunition and modern equipment, a fear of heavy losses and a negative outcome from the fighting. He added that the majority of SAA units were positioned at fortified checkpoints, which totaled to about 2,000 throughout Syria (Khodarenok 2016). Thus, over a half of the army operated with no connection to their units. Sitting inside fortified checkpoints, the Syrian regulars were mostly doing defensive duties and extorting money from the locals. The only exception to this situation was the Syrian Arab Air Force, which conducted an important number of sorties daily (reaching 100 in certain days in 2015), over 85 percent of which were bombing runs. The Air Force's contribution to the overall fire damage was about 70 percent. The airstrikes were conducted by several dozen fighter/bomber jets and around 40 army aviation helicopters (Khodarenok 2016).

At the same time, army recruits selected for officer training increasingly took on a deepened sectarian and localized identity: they were exclusively Alawi and largely came from the coastal regions of Lattakia and Tartus, while Alawi from Homs chose to join the NDF, instead of the army. Since 2011, 10,000 new students enlisted in Syria's military education system, which was reduced from three to two years. While the officer corps had long facilitated the enrolment of Alawis, it was by no means a purely Alawi institution. Before the 2011 uprising, for instance, the Military Academy in Aleppo and the Military College in Homs welcomed several hundred applicants per year from various backgrounds, although an entry quota system for the Military College favored recruits from Alawi-populated provinces (Hama, Homs, Lattakia, and

Tartus). The army's transformation to security-vetted Alawi aspirants was not openly recognized, but became the army's de facto recruitment policy (Khaddour 2016a).

This did not prevent the regime from putting pressure on the Syrian Sunni population in regime held areas to fight in the SAA on the frontlines. Journalist Yahya Alous (2015) gave evidence for this policy in February 2015, "when examining the opposition's capture of 48 soldiers at the end of February, all of who were Sunni – in exception for one Druze fighter". He added that at this period it was

"common in Damascus to see veiled girls, wandering along the city streets, accompanied by armed soldiers – soldiers that do not fight alongside opposition forces, but instead with Assad. These soldiers have worked hard to attract young Sunni men to enlist" (Alous 2015)

Similarly, the Syrian security forces and militias still included influential Sunni figures in regime and affiliated institutions. Ali Mamlouk, the head of national security who supervises the other security agencies; Colonel Khalid Muhammad, a Sunni from Dar'a, is in charge of securing Damascus for the Department 40 of Internal Security; Muhammad Deeb Zeitun, the head of state security; and Muhammad Rahmun, the head of political security; the head of the military security branch in Hasakah, General Ali Diab, General Hayez al-Moussa installed in the autumn of 2016, as governor of Hasakah. The commander of the NDF in Dar'a was a Sunni man of Palestinian origin. The commanders of the NDF in Qunaytra, Raqqa, and Aleppo were likewise Sunnis. One of the regime's leading anti-IS fighters who received support from all regime security branches was Muhana al-Fayad. He led the large Busaraya tribe between the Deir Zor and Hasakah areas and was also a member of parliament (Malik 2016; Zaman al-Wasl 2018a). These senior Sunni officers were hired, promoted, and maintained as individuals.

Sunnis in state institutions could also be found as the head of foreign intelligence, the minister of defense, senior officers in air force intelligence, the minister of interior, the head of the ruling Ba'th party, the majority of Ba'th party leaders, and the president of

the parliament. The posts of Vice President and Foreign Minister have also been occupied by Sunni personalities since the 1980s.

Their success had nonetheless little to no impact on their broader community or clan, as argued by researcher Emile Hokayem (2016), but were totally based on the sectarian, tribal and clientelist politics of the regime. In addition to this, other subordinates could challenge the authorities of some higher echelons in the security services, because they maintained strong links and connections with the Assad family (Belahdj 2014: 20).

The army did not however crumble and was still a useful actor in the country, despite the limitations mentioned. The defections within the army at the beginning of the uprising did not affect its organization. Aside from occasional cases of high-ranking defectors who were already outside the trusted security circles, the majority of defections were non-commissioned officers or conscripts. They mainly joined the FSA or fled the country with their families to escape retaliation (al-Kattan 2016). There were defections in the infantry, but no major fighting unit broke away en masse, as defections of this scale would have required the involvement of middle to high-ranking officers. The core of the officer corps remained on the side of the regime, or at least did not defect. This is not only limited to the sectarian nature of the army, a majority of Alawis, as other officers and high ranking officials were from other religious sects, both Sunni and other religious minorities, and did not defect.

There were a variety of reasons for this, including the reliance on some limited brigades mostly composed of Alawis to combat the insurgency and therefore not involving directly Sunni officers, but also socio-economic advantages. Army officers had access to a benefits system that linked nearly every aspect of their professional and personal lives to the regime, placing them in an antagonistic relationship with the rest of society. In the neighborhood of Dahiet al-Assad, or “the suburb of Assad” northeast of Damascus and the site of the country’s largest military housing complex, officers were provided with the opportunity of owning property in Damascus. As many army officers, both Sunni and Alawi, hailed from impoverished rural backgrounds, home ownership in the capital would have been beyond their financial reach (Khaddour 2015b). Before the uprising of 2011, ownership of a home could take

decades for someone with a limited income. For example, with an income of between 25,000 and 35,000 SYP, acquiring a home of around 100 m² took 39 years in Qabun neighborhood in Damascus, 23 years in Qadsiya or Jaramana, while in Aleppo for instance in the Ashrafiya neighborhood it took 24 years (Seifan 2013: 130).

The army remained relevant and central to the regime's survival across the war by its investment in various functions other than direct military combat. Throughout the war it was the central platform for coordinating and providing logistical support to the various pro-regime militia forces deployed around the country, notably by sourcing and distributing weapons to the paramilitary groups. The army was also the second largest landowner in the country after the Ministry of Local Administration; it ran the military construction company, the largest construction company in Syria, and the military housing establishment, which was the largest developer and permitted the army to continue providing officers with housing, allowances and other benefits. In fact, the Aleppo governorate in February of 2017 contracted the Institution for the Implementation of Military Construction, a company affiliated to the army, to clear the destroyed streets of the neighborhoods of Eastern Aleppo recaptured at the end of 2016, which was likely a first step for further reconstruction contracts. Finally, the army continued to play a major role symbolically in legitimizing the regime's leadership of the country (Khaddour 2017a).

c) Security services and establishment of militias

The military weakness of the SAA led to the creations of militias throughout the country, mainly at the initiatives of the security services and crony capitalists. These militias replaced the ones of the Ba'th Party and other popular corporatist organizations, which assisted the army and secret service to repress the MB insurgency in the early 1980s. At that time, paramilitary groups of young, armed Ba'th Party members were also involved, controlling checkpoints and sometimes fighting alongside army units (Khaddour 2013a: 20). Popular corporatist organizations of the regime, used in the 1980s to oppose the protests and demonstrations, were no longer relevant in terms of numbers or significance in the regime of Bashar al-Assad. To the contrary, they had implemented policies to weaken them considerably. The party had become too bureaucratic and inert to be used, while members defected

from the party in an increasing way from the beginning of the uprisings. Politically, the role and influence of security services also constantly increased throughout the uprising.

The role of Air Force Intelligence for example seemingly diminished during Bashar al-Assad's first decade in power, but the service again claimed center stage in 2011 following the beginning of the protest movement in the country. Air Force Intelligence immediately threw itself into the fight by assembling pro-Assad militias and launching a manhunt for dissidents. The influence of the head of the Air Force Intelligence, Jamil al-Hassan, grew in parallel with the regime's dependence on his organization, which gradually moved into a more conventional battlefield role (Lund 2016d). He even dared to criticize in one interview Bashar al-Assad for having shown too much restraint in the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, unlike his father Hafez that acted in his opinion "wisely" in Hama in 1982 by eliminating the opposition completely (Sputnik News Araby 2016).

As we explained earlier, the army entered the Syrian conflict effectively unprepared for combat, therefore the regime and its allies increasingly decided from the end of 2011 to delegate frontline fighting to smaller and agile militia groups and to keep the SAA itself behind the frontlines running logistics and, for example, providing artillery support (Khaddour 2017a). The "militiafication" started with the establishment of the "Popular Committees". Some of these groups spawned spontaneously, but they were usually recruited by intelligence services and pro-Assad businessmen all over Syria to break up demonstrations, along with the security forces. The security branches in various regions began organizing them according to their areas and provided them with arms, cars and security cards. The National Security Bureau, headed by Maj. Gen. Ali Mamlouk, oversaw the dynamics of "Popular Committees" nationally. The National Security Bureau divided the regions into sectors under the responsibility of the branches of the security services in Damascus and its countryside. Each branch of the security service assumed direct supervision and distribution of weapons to groups of young men to establish armed groups in charge of representing the authorities and respect of the "law" in the regime-controlled areas (al-Sheikh 2013).

The “Popular Committees” assisted the security branches and SAA in raids and operations to find and repress wanted men, while providing security at regime facilities, managing checkpoints. They both received cash and weapons from the regime’s security services (Halliday 2013: 18). Its members earned monthly salaries ranging between 20,000 and 25,000 SYP, and also gained social and authoritarian privileges such as facilitating access to gas, fuel and bread (al-Sheikh 2013). These groups often did not have a very good reputation and many complaints were directed against them because of their thuggish behavior and abusing the functions of security services and the army (Mashi 2012).

The regime assisted by the security services then encouraged the establishment of vigilante groups in neighborhoods. They gathered young men from the neighborhoods and convinced them that they had to protect their areas from terrorist attacks and provided information about what was happening around them in order to identify activists. The persons in these vigilante groups were generally provided with a licensed gun and a security pass. Checkpoints and neighborhood vigilante groups multiplied rapidly throughout 2011 (Sabbagh 2013: 83). In mid 2012, the regime started to systematically arm more vigilante groups in Damascus, while some of its members received training lasting one to three months in military camps in Iran and Lebanon (Reuters 2012b).

To a smaller extent, the Ba’th Battalions, which were not recruiting on any ideological basis, were created by former Aleppo Ba’th party chief Hilal Hilal when he was co-organizing the defense of the city against the armed opposition forces in the summer and autumn of 2012. The Ba’th Battalions were also used by security services to control neighborhoods and quell protest movements. The group remained strongest in Aleppo, but branches were established in various areas of the country, including in Damascus, Latakia, Tartus and Hasakah (Lund 2015b). In 2017, a number of al-Ba’th Brigades, especially in Homs and Hamas, were created by university students loyal to the regime and acted under the leadership of the Fifth Corps in the SAA. The students recruited in these battalions would have 18-month contracts, which would exempt them from mandatory military service. Members also received a salary of \$200 or more based on their qualifications (Zaman al-Wasl 2017c).

In 2013, the regime with the significant political, economic and military assistance of Iran established the *Quwat al-Difaa al-Watani* or National Defense Forces (NDF) and accounted to between 100,000 and 150,000 fighters in the following years (Kozak 2017; Lund 2015b). This force appeared as an umbrella organization and reshaped all “Shabiha” units and popular committees. The contractual arrangement on which it was based stated that the regime would provide financial compensation for volunteer members and that these would officially retain their civilian status. In the NDF, they simply served a six-hour shift at a checkpoint every three days, and they continued to live with their families and friends. The NDF was also set up because a lot young men throughout Syria were evading military service for the army. Some sections of the youth found the conditions of the new paramilitary forces attractive and joined the NDF, instead of the army, because they could remain within the borders of the province and were required to work only limited and regular hours. Only a few NDF units, including the Golan Regiment, originating in ex-rebels in Quneitra province fighting in the Homs desert, were deployed in areas far outside their areas of origin. The new paramilitary force ultimately became a strong force that managed many checkpoints and conducted regular security patrols. The security forces and the Ba’th Party recruited young men in the NDF as well on the basis of a deeply divisive and sectarian strategy in some regions (Ezzi 2013: 64; Massouh 2013: 95-96).

Alongside the establishment of the NDF, other militias existed such as the Local Defense Force that was created first in Aleppo in around 2013/2014, and then in other areas of the country. The LDF units were restricted to fighting in their areas of origin. The LDF units were set up with the assistance of Tehran and sometimes Hezbollah as well, which played a part in training and advising the LDF. LDF members were considered to be within the official Syrian armed forces (al-Tamimi 2017a).

The creation of these militias created a particular dynamic in the coastal areas inhabited by Alawis, as they provided the main manpower for both the army and these militias. The Assad regime started creating militia recruitment centres in countless villages on the coast as the army was suffering a shortage of ground forces to continue its military campaigns and was unable to mobilize them through the formal mechanism of military conscription as we have seen. Militia recruitment

centers boomed throughout the coastal region under the patronage of four main militias: the NDF, Suqur al-Sahara, al-Ba'th Brigades, and al-Bostan. These militias were chiefly headed by former and current Alawi army officers and particularly recruited among Alawi populations in charge with defending a regime that had been reproducing a sectarian narrative among the religious minorities in Syria. The Shi'a Lebanese movement Hezbollah mobilized and recruited Alawis as well, although for purely military objectives and not to build any political base. It opened offices in eastern Lattakia's Alawi neighborhood of Mashru' el-Ba'th. Through its recruitment center, the Lebanese group either recruited individuals to fight by their side directly, or set up contact with small militia groups that could collaborate with Hezbollah battalions on the battlefield (Khaddour 2016: 13-14).

Other members of religious minorities, particularly Christians and Druzes, have also joined NDF units. Sunni populations were also recruited in some areas according to previous clientelist / and tribal connections consolidated by the regime in the decades before. In the city of Aleppo, recruits to the NDF led by former businessman and land-holder Samy Aubrey were from the city's own youth, from loyalist villages as well as local clans and tribes such as the Berri, whose leader Zeno was executed as armed opposition forces first stormed Aleppo in the summer of 2012 (Scheider 2017). Aubrey has been making use of the NDF and other militias as well for personal motivations, including to protect and expand his own business interests. Members of Aubrey's extended family, such as the local construction magnate Muhammed Jammoul, have also been accused of abuses in Aleppo (Zambelis 2017).

Different Pro regime Palestinian based militias were also established such as Palestinian Liberation Army, the Galilee Forces or al-Quds Brigades in Aleppo. The latest was most probably the most important. It was established under the supervision of the engineer Muhammad al-Sa'id with members originating from the Nayrab refugee camp, which had suffered sieges by armed opposition forces in 2012 and 2013, and Handarat refugee camp in Aleppo. They openly operated as an auxiliary to pro-regime forces there since 2013 and were constituted by several hundred soldiers (al-Tamimi 2015b). They played an important role in fighting alongside regime and foreign Shi'a militia forces in the fall of 2016 to conquer the

opposition held areas of East Aleppo, which was finally recaptured in December of 2016 (See Annex 4) and in the campaign to recapture Deir Zor in the end of 2017.

Another decisive element that facilitated the recruitment of Sunni fighters with regime forces in Aleppo was the unprecedented early 2013 decree allowing conscripts from Aleppo to serve their mandatory military service inside the city itself, and optionally with a loyalist militia of their choice. In the past, the regime always mandated that conscripts serve in regiments well away from their hometowns, a rule that never had any exceptions until the beginning of the uprising. Many young men therefore took the opportunity to serve in Aleppo, as they could go home every day, instead of deserting. This considerably expanded the ranks of loyalist militias such as the Ba'th Brigades, which were almost entirely Sunni and turned into the second most powerful regime unit in Aleppo after the elite Republican Guard in 2013 (Dark 2014a).

Similarly, in the region of Idlib, longstanding regime allies led the small pro-Assad militia networks that emerged from 2012 onward, and all of them were local Sunni from Idlib. Three central figures, all Sunnis, played an important role in the establishment of these pro regime militia networks. Firstly, Khalid Ghazzal, who was a Ba'thist businessman with longstanding ties to the Syrian intelligence services and who worked with the regime in the 1980s to identify and liquidate MB sympathizers during the 1979–82 insurgency. He raised money to pay Popular Committees consisting of his relatives, Ba'thists, and other residents of Idlib. Secondly, Jamal Harmoush,²⁵ who established Popular Committee factions and which were then turned into the NDF. Finally, Jamal Suleiman managed a vigilante group given a Popular Committee status by the security agencies in 2011. As the conflict deepened, this growing force was provided with heavier weapons and increasingly took on a more conventional military role in policing the city and its outskirts. With the conquest of the city by Jaysh al-Fateh in March of 2015, many of the city's Popular Committee chiefs fled along with their paymasters, and these forces crumbled (Lund 2016a).

²⁵ A relative of Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush, who was one of the first officers to defect from the Syrian army.

In the region of Hasakah, the regime also established pro-regime militias relying on their links with local Arab tribal families, such as al-Maghawir militia (or the Commandos), in which the regular SAA was also deeply involved. The central personality for example in the al-Maghawir militia in this process was Muhammad al-Fares, a sheikh of the Tai tribe and former member of the Syrian Parliament, whose clansmen in the Qamishli area long operated as a regime proxy, (Lund 2015a). The IRGC-Quds Force and Hezbollah trainers were reportedly working to build the capacity of these regime loyalist militias (Jamestown Foundation 2015).

With the increasing military advantages of pro-regime forces on the battlefield at the end of 2016, some leaders of tribes who had joined the opposition now were turning their back on them and rejoining the regime and in some cases establishing militias to fight opposition armed forces. Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir, leader of the Baggara tribe in Syria's eastern Deir Zor Governorate and a former member of the Syrian Parliament, who in 2012 defected from the regime, came back in January 2017 to Damascus and pledged loyalty to Assad. In addition to this, he opened recruitment offices in Aleppo and Homs to recruit Arabs for a pro-regime militia backed by Iran and headed by Muhammed al-Baqir to play a future role in Deir Zor –Bashir's hometown (Van Wilgenburg 2017a). More generally, the fears of many local Arab tribes, such as Jubour and Sharabiyya, in the Jazirah areas of the PYD's power, combined in some instances with fears of a Shammar resurgence (see chapter 6), drove support for the Assad regime. Many have founded militias closely allied with the SAA (Khaddour 2017c).

Pro regime businessmen also established militias. Although initially a charitable foundation, the al-Bustan association controlled by Rami Makhoul, developed a security branch from the beginning of the uprising, recruiting mostly Alawis from the coastal areas in Latakia and Tartus. The association *al-Bustan* brought together around 11,000 fighters (Younes 2016). Researcher Khedder Khadour (2013a: 18) described in one of his studies how the Shabih earned around 15,000 Syrian pounds a month (about US\$200) in Homs, paid by the charity foundation, *al-Bustan*. Makhoul also armed some sections of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party under the leadership of Issam Mahayri (Massouh 2013: 93), and the Tiger Forces militia from 2013 under the leadership of General Suheil al-Hassan, an Alawi intelligence officer

and celebrity among regime supporters. The Tiger Forces were an elite unit, better equipped than the regular army, and drawn mostly of Alawi officers from the Fourth and Eleventh Divisions. The regime's Air Force Intelligence Directorate also recruited and trained civilians, mostly Alawis, to join this special force (Khaddour 2016a; Schneider 2016). Makhlouf was also suspected of funding other militias such as Dar'a Qalamoun, Kataib al-Jabalawi, Leopards of Homs and Dir' al-Watan (Hayek and Roche 2016).

Brothers Muhammad and Ayman Jaber funded the militia "Desert Falcons or Hawks", originally established in early 2013 and the "Sea Commandos". With his hundreds of millions of dollars secured through lucrative business deals with the regime, Jaber's brothers recruited former soldiers from the SAA's Special Forces and offered them generous wages. They purchased most of the equipment for his mercenaries from Western arms dealers. Sea Commandos provided 7,000 fighters to assist Assad's army in the battle to recapture Palmyra from IS in 2016. They also participated in regime's offensives in other regions for example in Raqqa and Homs countryside. Their militias received trainings from Russian and Iranian armed forces in Syria (Ahmed Y. 2016; Enab Baladi 2017a, Khaddour 2016a). The regime actually had to discipline Jabers' militias in 2016 and 2017 for stepping out of bounds on several incidents, notably clashing with other militias in the streets Lattakia, including one commanded by Munzer al-Assad, the cousin of Bashar ((Samaha 2017a; Ahmed al-Ali 2016). Following new violent incidents in February 2017 involving Ibrahim Jaber the brother of Muhammad and Ayman and a high official of the regime, Bashar al-Assad ordered the withdrawal of 900 soldiers of the regime 's forces serving in the militias of Jaber's brothers (Enab Baladi 2017a).

George Haswani, a native of Yabrud near Damascus and who was involved in buying oil from IS-controlled fields that led to his blacklisting, was another businessman close to the regime funding Qalamoun Shields, which included between 2,000 and 4,000 militants fighting close to the Lebanese border (Ahmed Y. 2016; Fadel 2016; Khaddour 2016a).

The Military Service Law, the legal framework officially governing the army, made the use of paramilitary groups possible because it allowed "auxiliary forces" and "other

forces that are necessitated by circumstances” to fight alongside the army. Militias were included in the latter category because they were characterized as autonomous armed groups operating in the military’s framework (Khaddour 2016a). This process of private militias was also translated in the economic field when the regime relinquished its role in protecting commercial facilities and convoys, leaving it to investors to establish their own security companies to protect their facilities and businesses. In August of 2013, a legislative decree legalized private security companies for protection and guarding services under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior (Zaman al-Wasl 2013b; al-Mahmoud 2015). Many of the private security companies were owned by businessmen close to Assad’s inner circle according to journalist Nour Samaha (2016). In August of 2016, the Syrian regime approved the establishment of a private “tourism security” company which would “offer services to protect tourist groups and those who wish to take advantage of its service,” including Syrians returning from abroad, businessmen and journalists. Their tasks could also include protecting properties, including hotels operated by Syria’s Tourism Ministry (Now 2016).

The importance and power of the various militias continued to increase throughout the war. The “militiafication” of pro regime Syrian forces developed considerably from 2015 reaching between 125,000 and 150,000 members (Barnard, Saad and Schmitt 2015; Balanche 2016b). There were several intertwined reasons for this situation. First, the weakness and deterioration of the SAA as mentioned previously. Secondly, the degradation of the fiscal position of the regime, which was lacking needed revenue and funds to fight the war. Finally, the increasingly worsening economic situation in the country, which pushed the majority of Syrians into poverty. Fighting with one of the numerous private militias was often the best-paying job available to men, while militias also offered the possibility for fighters to remain in their region and offered amnesty to the regime’s many draft dodgers (Hayek and Roche 2016). In addition to this and unlike soldiers in the army, they were often allowed and even encouraged to loot houses when attacking rebel-held areas (Reuters Staff 2013).

Large differences existed between the numerous pro-regime militias. Some of them had almost every major weapon system in the army pre-war arsenal, along with many weapons delivered by Iran and Russia (Hayek and Roche 2016), while others

were poorly disciplined semi-criminal or sectarian gangs in civilian attire (Lund 2015b). They were attempts by the regime, following Russian pressure, to try to integrate some of these militias, such as the NDF, in the army, notably by the establishment of the Fourth Corps in autumn of 2015. This was a failure as these paramilitary groups continued to act more or less autonomously and did not merge with the army, although the regime's army was able to have some level of control on auxiliary groups in Lattakia and Hama (al-Masry 2017). However at the beginning of 2018, growing numbers of members of militias started to join the army as these military groups were dissolved or their financial patrons stopped funding them (Zaman al-Wasl 2018b).

d) Religious establishments

A few weeks after the beginning of the uprising, in April of 2011, the regime sought to reach to the religiously conservative sectors of the society by closing the country's only casino and scrapping a ruling that banned teachers from wearing the niqab. Sheikh Bouti had criticized both measures before the uprising. Ironically, regime supporters' had initially used the demands of some protesters in the previous weeks for the reinstatement of banned teachers wearing the niqab as a proof of their religious extremism (Wimmen 2017: 72; HW 2011). In addition to this, the regime promised the establishment of a national institute for Arabic and Islamic studies with campuses throughout the country, whose degrees would be recognized by the regime as well as the establishment of an Islamic satellite channel based in Syria that teaches "true Islam" in the words of pro-regime Sheikh al-Bouti (Qureshi 2012: 76). The regime also met with a number of religious dignitaries from different towns to try to appease the protest movement.

The majority of the Sunni high religious establishment stood by the authorities, particularly long-standing allies of the regime such as Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassun as well as Sheikh al-Buti. They had much to lose from Assad's disappearance as they had been deeply linked with his regime. Al-Bouti immediately condemned the protests as a foreign conspiracy, and did not hesitate to praise the regime's army at a time when it was already responsible for the deaths of thousands of civilians. Al-Bouti died in a bomb attack while giving a mosque lesson in March of 2013. Very few

scholars were as vocal as al-Bouti in their support for the regime, but many warned against “discord” or took refuge in silence, according to academic Thomas Pierret (2014: 5).

Throughout the uprising, the influence and organizational activity of the Kaftariyya and the Qubaysiyyat, the two Sunni religious movements closest to the regime, were reduced to Damascus. Most of the schools that were built by their members outside of Damascus were either closed down or destroyed. In Damascus, the complex of Abu al-Nur became home to a branch of the al-Sham Higher Institute, which was managed and supervised by the Ministry of Awqaf. The Sufi order component of the Kaftariyya headed by Rajab Deeb remained silent on his position towards the uprising, as did many of the elder disciples of Kaftaru who remained alive. Al-Qubaysi, the head of the Qubaysiyyat, opted for a similar silent position, and which all members of her inner circle adopted as well (Imady 2016: 81-82).

The regime also used Sunni religious clerics in the so-called “reconciliation” agreement with opposition groups. A combination of coercion and enticement was used to replace administrative bodies established by the opposition with local authorities loyal to the regime. The agreement was implemented by the regime’s forces in various areas and many members of the “reconciliation delegation” were sheikhs and imams of mosques, who were for their large majority appointed by the government’s Ministry of *Awqaf* during the period leading up to the uprising in 2011 and afterwards were involved in opposition forces, most often Islamic movements. The regime rehabilitated these imams and provided them with power and authority through their control over the restoration of services to opposition areas, reproducing therefore official pro-regime religious’ establishments as they existed before the war. Merchants and traditional dignitaries were also often included in the “reconciliation delegation” (Ezzi 2017).

In the regime’s forces offensive on Eastern Ghouta in the beginning of 2018 for example, Bassam Difdaa, a Sufi preacher working in the Kafr Batna neighborhood led an armed revolt with his supporters few hours before the army entered the city against the local opposition forces, when they refused calls by the Sheikh to surrender and to establish peace talks through the offices of Assad’s electricity

minister, Mohammad Zuhair Kharboutli, whose family hailed from Kafr Batna. Difdaa was a sheikh from the al-Fath Institute, which has long been a pillar of the regime-backed Sunni religious establishment, and in 2007, he ran unsuccessfully for a seat in parliament. Difdaa joined the opposition in 2011, and collaborated with Faylaq al-Rahman for a period of time, but his passage to the uprising was mostly the result of the balance of forces in favor of armed forces dominating the areas (Lund 2018).

The leadership of the various Christians Churches was also considered to have strong connections and links to the regime, particularly those living in Damascus and Aleppo (Wieland 2012: 90). In the first statement on March 29th, 2011, of the Council of Bishops in Damascus regarding the situation in Syria, in which they described the situation in the country as “a foreign conspiracy with domestic hands, agitated by biased media”, while adding that “We congratulate our great people on the reforms started by President Dr. Bashar al Assad, our homeland protector, and hope that such reforms will be continued” (cited in Sabbagh 2013: 78). On June 16th, 2011, the Council of Bishops in Damascus published another statement stressing they did not want to see Syria turn into a second Iraq (Sabbagh 2013: 78-79; Wieland 2012: 90).

In the first year of the uprising, church leaders continued to issue pro-regime statements, while also appearing on official TV channels and writing articles for pro-regime newspapers. Some clergymen also supported the formation of vigilante groups encouraged by security services in Christian neighborhoods. For example, the Reverend Gabriel Daoud was famous for being the link between the Christian militias in both Homs and Qamishli and General Ali Mamlouk, head of the National Security office, and carried out a number of visits to Syrian regime officials to establish Christian paramilitary groups of a shabiha nature. In October of 2016, Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church who was based in Damascus, issued an official decision to stop Rev. Daoud from practicing his work in the Syriac church because of his military activities (All4Syria 2016). The increase militarization of the uprising led to diminishing appearance and statements in favor of the regime (Sabbagh 2013: 81), as Christian dignitaries did not want to see retaliations against Christian populations of some armed opposition groups because of their support to Bachar al-Assad.

The regime as mentioned had developed cooperative relations with the Druze community's three Sheikh al-Aql, who were the most important religious personalities in the Druze community. At the beginning of the uprising in mid March 2011, this triumvirate consisted of Hussein Jarbua, Hammud al-Hinnawi, and Ahmad al-Hajari, with Jarbua regarded as *primus inter pares* (Gambill 2013). Two of the Sheikhs al-Aql had died by 2014 and were replaced by younger relatives, with only Hammud al-Hinnawi remaining from the older generation (Lang 2014). Sheikh al-Hinnawi and Sheikh Hussein Jarbou were broadly supportive of the regime and denounced the protest movement as “a foreign plot” (Choufi 2012). They however refused early on in the uprising to denounce Druze army defectors as demanded by the regime. Sheikh Ahmad al-Hajari was more nuanced in his positions and even expressed his dissatisfaction with the regime’s repression against protesters, although without calling to join the protest movement. He also refused to issue a statement in support of Bashar al-Assad. Sheikh Ahmad al-Hajari passed away in strange circumstances in the aftermath of a car crash in March 2012. Some even blamed the regime to have ordered his assassination (sparent.net 2012; Aboultaif 2015, Gambill 2013). His successor Sheikh Hekmat al-Hajari was a staunch supporter of the regime and had close relations to the security services (Ezzi 2015). Following the death of Hussein Jarbua, Sheikh-aql Yusuf Jarbua replaced him. He was also backing the regime, even though he issued a fatwa condemning all civilians who fight with the regime forces outside Suwayda (Ezzi 2015).

The general tendency among the three Sheikhs since then was to continue to support the regime. The three Sheikh-aqls issued a statement setting redlines and banning any discourse against “the homeland and the leader of the homeland, its institutions, and the Syrian Arab Army” (Ezzi 2015). They also excommunicated Sheikh al-Bal’ous, who headed the movement of Rijal al-Karama (Men of Dignity) (see further in the chapter) who adopted an independent path from the regime and the opposition and had a very important influence at one point in the Suwayda region (Ezzi 2015). Sheikh Jarbua and Sheikh Hanawi, were also involved in the pro-Assad Dir’ al-Watan faction that was competing for influence with Sheikh al-Bal’ous movements of Rijal al-Karama (al-Tamimi 2015a).

4.3 Strategy of repressions: sectarianism and violence

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

To spread sectarianism and fear / or hatred of the others in this perspective was a key tool. The most violent way to instigate sectarianism was with massacres committed by pro regime militias and / or Shabihas, mostly from Alawi backgrounds in some specific areas, targeting poor Sunni villages and popular neighborhoods in mixed regions, particularly Homs and Hama Provinces and the Coast with Alawi and Sunni populations living side by side. It was Shabiha, hailing from surrounding Alawi villages, and Assad forces that stormed the city of al-Bayda, a village located north of Tartus at the beginning of the uprising in mid-April of 2011. The prisoners they arrested were then paraded out into the square, where they were abused and humiliated (Darwish S. 2016d; Satik 2013: 398).

Academic Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto explained that the dynamics of repression and the regime's strategic use of violence were central to the sectarianization process. He argued that

“The regime also used a selective distribution of violence in order to deepen sectarian fault lines among the protesters, dividing and isolating them. Whenever the protests occurred in mixed Sunni / Alawi or Sunni / Alawi / Christian cities, such as Latakia and Baniyas, even when members from all communities took part in the protests, military and paramilitary violence was directed mainly to Sunni neighborhoods.” (Pinto 2017: 135)

They had the clear objective of increasing fear and sectarianism between local communities and on a larger scale. This was particularly clear in Homs and the

coastal region in some cities such as Baniyas. One of the first phenomena of the Shabiha was most probably in Homs. As the protests increased in the city and on a national scale, the secret service were charged with forming and organizing paramilitary groups which then set up a direct connection with the army. The security forces worked to mobilize Alawis, particularly young and unemployed ones, to prevent any mobilization in their areas and moreover sent them to Sunni areas of Homs to lead demonstrations in support of the Assad regime. They constituted first what was called the popular committee and were established in neighborhoods majority inhabited by the Alawis of Homs (Khaddour 2013a: 13).

The position of large sections of the Alawi population in Homs to stand in favor of the regime or not join the opposition was reinforced following several incidents in the city early on in the uprising. The first case was the murder of the guard of the officer club, who was Alawi, following the attack of some protesters with stones. His funeral turned into a demonstration for the regime (Satic 2013: 400). The murder of brigadier general Abdu Telawi, his two sons and a nephew near the neighborhood of Zahra in April 2011, when anti-regime protests were becoming more frequent, was considered a turning point for many in the Alawi population of the city. The killing was highly publicized and footage of the mutilated bodies of the men and their funeral in Wadi al-Dahab was given extensive television coverage (Khaddour 2013a: 15). Other incidents occurred as well in the majority Alawi inhabited neighborhoods of Homs, in which Alawis were killed or injured. The regime's propaganda accused armed Salafist groups of committing these crimes, while having a hidden hand in provoking sectarian tensions in the city (Satic 2013: 400). Regime's officials also did not hesitate to spread rumors among Alawis and Sunnis populations living close by, particularly in Homs, of future attacks on each other's neighborhoods by armed men from each community to raise tensions and fear among them (Dibo 2014).

The development of the Shabiha phenomenon in Homs can be associated more to the Alawi community militarization rather than to any planned strategy to defeat the uprising, at least initially (Khaddour 2013a: 13). Alawis constituted a quasi-majority of these shabiha militias in Homs, Lattakia, Baniyas and Jableh (Satic 2014: 398), but shabiha, as mentioned previously in the chapter, could be of all sects and ethnicities.

These shabihās and their brutal attitude played a major role in the regime’s strategy to further sectarianize the country and transform the popular uprising into a civil sectarian war. The Shabiha were often embedded with the SAA troops in some offensives against villages and neighborhoods. In the Houla region of Homs for example, in May 2012, shabihās accompanying the army went house to house in the town of Taldou after it suffered continued artillery bombardment, slitting the throats of more than one hundred people including a majority of women and children. Bashar al-Assad accused al-Qa’ida for the massacre, but an investigation by the UN found “reasonable basis to believe that the perpetrators... were aligned to the government” (cited in Hassan and Weiss 2015: 137).

The Syrian Networks of Human Rights (2015: 8) noted that regime forces and its allies committed 49 sectarian massacres that resulted in the killing of 3,074 persons between March 2011 and June 2015. In addition to this, attacks on Sunni mosques, which were the often-public sanctuaries for protesters, were perceived as expressions and proof of the regime’s sectarian bias rather than as attempts to extinguish centers of dissent (Wimmen 2016).

In minority inhabited regions, the regime first sought to recruit and mobilize *Shabiha* of the same community, often young unemployed man with a criminal backgrounds, to take care of the repression against protesters. Security services would not directly intervene and thus portray the demonstrations as local conflicts within the community. This was the case in Suwayda in majority inhabited by Druze and Christian areas such as Bab Touma in Damascus (Ezzi 2013: 46). In Jaramana neighborhood in Damascus, Druze and Christian communities also formed militias that manned checkpoints at entrances to the neighborhood by fall 2012 (Reuters 2012c).

Groups allied with the regime were also mobilized to control populations from various backgrounds. In the Yarmuk camp in Damascus, it was the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC) headed by Ahmed Jibril, a long-time ally of the Assad regime, that was in charge in the beginning of controlling the camp and crushing any sign of dissent (Satik 2013: 398, Ibrahim 2014; Abu Zeed 2014, Salameh 2014). In the Christian neighborhood of Aziziya, in Aleppo, the

Armenian party Tashnag, which held demonstrations in favor of the regime, organized its own militia early on in the uprising in order to control the area and retaliate from incursions of FSA and other opposition armed groups that had captured large areas of neighboring Jdayde (Balanche 2015: 40).

The regime used as well the strategy of fear among some religious minorities to mobilize local civilians to pursue repressive actions and campaigns. The example of this testimony from a Christian young man of Bab Touma showed the reasons used by the security services to mobilize him and others to attack protesters:

“When saboteurs wanted to start a demonstration from the Umayyad Mosque, the security service called some young men, including me, and told us that the Muslim Brotherhood would demonstrate there and then move towards Bab Touma and Bab Sharqi to enter Christian quarters. We had to surround the mosque and help security forces prevent them. On that day, we brought some knives; they were the only arms we were allowed to hold. We cordoned off the mosque waiting for them to come out, but those who came out looked like regular worshippers. They seemed afraid. I did not see any one try or intend to break through. I was surprised at their fear. When I looked around, I realized that we along with the security men were the source of their fear.’ (Sabbagh 2013: 82)

This young man also described his previous relationship with the security service and explained why it specifically chose him and his friends: “we were local young men who got involved in every dispute. The security service knew us and knew about our strength and enthusiasm to step in” (Sabbagh 2013: 82). According to testimonies gathered by researcher Randa Sabbagh (2013: 87), most newly armed people had previously been jobless and had a criminal record. In a similar fashion, journalist Lina Sinjab (2012) interviewed a journalist from Jaramana who declared on her locality that

“The security people recruited all the convicted criminals in prison, released them under an amnesty and armed them under the pretext of protecting the area from armed Salafist gangs.”

Raed Abu Zeed (2014), a Palestinian activist in the Yarmouk camp in Damascus explained as well that few months after the beginning of the uprising in his neighbourhood

“The Syrian security services and allied Palestinian faction PFLP-GC started arming some local militias composed of criminals who had been released from prison recently in a presidential amnesty, and they were receiving attractive salaries to repress protests and target activists”

The establishment of “Popular Committees” also expanded to regions that had not witnessed or had been largely untouched by protests such as in the Wadi Nassara²⁶ (Massouh 2013: 94). They were initially faced with significant opposition since most people thought their presence was getting them involved in unnecessary problems (al-Monitor 2014a). This situation however changed progressively after opposition armed groups in beginning mid-2012 took over al-Hosn, al-Zara and Krak des Chevaliers, which are close to the villages of Wadi Nasara. Out of fear and after several incidents increasing tensions in the area, local youth started to join the SAA and pro-regime militias, including the NDF or the armed branch of the SSNP, which had a large following in this region (al-Monitor 2014a). The fears of the local community only increased when the area was taken over by the Jihadist organization Jund al-Sham, which massacred tens of Syrian Christians in August 2013 (Mashi 2013a).²⁷

²⁶ The Wadi Nassara (in Arabic the Valley of the Christians) region is in the countryside of western Homs. It's made up of a group of villages located below the surrounding ones. Most inhabitants are Christians and the largest village is Marmarita. Although Wadi Nassara administratively belongs to Homs province, it is geographically and demographically closer to the mountains of the Syrian coast, as they merge with the town of Tartus from the west.

²⁷ Similarly, large sections of Sunni Arab residents of al-Hussein village at the foot of the Crac des Chevaliers were not able to returned after regime's forces recaptured the castle in spring 2014 (Balanche 2018: 26).

Other events also reinforced the fear of local communities such as the departure of many Christians from Homs, and to a lesser extent Qusayr, and their arrival in Wadi Nassara, following the deepening of the war in these two cities and interventions of armed opposition groups (al-Monitor 2014a). Marmarita, the largest Christian town in Wadi Nassara alongside the town of Hawash, passed for example from a population of 7,000 to 30,000 in 2014 (Choufi 2014). Many in the region were afraid to face a similar scenario and pushed sections of the youth to join pro regime forces in order to defend their areas. In May 2014, two months after the regime forces expelled Jund al-Sham from the area and took over al-Hosn, the Shabiha force in Wadi Nassara was disbanded and its checkpoints were handed over to SSNP militiamen and Ba'th troops (Massouh 2013: 96).

Similarly initially in Jaramana, in Damascus suburbs, popular committees were criticized by wide sectors of the local population for acting as a criminal gang, by forcing people to pay protection money, harrasing displaced persons and committing crimes (Sinjab 2012). Criticisms were toned down after Jaramana, and to a lesser extent Bab Touma, became increasingly the targets of several car bombings and / or shelling of armed forces (Sherlock 2012; The Guardian 2013). Human Rights Watch (2015) collected information on 17 car bombings and other Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) attacks between January 2012 and April 2014 in Jaramana. This situation increased fears and resentments against opposition groups pushing them even more towards the regime.

Activists in regions inhabited by minorities suffered repression, but were generally far from the worst of the regime's gunfire and killing sprees. Researcher Mazen Ezzi (2013: 49) analyzed this behavior as a result of the regime's strategy of not antagonizing religious minorities. The heaviest firing ranging from sniper attacks to barrel bombs, was reserved for Sunni-majority cities and areas where demonstrations and protests were massive (al-Hallaq 2013a: 105), while Sunni populated areas with no protests were not the target of the regime's repression generally.

Sunni inhabited areas that witnessed massive protests were also on some occasions completely destroyed by regime's authorities. Some entire neighborhoods were

wiped out, using explosives and bulldozers, in 2012 and 2013 for example in Damascus and Hama, two of Syria's largest cities. Regime's officials and pro-regime media outlets claimed that the demolitions were part of urban planning efforts or removal of illegally constructed buildings. But as described by a report of Human Rights Watch (2014a)

“The demolitions were supervised by military forces and often followed fighting in the areas between government and opposition forces. These circumstances, as well as witness statements and more candid statements by government officials reported in the media indicate that the demolitions were related to the armed conflict and in violation of international humanitarian law, or the laws of war.”

The report added that these demolitions “served no necessary military purpose and appeared intended to punish the civilian population”. The governor of the Damascus countryside, Hussein Makhoul, actually explicitly stated in a media interview in October 2012 that the demolitions were essential to drive out opposition fighters in his governorate. Thousands of families have lost their homes as a result of these demolitions (HRW 2014a).

The regime had a clear interest in portraying the uprising as sectarian and led by religious extremist. On one side, it scared religious minorities in order to make them side with the regime, while it also impacted on the other side some sections of the Sunni population, especially liberal segments, who as argued by academic Heiko Wimmen (2017: 63) “feared a turn towards a state imposed religious rigidity and conservatism, as occurred in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf.

4.4 Sectarian demographic change?

Some opposition sources accused the regime of seeking a demographic change in Syria by removing Sunni Muslims from sensitive areas (McDowall 2016). According to this argument, the Assad regime was trying to diminish the percentage of Arab Sunnis who may pose a threat to its rule, and repopulate majority-Arab Sunni

territories with other religious communities, especially foreign and/or native Shi'a. As we have seen earlier in the text, the dynamics of repression and the regime's strategic use of violence was central to the sectarianization process, fostered by the sieges and forced displacement of different localities. By the end of 2015, more than 80 percent of the Syrians who had left the country were Sunni Arab, which was not a surprise because of the community's majority status and the fact that most of military fighting occurred in the Sunni Arab-dominated areas where the uprising erupted (Balanche 2018: 21).

The case of Homs is an example of forced displacement of population by regime's forces and the conflict leading to a significant demographic change. Before the uprising in March 2011, Homs was the third largest city in Syria, with an estimated population of between 800,000 and 1.3 million people. The population of Homs was decimated by the conflict, with only around 400,000 remaining in the city, indicating that at least half of the original population had left. In addition, much of the city's built environment was damaged or destroyed: as of 2014, 50 percent of Homs's neighbourhoods had been heavily damaged, and 22 percent had been partially damaged (Azzouz and Katz, 2018). Many residents had been denied permission to return to their homes, with officials citing lack of proof that they had indeed lived there, as a result of the torching of the Land Registry office in Homs (Chulov 2017). In addition to this and although small amount of formal residents came back, a lot of displaced persons complained that the government made return harder by demanding returnees to appear on state television — considered as a form of public humiliation — or by stipulating they bring their army-age sons (Solmon 2017).

In April 2018, the Assad regime issued a new legislative Decree, Decree No. 10, which raised new fears of stripping citizens that left forcefully the country of their properties and which would lead to demographic changes. Decree no.10 stipulated that property owners would have to submit their title deeds to the relevant authorities within 30 days, if they were not able to do it, they could ask their relatives to do so by procuration or to be represented by an attorney. The main purpose of the law however remained the seizure of real estates properties abandoned by civilians forced to leave the country, especially in former opposition held areas. As a result, this decree would be able to make new land registrations and exclude from these

registers a plethora of real estate owners. De facto, through the reconstruction of the administrative structure, the property of civilians forced to flee would be seized (TRT 2018).

Alongside this situation, the Iranian regime was also accused of actively participating in a demographic change scheme in some areas, while denunciations have been raised at the wave of purchases made by Iranian traders of a large amount of Syrian real estate in a number of cities (Al-Souria Net 2016e) (See chapter 7). These elements, regardless of their scale, increased sectarian tensions significantly.

There have been sectarian massacres and forced displacement by regime forces and its allies against impoverished Sunni populations involved in the uprising or at least suspected of sympathies towards it in various areas as mentioned previously in this work. Similarly, indigenous and / or foreign sectarian Shi'a militias and sometimes their families have been located in areas considered sensitive for security and political reasons for example in Qusayr and some areas of rural Damascus (Iqtissad 2016; Zaman al-Wasl 2017e). In this perspective, demographic change in particular areas were a reality.

This policy was however not a strategic and systematic policy on a national scale. The regime's strategic objective through its repression measures was not demographic change per se, although occurring as we saw, but to quell the protests and to end all forms of dissent.

The global demographic change discourse did not take into consideration the regime's multiple approaches to recapturing and administering opposition-controlled areas, which differed according to circumstances and needs. In the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, as the regime was increasing its control on newly conquered territories, it sought to recruit locals to establish new pro-regime militias in these areas. For example in Barzeh, a Damascus suburb, young residents joined the new Qalamoun Shield force, supported by Syria's military intelligence, to fight IS in July of 2017 (Zaman al-Wasl 2017g), while pursuing the policy of "reconciliation" agreements in opposition-held areas. There were also different cases of former FSA fighters joining pro-regimes militias such as the NDF-linked Golan Regiment

established in 2014 fighting on the front lines in Quneitra and the Golan Heights, but also in Hama and Jobar in Damascus (Samaha 2017b).

This narrative also ignored the support of sections of Arab Sunni populations for the regime, especially in Damascus and Aleppo, and the ones present within the regime's institutions. Pro regime Sunni militias existed since the beginning of the uprising and new ones were still being established in 2017 to fight alongside the regime's forces and allies in different regions.

This was without forgetting that around a million people from Aleppo and Idlib, in their vast majority Arab Sunnis from various socio-economic backgrounds, have settled during the war in the provinces of Tartus and Latakia (Sada al-Sham 2017a), areas that were previously mostly populated by Alawi populations, challenging the discourse of a possible Alawistan for Alawis to withdraw. More generally, some 80 percent of IDPs resided in regime-controlled areas (Balanche 2018: 20).

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

Similarly, Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements (such as the IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam) have also engaged in sectarian massacres and demographic changes in some regions (see chapter 5), although not to a similar level.

4.5 Women also the target of the repression

Security apparatus and Shabihis targeted also women, participating or not in the uprising, in areas considered as supporting the revolution. They have used particularly rape as a powerful weapon of repression and terror. Since the spring of

2011, women have been assaulted and / or raped by militiamen at checkpoints. Worse, campaigns of rape by pro-regime militias were organized inside the houses while the families were present. Women imprisoned in the regime's prisons have similarly been subjected to inhuman and degrading and sexual abuses.

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

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

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

The idea of sex as a conquest, associated with toxic masculinity and gender stereotypes, was integrally connected with the sexualization of domination. Historically, military conquest and repression have very often been accompanied by coercive measures and sexual crimes. Sexual harassment and humiliation in all its forms, including attempts and / or rapes, are used to dissuade women from

participating in resistance activities and protest movements and to establish the domination of the repressive power (Sears: 2017: 187-188).

4.6 Preventing any democratic alternative

The regime's security forces also wanted to prevent the meeting and unity of the Syrian people regardless of their sects by violently repressing demonstrations, for example during the Homs sit in that could have transformed into a Tahrir Square and a meeting point for all populations in the cities. The objective of the security services in some cities, such as Homs and Lattakia, was first to maintain the protests only in Sunni majority inhabited areas and not to allow its developments in other areas and then to crush them (Satik 2013: 403). There were some breaches in this strategy by protesters at some moments, for example in Homs when a demonstration went through a Christian majority inhabited neighborhood, where they started to sing the slogan "The religion of Muhammad is honorable, the religion of Jesus is honorable" (Satik 2013: 404), in a show to manifest the unity of the Syrian people.

Throughout the uprising, the regime specifically targeted opposition urban centers and highly populated neighborhoods, especially those held by non-IS forces, in order to force its residents to leave for regions under the regime's control and where it had the most support. According to researcher Khaddour (2016b: 6),

"the outcome of these internal migration flows directly played in the regime's favor: it depopulated rebel-held areas, increased the number of Syrians living under the regime, upheld regime propaganda over the increasing popular support for Assad, and justified its indiscriminate bombings in opposition areas".

The objective was also to destroy burgeoning attempts by the democratic political opposition to create and organize its own viable alternative to the regime's provision

of essential state functions, including through sieges²⁸ and bombings of opposition-held areas (Berti 2016).

Alongside these destructive military means, the regime centralized many of its administrative functions, distributing critical services from the capital cities of Syria's governorates where its affiliated forces were deployed, rather than from outposts in the countryside as it had done prior to March 2011. By doing this, the regime encouraged masses of displaced civilians to travel to these areas to benefit from particular public services. Many civilians took the decision to leave their houses and travel to relative safe areas under the regime's control, both for safety reasons and to get access to the services that made regime-controlled areas relatively more viable than opposition held areas being bombed and often suffering from insecurity. At the same time, state institutions were relatively well protected by regime security forces and affiliated militias (Khaddour 2015a: 6-7).

Further on in the uprising, the Assad regime increasingly promoted the strategy of local agreements with cities and / or districts besieged and continuously bombed to forcefully displace the local population, or at least wide numbers, opposed to the regime. They did this to pressure individuals to leave their homes for regions under the regime's control rather than other areas held by the opposition. In practice, this meant targeting opposition-held areas to destroy infrastructure and cut opposition supply lines, as well as deliberately attacking civilians and targeting hospitals, schools, or markets. One example of this was the campaign against medical personnel and facilities. There have been 382 attacks on medical facilities in Syria between March 2011 and June 2016, according to data collected by Physicians for Human Rights. Of those strikes, at least 344 — or 90 percent — were conducted by the Syrian regime or Russian's forces. These forces also killed over 700 medical personnel in Syria, according to the group's statistics (Williams J. 2016). Preventing civilian access to basic goods and services, including humanitarian aid, was another widely employed tactic to guarantee either that civilians were forcibly displaced or

²⁸ Regime sieges prevented goods from entering the areas, and civilians were forbidden from leaving through the use of military checkpoints or anti-personnel landmines. Besieged Syrians starved to death in some cases because of the lack of food.

that the opposition was eventually forced to surrender both territory and population (Berti 2016).

The regime also used the ‘Reconciliation’ security program to destroy opposition institutions by forcibly dismantling their political and service bodies in the newly submitted areas. Most of the individuals who were forcefully displaced in Idlib in these “reconciliation” agreements, were active in creating civil service bodies, local opposition councils and civil society organizations. The regime previously considered the local civilian opposition councils and popular organizations as one of the greatest threats to its return to opposition held territories. This was because these civil service institutions had enabled the opposition and local communities to self-organize, providing the population with an alternative to state institutions when it came to the provision of key services. These “reconciliation agreements” also often absorbed the former armed opposition groups into the regime’s local militias, mainly the NDF, or the SAA (Ezzi 2017).

4.7 The role of the state and urban state employees

The military and economic assistance from the IRI and Russia was a crucial element, which sustained the regime’s survival (See chapter 7). The ability of the Syrian state to remain the irreplaceable provider of essential public services, even for Syrians living in the many areas that were outside the regime’s control, was nevertheless also a key factor in its resilience. The pro regime media newspaper Sahibat al-Jalala,²⁹ estimated in September 2016 the number of civil servants and other beneficiaries of government salaries living in opposition and other areas outside regime control at around 300,000 civil servants and pensioners. Given that the total number of civil servants and pensioners was between 2 and 2.5 million, this would represent a percentage of between 12 and 15 percent (The Syria Report 2016l).

Despite the loss of a large portion of territories, the Syrian regime made it a first concern to maintain the functioning of state-owned agencies, and therefore keeping large sections of the Syrian population reliant on its authority. The conflict, with its

²⁹ The editor in chief was Abdul Fattah al-Awad, who held several government positions, including the editor-in-chief of Al-Thawra newspaper and he often wrote for al-Watan newspaper, controlled by Rami Makhlouf (al-Akhbar 2016).

massive destruction and damages, made Syrians who were already heavily dependent on the state before the uprising even more so. The state was by far the country's largest employer during the war (Khaddour 2015a: 3). Salaries for civil servants and public sector employees declined in real terms since 2011 but remained important in nominal terms in representing 25 percent of expenses in the 2016 budget (The Syria Report: 2016b). While subsidies were declining for most products and services, state-owned public agencies remained the primary providers of essentials like bread, subsidized fuel, healthcare, and education throughout the war (Khaddour 2015a: 3). The provision of state services, in contrast to the perceived chaos in other areas, especially those controlled by the opposition, was among the most powerful sources of regime legitimacy (Yazigi 2016c: 3-4).

The regime also implemented new laws during the war to try to win the loyalty, or at least to keep them neutral, of civil servants and soldiers in the army, the two key institutions of the regime. Their support or at least neutrality needed to be secured. In November of 2015, for instance, a new law regulating rents in Syria ensured a ban on eviction for civil servants and soldiers and their families (The Syria Report 2015h). In mid-January 2017, a presidential decree confirmed thousands of employees working under temporary contracts as civil servants, up to 40,000 according to the Ministry of Social Affairs. The decree stipulated that children of "martyrs", in other words fighters that died while fighting for regime forces, under temporary annual contracts as well as employees under "youth contracts" would be confirmed as full civil servants starting February 1st, 2017. By becoming civil servants they would receive bonuses, health insurance, pension and other benefits (The Syria Report 2017b).

At the same time, State employment was also used as an instrument to build and buy allegiances, and the share of public sector jobs going to Alawis – already disproportionately large relative to their share of the population before 2011 – increased. In December 2014, the government announced that 50 percent of new jobs in the public sector would go to families of "martyrs", soldiers and members of regime-affiliated militias who died while fighting opposition forces, who were predominately Alawi (Yazigi 2016c: 4). This did not prevent conflicts from erupting between different families of those killed by the regime's forces because of

discrimination in favor of those killed in the security forces over those who fell in the army or militias (Al-Souria Net 2016d).

4.8 Rising tensions and discontent in regime held areas

This situation of growing sectarian tensions between Sunni and Alawis in the country did not mean that no tensions existed between the Alawi population and the Assad regime. The rising death toll in the army was made up of many Alawis; insecurity and growing economic hardships created tensions and fuelled animosities among Alawi populations. A few examples speak to this situation. In October of 2014, the Syrian Prime Minister Wael Halqi, inaugurated several upscale retail and tourism projects in the coastal city of Tartus, worth a combined USD 100 million, including a 30,000 square meter commercial mall costing around SYP 10 billion, (USD 52 million) owned by businessman Ali Youssef Nada. These inaugurations exasperated and angered partisans of Bashar al-Assad, who considered these projects indecent while the country was devastated by the war. These criticisms expressed an increasingly palpable bitterness in the pro-regime media, in particular after considerable losses among the soldiers, and the drama caused by the death of about fifty children in attacks on Homs shortly before. The promotion of other tourist projects simply added to it. Loyal supporters accused the regime of abandoning them “while approximately 60 percent of the population of Tartus cannot afford to shop there” (in the new Mall), said one indignant message on a pro-regime Facebook page (AFP and Orient le Jour 2014c; The Syria Report 2014b).

In Lattakia in August of 2015, more than one thousand people carried out a sit-in at the roundabout of al-Ziraa protesting the murder of the colonel Hassan al-Sheikh in front of his children by Sulayman al-Assad, the son of Bashar al- Assad’s cousin, because the colonel’s car exceeded his car. The protesters raised photos of the colonel and demanded the trial of Sulayman al-Assad (SOHR 2015a). On October 2nd of the same year, an important demonstration in pro regime districts in the city of Homs took place against officials, notably the governor of the province,³⁰ Talal Barazi, a businessman who had been appointed in July 2013 and a known regime

³⁰ Governors are the formal representatives of the Syrian President across the country’s provinces.

supporter, following an explosion, which killed dozens of children (The Syria Report 2013b). This protest occurred one month after the arrest of pro regime activists at the origin of a protest campaign called “Where are they?”, against the abandonment by the regime of a military base in the north of Raqqa province and the massacre of hundreds of SAA’s soldiers by the IS (Dark 2014b). In January of 2016 the head of the Homs security council, Louay Mouala, was finally removed following the protesters’ demands and demonstrations criticizing the authorities of the city in guaranteeing security, but keeping the civilian governor, Talal Barazi, in place (Khaddour 2017b).

Before the war, the idea of removing a security figure because of public pressure would have been unthinkable. Once again, in February of 2016, protestors in Zahra neighborhood in Homs demanded the overthrow of the governor of Homs following a terrorist attack that killed dozens of people and injured hundreds (Homs 2016).

In July of 2016, Syrian authorities refused to authorize the organization of a sit in by regime supporters in the coastal regions to protest against the government’s decision to increase fuel prices by about 40 percent, fearing demonstrations would spread across pro-Assad areas after a number of loyalists also organized a protest the month before in the capital Damascus (al-Souria Net 2016b). In the end of September 2016, the destruction of dozens of small cafés and shops situated on the seaside of the city of Jableh generated important discontent in this coastal town traditionally supportive of the regime. The shop owners went on to burn tires while some fire exchanges took place with the security services when they came to destroy the shops. The decision to demolish the stalls was officially made on the basis that they were established illegally, although the shops had been operating for years and rents were actually paid to the city council. On social media, pro-regime supporters converged on one explanation – that the shops were destroyed to make way for a large real estate development, likely a hospitality resort (The Syria Report 2016p).

The opposition website Zaman al-Wasl (2017a) described 2016 as the hardest year for Syria’s coastal cities since the beginning of the uprising. Problems ranged from a lack of security and the spread of lawless shabiha groups, as well as a lack of public services alongside rising consumer prices. Armed individuals and gangs committed

violations such as killings, abductions and looting, as well as bullying and humiliating residents, even those loyal to the regime. The state of corruption in Lattakia's justice system became widespread, and included cases of bribery and unfair verdicts. Rotten and expired food also spread largely in the coastal areas, particularly in Lattakia city, but the local population had no other options than to eat this produce because of its low price. In regards to medicine, unregulated and expired drugs spread throughout the pharmacies, most of it smuggled by shabiha and members of different regime forces. On January 15th, 2017, dozens of people demonstrated in front of the Electricity Directorate in Lattakia city to complain of the electricity cuts, which could be up to 23 hours a day (Hourani 2017). Finally, the weakness and corruption of the state security forces facilitated terrorist bombings in various cities and towns in the coastal area.

In May of 2017, a call by the regime for the recruitment of new army reservists from Tartus sparked a new wave of anger among locals in the coastal city. The governorate of Tartus was already suffering from a shortage of youths and men under the age of 50 as a result of their joining pro-regime forces, emigration or death on the battlefield. Discontent could be witnessed on social media against the regime, a Facebook user, wrote for example to the regime:

"Why people should fight with you? For a grain of potatoes and a loaf of bread? If someone dies for you, you give him a clock as compensation that only costs 100 Syrian pounds... We are not slaves to the rulers and those hungry for power"
(Zaman al-Wasl 2017i)

In the coastal region, wounded and disabled former regime fighters also voiced their discontent with the regime, which had neglected them and offered no support and no job prospects to help regain their independence. The families of fighters were generally poor and often dependent on female relatives to financially support the household (Zaman al-Wasl 2017i).

There were growing frustrations among the Alawi population towards the regime, and most of the communities popular class interests could hardly be identified with Assad

family members or the Alawi business cronies accompanying them. Corruption and repression spread and expanded considerably and those who were desperately defending the regime and its symbols have been directly or indirectly submitted to an injustice that made them reconsider their staunch support, while not joining the opposition as well.

4.9 Adaptation of regime's policies

Faced with the growing frustrations among the coastal Alawi population and the effects of the war on them, the regime adopted new forms of governance in these regions to secure their continual support. The regime started to allow the establishment of local charity organizations, which multiplied rapidly, with the objective of supporting the communities that suffered the loss of many of their young men and also as a continuation of the privatization of the provision of social services. The new charities started to appear in 2011 and were mostly initiatives of individuals linked to the state bureaucracy and the regime through employment, familial, and network links. These institutions were set up firstly to address the immediate needs of their towns that would have been generally provided by the state before the uprising (Khaddour 2016b: 11-12).

These new charity organizations took a new intermediary role through which the regime could link with the coast, including sects other than the Alawis. They contributed to expanding the regime's networks of organization and domination over the local population in a changing context of war. The establishments of these charities allowed the regime to satisfy Alawis' needs at the very local level and tried to contain their resentments over the high toll of human losses on the battlefield in the Syrian army or the militias for the survival of the regime. This made, according to researcher Khedder Khaddour (2016b: 11-12), "coastal Alawis and the regime mutually dependent on one another for survival", while adding

"through the charities the regime has not only been able to redeploy a human network, but also to perpetuate its political culture in and domination over coastal Alawi communities"

Indeed, Alawis on the coast remain entrenched in the regime system as the emerging forms of local governance, such as the charities, were set up through and operated with the active collaboration of regime's networks.

At the same time, the investments of the state in these regions increased. It is worth noting that many of these projects were launched and even completed months or years ago, and their announcement served to ease rising frustrations in the region toward the regime. The combined value of projects announced in 2015 reached nearly SYP 30 billion for the Tartus and Latakia provinces, while the city of Aleppo was assigned 500 million in contrast, despite the latter being much more affected by the war and in greater need of support (The Syria Report 2015i). At the beginning of 2015, the University of Tartus was established, becoming the seventh state-run university in the country. The University of Hama, the only other university to be established after the beginning of the uprising, was created in 2014 responding to an inflow of displaced persons from other parts of the country (The Syria Report 2015j).

In 2016, the government announced in April a new series of investments in Tartus and Latakia totaling around SYP 37 billion, respectively receiving 17 billion and 20 billion worth of investments (The Syria Report 2016e). In this same perspective, the Syrian government increased by up to 260 percent the price at which it bought tobacco from its farmers, most of whom were based in the coastal area and mountains, where it represented a significant size of economic activity and employment (The Syria Report 2017f).

This policy continued in 2017. In mid-April, a delegation including twelve ministers and led by Prime Minister Imad Khamis spent five days in the province of Tartus to present and inaugurate several large development projects. As a result of the nonrealization of many projects announced in past years, the Prime Minister announced that he had set up a follow-up committee with the responsibility of providing a bi-monthly report on the implementation of the various projects announced and inaugurated during the visit. The delegation also met with local councils of the governorate, with business leaders, and honored the families of 80 "martyrs" from the SAA (Syria Report 2017g).

Prime Minister Khamis made a new visit in October to the coastal areas promising once more new investment projects in region (The Syria Report 2017o). In 2017, SYP 5.2 billion were spent in the coastal area out of a total of SYP 11 billion in the reparation of roads and building new ones across the country (The Syria Report 2018a).

However despite these investments, many project announcements by the government in the months and years before had not materialized or were not ready to materialize any time soon.

The regime was clearly adapting its policies towards the coastal regions and populations in order to prevent any opposition and maintain their support or at least non-opposition. The level of discontent remained nevertheless high because of the continuing rising death toll and harsh socio-economic conditions and the patience of many were running out.

4.10 Tolerance of criticisms among independent pro media regimes

The uprising created an upsurge of independent media run by activists of the protest movement as we observed in a previous chapter. Pro regime media outlets and Facebook pages also multiplied significantly impacting the traditional regime media landscape. The new media outlets resorted most often to the Internet, and in particular social media such as Facebook, to produce content instead of acquiring an operating license and avoiding long bureaucratic procedures still implemented in regime-held areas. The pro regime Facebook pages, often based on a network of people of a particular village, neighborhood or city and operating autonomously from the regime's control and its associate elites, generally reinforced the regime's narrative, becoming key sources of information on military movements and local incidents often not covered in state media.

Researcher Antun Issa (2016: 18) explained

“They represent the ‘mood’ of the communities that support the government, and thus can be viewed as a barometer of support for the regime”

This was observed when these pages or media outlets raised criticisms against some sectors of the regime or condemned some of its behaviors. A Facebook post on the pro-regime “Syria Corruption in the Age of Reform” page for example was highly critical of state-run media, (Issa 2016:19). Regime’s supporters initially criticized on social medias at the end of 2016 the looting of pro-regime militias of some neighborhoods of Aleppo (Hayek and Roche 2016).

In February of 2017, new salves of criticisms were raised against the government following a country-wide fuel crisis, especially in the coastal Latakia province where most gas stations halted work amid a lack of fuel. Many minibus drivers announced an open strike until a solution was found, as many officials continued to have access to fuel for their own vehicles. Most of the civilian population was denied access to fuel because militiamen, security and army personnel monopolized the limited fuel available. The loyalist social media pages blasted the Khamis government and oil ministry for their repeated hollow promises of securing fuel for citizens (Zaman al-Wasl 2017b).

In October 2017, the private newspaper *Al-Watan*, owned by Rami Makhlouf, publish an article criticizing severely the performance of the government following a visit of the Prime Minister Khamis to the coastal areas. The paper denounced the facts that in most of the sites visited by the Syrian Prime Minister, little or no progress had been completed, especially in Tartus, and enumerated them. In addition to this, the article claimed that no answers were provided to many demands from families of “martyrs” as well as limited appointments of handicapped in government jobs, which are both sensitive issues for the regime (The Syria Report 2017o). Although far from being a newly independent source, *al-Watan*’s article was reflecting a popular mood among regime’s loyalists or considered as, or more generally families of SAA’s soldiers who lost relatives.

The regime did not engage in any form of repression against these media outlets, despite occasionally being critical. Although these pro regime media were far from building a new and independent media landscape because of their support for the SAA and Assad leadership, the fact that such criticisms did occur was an important

undertaking and echoed a change to a media environment that was more representative and closer to the community's views, rather than simply a propaganda machine dominated by the regime and associated elites. Media freedom in regime held regions remained more restricted than at the initial period of the opposition-controlled areas, before the rise of the IS and other jihadist groups. This did not prevent the fact that the new methods of media coverage, which appeared and expanded during the uprising, were laying the foundations for a shift in Syria's media culture in a post-war context. The regime forces crushed and will have no problem in repressing all forms of opposition independent media in the near future, but it would be difficult to envisage the regime targeting its own supporters, who established a strong online media presence and have been instrumental in promoting the regime's narrative and propaganda to Syrians within the country. This ensured that, even within the regime's sphere of control, a more open media culture might survive and some form of growing tolerance of criticisms against the regime may continue (Issa 2016: 19).

4.11 The case of Suwayda, regime's balancing between control and autonomy

The weakening of the regime forces and their authority increased the autonomy or at least the political space in Suwayda, which however was still dependent on the regime in terms of food, fuel, and main services, all of which came to the governorate through the Damascus Suwayda road. Since the beginning of 2013, the main concern for the majority of the Druze population in Suwayda was to stop the mandatory military service of Druze youth outside of the Governorate. At the advent of 2015, the number of Druze loss of life exceeded 1,500 in the SAA. In the first half of 2015, there were actually many recorded cases of locals in the Suwayda Province attacking Military Police stations and conscription centers, to release their sons who had been arrested at checkpoints to oblige them serve in the army (Ezzi 2015). The regime's had to remove the military intelligence chief of the southern Syrian city of Suwayda after protests led by Druze religious sheikhs in April 2014 (Lang 2014). In August 2016, a number of Suwayda' residents tried to storm the governorate building in protest of the murder of a resident at the hands of NDF fighters. A sit in was organized outside of the governorate building, demanding the killers to be executed and the security situation reassessed (Orient News 2016).

It was in this atmosphere and situation of rising discontent against the regime that Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous became a very popular figure among the local Druze population. He was leading a group called Rijal al-Karama (Men of Dignity), which was committed to protecting the Druze in the province, while opposing both the regime's security institutions in Suwayda and Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups. Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous significant campaigns were notably to oppose the recruitment by the SAA of men originating from Suwayda, to be sent to fight outside the province, and to prevent the regime from withdrawing some heavy weapons from the Governorate and making its defenceless. The Rijal al-Karama grew into a significant group with a military force, including 27,000 objectioners, in other words individuals refusing to serve in the SAA (Ezzi 2015). Bal'ous also launched campaigns against corruption. He advocated a 'third-way' line that called for reform within the existing regime system in Suwayda province rather than revolution (Al-Tamimi 2015a). Even following Bal'ous assassination in the Summer 2015, suspicions pointed to the killing as the work of regime loyalists, Rijal al-Karama continued to expand and to be the key military actor in the Suwayda Province. The movement maintained a position of neutrality (neither the regime nor the opposition) and its objectives of preventing entry of any armed opposition group from outside the province, while prohibiting forced conscription in the province (al-Tamimi 2017b).

Druze pro regime militias still existed in the region such as Humat ad-Diyar, which was led by the son of a former Sheikh who received support and funding from the regime and from Druze groups in Lebanon, the NDF, or Dir al-Jabal, a 1000 strong militia whose members carried military ID cards and permission to carry arms issued by the Syrian Ministry of Defense (Ezzi 2015). In addition to this, thousands of Druze were serving in the regime's army against the opposition armed forces in some capacity or another (Gambill 2013). The most notorious was Issam Zahreddine, a Republican Guard brigade commander, who died in Autumn 2017.

Demonstrations and protests increased considerably in the province after the assassination of Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous in the summer 2015 (Rollins 2016). Punctual protests continued in Suwayda throughout the years, against the regime, its policies,

corruption and lack of services delivered to Suwayda's province (i'lâm al-sûwaydâ` 2016; Noufal and Wilcox 2016a, Szakola 2016).

The regime responded through various measures. It increased its investments or proclaimed ones in the region to claim its dedication to improve the socio-economic conditions. In 2014, more than SYP 6 billion (USD 25 million) were spent on the water, health and electricity sectors in the governorate, while in reality, most of the funds referred to the Government's subsidies of the electricity sector and not to actual investments in new projects. Other official announcements included compensation of SYP 20 million, around USD 85,000, that were provided to some 1,430 farmers who had suffered from the cold wave in the winter of 2014/2015, or SYP 70 million given in 2014 to microenterprises in the governorate (The Syria Report 2015a). In 2015, Suwayda hosted 17 investment projects by the SIA, the highest for all of Syria that year. The regime also had to deal with an attitude increasingly affirming the Druze identity of the region, including checkpoints with Druze flags and insignia (Ezzi 2015).

The most important element for the regime was that this region did not balance on the side of the opposition and was therefore ready to make some concessions in the short and mid term through more autonomy to some local forces and tolerating some level of dissent.

4.12 Conclusion

The regime's repression and policies were largely based on its main base of support, old and new: crony capitalists, security services, and high religious institutions linked to the state. At the same time, it made use of its patronage networks through sectarian, clientelist and tribal links to mobilize on a popular level. Through the war, the deepening Alawi sectarian and clientelist aspect of the regime prevented major desertions, while patronage connections served as essential elements, binding the interests of disparate social groups to the regime.

The regime's popular base demonstrated the nature of the state and the way the power elite related to the rest of society, or more precisely in this case its popular

base, through a mix of modern and archaic forms of social relations, and not through a constructed and large civil society. The regime had to rely mostly on coercive powers, which included repressive actions and installing fear, but not only. The regime could also indeed count on the passivity or at least non active opposition of large sections of urban government employees and more generally middle class strata in the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo, although their suburbs were often hotbeds of revolt. This was part of the passive hegemony imposed by the regime.

Moreover, this situation demonstrated that regime's popular base was not limited to sectors and groups issued from the Alawi and / or religious minority populations, although they were predominant, but included personalities and groups from various sects and ethnicities pledging their support to the regime. More generally, large sections of regime's popular base mobilized through sectarian, tribal and clientelist connections were increasingly acting as agents of regime repression. As argued by Steven Heydeman (2013: 71), "regime-society relations defined to a disturbing degree by shared participation in repression".

This resilience came at a cost however, in addition to increasing dependence on foreign states and actors. Regime's existing characteristics and tendencies were amplified. Crony capitalist considerably increased their power as Syria's bourgeoisie had left the country massively withdrawing its political and financial support to the regime. This situation compelled the regime to adopt more and more a predatory behavior in its extraction of increasing needed revenues. At the same time, the clientelist, sectarian, and tribal features of the regime were reinforced. The regime's sectarian Alawi identity was strengthened, especially in key institutions such as the army and to a lesser extent in state administrations, which is an issue the Assad leadership will have to deal with following the end of the war in a war torn country. There was also a deepening and institutionalization of repressive exclusionary practices.

The authority of the state was also weakened, as well as its institutions, allowing more space for militias, which were creating problems and rising discontents because of their thuggish attitudes. At the same time, in the case of Suwayda

governorate, the province was able to gain more autonomy as Damascus wanted to calm increasing tensions and frustrations of the local populations against the regime. Assad's regime did not see this political move as challenging or threatening its rule in any radical way or in a long term as the region's local population in its its great majority would not join the opposition.

In other words, the future end of the war and termination of opposition armed forces did not mean the end of the regime's problems and challenges to reach a situation stability.

Chapter 5: The failure of the opposition, the challenge of the rise of Islamic Fundamentalists and jihadist movements and sectarianism

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will firstly look at the limitations and subsequent failure of the opposition in exile to constitute a credible, democratic and inclusive alternative and translate the demands of the protest movement. The establishment of a large and disparate coalition of opposition forces did not change this situation. The various bodies of the opposition in exile, Syrian National Council and Syrian Coalition, were also subjected to divisions under the interventions of foreign actors and progressive submission to their interests. This situation allowed for the increasing development and expansion of the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements, at the expense of the armed opposition forces linked to the initial FSA's networks and civilian and democratic groups and activists, and more generally of the democratic and inclusive component of the protest movement.

The violent repression by regime forces against the democratic sections of the protest movement, both in its civilian and armed components, was as I showed in the previous chapter the main reason for its weakening. The protest movement and its civilian institutions, along with the appeal of the uprising to represent a democratic and inclusive alternative to large sections of the population in Syria, were however also undermined as a result of the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements. They not only acted as repulsive for the far majority of religious and ethnic minorities, but also to sectors of the Arab Sunni populations, and especially to large sections of the middle class and the bourgeoisie in Damascus and Aleppo. In addition to this, in the regions they controlled numerous resistance protests and actions developed in rural areas and mid-sized towns against their authoritarian practices and behaviors.

Salafist and jihadist organizations would on many aspects adopt the discourse of the various Islamic fundamentalist movements of the seventies and eighties. They had

characterized the regime as Alawi and therefore the conflict as one opposing Sunnis against Alawis.

Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements also started to attack the democratic activists and impose their authority on the institutions developed by locals in areas liberated from the regime. In general, a decrease in the influence of democratic and independent civilian institutions was witnessed as the influence of these extremist forces became stronger in various areas suspending, limiting or terminating the activities of the protest movements. The changing dynamics on the ground with the increasing presence of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements resulted in the number of popular organizations to drop or limit their activities in the end of 2013 (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014: 16).

The rise of the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements was initially encouraged and favored by the regime to sectarianize the uprising and transform its propaganda into a reality characterizing the protesters as sectarian and religious extremists. At the same time, the Arab Gulf Monarchies and Turkey also assisted these groups for their own political reasons. Their expansion was equally the result of the divisions, problems and weaknesses of the FSA's networks as analyzed in the previous chapter.

5.2 Opposition in exile and the challenges to present an inclusive alternative

Throughout the years, the obstacles facing the uprising were mounting and rendered the tasks of the protest movement to overthrow the regime and establish an inclusive democracy very difficult nearly impossible. Alongside these elements, the SNC and then the Coalition were not successful as well to gather the various opposition groups and represent a political alternative translating the aspirations of the protest movements and activists on the ground, despite its recognition on the international scene. Similarly, they were unable to appeal to large sectors of the population within the country and Syrian refugees. This was linked to a lack of political strategy or at least a broad strategy to win a hegemony in the Syrian population, most probably based on its dependence on foreign powers and linked to its early attempts to convince various foreign powers to intervene in Syria in order initially to impose a no-

fly zone, or perhaps a buffer along Syria's border with Turkey (Peterson 2011). The SNC, and representatives of the MB particularly, discussed with the Turkish authorities of the possibility of the imposition by their air forces of a no fly zone in Syria in November 2011 (AFP 2011). From February 2012, the SNC officially retrieved from its initial opposition to external military intervention in Syria and the arming of the opposition. These issues became central demands of the coalition towards western and allied regional powers. Meanwhile, it was unable to provide strategic political leadership, to empower local civil administration, assert credible authority over armed opposition groups, deliver humanitarian relief, and devise a political strategy to split the regime (Sayigh 2013).

The unwillingness of foreign powers to intervene directly in Syria to topple the regime pushed progressively the SNC and then the Coalition to turn increasingly or at least legitimize the various Islamic fundamentalist forces and jihadist groups as their influence was growing within the country in their struggle with the regime. The former president of the Syrian Coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, justified in March 2013 the influx of jihadists into Syria as a counterweight to the presence of Russians and Iranians military experts and Hezbollah fighters, and considered them brothers and honored guests (*al-îtilâf al-watanî li-qûwa al-thawra wa al-mu'ârada al-sûriya* 2013). Jabhat al-Nusra was characterized as "part of the revolutionary movement," by the president of the SNC, George Sabra, member of the liberal People's Party (former Communist Party Political Bureau led by Ryad al-Turk) in a statement that came in response to the USA listing of the jihadist group as a terrorist organization (Ali 2015). Similarly, Michel Kilo refuted initially all accusations against Jabhat al-Nusra that characterized it as a fundamentalist organization (Syrian4all 2013). He also rejected any comparison between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, arguing that the latter was a movement willing "an Islamic electoral system" and wanted to reach an Islamic state by national consensus, while the first wanted to implement this through despotism (Radio Rozana 2014).

Jaysh al-Islam, a salafist organization, was integrated in some of the exiled opposition's official bodies, while Ahrar al-Sham participated in some meetings and discussions but did not join them. These two organizations were guilty of numerous violations of Human Rights, including attacks on activists involved in the uprising,

sectarian discourses, and authoritarian rule in the areas they controlled. The Coalition did not condemn these practices and / or mobilize to demand the release of the kidnapped activists (see later in the chapter). In July 2013, Zahran Alloush, the military commander of the Islamic Front and leader of Jaish al-Islam declared in a discourse:

"The mujahidin of al-Sham will wash the filth of the rafidha³¹ and the rafidha from al-Sham, they will wash it forever, if God wills it, until they cleanse Bilad al-Sham from the filth of the majus who have fought the religion of God. So go oh mujahidin to support your brethren, go to support your brethren, we, in Liwa al-Islam [former name of Jaish al-Islam], welcome the mujahidin from all over the world to be an aid and support for us, to fight in our ranks, the rank of sunna (traditions of Muhammad) the sunna of the messenger of God, which raise the banner of tawhid [pure monotheism] high, until the humiliation and destruction is upon the majus, the enemies of Allah." (cited in Smyth and Zein 2014)

On its side Hassan Aboud, leader of Ahrar al-Sham, in an interview explained:

"What is happening in Syria is that the country has been ruled by a Nusayri idea, a Shi'a group that came to power and started discriminating against the Sunni people. They prevented them from practicing their religion and painted a picture of Islam that is far from what Islam is, with traditions and practices that are not Islamic at all. It wanted to wipe true Islam from the country" (Abu Arab 2013)

Despite their authoritarian and sectarian practices, Muhammad Alloush, the political leader of Jaish al-Islam, following the death of his cousin Zahran Alloush, from January

³¹ In reference to Twelver Shi'a. Rafidha means rejectionist and refers to the Shi'a because, according to those who use the term, they do not recognize Abu Bakr and his successors as having been legitimate rulers after the death of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. In the Syrian context, rafidha has been used to denote Iran due to its support for the Assad regime (Zelin and Smyth 2014).

2016 to May 2016 served as the chief negotiator for the Saudi-based High Negotiations Committee (HNC) in opposition peace talks with the Assad Regime in Geneva. Alloush resigned on May 30, 2016 claiming that the peace talks were a “waste of time” because the Assad Regime was not willing to pursue “serious negotiations” (Stanford University 2016). He remained however a member of the HNC itself, and was a key actor in other peace negotiations sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran in the end of 2016 and 2017. Ahrar Sham was also initially included in the HNC list, and its delegate, Labib Nahhas, attended the signing ceremony in Riyadh and put his name down as a representative of Ahrar al-Sham. The leadership of the salafist group however issued a public statement saying they were withdrawing from the conference directly after the closing ceremony. Ahrar Sham had already criticized the inclusion of some groups such as NCBDC, viewed as too close to Russia, and they ultimately pulled out from the HNC because they considered the final statement as too secular-leaning and opposed the inclusion of actors perceived as too hostile to Islamic forces (Lund 2015e). Ahrar Sham however participated in the Turkish led military offensive against Afrin in January 2018 with the support of the Syrian Coalition (See chapter 6).

The SNC and Coalition also failed to provide any socio-economic alternative in the interests of the popular classes, instead promoting neo-liberal policies not very different from the regime. In 2013, a group of leading Syrian experts affiliated with the opposition actually published a policy document called “The Syria Transition Roadmap” on post-Assad Syria in which it called for the privatization of Syria’s publicly owned companies, price liberalization, lifting subsidies, downsizing of the public sector in order to develop the private sector, the return to their “rightful owners” of all assets (lands, whether agricultural or not, corporations, factories, houses, and buildings) nationalized by the Ba’th Party, supporting Syria’s entry into multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), etc... (Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies and Syrian Expert House 2013: 202-215) Their conclusion was

“thus, Syria needs to gradually abandon its state-led, dirigiste economic model in favor of a market-based one. The country needs to unleash the great entrepreneurial spirit that has

characterized its industrialists and merchants throughout history... The key objective here is to enhance the Syrian economy's productivity and competitiveness, and thus to put it on a path toward where growth and employment generation are led by the private sector" (Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies and Syrian Expert House 2013: 203)

These recommendations emphasized the weight and influence of the former bourgeoisie and landowning families among the leadership of the political opposition. This was also not appealing to large sectors of employees in the public sector.

At the same time, increasing voices complained of the lack or absence of female representation in revolutionary institutions within Syria. Women were often limited to symbolic representation without any real responsibilities such as in the SNC, the Coalition and then the HNC. Activist Khawla Dunia declared in March of 2014 that the situation of Syrian women was in a constant state of degradation,

"not only in terms of rights, which is the case for both sexes, but, more importantly, in terms of the lack of balance between the sacrifices and the achievements" (cited in Syria Untold 2014e)

For example, female participation in the HNC at its establishment was limited to two representatives on the 33 members in the end of 2015. Female activists often characterized most of the opposition groups as "unreliable", "discriminative" and "elitist" when it came to women's rights, similar to the Assad regime, and only having female representatives holding "decorative positions" without any effective role in the decision making process (Ghazzawi, Afra and Ramadan 2015: 19). Feminist activist Lama Kannout (2016:59) explained that from the beginning of the uprising in the various alliances and political conferences of the opposition "seculars would inevitably yield to Islamists, sacrificing women's rights in the process".

Some of the members of the Coalition or opposition members adopted as well sectarian positions. Opposition and former member of parliament, Mahmoud Homsî declared for example at the beginning of the uprising “you despicable Alawis, either you renounce Al-Assad, or else Syria will become your graveyard” and adding at the end “Down with the despicable political Shi'a. From this day on, you will see what we Sunnis are made of” (MEMRI 2011). The SNC at the time did not publish any statement to condemn this discourse.

Salafist Sheikh and member of the Coalition, Anas Ayrout, who was also leader in the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, called on July 1, 2013 fighters of opposition armed groups to target Alawi villages on coastal areas. He declared they “must concentrate on their villages, their homes, their strongholds. We must strike at their infrastructure, and prevent them from living a normal and peaceful life... We have to drive them out of their homes like they drove us out. They have to feel the pain that we feel...” (cited in Oweis 2013a). A member of the SNC, Saleh al-Mubarak, on his side supported as well the attack on Latakia’s countryside affirming “the battle may be moved to the ruling family’s heartland, and the Alawis be given notice that they cannot be safe if the rest of the people are unsafe” (cited in Mouzahem 2013).

Some pro-uprising medias were also guilty on some occasions of sectarian discourses. Orient TV, owned by Syrian businessmen in exile Ghassan Abboud known for his sectarian diatribes,³² for example presented the massacre in May 2015 of more than 40 civilians, including children, by the IS’ fighters in the mix town of Majaoubé, composed of Sunni, Isma’ili and Alawi, as members of the regime’s forces. The presentation of the events provoked an important controversy as it was considered as a justification for a sectarian crime (Arif 2015).

The Coalition members also maintained a constant refusal for the recognition of Kurdish national rights accompanied by a very chauvinist attitudes towards Kurdish populations. The Coalition’s members also supported Ankara’s hostile positions and military aggressions against the PYD / PYK, characterizing the Kurdish party as a terrorist actor (See chapter 6).

³² One of his facebook post for example attacked Alawi and other religious minorities (see Abboud 2015)

The lack of real inclusiveness of the Coalition and exiled opposition was once more seen in the General Principle of the transition plan submitted by the opposition's HNC in September 2016 in which they exclusively listed the Arab Islamic culture as source "for intellectual production and social relations amongst all Syrians" (High Negotiation Commission: 2016: 9). Different groups affiliated with the HNC, notably Kurdish and Assyrian movements, denounced this document as being not inclusive of the diversity of the Syrian population.

The Coalition was further increasingly poisoned by internal rivalries and dissensions and defections increased throughout the years. In December 2016, Samira Masalmeh, the deputy president of the Coalition, declared that she was unaware of the methods by which the political body received money and requested that an inquiry be made on how its spent. She stated also that her work concentrated on fighting "extremist ideas" within the group, but that she had been stopped from speaking by some "extremist groups" present as a bloc within the coalition (Enab Baladi 2016d). Following her declarations, Samira Masalmeh was turned over to the body's legal committee for internal investigation after her criticism on the functioning of the Coalition (Zaman al-Wasl 2017a). She resigned completely from the coalition after that.

In his resignation of the Coalition in January of 2017, veteran opposition activist Fayeza Sara enumerated several problems characterizing it. It mentioned its inability to enact reform in the bloc's political institutions as the reason for his departure, as some blocs and individuals derailed any attempt to reform the Coalition and imposed their control over the temporary government. He criticized the unwillingness of the Coalition to take any position on the "Islamic" forces — from IS to Jund al-Aqsa and Nusra — which played an "evil" role in implementing the Assad regime's policies, as he described it. Sara added that the Coalition had been established with the diseases of the SNC, including regional and international interventions that shaped it according to their agendas and involved figures and groups among them (Madar al-Youm 2017).

The increasing focus of the major international and regional state actors on the “war on terror” and consensus around Bashar al-Assad remaining in power also diminished the significance of the Coalition and even pushed some of its members to make their peace with the regime. Bassam al-Malak, a member of the Coalition, who was a Damascus trader and former member of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce prior to the uprising in 2011, announced his withdrawal from the coalition in August of 2017 and his return to Syria to work for the support of the sovereignty of Syria and support for the army against terrorism arguing that he

“learned the extent of the Gulf, American and Western conspiracy which aims to divide Syria and to destroy the Syrian army to serve the American-Zionist project” (cited in Syria News 2017)

This kind of statement subjugating oneself the regime’s propaganda was of course the rule to be able to come back to Syria.

Similarly, the increasing dependence of the Coalition on foreign actors also put them more and more in difficulties as the interests of these states diverged from their own and were less and less seeking the overthrow of Bachar al-Assad. In November 2017, the head of the Syrian opposition’s High Negotiations Committee, Riyad Hijab, chief negotiator, Muhammad Sabra, and eight others members announced their resignation from the committee ahead of the Riyadh Conference to unite the opposition because there was international pressure to force the opposition to accept that Bashar Al-Assad will remain in power, according to Suheir Al-Atassi one of the members who resigned (Middle East Monitor 2017b).

5.3 Gulf monarchies fostering a sectarian framework

The support of Gulf monarchies to the SNC and Coalition was also accompanied by a particular sectarian discourse, increasing the doubts in this opposition to provide an inclusive alternative for all in Syria, especially minorities. Gulf monarchies and media promoted a sectarian understanding of the uprising in Syria and attempted to turn it into a sectarian conflict between Shi’a and Sunni, while they hosted many Salafist

sheikhs who would use Gulf channels to promote their sectarian and hatred discourse. As soon as March 25th, 2011, the Egyptian Salafist Sheikh Youssef Qardawi, an influential member linked to the MB and a weekly guest on al-Jazeera television with his own program residing in Qatar, declared

“The President Assad treats the people as if he is Sunni, and he is educated and young and he might be able to do a lot, but his problem is that he is prisoner of his entourage and religious sect” (Satik 2013: 396)

Syrian protesters at the beginning of the uprising held banners opposing sectarian discourses such as the “Sunni blood is one’ as promoted by some Gulf channels, while chanting instead in favor of the unity of the Syrian people.

In August 2012, Bahraini Member of Parliament Abd al-Halim Murad, when visiting Suqur al-Sham declared it was possible for the group to achieve victory against the slaughter of the “rancorous” Safawis, which referred to the Safavid dynasty that ruled Iran from 1501 to 1736 and Shiitized Iran, which used to have a Sunni population (Smyth and Zeilin 2014).

In May 2013, Sheikh Youssef al-Qardawi declared this time a jihad on the Syrian regime at a rally in Qatar, calling for Sunni Muslims to join the fight against president Bashar al-Assad and his Shi’a support base, in addition to calling the Alawi sect “more infidel than Christians and Jews” (Pizzi and Shabaan: 2013). This statement very much took its roots in the political and religious thoughts of Ibn Taymiyya’s view on Alawis, which were particularly promoted within the ranks of the Syrian MB³³ in the past:

³³ In the MB’s political program of 1980 “Manifesto and Program of the Islamic Revolution in Syria”, the text is full of sectarian attacks against Alawis, their dissolute and disgusting mores. They actually refuse to consider them as an Islamic sect, characterizing them as polytheist. The manifesto describes an “alawi conspiracy” on-going since the 9th century against the state, the Umma and society, notably by reaching the summit of the state and in infiltrating the apparatus of the Ba’th and of the army. The Nusayris are the heirs of an uninterrupted history of “betrayals from the sacking of the Kab’aa by the Qarmates at the 10th century to the Israeli occupation of the Golan in 1967 (cited in Seurat 2012:146).

“the people called Nusayriyya... are more heretical than the Jews and the Christians and even more than several heterodox groups. Their damage to the Muslim community... is greater than the damage of the infidels who fight against the Muslims such as the heretic Mongols, the Crusaders, and others. They do not believe in God... They are neither Muslims, nor Jews, nor Christians.” (Cited in Lefèvre 2013: 65)

Qardawi added “How could 100 million Shi’a [worldwide] defeat 1.7 billion [Sunnis]?” (Pizzi and Shabaan: 2013). This statement was later praised by Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh (al-Arabiya 2013). Similarly, the *Râbitat al’âlam al-îslâmi* (Muslim World League), an association of Islamic cleric established in 1962 and serving as a political instrument of Saudi Arabia in foreign policy, characterized repeatedly the Syrian regime as a “rogue Nusayri regime” and “stressing the obligation of supporting the Muslims of Syria and saving them from the sectarian conspiracy”, in other words from the Shi’a (Muslim World League 2013).

Gulf television channels also fuelled sectarian tensions from the beginning of the uprising. Faisal al-Qassim, a presenter on al-Jazeera Channel, hosted a segment on whether Syria’s Alawi population deserved genocide, while al-Arabiya welcomed Syrian Salafist cleric Adnan al-Arour, who once promised to “chop you (Alawis) up and feed you to the dogs” (cited in Carlstrom 2017).

Private donations from the Gulf also supported Islamic fundamentalist armed movements. The Popular Commission to Support the Syrian people for example, associated with the wealthy Ajmi family in Kuwait funnelled millions of dollars in funds and humanitarian aid to Salafist movement like Ahrar al-Sham. Ahrar publicly thanked the commission for sending \$400,000 (McCants 2013). The Salafi cleric, Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi was among the most vitriolic purveyors of sectarianism in Kuwait, calling for the torture of Syrian soldiers and demonizing the Shi’a (Wehrey 2013: 3). In Saudi Arabia, sheikhs of the Saudi Islamic fundamentalist movements Sahwa,³⁴

³⁴ The Saudi Islamic fundamentalist movement, known as the Sahwa was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideological views, while maintaining a close, non-conflictual relationship with the Saudi Kingdom for few decades. At the beginning of the 1990s, they demanded the opening of the

who could easily gather donations from their followers, became significant channels of funding for the Syrian armed opposition, mostly Islamic groups. In May 2012, Saudi officials decided officially to prohibit several Sahwa prominent sheikhs from collecting money for Syria outside official channels because their activities became so successful and visible and could not be controlled by the authorities. Private donations however continued to be transferred to Syria through Sahwa networks, but collectors adopted a lower profile. Salafist armed groups were the main beneficiaries of those donations, especially the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, which was supported politically by the Saudi Kingdom and the Sahwa. Some sheikhs close to the Sahwa, such as Muhammad al-'Arifi and Abdallah al-Ghunayman, also argued in favour of Saudis going to fight in Syria. Personalities of the Sahwa networks have presented the Syrian uprising since its beginning in sectarian undertones affirming what was happening was nothing but a religious war between Sunnis and 'a Nusayri regime whose strongest allies are Shi'a and Jews (Lacroix 2014b: 4-5).

Even the Saudi jihadist Abdullah Muhaysini initially participated in several campaigns aimed at raising funds to assist jihadi groups and victims of the war at the beginning of the uprising in the Saudi Kingdom. He then travelled to Syria following the death of his uncle, Omar al-Muhaysini, to participate in the fights against Assad's regime and to bridge the gap between IS and other factions. He is a member of a rich family that work in the construction industry; Muhaysini's family owns a construction company that was worth 500 million riyals (\$133 million) (Hashem 2016). Abdullah Muhaysini established in Syria institutions that provided military and financial assistance to jihadist groups, and managed a proselytization (Da'wa) center (named "The Jihad's Callers Center") in Idlib Province. In March of 2015, he participated in the establishment of Jaysh al-Fateh's coalition, led by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham (Rikab 2015).

political system, criticized the call made by King Fahd to "infidels" to assist the kingdom during the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation, and demanded the islamisation of state's policies in economic, social, political, media and military spheres. The Sahwa was reintegrated to the Saudi religious and social spheres, in exchange for which Sahwa leaders avoided all criticism of the government. The MENA uprisings started in 2011 challenged that accommodation, as the Sahwa was tempted to seize the opportunity and make a renewed political stand (Al-Rasheed 2010: 185; Lacroix 2014a)

With the increasing militarization of the uprising, foreign financing and influence expanded. Armed opposition factions brandishing an Islamic identity were favored by Islamic donors, such as states and individuals from the Sunni Gulf monarchies, while the battalions of the FSA were increasingly weakened. In these conditions, more and more fighters joined Islamic armed opposition groups, and Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements gained ground throughout the years, while the democratic and secular voices were forced into silence.

A similar trend was occurring, although with less success among civilian activists. Local activists in Salamiyah claimed that one well-known Arabic-language broadcasting organization refused to broadcast video footage of one of the revolutionary campaigns in the city because it included no images of flags bearing the Shahada (testimony to Islam symbol). Moreover, they also argued that some broadcasting organizations in Arab countries, mainly in the Gulf, were inclined to screen footage of revolutionary activities in Syria only if it contained Islamic speeches and slogans (al-Hallaq 2013a: 109). More generally, criticisms were raised that Islamic actors were interviewed much more often as opposed to more secular opposition figures or intellectuals. In Dar'a at the beginning of the uprising for example, activists complained "that satellite networks were marginalizing prominent leftists", according to journalist Nir Rosen (2012).

5.4 Establishment of Islamic Fundamentalists groups

The release of significant groups of jihadists and Islamic fundamentalists by the Assad regime started as early as the end of March 2011, with the liberation of 260 prisoners from Sednaya prison – a great majority of whom were known Islamic fundamentalists and jihadists (Lister 2015: 53). This strengthened the militarization of the Syrian revolution in establishing their own military brigades. On May 31, Assad announced an amnesty to free all of Syria's political prisoners. The amnesty was actually very selective by keeping the vast majority of protestors and activists in prison, while a great number of Salafist jihadists were released.

Three of these Salafist jihadists would become founders of the most important Islamic fundamentalist brigades:

- Zahran Alloush, son of a famous Syrian Sheikh based in Saudi Arabia, established Liwa al-Islam in Damascus suburbs in Douma in March 2012. Liwa al-Islam's first popular base of recruitment was based on a pre-war network of Salafi activists, ex-prisoners, and friends and students of his father at the Tawhid Mosque in Douma. The group also benefitted from the beginning of the uprising of the financial support of Gulf-based Salafi preachers like Adnan al-Arouf, in exile in Saudi Arabia and old acquaintance of the Alloush family. Al-Arouf actually praised Zahran Alloush on several television apparitions on Saudi channels (Fî sabîl âllah 2015). Liwa al-Islam had a Salafi orientation and called for an Islamic state. They opted for the black Islamic flag and the group presented itself as an independent jihadi militant group, although collaborating with FSA groups (Lund 2017a). In September 2013, following the merger under the leadership of Liwa-al-Islam of at least 50 groups operating mainly around Damascus, the movement changed its name to Jaysh al-Islam (Hassan H. 2013c). This merger was engineered by Saudi intelligence to build an Islamic fundamentalist force able to act as a counterweight to the jihadist forces of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS (Oweis 2013b).

- Hassan Aboud was a Salafist who participated in the establishment of Kataib Ahrar al-Sham officially founded in late 2011 in the region of Idlib and Hama, although some secret cells had been active soon after the beginning of the uprisings in the MENA region according to one source in February 2011 (Abou Zeid 2012). The organization was originally composed of former Islamic fundamentalist prisoners and Iraq war veterans held previously in the Sednayya Prison. Funding was quickly secured from foreign sympathizers such as Hajjaj al-Ajami and other Gulf clerics, many of who were linked to the Salafi Umma Party in Kuwait (Lund 2014c) and from private sources in Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Lister 2015: 56-58; Solmon 2012c). The principal objective and ideological belief of the movement was to wage jihad against Iranian-led efforts to project Shi'a power across the Levant and to replace the Assad regime with an Islamic state, according to its founding statement (ICG 2012b: 15). Ahrar al-Sham always made clear it was a separate entity from the FSA. Despite some connections to the al-Qa'ida movement - some of its leaders had worked with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the past - Ahrar al-Sham was not a transnational jihadi group. It constantly declared that its struggle was limited to Syria

and also sought to ally itself pragmatically with all groups fighting against the Syrian regime forces, from Jabhat al-Nusra to the FSA brigades (Abu Arab 2013; Lund 2014d). Ahrar al-Sham's repeatedly referred to the Taliban as an example of a successful and praiseworthy Islamic project and actually issued on August 1, 2015 a statement mourning the death of Taliban founding leader Mullah Muhammad Omar (Lister 2016a: 28).

- Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh was the founder of the Liwa Suqur al-Sham that was established in November 2011 as a FSA brigade, but rapidly adopted a Salafist discourse and political orientation. Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh called for the establishment of an Islamic state, while the group's propaganda and media promoted a message rejecting any national and pan-Arab identity, as claims of national unity between Sunnis, Alawis and Christians were absolutely forbidden under Islamic Law (ICG 2012b: 17-18).

There was a famous picture of these three personalities of them standing in a row, all smiles, not long after being decreed free by Assad's amnesty in the spring 2011.

Future ISIL members were also released at this same period, including Awwad al-Makhlaf who was at one point a local emir in Raqqa, and Abu al-Ahir al-Absi, who was jailed in Sednaya prison in 2007 for membership in al-Qa'ida. In mid-July 2014, al-Absi became IS's provincial leader for Homs (Hassan and Weis 2015: 145). In early February 2012, the Syrian regime released Abu Musab al-Suri, an important jihadist ideologue and a top al-Qa'ida operative with significant experience fighting against the Assad regime towards the end of the seventies and early eighties (O'Bagy 2012b: 15). These were just a few examples of a larger phenomenon.

5.5 Jabhat al-Nusra's establishment

By August 2011, several Islamic fundamentalist armed groups had been formed in Damascus and in northern Syria. The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) had sent a senior commander, Abu Muhammad Jolani, a Syrian from Damascus, along with six other ISI commanders who were a mixture of Syrians, Iraqis and Jordanians, to set up a Syria based wing. In the weeks following his arrival in Syria, Jolani travelled

frequently from Hasakah to Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Idlib and the Damascus countryside, initiating contact with small ISI-connected cells that had already started making initial arrangements for their activation. The Iraq based ISI provided about 50 percent of its entire budget to its new Syrian front, while additional support was transferred from pre-existing al-Qa'ida private networks financiers in the Gulf monarchies (Lister 2015: 56-68).

The ISI branch carried out its first operation, a double suicide bombing, outside Syrian military intelligence facilities in south west Damascus in the neighborhood of Kfar Souseh on December 23, 2011, killing at least forty people (Casey-Baker and Kutsch 2011). A second attack was carried out on January 6th, 2012, when a suicide bomber on foot detonated explosives near several buses transporting riot police in the al-Midan district of Damascus, killing twenty six people (Shadid 2012). The ISI claimed credit for the first attack only at the announcement of the official establishment of its branch in January 23, 2012 under the name of Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahidin al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad (The Support Front to the People of the Levant by the Mujahideen of the Levant on the Fields of Jihad), through its media wing al-Manara al-Bayda. The second attacks were not mentioned until February 26. The third attack by the jihadist organization occurred in Aleppo on February 10, when two Syrian fighters detonated their explosive laden vehicles outside security buildings in the al-Arkoub and New Aleppo neighborhoods of Aleppo city, murdering a total of 28 people and injuring over 200 others. This operation and the one of January 6 were carried out in order to “avenge the people of Homs”, who at that period were under siege by the regime (Lister 2015: 64).

Jolani stated in the video announcing the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra a declaration of war against the Assad regime. He added that this was only half of the struggle and the rest of it would be the establishment of Islamic law across the *Bilad al-Sham*.³⁵ He also explained that Jabhat al-Nusra was an organization composed of mujahidin from various fronts, thereby indicating an international and likely Iraqi operational influence. The organization's vocabulary pointed to a common phraseology with al-Qa'ida, while it was the *Shumukh al-Islam* online forum that became the main

³⁵ Greater Syria and generally including Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, western Iraq

distributor of its media material, which was also used by al-Qa'ida and ISI. At the same time, Jolani was careful to hide his organizational links with al-Qa'ida branch in Iraq (Lister 2015: 51+59+64; Hassan and Weiss 2015: 149-150).

In the same video, Jolani denounced the Western states and their assistance to the Syrian "moderate" opposition, thereby warning the opposition to refuse any such offers from abroad. He also attacked the Arab League and Turkey for being too close and submissive to the orders of the USA, while the establishments of the state of Israel in 1948 and of the IRI in 1979 were part of an ongoing struggle against Sunni Islam. In addition to this, Jabhat al-Nusra portrayed itself as the Sunni community's aggressive defender against the "Alawi enemy" and its "Shi'a agents". It had from the beginning used a sectarian rhetoric by employing derogatory terms such as *rawafidh* (literally: rejectionists, the plural of *rafidhi*) in reference to Shi'a, a practice commonly used among Iraqi Salafi jihadi insurgents, and the word *Nusayri*³⁶ instead of Alawis (ICG 2012b: 11).

Following its establishment in January 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra received statements of support from famous jihadi ideologues (Lister 2015: 59-60; O'Bagy 2012b: 31). Beginning in 2012, al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, called on Muslims in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to join the uprising against Assad's "pernicious, cancerous regime", and warned Syrian opposition fighters not to rely on the West for help (The Guardian 2012). Jabhat al-Nusra increased its operations in March 2012 throughout the country. At the same time, Jabhat al-Nusra also started participating in small scale operations on the battlefield by fledging insurgent organization, joining guerrilla style ambushes, assassinating personalities close to and/or from the regime, and planting and detonating IEDs in suburban Damascus and in rural areas of Idlib, Hama and Homs (Lister 2015: 71).

Jabhat al-Nusra's strategy at the time was to present itself as a local Syrian jihadist organization struggling against the Assad regime, trying to forge alliances with other military forces with similar objectives and avoiding enemies and abstaining, at least in

³⁶ Nusayri is in reference to the founder of the Alawi religion, Abu Shuayb Muhammad Ibn Nusayr. It is used to characterize the Alawi religion as following a man and not God and therefore not divinely inspired

the beginning, from an extreme implementation of a very religiously conservative understanding of Sharia. This was the line followed by the al-Qa'ida leadership between 2011 and 2013 in various countries of the region (Lister 2015: 67). In many ways, Jolani followed al-Zawahiri's plan of action after Bin Laden's assassination in May 2011, avoiding targeting other religious groups or sects such as Shi'a, Yazidis, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists unless they targeted Sunnis first. This strategy was also the result from the failures of al-Qa'ida in the past in Iraq to win large popularity because of their violent practices (Hassan and Weiss 2015: 150). The emir of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, emphasized this same element to his forces in Mali in 2012 in saying that

“One of the wrong policies that we think you carried out is the extreme speed with which you applied Sharia... our previous experience proved that applying Sharia this way... will lead to people rejecting the religion and engender hatred towards the mujahidin” (cited in Lister 2015: 56-58)

This position was actually at the center of a debate in 2006 in an exchange of letters between the heads of al-Qa'ida and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, criticizing his attacks and massacres of Shi'a Iraqis, which they considered harmful to the cause (Moutot 2015).

The efforts to present, Jabhat al-Nusra as authentically Syrian and more or less moderate in comparison to the previous practices of al-Qa'ida in Iraq did not prevent its unpopularity at the beginning of the uprising. The general atmosphere within the nascent and developing protest movement in the country motivated by democratic and anti-sectarian objectives was quite at odd with al-Qa'ida's rethoric or political program. In the beginning of 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra had difficulties finding allies on the field. They were even accused of being a creation of the regime's security forces. The senior Syrian Salafi-jihadist Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartusi actually doubted the authenticity of the organization. Protesters in the streets opposed to the regime rejected the use of suicide bombings against state buildings.

The suicide bombing tactics targeting city squares and locations with significant civilian populations were less and less adopted and a shift towards other forms of military operations was increasingly practiced by Jabhat al-Nusra throughout 2012. This strategic consideration would change in 2017 (see chapter 8). The jihadist movement tried to be more careful with civilian casualties and to limit operations strictly to military targets. Unlike al-Qa'ida in Iraq, Jabhat al-Nusra demonstrated in the first two years of the uprising a keen sensitivity to public perception. Zawahiri's advice and the lessons from the Iraq war were being taken into account. Jabhat al-Nusra was careful not to alienate the larger population, which allowed it to garner popular support in the beginning of its organizational existence (O'Bagy 2012b: 36-37; Lund 2012: 29). The fact that the group was on its far majority composed of Syrians also influenced the behavior of the members and to pay more attention to the discontent of the local populations.

In April / May 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra was included for the first time in a major offensive of FSA forces against Damascus. Damascus' northern suburbs increasingly became a base area for Jabhat al-Nusra's recruited fighters and senior leadership figures. The jihadist organization multiplied operations in this area against the regime, while at the same time claiming activities in Hama, Idlib, Dar'a and Deir Zor (Lister 2015: 73). By June, it had attained a rate of sixty attacks per month, up from only seven in March (ICG 2012a: 11).

5.6 Growing support and presence of Jihadist fighters

By mid 2012, a number of foreign jihadist organizations issued a call to support the Syrian uprising and encouraged jihadists to join the fight against the Assad regime (O'Bagy 2012b: 30-31; Lister 2015: 73). Jabhat al-Nusra was endorsed by several internationally or locally prominent jihadi thinkers such as Abul-Mondher al-Chinguetti of the influential *Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* website,³⁷ the Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, and Lebanon's Abul-Zahra al-Zubeidi. The movement was clearly seen by most of the global salafi-jihadi community as "their" group in Syria (Lund 2012: 25).

³⁷ A website whose publications carry significant weight within the jihadi community.

In Mid 2012, foreign fighters were starting to arrive in Syria on a more organized level. In the same period, a second prominent jihadist group called *Kataib al-Muhajireen*, was established in the country's northwestern governorate of Latakia and became active as well in western parts of Aleppo. The jihadist group was originally controlled and led by Libyans who had fled Libya following the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. Afterwards, a growing group of Russian speakers from Chechnya and Dagestan progressively assumed the leadership of the group. The jihadist movement was then led by Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili, an ethnic Chechen from Georgia, commonly known as Omar al-Shishani (or Omar the Chechen), who would play a key role in the evolution and development of Syria's jihadist rebellion in the years to come. Junud al-Cham, another jihadist group largely composed of Chechnians, was created during the same period. Jihadist Muslim Margoshvili, commonly referred to as Muslim Shishani, who had fought alongside the famous Saudi jihadist Ibn al-Khattab in Chechnya in the mid 1990s, established the organization (Lister 2015: 73-74).

Most of these jihadist groups stood apart from the FSA, adopting an aggressive sectarian discourse and refusing the kind of nationalist discourse of most of the FSA brigades, as well as the Syrian revolutionary flag, insisting instead on the black jihadi flag (Macfarquhar and Saad 2012). The isolation or relative weakness of jihadists in Syria until mid 2012 was symbolized by the interview with Omar al-Chichani, head of the military organization of the IS, published in the first edition of the IS's newspaper called *Sana al-Cham*. He explained that he arrived in March 2012 and that he was surprised to see

“people smoking, shaving their beards instead of letting it grow. They listened to songs. And flags of the revolution did not contain the formula of the oneness of God, la ilaha illa Allah. I wondered where I fell! All of these have seemed to me discouraging” (Sana al-Sham cited in Syria Freedom Forever 2013c)

Another group, Liwa al-Ummah, constituted by 90 percent of Syrian fighters, was led by the Irish-Libyan Mahdi al-Harati, previously a commander in the Tripoli Brigade that helped topple the Qaddafi regime in Libya (Zelin 2012). The brigade was established in April 2012 and was based in the Idlib province. The organization was not following jihadist ideology, but was aligned with the MB and with a strong Islamic frame of reference by calling for the establishment of an Islamic governance and to work to unite the ummah and bring about its renaissance. By August 2012, Liwa al-Ummah was composed of approximately 6,000 fighters, most of whom were Syrian, but there were many others from Libya, and some from other Arab nationalities (Fitzgerald 2012).

At this point, on-the-ground media coverage in English, French, Arabic, German, and other languages reported between 800-2,000 foreigners in Syria, representing less than 10 percent of the armed opposition fighters. The vast majority had come at the beginning of 2012 from countries surrounding Syria such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. A smaller North African contingent hailed from Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. The presence of Westerners during that period was minimal. Foreign fighters combating in Syria against Assad regime's forces were mainly joining jihadi organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra (Zelin 2012). The foreign fighters and Syrian jihadists with experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan brought some military skills to the insurgency, for example constructing IEDs and vehicular borne improvised explosive devices. These tactics were introduced by Jabhat al-Nusra and Kataib Ahrar al-Sham (ICG 2012b: 19).

5.7 Establishment of ISIL in Syria

On April 9, 2013, a voice message from the leader of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi publically announced that Jabhat al-Nusra was only a cover and merely an extension and part of the ISI (Hassan and Weiss 2015: 184). In his message, Baghdadi declared that the two jihadist organizations would now work under a single name: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Two days later, the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Muhammad Jolani, admitted that he had fought in Iraq under Baghdadi's command and that Jabhat al-Nusra had benefited from funds, weapons, and fighters sent by the ISI, which he thanked, but he rejected Baghdadi's

call for unification. He also sought to guarantee the jihadi identity of Jabhat al-Nusra by ending his statement with a renewal of allegiance to al-Qa'ida's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, seeking a possible arbiter that he knew would be favorable to him (Caillet 2013).

Increasing defections, infighting and a breakdown in operations started to occur as members disagreed over who commanded the battlefield. Al-Zawahiri's ruling came two months after Baghdadi's declaration in the form of a letter in which he wrote Baghdadi was wrong to declare the merger without consulting or even alerting al-Qa'ida's leadership, but he also said that Jolani was wrong by announcing his rejection of ISIL, and by showing his links to al-Qa'ida without having their permission. He thereby dissolved ISIL and added that Syria was the spatial state for Jabhat al-Nusra, headed by Jolani, while Baghdadi's rule would be limited to Iraq. He appointed Abu Khaled al-Suri, a former member of al-Qa'ida and at the time a member of Ahrar al-Sham, as al-Qa'ida delegate to act as an arbiter between the two entities (Atassi 2013; Hassan and Weiss 2015: 184-185).

Al-Baghdadi disapproved with al-Zawahiri's letter and refused to submit to his orders. He justified his rejection by claiming that al-Zawahiri, by insisting on the separation between the lands of Syria and Iraq, was holding off to artificial state borders built by Western imperial powers at the end of the First World War (Hassan and Weiss 2015: 185-186).

Most of Jabhat al-Nusra's fighters joined the ISIL, especially the non-Syrian volunteers. It was estimated that 80 percent of *muhajirin* (foreign fighters) in Syria joined the ranks of ISIL (Ghaith 2013). In early May 2013, the majority of the Muhajirin wa-Ansar Army, a group largely composed of fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia, also merged with the ISIL. Its emir, Omar al-Shishani, swore allegiance to Baghdadi and was appointed *wali* (governor) of the Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia regions. In addition to foreign fighters, the ISIL was bolstered by Syrian tribes pledging allegiance to Baghdadi, especially in the northern Aleppo and Raqqa regions. In Deir Zor, Jabhat al-Nusra, which had many commanders from the region, was able to win the support of tribes that were seeking to protect their incomes from oil wells. Oil profits had enriched both the tribes and al-Nusra (Caillet 2013).

At the same time, as far as relations on the ground went, the relationship challenged a simple opposition reflecting the tensions at the leadership level and varied according to different regions until the summer of 2013. In Aleppo and the city of Deir Zor, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL were clearly distinct entities. In Dar'a, only Jabhat al-Nusra had a presence. In the Raqqa governorate and areas of the east outside Deir Zor, the boundaries between the two jihadist groups were more blurred at the beginning, such that in many parts the two names and their symbols could be considered interchangeable (al-Tamimi 2013). In the city of Raqqa, the violent and repressive practices of ISIL leaders against other armed opposition groups ultimately led the leading emirs of Jabhat al-Nusra in the town, who had initially been subsumed within ISIL leadership after the merger, to renounce their position in ISIL and withdraw from Raqqa along with a group of core followers (Issam 2014).

5.8 Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces increasingly dominating the military scene

The first six months of the year 2012 witnessed the emergence and expansion of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces in the armed opposition political scene in Syria. These forces benefited from the lack of effective leadership and the lack (and in some cases even absence) of organized and broad support from Western states, to the armed opposition groups of the FSA. While Western states provided rhetorical support, they failed to provide the FSA forces with the necessary weaponry. The Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups unrelated to the FSA and funded mostly by private networks from Gulf monarchies and for some groups directly from states, were able to expand in this situation to secure their own funding. During this period, members of a leading Homs activist group explained in a report of the International Crisis Group that “donations from Syrian expatriates and other Arabs in Gulf countries helped fuel a growing Islamist trend among militants as of early 2012”, while according to another activist, most of the funding received by armed groups in Homs was sent from Islamic fundamentalist movements to other Islamic groups (ICG 2012b: 9-10). In July 2012, local FSA leaders were complaining that their own leadership in Turkey was not able to provide similar support and funding (ICG 2012a: 10).

Other elements also favored the development of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements. Some fighters of the FSA armed opposition groups became disillusioned with their disorganization and inability to strike at the regime, while salafist (Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar Sham) and / or jihadist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra had military experience, high salaries and strong discipline (Ghaith Abdul-Ahad 2012). The corruption of sections of the opposition, notably the SNC and the Coalition, and of some commanders of opposition armed groups also led fighters to join jihadist groups considered uncorrupted (Lund 2012: 20). In addition to all of this, the division of the armed opposition among a multitude of independent groups claiming to be FSA or linked to FSA was problematic. There were around 1200 opposition-armed factions at the beginning of 2013 in Syria, according to David Shedd, No. 2 in the US Defense Intelligence Agency (Atlas 2013). Factionalism, profit making and incompetence of the FSA groups started to alienate people at the end of 2012, as explained by Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss (2015: 225), and Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces increasingly gained a foothold as they proved to be more effective, whether in terms of governance or fighting, than the various FSA battalions.

This situation increasingly pushed FSA armed groups to collaborate with Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces against Assad forces, although not without difficulties and sometimes even clashes, and leading them as well to islamize their discourses (Lister 2015: 71-72, Rafizadeh 2014: 319). The growing presence and domination of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces in Syrian battlefields was translated through the emergence of new military coalitions dominated by an Islamic rhetoric and political program. The chemical attacks on Damascus suburbs constituted in this perspective a turning point.

5.9 Ghouta chemical attacks, a turning point...

On August 21, 2013 the regime used chemical weapons to attack opposition-controlled areas of Damascus suburbs of Eastern and Western Ghouta that killed more than a thousand civilians. Following this chemical attack, US President Barack Obama declared that, before launching a widely anticipated military strike against

regime forces, he would first solicit congressional authorization for use of force (The White House 2013). This decision, understood by many to imply that any U.S. military action would be contingent on the approval of a chronically divided U.S. legislature, resulted in a sharp decline in morale among Washington's allies in the Syrian opposition, who had hoped for the implementation of the president's "red line"³⁸ regarding chemical weapons. The USA's intervention would actually have relatively improved the relevance of FSA forces and the coalition and undermined the regime's military capacity. Within weeks, the situation changed dramatically, Washington reached an agreement with Moscow to get rid of and destroy the regime's chemical weapons by the end of June 2014. This agreement contributed to making American threats of military intervention even less credible, while Bashar al-Assad was made a partner in an internationally monitored disarmament process and the hopes of the Syrian Coalition that had been relying on USA military support to transform the situation on the battlefield to their advantage were broken.

The Syrian Coalition lost even more credibility within the country, as it was its ability to attract a western military intervention that still brought it some followings among armed opposition forces, including Islamic fundamentalist forces such as Jaysh al-Islam and Suqur al-Sham that collaborated previously with the SMC and other FSA groups.

Washington's decision to not intervene and settle an agreement with Moscow, which did not weaken the regime's forces, had also significant consequences in the armed opposition's scene.

FSA battalions saw even less incentive to distance themselves from jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, which had proven itself a very effective actor in battle against the regime forces despite not agreeing with its ideology. Secondly, the centrality of Western powers to an international political settlement increased suspicions and fears of an agreement that would benefit opposition exiles at the

³⁸ The attack actually occurred one year and one day after USA President Barack Obama's 20 August 2012 "red line" remarks, in which he warned: "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation" (CNN 2012).

expense of opposition armed groups within Syria (ICG 2014c: 2-3). Finally Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements were strengthened with an increasingly discredited FSA and exiled opposition linked to Western countries.

This major setback was indeed for the mainstream armed-opposition's Western-backed umbrella body, the SMC. When US officials moved toward a negotiating track, the SMC and its then-leader Salim Idriss, had very little to offer armed opposition groups. The Syrian Coalition, found itself facing intense U.S. pressure to negotiate in Geneva with representatives of a regime believed to have used chemical weapons against populations in opposition held areas just weeks prior and not ready to negotiate on any concessions. The SMC's links with the Coalition, a body considered increasingly by the activist base as ineffective and submitted to the will and objectives of foreign backers, aggravated the former's own credibility crisis.

Washington's decision to not intervene and settle an agreement with Moscow, which did not weaken the regime's forces, had significant consequences in the armed opposition's political scene, particularly strengthening Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements.

In September 2013, 11 groups signed a statement calling for the opposition to Assad to be reorganized under an Islamic framework based on Sharia law and to be run only by groups fighting inside Syria. Signatories range from various Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements, including Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid and Jaysh al-Islam. These signatories rejected the authority of the SNC and the exile administration of Ahmad Tumeh (Solmon 2013).

In mid November of 2013, the Islamic Front (IF) was established by some of the most significant Islamic fundamentalist organizations: the Suqur al-Sham Brigade, the Army of Islam, the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement, the Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Haq, the Kataib Ansar al-Sham and the Kurdish Islamic front. This new Islamic coalition was formed following a process that started in September of the same year, when several of these movements mutually distanced themselves from the Coalition, its exile government and the SMC (Lund 2013a). The IF charter won the support and approval of multiple significant Salafist ideologues, including the Jordan based Iyad

al-Qunaybi (a consistent Jabhat al-Nusra advocate) and London based Abu Basir al-Tartusi (Lister 2015: 106). Some of these groups within the IF did not hesitate to attack democratic groups and activists and sections of the FSA as well. In addition, the IF sought a coalition with the rising ISIL to attack Kurdish civilians and the YPG (Lund 2014a). Groups within the IF were backed by different regional powers. Both al-Tawhid and Ahrar al-Sham enjoyed friendly relations with Qatar and Turkey, while Jaysh al-Islam led by Zahran Alloush was supported by Saudi Arabia. The alliance remained an umbrella organization rather than a full union, with each organization maintaining its own structure (ICG 2014c: 18-19; Lund 2014b).

Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, all of whom felt betrayed by the U.S. policy reversal following the chemical attack against Syrian civilians in the Ghouta in the Summer 2013, were pivotally significant in encouraging the IF's establishment as a clear protest against what Western policy had allowed to take place in Syria (Lister 2016b: 12).

On 9 December 2013, elements of the IF took control of the SMC's storage facilities, which were full of weaponry provided by Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as vehicles, body armor, and medical supplies from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and other countries, close to the Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Turkish border. This large border crossing between Turkey and Syria's Idlib Province had long been a major entry point for supplies to the opposition-armed groups. As a result, the U.S. and UK suspended support to the SMC (Lund 2013b; ICG 2014c: 4). This episode represented the beginning of the end of the SMC and pushed further towards a decentralization of the FSA and its leadership, despite failed attempts for new forms of centralized unity in the following years.

Each defeat on the military front in favour of the regime and its allies strengthened the salafist and jihadist movements in the armed opposition political scene. Similarly, few years later, the fall of Eastern Aleppo in December of 2016 in the regime's hands reinforced jihadist and Islamic fundamentalist forces in north-west regions of the country in the midst of increasing divisions and clashes among armed opposition forces. Meanwhile, local populations in opposition held areas were increasingly angered by the division and infighting between the various armed opposition forces,

seen as the main reason for the defeat of Eastern Aleppo. They called for the unity of armed opposition forces. Attempts to unite different armed opposition groups in the Northern areas were however repeatedly unsuccessful, while infighting continued to increase in 2017.

5.10 Rising competition from Islamic and jihadist fundamentalist forces

The repression of the regime was the most significant element in preventing a democratic alternative to develop in Syria, while the own limitations of FSA's groups, and the division encouraged by some regional actors and inaction of western powers, undermined FSA forces, at the benefits of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces. The rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces on the military scene was however also accompanied by their growing and increasing significance on the political and social arena in areas controlled by opposition forces through the establishments of their own institutions, such as Sharia council or committees, to manage resources and government facilities (Hassan and Weiss 2015: 225). Sharia councils started to emerge in areas liberated from regime forces, challenging the previous local councils. While popular in the beginning in some cases by restoring stability and security in liberated areas of the regime (Sly 2013), Sharia councils were reported to have been the scene of unfair, unlawful and retribitional trials (Hanna 2016). These sharia councils had the role of implementing the authority of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces, of Islamizing laws and the local population, while "legitimizing" the repression of rival forces and / or activists (Pierret 2013a).

In various towns and neighborhoods, local councils also suffered the interventions of armed opposition factions, especially Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces. The judiciary, which fell within the framework of the tasks that these local councils were trying to achieve, were often subjected to many transformations. Most of the judicial institutions that began as independent civil "tribunals" were turned into "Sharia Committees or Council" under pressure from military opposition factions. A great number of armed opposition factions actually established "Sharia Councils", which did not recognize any other authority except their own. This assisted in the decline of the authority of the local councils, limiting their influence to civilians, while they did not have any control over the fighters of the armed opposition factions. This had a

significant impact on the spread of anarchy and chaos, according to Sabr Darwish (2016f: 3).

In Aleppo for example, the Aleppo Sharia Commission (ASC) was formed on November 10th, 2012 led by Jabhat al-Nusra and with the participation of Liwa al-Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Fateh, Harakat Fajr al-Islam, and Suqur al-Sham. According to researcher Thomas Pierret (2013b), the ASC was a mere judiciary arm of the armed groups that lacked any kind of independence. Its objective was to counterbalance the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Sharia Council of Aleppo Province, which was rapidly sidelined and was fully absorbed in February 2014, but above all, their aim was to challenge the Unified Judicial Council (UJC), which was formed by former lawyers and judges who adopted the unified Arab law of the Arab League. The UJC was not secular, as it implemented the sharia-inspired Unified Arab Codes and reduced sentences for prisoners who memorized parts of the Quran (Pierret 2013a). The ASC tried to limit the UJC's influence to the districts of Ansari, Mashhad, and Salah al-Din, while not hesitating to dispatch its fighters and surround the courthouse where the UJC had installed itself, detaining all those inside including judges, note-takers and bodyguards, and imprisoning them for one night (Sly 2013). When the Council attempted to take control of the old transportation department building in the Qaterji district, in order to establish a court in what was ASC's backyard, militants detained the members of the UJC. One of the main reasons for the establishment of the ASC was to expand its domination over new areas of liberated Aleppo and to "Islamize" the city, something that became quickly obvious when the court shunned all secular leaning laws (al-Akhbar English 2013). The ASC also attracted external funding from Gulf donors, who supported the implementation of Sharia (Lister 2015: 103).

Similarly, there was competition regarding the control and the provision of resources in different opposition areas. Members of the Nusra jihadist groups often took most of the supplies intended to be distributed among the local councils, leaving them without enough goods to supply their neighborhoods (Arfeh 2016). From mid-December 2012, the jihadist organization took control of flour production and distribution in opposition-controlled neighborhoods of Aleppo city. With four-grain compounds under its domination and the entire distribution network under its control and

protection, Jabhat al-Nusra generally guaranteed a cheaper and more efficient provision of this staple food product to civilians during the winter of 2012-2013 (Lister 2015: 98-102). In the North-Eastern regions of the country, Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements also started to organize the provision of services and then to form their own councils or to dominate former ones. Jabhat al-Nusra led the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), which formed the backbone of the organization's governing coalition in eastern Syria (Cafarella 2014: 39) and then established the Sharia Board in the Eastern Region on March 9th, 2013.

In the city of Idlib following the dislodging of regime forces in March of 2015, a new judiciary system was imposed and submitted to the coalition of Jaysh al-Fateh, which was dominated by Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. The new authorities imposed their rule on other armed opposition forces, encroaching on civilian affairs. Leaders of the FSA or civil society activists were imprisoned under charges of espionage and apostasy (al-Haqq 2016).

In the Damascus countryside, a similar process occurred with the consolidation of power of Jaysh al-Islam. Jaysh al-Islam started to threaten institutions and councils organized and managed by local coordination committees, while imposing its domination over other armed opposition groups. In the city of Zamalek for example, in the beginning of 2013, the Judicial Body, which was established to resolve disputes and conflicts between civilians and to implement rule of law based on civilian and religious sources, was progressively transformed into a Sharia council. The composition of the council was changed with the inclusion of individual supporters or those close to Jaysh al-Islam and composed essentially of religious clerics, while Sharia became the only source of law. The Jaysh al-Islam expelled religious clerics from the areas it dominated, not sharing its ideas and replacing them with clerics linked to the Salafist movement. Activists also started to be arrested and repressed (Darwish S. 2015: 65-69).

With the siege imposed on this region by regime forces since the end of 2013, the group took increasing control of food supplies while having a monopoly on employment in Douma in the following years. The group established an employment center where applicants were matched with available jobs, almost all of which they

controlled. The armed group's approval was required even for private initiatives, such as shops, charities and pharmacies. Jaysh al-Islam also created the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vices institution, a form of religious police. For roughly \$200 a month, informants were required to report violations ranging from publicly opposing Jaysh al-Islam and cursing to "blasphemy" and the wearing of "indecent clothing" by women (Zaza 2017).

5.11 Growing opposition among activists

From 2013, growing opposition occurred between these Sharia councils controlled mostly by Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements on one side and local councils and democratic youth organizations on the other. The various coordination committees and other democratic organizations increasingly condemned the exactions and human rights violations of these groups. On July 28th, 2013, the LCC (2013c) wrote a statement entitled "the tyranny is one, whether in the name of religion or of secularism," rejecting the authoritarianism of both the Islamic fundamentalist groups and the regime. On August 2nd, 2013, the LCC addressed a new message to these groups saying:

"in a unified message from the revolution to the entire world, we are confirming that the kidnapping of activists and essential actors of the revolution, unless they serve tyranny, hinder the freedom and the dignity of the revolution" (cited in LCC 2013d).

Protests to denounce the authoritarian and repressive policies of the various authorities and councils controlled by Islamic fundamentalists and jihadists movements multiplied throughout the areas liberated from regime's presence. In September of 2013 for example, a statement signed by eleven civilian groups³⁹

³⁹ Revolution Coordination and Liaison Office of Eastern Ghouta; Eastern Ghouta United Relief Office, Middle Sector; United Syrian Services Office in the Eastern Ghouta; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Kafr Batna; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Saqaba; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Ayn Terma; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Harasta; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Hazzah; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Douma; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Hamouriya; Local Council for the Revolution in the City of Irbeen

representing the organized structures of the protest movement in Damascus' countryside, rallied strongly around Razan Zaytouneh, who

“was threatened and harassed by members of armed factions in eastern Ghouta of Damascus Province, for no other reason than being an independent and unveiled woman who is among the grassroots leadership cadres of our revolution” (Syria Non Violence Movement 2013)

In addition to this, the statement also stated that

“on September 9, 2013, fighters reportedly members of the Liwa al-Islam Brigade shot live fire in front of the door of Zaytouneh's home. Three days later, members of armed Jihadist factions began a public smear campaign against Zaytouneh, slandering and libeling her by accusing her of being an agent of the Syrian regime, in a manner to incite potential violence against her” (Syria Non Violence Movement 2013)

In mid-October, a new clash erupted between local councils and organizations with the leader of Jaysh al-Islam, Zahran Alloush. The “Statement of the Civilian Movement in Syria Regarding the Remarks of Mr. Zahran Alloush, Commander of the Army of Islam” was published in which these groups stated their rejection

“of any attempt by any party to impose authoritarianism upon decision-making and upon the work of citizens. We also reject any attempt to make compliance with any institution not elected by the people, no matter how powerful or wealthy the institution, a benchmark for the public good or a gauge of patriotism or an indicator of the ability to perform civic duty today” (cited in Syria Freedom Forever 2013b).

This statement was issued after Mr. Zahran Alloush pronounced that the establishment of the expanded Douma Civilian Council was “divisive” because it ought to have taken the Consultative Council that is associated with him as its sole reference point.

In December of 2013, important figures of the protest movement and of the democratic aspirations of the uprising, Razan Zaytouneh, Wael Hammdeh, Samira Khalil and Nazem Hammadi, were kidnapped from their workplace, the Center for Documentation of Violations in Douma, by armed masked men. Jaysh al-Islam was widely believed to have been behind the kidnapping.

Opponents to Jaysh al-Islam were increasingly repressed, with many who were critical of the organization’s activists imprisoned. By 2014, reports started to trickle out from the Repentance Prison in Douma, a secret jail where opponents of the Jaysh al-Islam were tortured and killed on the orders of the group’s religious tribunals (Lund 2017a). In Eastern Ghouta, women activists started to organize the “Mothers Movement”, in which they demonstrated on numerous occasions for the release of their children who were imprisoned by Jaysh al-Islam (Ghazzawi; Mohammad and Ramadan 2015: 27). In the following years, Jaysh al-Islam’s authorities continued to target various civil society organizations and close their offices putting an end or diminishing considerably their activities. In August 2017 for example, “Rising for Freedom” magazine was outlawed in Douma, and two of its journalists sent to jail over an article published earlier in this year by a court controlled by Jaysh al-Islam.

Numerous similar other cases of activists being arrested, repressed and kidnapped by Islamic fundamentalist forces existed. Moreover throughout 2013, the growing authoritarian behaviors of IS members were increasingly opposed by local populations, especially in Raqqa (Syria Untold 2013i). After the departure of Jabhat al-Nusra and the consolidation of IS’ presence in Raqqa in the summer 2013, an intimidation campaign was launched by the jihadist organization against local activists and journalists in the city, forcing many of them to flee for fear of detention, torture and assassination (Syria Untold 2014a). Firas Hajj Saleh and Father Di Paolo, were notably among the activists kidnapped by the jihadist group (New Syrian Project: Nahwa watan ‘asrî dîmuqrâtî ‘almânî 2013). Rami Jarrah, the co-director of

ANA, declared at this period that they were nearly no more media activists left in Raqqa and that “across the whole of the north there have been around 60 documented media activist abductions by IS, with the crackdown worsening in the last two months” (Beals 2013).

In 2014, the consolidation in the Eastern region of ISIL eliminated nearly all forms of peaceful activism.

5.12 Women’s participation threatened

Similarly, the participation of women in the uprising also suffered. The role of women decreased significantly, and became mostly reduced to humanitarian aid and relief (Dawlaty 2015: 39). Activist Yara Nassir explained in early 2014 that “Syrian women today continue to be hammered by the regime’s oppression on the one hand, and by new impositions on the other”, while adding

“the situation is dramatic, as women continue to suffer in areas under regime control, while in many liberated areas they are pushed out of public spaces and decision-making processes. Women continue to look for a civil space where they can freely develop and express themselves. The fact that the revolution did not incorporate women’s rights at its core is part of the problem. Gender equality was not at the center of the movement for change.” (Syria Untold 2014d)

In addition to this, in the words of activist Razzan Ghazzawi, “while male activists were able to enter liberated or disputed areas, women face all kind of restrictions”, and she added that women had to “take extra precautions and security measures to protect themselves from all kinds of dangers.” She denounced this situation and also the fact that male activists did not condemn “these obstacles that are being put in the face of their, supposedly, partners in the revolution” (Syria Untold 2014c). Civil activist Mahwash Sheiki (2017) recounts for example that

“One of my veiled friends who was excited about the revolution told me that once, after enduring extenuating circumstances, she managed to visit Daraya to deliver aid. At the time, neither Daesh nor the Nusra Front controlled the area. It was the Free Syrian Army, which we had hedged our bets on, who stopped and arrested her for traveling without a *mahram* (a non-marriageable male kin). Mind you, she is an adult, religiously committed woman with a university degree and a strong personality”.

These kinds of behaviors were expanding in the opposition held territories, especially with the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces. In the Eastern Ghouta for example, women activists explained that the situation changed negatively when Jaysh al-Islam took power in the region preventing their activities from taking place and imposing restrictive social codes. In the first years following the beginning of the revolution, female activists were respected and enjoyed a relatively high level of communication and access to negotiations with some armed opposition factions, particularly local FSA groups, which even sometimes facilitated the implementation of female activists' projects (Ghazzawi; Mohammad and Ramadan 2015: 20).

More generally the spread and hegemony of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces led to more and more exclusion of women from public life, and constraints on women's rights to work, to seek education, as well as freedom of mobility (Kannout 2016: 56). Journalist Zaina Erhaim (2014) also wrote on her experiences in the areas controlled by opposition armed groups, mostly Islamic fundamentalist groups, about the restrictions imposed on the women's movement, where she was forced to wear the niqab, and to be accompanied by a man while passing through checkpoints. Similarly feminist activist Razzan Ghazzawi (2018) in the Idlib Province stated that

“I was prevented from doing my work (humanitarian work for displaced persons and teaching to children refugees, etc...) on some occasions and even threatened by Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups because I was not veiled.”

In Idlib region, Jabhat al-Nusra tried to limit women's role in society, forbade mixed in workplaces such as Radio Fresh offices in Kafranbel, and targeted women's economic empowerment groups such as in the case of the center of Mazaya. Both institutions were located in Kafranbel (Syria Untold 2015a; Enab Baladi 2016a). Jabhat al-Nusra also tried to prevent women coming from Idlib Province from going to university to Aleppo, while their members distributed in front schools long black hijabs for students to wear, as this was considered the religious legal cloths (Ghazzawi 2018). At the end of December 2015 in Idlib province, the courthouse of al-Fateh Preaching and Awkaf, which was one of the institutions of Jaysh al-Fateh, issued a statement calling on women to comply with the religiously legitimate dress, long black hijabs, in the streets and public markets (Kannout 2016: 57).

A similar process of authoritarian and reactionary measures was imposed after the establishment of the Free Idlib University by the religious Sharia authorities controlled by Jaysh al-Fateh. In November of 2015, the university imposed gender segregation. Female students were prevented from studying specific subjects such as civil and mechanical engineering and even from entering the medical institute in emergencies, while only female students could be admitted to the midwifery institute. The university administration also merged the faculties of law and of Islamic Sharia, while making a "principles of faith" course that covered Islamic doctrine and jurisprudence compulsory for all students. The university's administration in January 2016 imposed on women at Free Idlib University "Sharia clothing", threatening to "prevent those who do not wear Islamic dress from entering the university and doing exams." Female students were actually verbally abused and forbidden from entering classes after being accused of not adhering to the standards of Islamic dress by the *Rijal al-Hisbah* (the so-called religious police). Female lecturers were also targeted by the Islamic authorities (Damascus Bureau 2016).

Coordination committees and other women's organization tried to maintain in their activities the necessity of putting forward women's rights and their participation in the uprising, although their role unfortunately continued to be undermined. According to a report on women's peace activism, 14 new women's groups were established in 2013 and 2014 in areas of Syria where regime's forces and ISIL was not ruling (Ghazzawi, Razzan, Mohammad Afra and Ramadan, Oula 2015: 12-13). One

famous women's organization in this field was Women Now For Development (2012), directed by the feminist activist Samar Yazbeck. Its objectives were to enable Syrian women to become active members of society, both economically and socially, and to become a key partner in the political decision-making at the local and international level. In 2015, the organization grew significantly. Hundreds of women had enrolled in vocational courses, including hairdressing, nursing, and textile work, and their financial education courses, such as operations methods and budget preparations (Syria Untold 2016c).

The conditions for women's participation in the opposition held areas were however increasingly threatened by the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces. As described by Feminist activist Kannout (2016: 55) in relation to Islamic fundamentalist forces:

“They played a major role in sidelining and marginalizing women, while consolidating the conservative culture that perpetuates discrimination and gender inequality”

5.13 Sectarianism, Islamic fundamentalism and minorities

Among wide sectors of religious minorities, although not all, a sense of fear of the future was present from the beginning of the uprising to any kind of change. Reasons varied as well within each sect according to class, gender, etc... Large sectors of Alawis working in public administrations, the army and security services were scared to lose their employments in the case of a change of regime and to be the targets of revenge actions for their affiliations with the Assad regime or simply because of their sect. Other larger sectors of minorities such as Christians, Druze and Shi'a feared also the fall of the regime and a form of chaos prevailing in the country in which they could be easy targets.

For instance, large sectors of the Christians populations had particularly in mind the case of Iraq after the US and British led invasion in 2003 and the targeting of Christians populations by Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces. More than half of the Christian population in Iraq left the country since 2003 and their numbers are still

diminishing (Ufheil-Somers 2013). This was translated most of the times in a form of passivity and neutrality towards the protest movement.

The repression of demonstrations, increasing sectarian tensions and the multiplication of sectarian killings and abductions, increased this fear and had dramatic consequences on the relations between religious sects. In the city and the province of Homs, sectarian violence expanded rapidly from the summer of 2011, with revenge killings and attacks between Alawi and Sunni populations becoming more common. Consequences were dramatic in regard to relations between the two communities. Before the uprising of March 2011, the different neighborhoods of Homs used to be composed by a single religious sect- whether Sunni, Alawi, Christian, or Shi'a, but the society of the city was generally pluralistic and peaceful. It was possible to encounter minority-owned businesses, such as Sunni-owned shops, in Alawi neighborhoods. The population in some of the newer areas built in the mid-1990s was mixed (Khaddour 2013a: 11). This pluralism was increasingly challenged as when, a few months following the beginning of the uprising, groups of *shabiha* from outlying villages started taking over the houses and businesses of Sunnis. Most of these Sunni families were forcibly evicted and expelled from the neighborhoods. The Shabiha looted and sold their belongings in what became known locally as the "Sunni market" (Khaddour 2013a: 18).

Religious tensions were growing and hostile remarks could be heard among some protesters. Author Johnathan Little (2015) documented several instances of hostility against the Alawis among protesters in Homs and al-Qusayr in 2012 and even cited individuals part of the FSA claiming their admiration for Ben Laden or Zarqawi, because the latter "came to Iraq to confront Iran and the Shi'as" (cited in Little 2015:48). In addition to this, the word "Nusayri", previously mostly used by Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups, became more and more common among fighters of the Syrian opposition (Zelin and Smyth 2014). They were also cases of FSA units arresting individuals according to their religious sects, from religious minorities on checkpoints, as they were considered as suspicious and most of the time defacto affiliated to the regime, and liberating them after few weeks against a ransom (Anonymous C).

Many Alawi and minority activists increasingly voiced their fear and experiences of hatred in regions controlled by Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups, contrary to the beginning of the uprising when they were initially warmly welcomed by protesters (Wieland 2015: 242).

While not reaching similar levels of violence in Homs, cases of abductions and kidnappings increased in the beginning of the uprising in various regions such as between local communities of Suwayda, a majority Druze city, and Dar'a, a majority Sunni city, and between Christian and Muslims in Qusayr in Homs Province (Satik 2013: 407). This situation did not prevent the province of Suwayda from welcoming around 150,000 internal displaced persons who came from other regions suffering from the war such as Homs, the suburbs of Damascus and Dar'a during the uprising times (Khalaf K. 2015)

In the town of Qusayr,⁴⁰ the increasing presence of jihadist fighters, including foreigners, in the first half of 2012, alongside local armed opposition groups and the rise of kidnapping and abductions targeting Christian individuals rendered the presence of the community more and more difficult. St. Elias Church in the city was also turned in mid June into the headquarters of an Islamic fundamentalist group, (Ashkar 2013), while in the summer 2012 following the complete conquest of the city by armed opposition forces, the local preacher-turned-brigade-leader, Abdel Salam Harba, called through the Mosques of the city on the Christians to leave under the pretext of supporting Bashar al-Assad and because they refused to carry weapons to fight the regime (Putz 2012; Wood 2013). The local FSA in Qusayr expressed their shock at the news and rejected “the ultimatum, saying that it is not responsible and does not share it in any way” (cited in Ashkar 2013). Harba threatened again in a mosque sermon on October 12, 2012, Christians, saying that “there is nothing left for them in Qusayr” “there is no return for them to Qusayr” and that “Qusayr Christians are traitors”. Most of the Christians left Qusayr in the Summer 2012 following the ultimatum, with few remaining in the town until December 2012 (Ashkar 2013). Christian started to come back to the area only following the SAA and Hezbollah regained control of al-Qusayr in June 2013, despite the wide-scale destruction of the

⁴⁰ Qusayr was a town of 30,000-40,000, a few miles into Syria from the Lebanese border. It was once around three-quarters Sunni Muslim and one-quarter Christian.

city. A minority of the local Sunni population, who were mostly not involved with the opposition, also returned (Mashi 2013b), while the majority still did not return at the time of the writing.

From mid to late 2013, researchers Baczko Dorronsoro and Quesnay (2016: 324-325) described a situation with mounting sectarianism in some opposition held areas, particularly the ones with growing Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist presence and influence. Religious minorities were increasingly excluded or discriminated from any future political system, while some suffered from looting and attacks because they were considered or accused of collaborating with the regime. These actions and discourses led large sections of religious minorities to join regime-controlled areas. Even minority activists opposed to the regime from the beginning of the uprising were not welcome in some opposition held areas or were threatened by some groups. This does not mean that the majority of the local population in opposition held areas shared these feelings, quite to the contrary, it was the influence and control of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces, but also some from the FSA, that rendered the unwelcoming situation for minorities. Growing sectarian sentiments negatively affected the uprising. For example, tensions (between Arabs and Kurds; and between Muslims, Druze and Christians) in the Damascus suburbs of Jaramana, Tadamon and Rukn al-Din made the formation of local councils difficult (Khoury D. 2013: 7).

Sectarian attacks increased against religious minorities across the year 2013 and the following years as well, with suicide bombings targeting Christian and Alawi neighborhoods of Damascus more often (Lister 2015: 153), or the numerous attacks and kidnappings of Assyrian populations in the Jazirah by the ISIL. This included IS' offensive driving out 3,000 Assyrians from their villages and kidnapping hundreds in February of 2015 (Isaac 2015).

From 2013, religious minorities were also targeted by some military offensives. In June of 2013, opposition armed forces murdered at least 30 people in a raid on the Shi'a village of Hatla in Deir Zor Governorate, scorching houses and decrying Shi'a "dogs" and "apostates" (IRIN 2013a). In the summer of 2013, a coalition of different opposition armed groups, led by Ahrar al-Sham, ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra, Jaysh al-

Muhajireen wal-Ansar, Suqur al-Izz, launched a large-scale offensive in Lattakia countryside. They occupied more than 10 Alawi villages for few days in August and committed massacres. Human Rights Watch collected the names of 190 civilians who were killed by these opposition forces in their offensive on the villages, including 57 women and at least 18 children and 14 elderly men (Human Rights Watch 2013). At one more occasion, in May of 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and other allied groups killed at least 19 civilians after capturing an Alawi village from regime forces, al-Zara, north of Homs (Barrington and Perry 2016; Institute for the Study of War 2016). In the same month, multiple coordinated explosions rocked two highly secured cities on Syria's coast, Jableh and Tartus, killing more than 120 people and injuring scores of others in grisly suicide bombings targeting civilians at bus stations and a hospital. After the bombings and as an act of "retaliation", a group of young men, mostly affiliated with NDF's militias, set fire to a displaced persons' camp south of Tartus, the al-Karnak camp, which contained about 400 Sunni families who had fled to the area (Noufal and Wilcox 2016b).

In October of 2013, the city of Yabrud witnessed a heavy exodus of Christians after Jabhat al-Nusra targeted the Church of Our Lady and the Church of Constantine and Helen with IEDs, resulting in their partial destruction (Ali 2014a). In December of 2013, Jaysh al-Islam stormed the city of Adra, north of Damascus. The Islamic fundamentalist group beheaded and burned alive – in ovens – dozens of Druze, Isma'ili and Alawis, out of thousands of mostly Sunni civilians, who later fled to regime-held areas (Al-Atrache 2016). On a similar model, IS singled out and killed 4 Druze cement workers out of 300 mostly Sunni workers they had abducted in the city of Dumayr, near Damascus, in April of 2016. In late March of 2014, the offensive of Jabhat al-Nusra along with jihadists from Chechen and other Islamic fundamentalist groups, on the city of Kessab and its Armenian-majority population provoked the displacement of its residents (Ali 2014b) Kessab churches were burned, as crosses were shot and graves destroyed by the Islamic militants (Sherlock 2015).

In the case of the small Druze population in the countryside of Idlib governorate, relations evolved negatively between the Druze population and jihadist groups since late 2013. First, ISIL controlled the region and demanded that the Druze convert to Islam. It also tried to impose a dress code and other strict measures such as adding

domes and minarets to places where Druze pray. A period of calm occurred following the eviction of ISIL by the FSA coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary Front. However, in late October 2014, SRF troops were expelled from these regions by Jabhat al-Nusra forces. Once again Druze populations suffered repressive measures (al-Assil and Slim 2015). In 2015, al-Nusra's emir for the area of Jabal Summaq, where Druze reside, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Tunisi, forced the Druze to issue a statement from representatives of the various villages agreeing to renounce their religion and abiding by al-Nusra's regulations on public morality which forced women to wear clothing Nusra believed to be in line with Sharia law, gender segregation in schools and public spaces, and to submit to lessons on Islamic doctrine and jurisprudence (Gartenstein-Ross and al-Tamimi 2015). In June of 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra members committed a massacre against 24 civilian residents of Qalb Lozeh, a Druze village in Idlib Governorate (al-Assil and Slim 2015).

A Human Rights Watch (HRW)'s report in 2015 investigated at indiscriminate attacks with car bombs, mortars and unguided rockets by armed opposition groups between January 2012 and April 2014 in the following areas: in central Damascus and Sayida Zeinab and Jaramana in Damascus Countryside governorate, in the neighborhoods of al-Zahra, Akrama, al-Nazha, and Bab Sba` in the city of Homs, and in the village of Thabtieh near Homs.⁴¹ The areas, most prone to be the target of opposition armed forces according to HRW, are populated areas predominately inhabited by religious minorities, including Shi'a, Alawi, Druze, and Christians, and were in close proximity to neighborhoods under the control of opposition groups. Exceptions were Bab Sba`, which is a predominately Sunni neighborhood with some Christian residents, and central Damascus, which is a mixed neighborhood of various faiths. The report concluded that

“Human Rights Watch found that in the areas we could visit, neighborhoods under government control inhabited predominately by religious minorities were subject to more indiscriminate attacks by opposition groups than areas that were largely majority Sunni. Public statements by opposition

⁴¹ These neighborhoods were selected by HRW because they were among those most prone to attack by opposition groups and because of their ability to visit them.

armed groups provided strong evidence that these groups considered the religious minorities to be backing the Syrian government or that the attacks were in retaliation for government attacks on Sunni civilians elsewhere in the country.” (HRW 2015)

This demonstrated the increasing sectarian practices among the Syrian opposition armed forces.

The domination of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces on the battlefield was also observed in the sectarian rhetoric or behavior used by armed opposition forces. Following the chemical weapons attacks in the Ghouta, Jolani issued a statement on August 25th, 2013, in which he announced that Jabhat al-Nusra would execute retaliatory attacks, naming the operation “Operation Volcano of revenge”, against regime and pro regime regions under the Islamic concept of *qisas*. This meant equal retaliation, “an eye for an eye”. One Alawi village would be attacked for every chemical loaded rocket fired into East Ghouta, Jolani declared (Lister 2015: 164). The seizure of the city of Ma'lula was presented by Jabhat al-Nusra's official account, as part of the “Eye-for-an-Eye” revenge campaign. One of Nusra's photos for the attack on Ma'lula was published on Facebook with a verse from the Qur'an stating: “Allah give us patience and victory over the infidels”. In November of 2015, in the town of Douma in the suburbs of Damascus, two days after attacks from regime planes killed at least 40 people in a market, Jaysh al-Islam caged Alawi army officers and their families in cells and displayed them on the streets. This was supposedly done to shield the area from further bombardment (Mackey and Samaan 2015).

In August of 2016, armed opposition groups, on the initiative of Nur al-Din Zinki, in Aleppo named their attempt at breaking the siege of the city after Ibrahim Youssef. He was a militant of the jihadist group Fighting Vanguard, which opposed the regime in the 1970s and 1980s, but moreover headed the group that seized the Aleppo Artillery School in June of 1979 and in which they separated the Alawi and Sunni cadets before executing up to 83 of the Alawis (Lefèvre 2016). During the military offensive in Aleppo, a spokesman for the Jabhat al-Fateh al-Sham led forces declared they would do the same to Alawis. None of the participant groups, which

ranged from FSA battalions to jihadists, objected to the name choice, demonstrating the islamisation of the armed opposition forces (Hassan H. 2016c). A few weeks later, militant factions in the Hama countryside dubbed their military offensive on regime-held positions the “Invasion of the Martyr Marwan Hadid”. He was the Fighting Vanguard’s charismatic founder and first leader, before dying in prison in 1976. He referred in a derogatory way to Alawis as “Nusayri dogs” and called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria (Lefèvre 2016).

The behavior and rhetoric of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces pushed minorities, among others, to leave cities in advance for fear of retaliations and oppression. The conquest of the city of Idlib in March of 2015 by the armed opposition coalition led by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar Sham provoked the departure of nearly all of Idlib’s Christian minority before the capture of the city. Jabhat al-Nusra was also guilty of foul treatment, looting and killing of Christian citizens after taking over the city, while a priest, Father Ibrahim Farah, along with a young pharmacist were kidnapped. They also used the remaining families in Idlib as media pawns. They forced a woman to appear in a video and praise the insurgents’ treatment of Christians in Idlib. The families decided to stealthily flee, coordinating with some Muslims in the city to escape and reach the province of Hama (Slaytin 2015). In addition, a large number of civil servants and others not directly tied to government repression fled as well. The reasons were multiple: they preferred Assad to Jaysh al-Fateh, or simply to escape the fighting and, later, aerial bombardment by the Syrian Arab Air Force (Lund 2016c). The Red Crescent in Idlib buried about 300 bodies in a mass grave on April 9th, both of Christians and Muslims, which also contained bodies of families Jabhat al-Nusra called thugs and then slaughtered (Slaytin 2015).

In different areas controlled by Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements, these forces did not hesitate through religious polices to enforce an “Islamic order” as mentioned earlier in the text, not appealing to vast sectors of local Sunni populations. In Idlib, the Jabhat al-Nusra led HTS first created a Hisbah agency (religious police) and then a Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which imposed a number of decisions related to clothing, barbershops, smoking, listening to music and mixing at parties. The committee’s actions also included the monitoring of Sharia matters inside hospitals, health centers and schools and academic institutes

through daily patrols at the hospitals to monitor the clothing of medical staff and make sure they comply with Sharia clothing. Persons not respecting the rules imposed by the committee were repressed (Souriatna 2018). In June 2017, HTS established also the "Sawa'id al-Khair" or "Goodwill Corps," affiliated with the religious morality police to enforce its laws on the streets and to monitor people. This new unit regularly intervened in public affairs in Idlib and imposed its authority on the education centers and disrupted hospitals and other humanitarian facilities (Arfeh 2018).

For large sections of religious minorities and some sections among the Sunni population, there was no more democratic and inclusive alternative provided by the protest movement at the beginning of the uprising with the rise of these Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces. The growth of the IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and others benefited the regime politically by undermining other opposition groups, while also reinforcing the idea that only the regime can rescue the country from this extremist alternative. The rise of the various Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements raised fears among large sectors of the population, not only religious minorities, while pushing even more Alawis in the hands of the regime as they were increasingly the targets of suicide bombings in the aim of exacerbating sectarian tensions.

Researcher Kheder Khaddour reported for example the evolution of a young Alawi in Homs initially supportive of the uprising who after joining a large demonstration against the regime in the main square in Homs and witnessing the secret services repress violently and shoot on the protesters, progressively withdrew from the protest movement. He explained that soon afterwards he heard loud appeals for

“jihad coming from the minarets of mosques - which to Alawis meant a holy war against them... Suddenly I became scared and I changed my mind, as I realized that what was happening was no longer a revolution” (cited in Khaddour 2013a: 22)

He added that a turning point for him came in July 2011 when three Alawi boys were killed and then in revenge, Alawi men went on a rampage and attacked local Sunni-owned stores, causing the Sunni owners and their families to flee. Fadi however still

claimed his opposition to Bachar al-Assad, but then left to Lebanon in order to avoid the army's conscription, as he was unwilling to serve in the army (Khaddour 2013a: 22).

Similarly, some opposition figures, especially among Alawis, started to retreat from their previous positions, such as Nabil Suleiman who distanced himself from the revolution. Fateh Jamous, longtime leader of the Party of Communist Action and who had been imprisoned between 1982 and 2000 and again between 2003 and 2006, declared in May 2012 during the vote for the new constitution that the opposition's objective should not be to seek to overthrow of the regime but to pave the way for a peaceful transition. He rejected the Coalition and acted as Secretary General of the Peaceful Change Path Party, within the so-called "official" opposition which the regime publicly accepted (Wieland 2015: 235).

5.14 Conclusion

The opposition bodies in exile, the SNC and the Coalition, were unable to constitute throughout the uprising a credible alternative and act as a representative of the initial objectives of the protest movement and its diversity. They also failed to provide a political strategy and leadership, both in its civilian and armed components, to unite it and lead efforts to overthrow the regime. The successive failures of these opposition bodies increasingly allowed Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups to dominate the military scene in Syria.

The growth of these forces reduced the capacities and appeal of the protest movement to provide an inclusive and democratic message to large sections of the Syrian population, even the people who were not involved directly in the protest movement, but who had sympathies to the initial goals of the uprising. They also targeted activists involved in the uprising and attacked the democratic components of the protest movement to impose their own objectives and authority, which were opposed to the initial objectives of the uprising for democracy and equality.

There was a clear strategy by the regime to favour the creation of Islamic fundamentalist and Salafists jihadists' organizations to discredit the uprising, while repressing democratic components of the protest movement and of FSA forces. The regime also wanted to create fear among sections of the population, afraid of these kinds of forces. The Syrian regime opted for the strategy of allowing the development of these organizations, including the IS, in order to present the opposition as Islamic fundamentalist extremists as its propaganda has done since the beginning of the uprising, and increase division within the opposition. Between April 2013 and Summer 2014, the Syrian air force largely abstained from bombing discernible IS buildings and installations in the city of Raqqa. In a study conducted by the Carter Center, it was established that prior to IS military advances throughout Syria and Iraq in July and August 2014, the Syrian regime had

“largely abstained from engaging (IS) unless directly threatened... Prior to this (IS) offensive, the Syrian government had directed over 90 percent of all air raids against oppositions positions” (cited in Hassan and Weiss 2015: 198).

The IS is not the "prime concern" of the Syrian regime Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem reportedly admitted, saying that opposition armed groups - who were also fighting the jihadist groups - posed more of a threat to Damascus' rule (The New Arab 2016b).

Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces increasingly gained influence among the armed-opposition groups as they were better funded, better organized, and had greater experience and discipline, while the FSA lacked all these elements. Each defeat of the democratic sectors of the protest movement, both civilian and armed, strengthened and benefited the Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces on the ground throughout the years, which progressively dominated the military scene. The growth of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces provoked various internal conflicts between the different armed opposition forces, including between Islamic forces.

The various Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements (such as the jihadist organization of IS and JFS, the Salafist organizations Ahrar al-Sham and the Jaysh al-Islam, as well as others such as the Muslim Brotherhood) defend an Islamic State despite their differences on how to reach this objective. This was of course an exclusionary project and was not appealing to various groups within Syrian society such as religious minorities, women, or those who had a different understanding of Islam.

Just as the Syrian MB in 1980s, they probably had been successful in widening the gap between the regime and large sections of the population, but they were unable to destabilize decisively the regime. Their sectarian and violent propaganda and practices had scared sections of the population not sympathizing with this ideology. In addition, instead of dividing the Alawi population and thus weakening their foothold in the army and security services, they had by their sectarian anti-Alawi practical discourse and actions, scared vast section of the Alawi and rallying them behind Assad (Batatu 1982).

In this context, democratic activists were not only threatened by regime forces, but by some armed opposition groups, especially by the rise Islamic Fundamentalist and jihadist movements who rejected the initial objectives of the uprising – freedom and dignity. In addition, these forces were particularly effective in the establishment of civil structures as a counterbalance to local councils and local coordination committees, while repressing any dissent from them.

The dual opposition faced by the democratic protest movement was symbolized in the summer of 2013 with the arrest of the sisters Maisa and Samar Saleh respectively by the Assad regime and IS. On April 23, Syrian activist Maisa Saleh was arrested by regime forces in the Saruja market, in the heart of Damascus. She was known for her active participation in peaceful protests and civil disobedience initiatives. On August 8, her sister Samar was detained in the area of Tahuna, Aleppo for demanding a civil state and equality for all citizens by IS (Syria Untold 2013e). Similarly, numerous cases of activists existed during the uprising who were jailed first by the regime and then Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces, such as Ahmad al-Abdo who was detained by the Assad regime in 2012 when he was filming a protest

in his hometown, Jisr Al Shughur and in 2015 when he was imprisoned for almost 90 days by former al-Qa'ida affiliates JFS (Mrie 2017).

The protest movement and its initial objectives were therefore increasingly challenged from different sides and not only the regime, although this latter remained the most dangerous actor in the country...

Chapter 6: The Kurdish question in Syria, the PYD and Rojava

6.1 Introduction

The first Syrian Kurdish parties were established in the 1950s as the result of an increasingly aggressive and chauvinistic Arab nationalism and growing frustration with Kurdish members of the Syrian Communist Party. While Kurds had a significant presence in the party, and were close to it, many came to the conclusion that the party headed by Khalid Bakdash would not defend Kurdish rights and actually opposed the recognition of Kurdish national rights in Syria (Tejel 2009: 48). The vast majority of these Kurdish movements found their first and strongest supporters among educated and urbanized members of the traditional elite and gradually expanded their class base when higher education became more widely available. Most of the movements adopted various socialist ideologies, although the tribal elite remained well-represented among their leadership. The major exception to this dynamic would be the PKK in the 1990s and 2000s before its divisions, which from the beginning sought to represent the popular classes and considered the tribal elite as collaborators in the colonization of Kurdistan (Van Bruinessen 2016: 7). To a lesser extent the Yekiti party was able to have a large following in the 1990s and 2000s before it suffered from internal divisions.⁴²

This chapter addresses the participation of the Kurdish population and Kurdish political forces in the Syrian uprising. Kurdish protesters initially organized in a similar fashion to other areas through local coordination committees. The initial collaboration between the Arab and Kurdish coordination committees and youth progressively however ceased because of various political pressures, of militarization and increasing Arab and Kurdish ethnic tensions, which I will analyze.

The rise of the PYD, with the benevolent attitude of the Assad regime, led to its increasing control over the Kurdish political scene in Syria (see Annex 6). The situation diminished communication and exchange with other sectors of the Arab

⁴² The Yekiti party was created in 1992 following the unification of several Kurdish groups from leftist and nationalist origins. Students, intellectuals and liberal professionals dominated their ranks, although members of all strata could be found. Members of the party were mainly located in urban centers, especially in Qamichli, Hasakah, Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia (Tejel 2009: 112).

opposition as the PYD pursued its own objectives. The main representatives of the Syrian Arab opposition in exile on their side did not satisfy Kurdish national demands and maintained a chauvinistic behavior and discourse against Kurdish populations.

PYD was able to take advantage for a period of time of the divisions among the various international actors intervening in Syria, notably in receiving the assistance of the USA, and to a lesser extent Russia, to advance its own political interests. At the same time, the PYD led autonomy of Kurdish regions would increasingly be the targets of numerous actors threatening the future of the entity and the same international actors that supported it increasingly turned their back on the Kurdish group.

The appearance on the Syrian political scene of the Kurdish national issue was an important element in understanding the development of the Syrian uprising and its increasing divisions.

6.2 Kurdish issue before 2011 between repression and cooptation

In the 1950s and 1960s, Kurds in Syria were of the main scapegoats of rising Arab nationalism in Syria – including during the UAR⁴³ and afterwards with the Ba’thist rule from 1963. They were presented as hired agents working at the service of powerful foreign enemies, especially American and Zionist imperialism (Tejel 2009: 41). The first measures of the “Arab belt” plan started in 1962. This policy of the “Arab Belt” was a plan for a cordon sanitaire between Syrian and neighboring Kurds around the northern and northeastern rim of the Jazirah, along the borders with Turkey and Iraq. An “exceptional census” of the Jazirah population in 1962 resulted in around 120 000 Kurdish being denied nationality and declared as foreigners, leaving them, and subsequently their children, denied of basic civil rights and condemned to poverty

⁴³ The UAR authorities launched a harsh campaign of repression against the main Kurdish party of that period the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) in August 1960. More than 5,000 individuals were arrested and tortured, while some twenty of its leaders were imprisoned and charged with separatism. They were ultimately sentenced to six months or a year’s imprisonment, during which time they were tortured (Vanly 1992: 118; Allsopp 2015: 21; Tejel 2009: 49)). The pressure on the organization pushed some of the leadership to also travel to Iraqi Kurdistan to seek refugee (Allsopp 2015: 77).

and discrimination (Seurat 2012: 181).⁴⁴

The Assad regime continued policies of discrimination and maintained the institutional racist system against Kurdish populations in Syria. Between 1972 and 1977, a policy of colonization was implemented in specific regions populated dominantly by the Kurdish population in the continuation of the “Arab Belt” plan. Around 25,000 “Arab” peasants, whose lands were flooded by the construction of the Tabqa dam, were sent in the High Jazirah and established in “modern villages” close to Kurdish villages (Seurat 2012: 183).

Meanwhile, the regime developed a policy to coopt certain segments of Kurdish society – especially with mounting opposition in the country at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s – and to serve foreign policy objectives. Some Kurds participated in the regime’s system through the incorporation of certain Kurdish elites from the religious brotherhoods and official sheikhs such as Ahmad Kuftaro, mufti of the republic between 1964 and 2004 and Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Bouti (Pinto 2010: 265). Several Kurds held positions of local authority, while others reached high-ranking ones such as: Prime Minister Mahmud Ayyubi (1972-1976), Hikmat Shikaki, chief of military intelligence (1970-1974) and chief of staff (1974-1998), and general Mahmud al-Kurdi, former director general of the Military Construction Enterprise and later Minister of Agriculture. However, this was on the condition of not demonstrating any particular Kurdish ethnic consciousness. Some Kurds were also included at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s into elite divisions of the army or linked to specific military groups serving the regime. Another way of cooptation was the complicity of local security services with certain families of active Kurdish smugglers in the Jazirah on the Syrian-Turkey and Syria-Iraqi frontiers (Tejel 2009: 66-67).

This policy of cooptation included some Kurdish political parties as well. The Assad regime actually established a form of alliance with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party

⁴⁴ Between 120,000 and 150,000 Kurds are classified as firstly 1) non-citizen foreigners (*ajanib*) on their identity cards and cannot vote, own property, or obtain government jobs (but are not, however, exempt from obligatory military service) and secondly as 2) the so-called *maktumin* (unregistered) who cannot even receive treatment in state hospitals or obtain marriage certificates. They are not officially acknowledged at all and have no identity cards.

(PKK)⁴⁵ and Ocalan became an official guest of the regime at the beginning of the 1980s in the background of Syrian and Turkish tensions. The PKK was authorized to recruit members and fighters, reaching between 5,000 and 10,000 persons in the 1990s (Bozarslan 2009: 68; Allsopp 2015: 40) and to launch military operations from Syria against the Turkish army. PKK had offices in Damascus and in several northern cities (McDowall 1998: 65). PKK militants took de facto control over small portions of Syrian territory, particularly in Afrin. Other Kurdish political parties also collaborated with the Syrian regime such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)⁴⁶ led by Jalal Talabani, who had been in Syria since 1972 and later in 1979 the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP)⁴⁷ affiliated with Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani (Tejel 2009: 72-78).

The condition sine qua non of this support from the Syrian regime was the abstention of the Kurdish movements of Iraq and Turkey from any attempt at mobilizing Syrian Kurds against the Syrian regime. Damascus was able to instrumentalize these Kurdish political groups to serve its own interests by using them as a tool in foreign policies to achieve some regional ambitions and at the national level by diverting the Kurdish issue away from Syria, towards Iraq and Turkey.

Relations between the Kurdish political parties and the Syrian regime became increasingly bad at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. The improvement of Turkish and Syrian relations prompted Syrian security forces to launch several waves of repression against the remaining PKK elements in Syria (ICG 2013: 12). Following the exile of Ocalan in 1998 and imprisonment of many PKK members, party's activists tried to establish new parties with the double objective of avoiding state repression and providing support for its thousands of members and sympathisers. The PYD (Democratic Union Party) was established in 2003 as a successor to the PKK in Syria (Tejel 2009: 79).

⁴⁵ The PKK was formed in the late 1970s in Turkey and its ideology was originally a fusion of Marxism and Kurdish nationalism which was intended to be used as the foundation of an independent, Marxist–Leninist state known as Kurdistan.

⁴⁶ The PUK was originally a leftist Iraqi-Kurdish political party that splintered from the KDP in the mid 1970.

⁴⁷ The KDP is the oldest Kurdish political party in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was founded in 1946 in the Kurdish region of Iran where the Iraqi Kurds led by Mustafa Barzani were taking refuge (The Kurdish Project 2017).

Relations were similarly weakening with KDP and PUK from 2000 as Damascus was trying to normalize relations with Baghdad, which meant an end to its interference in Iraqi Kurdish affairs (ICG 2011: 21).

In 2004, the Kurdish uprising, which had started in the town of Qamishli and had spread in the predominantly Kurdish regions throughout the country - Jazirah, Afrin -, but also in Aleppo and Damascus, was severely repressed by the security forces. The regime appealed for the collaboration of some Arab tribes of the Northeast that had historical connections to the regime. Around 2,000 protesters were arrested and 36 killed, while others were forced to leave the country (Lowe 2006: 5). The Kurdish *Intifada*, as well as developments in Iraqi Kurdistan with increasing autonomy and Kurdish symbols being raised, gave Syrian Kurdish people increased confidence to mobilize for their rights and strengthened the nationalist consciousness of the youth and its will for change.

Kurds continued to assert themselves by organizing events celebrating their Kurdish identity and protesting anti-Kurdish policies of the government. Kurdish students of various political groups were also very active throughout these years on university campuses, particularly Damascus and Aleppo. Syria pursued harsh repressive policies against Kurdish political and cultural activisms and celebrations.

6.3 The beginning of the revolutionary process

Protests in predominantly Kurdish areas started as soon as the end of March and beginning of April 2011. The first demonstrations were organized in 'Amuda and then reached the city of Qamishli on April 1st calling for freedom, to brotherhood between Arab Kurds and solidarity with Dar'a (Kurd Watch 2012; Aziz Abd El-Krim 2016; Darwish 2016a, Hassaf 2016). In the Friday demonstrations, protestors often chanted for freedom and dignity in various languages: Arabic, Kurdish and Assyrian communities present in the Jazirah. Other Kurdish inhabited cities were also active in the protests with Kurdish flags raised alongside Syrian ones (Daragahi and Sandel 2011).

The protest movement in these areas emerged around pre-existing youth groups or newly established LCCs, seeing themselves as part of the national movement against the regime. Throughout the year 2011, as explained by a Syrian Kurdish activist, Alan Hassaf (2016)

“The Kurdish coordination committees coordinated and cooperated with their counterparts in other Syrian cities across the different networks available to coordinate between them, such as the Local Coordination Committee and the Syrian Revolution General the Revolution Commission and others”.

Ciwanan Serhildana (Youth Uprising), which was founded on February 20, 2011, played a significant role in the organization of the first demonstrations in the city of Qamishli. In their first statement, end of March, they stated that Kurds were an integral part of the fabric of Syrian society, and like any other “Free Syrian Youth”, they sought freedom, dignity, and the elimination of one-party rule and tyranny (Abdallah, Abd Hayy (al-) and Khoury (2012); Youssef 2014; Hassaf 2016; Darwish S. 2016a).

Continuous protests occurred in the following month, especially as the regime’s forces did not intervene to repress violently the demonstrations until mid July.⁴⁸ The regime sought to win the backing or at least the non-opposition of Kurdish political parties through various means. In early March 2011 for example, the Ministry of Social Affairs took the decision of normalizing the status of Kurds in all employment matters, while the regime also revoked the Decree 49, which had impeded the transfer of lands in border regions affecting Kurdish populations (Kurd Watch 2013b: 4). On March 20, the regime acknowledged and celebrated the Kurdish New Year, which was shown on state television and extensively covered by the national news agency (ICG 2011: 22). Nawruz would be celebrated in the following years as well with much publicity by the regime (Sabbagh 2015). The Kurdish Coordination committees however cancelled the celebrations of Nawruz in March 2012 and transformed them into protests calling for the overthrow of the regime. They also

⁴⁸ This situation lasted until July 22, 2011, the Friday of “Khaled’s Grandchildren”, when a demonstration that came out in Qamishli was attacked by the regime’s forces (Darwish S. 2016a).

programmed a general strike and a candlelight vigil “to mourn the martyrs” killed since March 15, 2011. The main slogan for the Kurdish national holiday in 2012 was the “Nawruz of Syria’s Freedom” (Abdallah, Abd Hayy (al-) and Khoury 2012).

Bashar al-Assad issued a decree in April, 2011 following meetings with Kurdish representatives, granting nationality to persons registered as foreigners in the governorate of Hasakah, while 48 prisoners, mainly Kurds, were also released. Many stateless Kurds were still awaiting citizenship in the following years. By March 2012, only an estimated 6,000 out of 150,000 stateless Kurds had been granted citizenship and discriminatory regulations continued (The Daily Star Lebanon 2012; Kurd Watch 2013b: 3-4). Despite this measure, several hundred people peacefully marched in various cities such as Qamishli, ‘Amuda and Hasakah, chanting “We do not want only nationality but also freedom” (Orient le Jour 2011f).

From the summer of 2011, the demonstrators increasingly, and then systematically, raised the Kurdish flag alongside the Syrian one. In October, massive demonstrations occurred in the city of Qamishli, following the assassination of prominent Syrian Kurdish political activist Mishal Tammo. Mr Tammo was a member of Kurdish Future movement and had recently been released after spending more than two years in jail. He was also a member of the executive committee of the newly formed SNC. Thousands of protesters took to the streets to express their anger (Nono Ali 2011), and chanted to topple the regime.

Soon after the first protests a number of committees appeared on the Syrian Kurdish political scene, in addition to Ciwanan Serhildana, all of which claimed to represent the protest movement: The Youth of Jazirah; Towards A Civil Society; Coalition of Kurdish Youth Movements; SAWA Youth Coalition (part of the LCCs). The four groups established a coalition called “The General Council of the Kurdish Youth Movements”. This coalition lasted until it was replaced by the Union of Kurdish Committees, instituted in September 2011. The group fell apart in early 2012, when the Kurdish Youth Movement pulled out. The coalition was however one of the founders of the Kurdish National Council (KNC). In the summer of 2016, 10 committees were involved with the General Council, none of which had a real presence on the ground (Kurd Watch 2012b; Darwish S. 2016a).

Mass demonstrations continued in Qamishli, and they reached their peak in mid-2012. Activists removed most of the pictures of Assad and sprayed and painted over the government institutions. Demonstrations and civilian actions decreased considerably after the summer of 2012 for various reasons, including the militarization of the uprising and the PYD's progressive domination of large sectors of the city, although organizations still protested on some occasions (Darwish S. 2016a).

The collaboration between Arab and Kurdish youth groups and LCCs continued until approximately March of 2012. After this period, Kurdish activists started using their own slogans that made reference to specific Kurdish issues and had not been previously accepted as general slogans. At the same time, the use of some religious slogans by some Arab groups also became a point of contention, (Hassaf 2016; Kurd Watch 2013b: 4). For example, May 11th was designated "Victory from God" in the national protests. However, in Kurdish inhabited areas, it was referred to as the "Friday of celebrating Kurds in Aleppo" in reaction to regime attacks on the neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsud in Aleppo, a majority Kurdish neighborhood, a few days before (Allsopp 2015: 206).

Number of Kurdish activists and committees welcomed initially the establishment of the FSA although willing to keep the protest movement in their areas peaceful. They however increasingly turned against them following the influence and sponsoring of foreign powers, Turkey particularly, of some of these groups and their increasing religious extremist features and practices or hostile attitudes towards Kurdish political demands or symbols (Youssef 2014; Hassaf 2016). Activist Aziz Abd el-Krim (2016) explains for example that

"As for the other armed groups (Free Syrian Army –Jabhat Al-Nusra – other Islamist brigades), I remember when they entered the city of Ras al-Ain (Sari Kany), where a group of Kurdish activists waved Kurdish flags to greet the rebels. The initial response of the rebels was to throw the (Kurdish) flag on the ground and attack the activists raising their flags."

Similarly they were complaints that Arab activists had anti Kurdish discourses since the beginning of the uprising accusing Kurdish activists of “being separatist” and wanting “Kurdish independence”. If criticism were raised on some practices of the opposition or Kurdish national rights mentioned, Kurdish activists were often blamed of betraying the Syrian revolution. A Kurdish activist from Aleppo actually argued that for many Kurds, to see that the Arab revolutionaries treated them like the regime pushed them increasingly towards the PYD (Lundi Matin 2018).

Kurdish Youth committees were nevertheless still able to organize punctual demonstrations and actions of protests against the Syrian regime and defuse tensions between Arab and Kurdish population, including in Aleppo, particularly in the Ashrafiya neighborhood – mostly populated by Kurds (Tansîqîya al-tâkhî al-kûrdîya 2011) or, in the city of Tal Abyad (All4Syria 2013) in the first years of the uprising.

The Kurdish protesters were not limited to “corporatist demands” as argued by French academic Fabrice Balanche (2011: 450), such as the provision of nationalities to Kurds lacking any citizenship, but were part of a much larger protest movement throughout the country as argued by different Syrian Kurdish activists who saw this movement as their own and in which they were full participants to build a new Syria for all (Youssef 2014; Abd El-Krim 2016; Hassaf 2016). This did not mean that traditional Kurdish national demands were sidelined by the youth and protesters, but rather integrated by them in the struggle against the Assad regime.

Despite their activism in the uprising, the Kurdish LCCs had to face skepticism and opposition of traditional Kurdish political parties from the beginning, almost all of whom were unwilling to participate in anti-regime protests (ICG 2013: 9). Only the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria led by Mishal Tammo and Yekiti publicly supported the uprising from the beginning, while many youth members of the Yekiti party were among the organizers of the protests (Kurd Watch 2013b: 4; Othman 2016).

In late April of 2011, the Kurdish Political Congress,⁴⁹ which was established in 2009, grew in number and established the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties with the inclusion of 3 new parties, including the PYD. By May 2011, the National Movement of Kurdish Political Parties announced its program, which included ending one party rule in Syria, the establishment of the rule of law, equality for all citizens, and a secular state (Kajjo and Sinclair 2011). A new conference was organized in October 2011 gathering the majority of Kurdish political parties, independents, Kurdish youth organizations, Kurdish women organizations, human rights activists and professionals in the objective of uniting the Kurdish opposition in Syria. Several Kurdish political actors actually had concerns about the political program and agenda of several actors within the SNC, particularly the MB and its close relations with the AKP Turkish government, according to researcher Harriet Allsopp (2015: 201).

This led to the establishment of the KNC, which followed the creation of the SNC. The KNC was formed in Erbil, Iraq, under the sponsorship of Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq (Carnegie 2012b) and an important ally of Turkey at the time. Barzani had large influence among several Syrian Kurdish opposition groups. The stated mission of the KNC was to find a “democratic solution to the Kurdish issue” while emphasizing that it was part of the revolution. In November, videos and reports in Kurdish media showed that thousands of Kurds in Qamishli held up banners saying “The Kurdish Syrian National Council represents me” (Hossino and Tanir 2012).

Problems still existed within the KNC, particularly regarding its decision-making process in which representation of independent activists and youth organizations was rather small in comparison to that of political parties. In the initial executive committee, 45 people were elected, including 20 party representatives and six representatives of Kurdish Youth organizations. The executive committee was then

⁴⁹ Nine Kurdish political parties established in 2009 what became known as the Kurdish Political Congress which included the following parties: the Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party led by Sheikh Jamal; the Kurdish Left Party led by Muhammad Mousa, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria led by Nasruddien Ibrahim; the Kurdish Democratic Front, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria led by Dr. Abdul Hakim Bashar; The Kurdish Democratic National Party in Syria led by Tahir Sfook; the Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria led by Aziz Dawe; the Kurdish Coordination Committee; the Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria led by Ismail Hamo; The Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria led by Mustafa Jumaa; The Kurdish Future Movement led by Mishaal Tammo (Hossino and Tanir 2012).

expanded to 47 to integrate the new political parties, which entered the council, in January 2012.⁵⁰ Some Kurdish youth groups also became associated with particular political parties, losing their independence and often diminishing their activities, while other youth movements that remained independents were increasingly marginalized within the KNC by the dominant parties (Allsopp 2015: 203-204). Other organizations and political parties only remained symbolically listed with the KNC, but without any formal activities within it (Halhalli 2018: 40).

Two parties attending the founding conference did not join the KNC: the Kurdish Future Movement and the PYD. The Future Movement cited four points of objection to the KNC: the failure of the KNC to commit to the overthrow of the regime; the failure to adopt stronger support for the youth; demands for the Kurds that should be more specific and not determined and influenced by external interests; and that independent activists should have a stronger representation in the council (Allsopp 2015: 204). The PYD attended the founding conference of the KNC after its inception in October before boycotting the group and joining the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (known as the NCBDC) (Hossino and Tanir 2012). The PYD was very suspicious of Turkey's role and influence in the establishments of the SNC, but of the KNC as well as its sponsor was Kurdish leader Barzani who was a close ally of Ankara. Turkish military and Barzani's peshmergas (combatants) had both targeted at different periods PKK positions in Iraq and repressed its militants. Tensions between the KDP and PKK remained still very much present at this period.

Soon after the creation of the KNC, the PYD progressively began to put up checkpoints in the Kurdish area of Afrin, and reports started to emerge accusing the PYD of harassing political activists, enforcing its authority over Kurdish areas, and of fights between PYD and KNC supporters (IRIN 2012; Allsopp 2015: 204).

The PKK remained fiercely critical of Barzani's party, the KDP, and affiliated parties, for the 'feudalism' and corruption with which it associates them. The KDP on its side blamed the PKK and its sister organization PYD for their violent politics and

⁵⁰ The Kurdistan Union Party in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic party in Syria and Kurdistan Democratic Concord Party, which were initially part of the coalition of the Union of Kurdish Democratic Forces, finally joined the KNC, in early 2012, after having refused to do so at the first meeting

unwillingness to collaborate with others except as the leading partner (Van Bruinessen 2016: 11).

6.4 Establishment of PYD's organizations

In December of 2011, the PYD established the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK), as an alternative to the KNC that it refused to join. The PCWK was described by the organization as an elected local assembly designed to provide various social services and establish institutions (ICG 2013: 13). The conference statement clearly supported the popular uprising in Syria and elsewhere in the region "aimed at establishing a pluralistic democracy" (The People's Council of Western Kurdistan 2011).

The conference was attended by representatives from throughout Kurdish significant populated areas in Syria such as Kobani, Qamishli, and the predominantly Kurdish neighborhoods of Aleppo (ICG 2013: 13). This said, the five organizations included in the PCWK (TEV-DEM, the Western Kurdistan Democratic Society Movement, Yekitiya Star women's organization, the Union of Families of Martyrs, the Education and Language Institution and the Revolutionary Youth Movement of Western Kurdistan) were all connected to the PYD. The PCWK was actually an umbrella organization for PYD affiliated groups and movements (Allsopp 2015: 205).

The PCWK activities had the objective of mobilizing support for the PYD and a semblance of governance in regions witnessing a vacuum of authority by establishing civil institutions such as the People's Local Committees (PLCs), in charge of specific activities in Kurdish populated areas under its control and security institutions such as the People Protection Committees and the People's Defense Corps (known as the YPG) as well (ICG 2013: 14).

6.5 Increasing clashes between KNC and PYD

The KNC had signed a contract of civil peace with the PYD in January 2012 to prevent violent clashes like those that occurred in Kurdish regions previously. This contract was nevertheless not implemented and many examples of violent attacks

from PYD supporters and members against other Kurdish activists occurred (Hossino and Tanir 2012). Human rights monitor Kurd Watch (2018) and other human rights organizations (HRW 2014b), as well as activists (Abdelkrim 2014; Youssef 2014; Hassaf 2016; Othman 2016) recorded numerous cases in which PYD members and supporters reportedly attacked, threatened and kidnapped anti regime Kurdish youth activists. Kurdish youth movements and independents started to oppose PYD domination and control over Kurdish inhabited areas. Clashes between PYD and KNC supporters multiplied (ICG 2013: 10; Allsopp 2015: 210).

The demonstration of 'Amuda became quite famous for the harsh repression of YPG forces against protesters. On June 17, 2013, Asayish forces in 'Amuda arrested three activists. To protest these incarcerations, Kurdish opposition groups and supporters staged a protest by establishing a tent in the town's main square, which developed into a hunger strike (Syria Freedom Forever 2013a). On June 27, 2013, new protests occurred in 'Amuda, and YPG forces did not hesitate to fire on the crowd, shooting and killing three men (Zakwan Hadid 2013). PYD security forces killed two more men that night in unclear circumstances, and a third the next day. On the night of June 27, YPG forces also detained around 50 members or supporters of the Yekiti Party in 'Amuda, and beat them at a YPG military base (Human Rights Watch 2014: 4). Following these incidents, the LCC (2013b) published a statement "Regarding the Acts of Violence Against the Kurdish Syrian Civilians" affirming its rejection of such practices and its condemnation.

Demonstrations in the Kurdish inhabited regions were increasingly divided; in Qamishli and Hasakah for example several, as many as four or five separate protests were organized on every Friday (IRIN 2012; Allsopp 2015: 211). At the same time, the PYD maintained a hostile position towards the SNC, who it considered as a tool of Turkish foreign policy, and called the Kurdish groups and figures that joined it of "collaborators". PYD leaders argued that the SNC had not sufficiently answered the Sunni-Alawi issue in post-Assad Syria, or the Kurdish issue. The party also declared that the objective of the SNC was to facilitate the interventions of foreign powers, particularly Turkey (see chapter 5), in Syria and establish a moderate Islamic regime, which would oppress Kurds (Hossino and Tanir 2012).

6.6 Regime attempts to co-opt the PYD and control Kurdish regions

Soon after the beginning of the uprising in 2011, the PYD leadership was able to come back to Syria despite the party being forbidden in the country. Saleh Muslim the leader of the PYD at that period came back to Syria, to the city of Qamishli, in April of 2011. Saleh Muslim had taken refuge in a PKK camp in Iraq in 2010 after he and his wife had been imprisoned in Syria (Carnegie 2011).⁵¹

With the PYD's leadership return to Syria, the organization started to pursue political and paramilitary activities to mobilize support among Syrian Kurds. In this framework, the PKK transferred between 500 and 1,000-armed fighters to create the PYD's military wing, the YPG (ICG 2013: 2), which operated as an army. In October 2011, the regime freed several Kurdish political prisoners. In late 2011, Damascus also allowed the PYD to open six Kurdish "language schools" in northern Syria, which the group used for political work. In March 2012 the PKK was able to transfer between 1,500 and 2,000 of its members to Syria from the Qandil enclave. This was occurring while Turkey was taking a hostile position to the Assad regime in 2011 (Cagaptay 2012; IRIN 2012). Assad's regime let PKK developed and extends its influence in order to pressure Turkey. Militarily, the PKK's Qandil leadership exerted authority over the YPG throughout the uprising, whose leadership was dominated by Syrian and foreign (Kurdish fighters from other nationalities) PKK fighters trained at that base (ICG 2014a: 5; Grojean 2017: 125).

The Syrian regime had actually partially withdrawn its forces from some Kurdish areas in July 2011. The PYD on one side and the Kurdish forces that would join the future KNC on the other competed since then to represent Kurdish interests in Syria. The ability of the PYD to organize that freely in Syria raised suspicions that the party had settled an agreement with the regime permitting it to reestablish a presence and operate openly in Syria, in exchange for cooperation with security forces in order to

⁵¹ His leadership was reconfirmed at the extraordinary fifth party congress of the PYD, held on June 16, 2012, at which the party's Central Committee was expanded and dual leadership was introduced to increase and promote the representation of women in the party. Asiyah Abdullah was elected co-chairman of the party (Carnegie 2012d). At the 7th congress of the PYD in September 2017 in the town of Rmeilan in Syria's northeast, a new leadership was elected. Shahoz Hasan and Aysha Hisso replaced Saleh Muslim and Asya Abdullah as the new PYD co-chairs (Arafat 2017b).

crush anti regime protests in majority Kurdish populated areas and moreover marginalize the other Kurdish political parties in order to win a hegemony over the Syrian Kurdish political scene. PYD was very eager to fill the power vacuum left by the regime (IRIN 2012; ICG 2013: 2; Grojean 2017: 123).

Similarly at this period, the PYD increasingly resorted to social media to project its anti-regime credentials, especially from the beginning of 2012 (IRIN 2012; ICG 2013: 14). During this period, tensions between the regime and the PYD became more noticeable in some regions with for example in February a gunfight breaking out in 'Ayn al-'Arab (Kobani) between supporters of the PYD and supporters of the regime, as well as members of the Air Force Intelligence Service, or a military court in Aleppo sentencing at the same period four PYD supporters to a 15-year prison sentence for membership in the organization. In addition, before the vote on a constitutional referendum by the Assad regime on February 26, 2012, the PYD urged a boycott of the polls saying that the new constitution did not offer anything to the Kurds. PYD's propaganda and statements became much more aggressive against the regime, while reiterating their support for the democratic popular uprising in Syria (Hossino and Tanir 2012). On September 6, the People's council of Western Kurdistan, affiliated with the PYD, also condemned severely the attacks the bombardment and shelling committed by Syrian regime forces against the Kurdish populated Sheikh Maqsud neighbourhood in Aleppo resulting in the death of 21 civilians and more than 45 injured (Peace in Kurdistan 2012). Another attack happened again on February 26, 2013, once more killing civilians and causing important damages. For over two years the situation remained quite calm until the YPG led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (see further in the chapter) signed a truce with the opposition operation room of Fatah Halab on December, 19 2015. Few days later, SDF and regime troops clashed, and Sheikh Maqsud even became the target of regime's airforce attacks (Shocked 2016).

Rather than being an Assad proxy, the PYD was playing a mutually beneficial role for itself and the Assad regime, seeking to take advantage of the lack of security and to expand the land it controlled to try to achieve its political objectives and enforce some form of Kurdish autonomy in Kurdish majority populated regions. From then on, the party avoided confrontation with the regime, while steadily expanding its territorial

control at the expense of the FSA and salafist-jihadi armed groups, which were allied for a large majority with PKK arch enemy Turkey and opposed Kurdish national rights. On the other side, the regime benefited as well from this deal, as it could concentrate its military forces on other regions witnessing protests and armed resistance, while PYD was generally hostile to the various opposition armed groups preventing them to enter their areas. The presence of PYD along the northern frontier of the country also deprived in some areas Syrian Arab opposition forces of their bases and supply lines in Turkey. In addition to this, as mentioned previously, PKK's expanding influence was also a tool for Damascus to pressure Turkey, which hostility against the regime and active policy on the side of Syrian opposition armed groups was increasing.

6.7 Refusal of any self-determination for the Kurds

The historical problems regarding the Kurdish issue reappeared with the popular uprising.⁵² The Syrian Arab opposition rejected the demands of the Kurdish opposition, both from the KNC and the PYD. In mid-July of 2011, Kurdish representatives at the Istanbul gathering, which would establish few months after the SNC, walked out of the conference in protest after the refusal of their request to change the name of the country from the Syrian Arab Republic to the "Republic of Syria" (Kajjo and Sinclair 2011).

Relations between the SNC and the KNC have been difficult from the beginning. The SNC's first chairman, Burhan Ghalioun, refused the KNC's main demand for federalism in a post-Assad Syria, calling it a "delusion". Ghalioun also infuriated Syrian Kurds by comparing them to the "immigrants in France" in November 2011, implying their exteriority to Syria (Abdallah, Abd Hayy (al-) and Khoury 2012). In late February of 2012, all Kurdish parties in the SNC (with the exception of the Kurdish Future Movement headed by Fares Tammo) suspended their membership after Ghalioun's renewed commitment to oppose administrative decentralization (Carnegie

⁵² Although the Declaration of Damascus in 2005 explicitly recognized the Kurdish issue, the four Kurdish parties signatories were still not satisfied by the way the far majority of the Syrian political parties and human rights associations limited the Kurdish question to the single issue of the census in 1962 and the Kurds deprived of their citizenships. They were not ready to recognize the Kurds as a separate nation and willing to listen to demands aimed at Ffederalism and the principle of administrative decentralization (Tejel 2009: 127).

2012b). On March 30th, 2012, Kurdish protesters named the Friday demonstrations the “Friday of Kurdish Rights” (Allsopp 2015: 206).

Tension between the KNC and the SNC increased considerably following the SNC’s publication of its “National Charter: The Kurdish Issue in Syria” in early April of 2012. The document eliminated language recognizing a Kurdish nation within Syria that had been included in the draft’s final statement of the Friends of Syria meeting in Tunisia. This resulted in the withdrawal of the KNC from unity talks with the SNC, and they accused Turkey of excessively influencing the SNC’s policy (Carnegie 2012b). Within Syria, in response to the SNC denial of Kurdish national rights, youth groups and parties held banners reading “Here is Kurdistan” on April 20th, while, two weeks before, April 6th demonstrations were designated as the “Friday of putting Kurdish Rights above any council” (Allsopp 2015: 206).

The KNC however diminished its demand for political decentralization within Syria and withdrew the call for self-determination in late April—promising to approve a common platform with the rest of the Syrian opposition if the remainder of its agenda was accepted (Carnegie 2012b). The change in the KNC agenda was viewed by many as a submission to pressures of the Syrian Arab opposition and an accommodation of Kurdish demands in Syria, but this also occurred in the background of the deteriorations of the relations between the KNC and PYD. The PYD was actually asserting its control in Kurdish inhabited regions, and therefore the KNC needed the SNC to counterweight the PYD’s growing influence (Allsopp 2015: 207). The Syrian Arab opposition dealt a new blow to the KNC by refusing its demands to include a reference to the ‘Kurdish people in Syria’ in its Cairo meeting in July of 2012 (Sary 2015: 9).

The KNC then joined the Syrian Coalition on August 27, 2013, hoping for improvements, but without any concrete changes. The SNC and the Coalition continued to act negatively towards Kurdish parties and interests. The KNC was then included in the High Negotiation Committee (HNC) (KNC 2016a) following the Riyadh Opposition Conference in December of 2015. This did not prevent the continuation of the denial of Kurdish rights and of chauvinist comments from members of the Syrian Arab opposition of the Coalition. For example on March 29th, 2016, the Chairman of

the opposition's delegation of the HNC, in Geneva, former general As'ad al-Zo'abi, said on "Radio Orient" television that

"The Kurds made up 1 percent of the population and they only wanted to get their papers during the era of President Hafez al-Assad to prove they are "human beings" (Smart News Agency 2016a).

In response to these comments considered as racist by many Kurds, demonstrations were organized in various Kurdish majority inhabited city to protest against this declaration (SMART News Agency 2016a).

At the same time, the SNC and Coalition continued to adopt a very harsh attitude against the PYD, considered as an enemy of the revolution. George Sabra, President of SNC at the time, declared for example in January 2016 that PYD was not part of the opposition and was very close to the regime politically, in addition to being part of PKK, which was classified as a terrorist organization he argued, supporting therefore the official discourse of Turkey towards it (al-Jazeera English 2016).

In autumn of 2016, the great majority of the Syrian Kurdish political movements, including both the PYD and KNC, and Assyrian parties as well, were angered by the transition plan proposed by the opposition's HNC in September 2016. The KNC (2016b) stated clearly that

"this document is not part of a solution, but rather a danger to a democratic, pluralistic and unified Syria guaranteeing cultural, social and political rights to all its ethnic, religious and linguistic groups."

They added

"Whoever reads the document notes immediately that point 1 of the "General Principles" exclusively lists the Arab culture and Islam as sources for intellectual production and social

relations”. This definition clearly excluded other cultures – be they ethnic, linguistic or religious – and sets the majority culture as the leading one. As Syrian Kurds we feel repulsed by this narrow perception of the Syrian people. The similarities between this definition and the chauvinist policies under the Assad regime are undeniable” (KNC 2016b).

A new episode of confrontation happened in March 2017 during a further round of peace negotiations in Geneva, when representatives of the NCBDC and a few other members of the HNC refused to transfer a document written by the KNC to the UN Special Envoy, Mr. de Mistura. This document confirmed the representation of Kurds in the negotiation process and demanded an inclusion of the Kurdish Question and of other sections of Syria’s population into the agenda of the negotiations. In reaction, they suspended their participation in the negotiations and with the HNC’s meetings (KNC 2017).

The NCBDC has not been very different than the SNC and the Coalition regarding the Kurdish issue. Their original position envisaged a “democratic solution to the Kurdish issue within the unity of Syria’s land that does not contradict that Syria is part and parcel of the Arab world”. In February of 2012, the Kurdish parties belonging to the NCBDC (with the exception of the PYD) withdrew and decided to join the KNC. The NCBDC modified its position slightly in April of the same year, endorsing the implementation of “decentralized principles” in a future Syria, but with no change from Kurdish parties to come back in it (Carnegie 2012b).

The FSA had no official position, but most of its leadership was hostile to Kurdish national rights and demands. Colonel Riad al-As'ad, FSA leader, declared that they would not permit any territory to be separated from Syria and that “we will never leave Qamishli... We will not accept one meter of Syrian soil seceding and will go to war” (cited in Dunya Times 2012).

6.8 The beginning of PYD self-administration region

The KNC engaged in attempts of reconciliation with the PYD in June 2012. Barzani mediated a power sharing agreement between the two Kurdish leading groups KNC and PCWK, a body created by the PYD as mentioned earlier. Known as the “Erbil Declaration”, it stated that they would rule Syria’s Kurdish regions together during the transition and created the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC) towards this objective (Kurd Watch 2012a). The Erbil Declaration remained however a dead letter, as a new situation occurred on the ground that strengthened the already dominating position of the PYD in Syria, which reinforced its unwillingness to share power with other Kurdish political forces.

On July 19, 2012, seventeen months after the beginning of the uprising, the regime’s forces withdrew from nine Kurdish-dominated towns and handed them to the PYD. PYD members claimed that the regime’s representative left after an ultimatum of the party to leave in the following 24 hours and under pressure of local mobilizations, while the SNC and some Kurdish rivals accused the PYD of making a deal with the regime (ICG 2013: 14; Arcan Ayboga, Anja Flach and Michael Knapp 2016: 56-57).

The withdrawal of Assad’s regime forces was most probably the result of a tacit agreement with the PYD, which was allowed to come back and organize few months after the start of the revolt. The regime needed all its armed forces to repress the demonstrations elsewhere in the country and did not want to open a new military front, while maintaining a small presence in some cities such as Qamishli and Hasakah. This also was part of the regime’s strategy to divide the uprising along ethnic and sectarian lines, as the PYD adopted a very neutral position towards large section of the opposition forces supporting the uprising and was less eager to collaborate with the popular organizations and activists in Arab inhabited areas, while trying to dominate and control the Kurdish population in Syria.

The PYD took over the regime’s municipal buildings in at least five of its strongholds – Ayn al-Arab (Kobani in Kurdish), ‘Amuda, Al-Malikiyah (Derek), Afrin and Jinderes – replacing Syrian flags with its own. The PYD control of these territories, so close to the Turkish border, alarmed the Turkish government. Turkish Prime Minister at the

time, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, warned against any plans for an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria before the visit of PYD leader Salih Muslim to Ankara for discussions in July of 2013 (Naharnet 2013). Despite the assurances given by PYD leader Muslim to Turkish administration that his group's call for a local administration in Syria's Kurdish regions does not mean a division of Syria (Khoshnawi 2013), relations worsened between both parties very rapidly, strengthened as well with the end of the peace process in Turkey between the PKK and Turkish government.

PYD's total control over the Kurdish majority inhabited regions led the organization to refuse the power-sharing proposition of the Erbil declaration submitted by Barzani. Instead they proposed an alternative; to establish a temporary independent Council to manage Western Kurdistan (North East Syria) until the end of the war in Syria. The role of this independent council would be to meet the needs of the local population, improve the economy and deal with attacks of the Assad regime, Islamic forces and Turks. The PYD was prepared to go no further than permitting others to participate in its institutions, provided they operated within its ideological framework. Accordingly, the PYD refused entry of peshmerga fighters – affiliated with Barzani's KDP - into the country if they were not under its own leadership. They feared that the arrival of these fighters would create internal clashes. Instead, it proposed to merge KNC fighters into the YPG under the latter's leadership. The KNC disagreed with one single Kurdish political entity to decide the future of the Kurdish people, without any consultation with other Kurdish partners. The KNC also reiterated the importance of cooperation and understanding with the revolutionary forces and national opposition in Syria (IRIN 2012; ICG 2014a: 2-3).

The increasing political and military hegemony of the PYD and the inability of the KNC to project influence inside Syria further weakened it with internal divisions. Some parties within the KNC saw cooperation with the PYD as the unique way to maintain a power-base in Syria and to defend itself against opposition, Islamic and jihadist forces attacking Kurdish regions. The launch of the campaign "Western Kurdistan for its children" by the PYD in the summer of 2012 against the attacks by opposition armed groups, Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups against the cities mostly inhabited by Kurds also diminished criticisms against the party and

temporarily united the Syrian Kurdish political scene (ICG 2014a: 3). Syrian Kurdish activist Shiyar Youssef (2014) explained that

“Even those most critical of the PYD started to see it as the “lesser of two evils” following the attacks of FSA, Islamist and jihadist forces against Kurdish populated areas. I know many Kurdish activists in Qamishli, ‘Amuda and other areas who, before these developments, used to organize demonstrations and write against the PYD, but have now suddenly started volunteering in the ranks of the YPG, to fight against the Islamists because if they won they would impose their rule and their values that are alien to the local population”

Similar arguments were put forward by different activists leading to a strengthening of PYD’s role as the sole viable protector of Syria’s Kurds against these forces (Youssef 2014; Abd El-Krim 2016; Hassaf 2016). This situation and feelings among large sections of Kurds in Syria increased throughout the uprising.

The relations between the KNC and PYD continued to deteriorate, as no space on the political scene was provided for the KNC and its various factions. The border between Syria’s and Iraq’s Kurdish area controlled by the patron of the KNC, Barzani, became an arena for this intra-Kurdish competition. Fearing that the PYD would increase its influence and role by taking control of aid distribution, the KDP would periodically close crossings on its side of the border, preventing the entry of supplies. As a result, living conditions deteriorated rapidly in Syria’s Kurdish areas. By mid-2013, populations were suffering from significant shortages of electricity, water, food and gas, leading to a stream of departures for Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover at the same period several Kurdish inhabited areas in northeastern Syria were suffering attacks by Islamic fundamentalists and jihadist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra. On August 15, the KDP opened the border, but only to close it again three days later. In this period, between 40,000 and 70,000 Kurds fled to Iraqi Kurdistan. The number of refugees reached in Iraqi Kurdistan nearly 200,000 by early August 2013. Relations worsened further, as the KDP forbade PYD members from entering

Erbil governorate; in response, the PYD prevented pro-Barzani leaders from crossing into Syria (IRIN 2013b; Eakin 2013; ICG 2014a: 10-11).

6.9 The PYD and the Assad regime

As the PYD expanded its control in Kurdish populated areas, regime forces kept a presence in the largest enclaves nominally under the party's control, most notably Qamishli and Hasakah. Damascus maintained government services under its responsibility, for example continuing to pay salaries to state employees and manage administrative offices, which gave the regime an important edge (ICG 2014a: 9). The Qamishli airport, which through the years became the country's second largest ranking airport (only behind Damascus) in 2016, remained under the control of the regime army (The Syria Report 2016k). YPG and regime's forces coordinated on some occasions, or at least timed some attacks to distract and force opposition forces to fight on multiple frontlines. The coordination also included some air cover protection provided by the Assad regime or the Russian Air Force later on after 2015 (Haid 2017a).

On various occasions, Saleh Muslim denied any alliance with the regime and affirmed that since September 2011, the PYD has called for the fall of the regime and all of its related symbols (Kurd Watch 2013a). In an interview in January 2014, Saleh Muslim (cited in Schmidinger 2014) declared

“We have always said that Assad has to leave. This is still our position. We want a negotiated peace but we can't imagine that he stays in power. We really need an end of the regime and a new democratic beginning.”

At the same time, PYD officials actually recognized they made a tactical decision not to confront military regime forces, yet refusing accusations of collusion, describing themselves as a “third current” between an “oppressive regime and hardline rebel militants” (ICG 2014a: 7). This position also has to be put in the framework of a hostile Syrian Arab political opposition in exile represented by first the SNC and then the Coalition, and of large sectors of armed opposition groups in the North of Syria.

These actors were allied with Turkey, considered by PYD / PKK as a staunch enemy, and refused to consider Kurdish national demands in Syria.

Saleh Muslim declared in mid-March 2016:

“regarding our position in the conflict, the Kurds in Syria had been fighting for our democratic rights in a country ruled by a dynastic and despotic regime. But a few months after the uprising we realized that many who were siding with the insurrection were coming from the mosques and we thought that those were not good travel companions for us.” (Zurutuza 2016)

The Rojava Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) – dominated by the PYD –kept discreet lines open with regime officials in Damascus and focused its efforts on combating IS and establishing a form of localized government (Sary 2015: 4).

As argued by a report of the International Crisis Group (2014a: 7-8):

“There is little doubt that the PYD is engaging the regime in a conciliatory rather than confrontational manner and has pursued a modus vivendi that serves both, at least for the short term. Its initially rapid advance was dependent on Damascus’s June 2012 withdrawal from Kurdish areas; this was mutually beneficial, regime forces to concentrate elsewhere in the north, while the PYD denied Kurdish areas to the armed opposition.”

The relations between the Assad regime and PYD continued to be non-confrontational, although localized clashes continued to erupt on occasions, especially in the city of Qamichli where Assad’s regime still retained a presence (Van Wilgenburg 2016a) On the side of Damascus, regime officials repeatedly refused any form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Sharif Shahada a member of the Syrian

parliament, with close relations with Assad's regime, declared in a visit to Erbil in December 2015 that "neither the YPG or the PKK have any place in (the future) Syria" (Ahmed H. 2015).

In mid end August 2016, two Syrian SU-24 attack planes targeted Kurdish forces in the city of Hasakah. A US-led coalition scrambled its own jets in the area in order to protect US advisers working with Kurdish forces and to intercept the Syrian jets, but the regime planes had left by the time they arrived. Pentagon spokesman Captain Jeff Davis said, "this was done as a measure to protect coalition forces" (The New Arab 2016a). This allowed the YPG forces to take near complete control of Hasakah after a ceasefire, ending a week of fighting with the regime forces and consolidating the Kurds' grip on Syria's northeast (Perry and Said 2016) (See Annex 6).

Despite the weakening of its influence following the armed confrontations, the Syrian regime sent the Minister of Health, Nizar Yazigi, and of Local Administration, Hussein Makhoul, to Hasakah as a means of reaffirming its bid for influence in the northeastern province, where they visited various officials including the governor of the province and the head of the local police (al-Sultan 2016; The Syria Report 2016n). These tensions between the regime and the PYD were also observed in the struggle over the language taught in Syrian educational institutions in the northeastern areas. The PYD wanted to impose the teaching of Kurdish in state schools while the regime threatened to stop the salaries of teachers that taught any curriculum other than the official one, while closing some schools when the Kurdish party imposed its own curriculum (Jamal, Nelson and Yosfi 2015; The Syria Report 2016q).

In mid-October 2016, the regime appointed a new governor for the province of Hasakah, Jayed Sawada al-Hammoud al-Moussa, a former military and security official known for his brutality against civilians.⁵³ His military record was a clear message of escalation by the regime towards the PYD (SANA 2016b; Zaman al-Wasl 2016c). The incoming governor actually cut all financial support to the National

⁵³ He participated in the repression of civilians, particularly in the Qalamoun mountains along the Damascus-Homs highway, where troops he commanded reportedly committed several massacres against civilians, in particular in the town of Dumeir (Zaman al-Wasl 2016c).

Hospital of Hasakah, the largest in the region, after Asayish, Kurdish police force and other partisan security forces' refusal to leave the building by the start of 2017. The National Hospital of Hasakah operated at under 15 percent capacity compared with a few months before and entire departments closed their doors. The unprecedented rollback in services affected the more than one million residents of Hasakah city, particularly those who were unable to afford medical care at one of the provincial capital's five private hospitals (Ibrahim, Nassar and Schuster 2017).

Meanwhile, during the same period in March of 2017, the Syrian regime and supporters of the ruling Ba'th party formed a new paramilitary group from local tribesmen and government employees in northern Hasakah province of around 3,000 fighters, building on heightened resentment toward the PYD administration (Zaman al-Wasl 2017d). Other pro-regime militias were also established in this region.

Between 2012 and 2016, both actors maintained a pragmatic non-aggression pact and tactically collaborated on some occasions, according to various elements (geography, particular periods, etc...), despite occasional clashes. Deep strategic disagreements nevertheless existed and would reappear in 2017 as IS' forces in these areas were progressively being eliminated. In addition to this, the regime would not abandon regions rich in natural resources in the long term, especially agricultural and energy resources.

6.10 The PYD, the opposition, FSA and Islamic fundamentalist forces

Large sections of the Syrian Arab opposition, in addition to considering the seizure of Kurdish areas in July 2012 as, in effect, a gift from Damascus, accused the PYD of acting in dishonest ways by breaking ceasefires, in some cases allegedly at the regime's behest (ICG 2014a: 8). Anti-PYD feelings among the Syrian Arab opposition increased and certainly contributed to the violence that opposed Kurds against the Arab opposition since mid 2012. These clashes were also fueled by mistrust, competition for scarce resources (land along the Turkish border, oil and gas in Hasakah) and the growing influence and presence of jihadi groups fighting alongside mainstream opposition factions of the FSA.

This also led to the expulsion of the PYD-linked FSA, *Jabhat al-Âkrad* (Kurdish front), from several mixed areas by the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra in the summer 2013 (al-majlis al-'askarî al-thawrî fî halab 2013). YPG forces and Kurdish civilians suffered serious abuses at the hands of groups such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. These abuses included indiscriminate shelling of Kurdish inhabited areas, targeted attacks on civilians, and the torture and killing of captured civilians or fighters, sometimes by beheading, as well as suicide and car bomb attacks (Human Rights Watch 2014: 15-16).

For more than a year, Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic fundamentalist groups and FSA affiliated groups imposed a blockade on isolated Kurdish enclaves in Afrin and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani), to pressure the YPG fighters to give up their territory (Van Wilgenburg 2014a). This situation prompted a number of Kurds of Syria to join the YPG. Kurds from Turkey also came to the YPG's assistance by crossing the border into Syria through Qamishli. At least twice, children of elected officials of the Democratic People's Party (HDP), a Kurdish led leftist coalition in Turkey, died fighting with the YPG, underscoring the growing links between events in Syria and Turkey's southeast (Itani and Stein 2016: 7).

Clashes between FSA groups and the PYD declined significantly in late 2013; a truce reached in Afrin encouraged mainstream armed opposition groups west of Aleppo city to concentrate their fights against the regime (ICG 2014a: 8). In March 2014, a new situation emerged and a rapprochement occurred between the FSA and PYD. They found a common enemy in the IS in the countryside of Aleppo. This was a reversal of the situation of the summer of 2013. PYD leader Salih Muslim was now accusing the regime of supporting jihadist attacks against the Kurds (Van Wilgenburg 2014b). Jabhat al-Akrad again cooperated with the FSA against the IS, carrying out operations in Tal Abyad, Jarablus and Aleppo (Van Wilgenburg 2014a). In September, the threat of a continued IS advance West and North from its stronghold towns of al-Bab, Manbij and Jarablus, encouraged the establishment of an alliance between the YPG, six FSA battalions and Liwa al-Tawhid (Lister 2015: 285). The siege of the city of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab), which was in its majority inhabited by Kurdish people, from September of 2014 by the IS, provoked the forced displacement of about 200,000 people in the surrounding villages in its military

enterprises before reaching Kobani. The city was defended by the YPG, and also the active participation of at least three battalions of Arab fighters in the city: the revolutionary battalion of al-Raqqa, the battalion of "the northern Sun" and the battalion of "Jarablus". On October 4, the FSA also decided to send a thousand fighters to defend Kobani. In a statement on October 19, 2014, the YPG declared during the siege of Kobani by IS:

"We are certain that the result of this battle will shape the future of Syria and the democratic struggle for freedom and peace. We want it to be known that the victory in Kobani is a victory for all Syria, and it will also be a major defeat for IS and terrorism. The resistance shown by us, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a guarantee for defeating IS's terrorism in the region. Counter-terrorism and building a free and democratic Syria was the basis of the agreement we signed with factions of the FSA. As we can see, the success of the revolution is subject to the development of this relationship between all factions and the forces of good in this country... We also confirm that there is coordination between us and the important factions of the FSA in the northern countryside of Aleppo, Afrin, Kobani, and Jazirah. Currently, there are factions and several battalions of the FSA fighting on our side against the ISIL terrorists." (General Command of the YPG 2014)

The battle for Kobani exacerbated tensions with the Turkish government, as Ankara prevented and blocked people from crossing into Syria to fight with the YPG. This part of the border was historically poorly policed, allowing Kurdish youth to cross back and forth. This situation strengthened the deeply held conviction among a large subset of Syria's and Turkey's Kurdish population that the Turkish government was backing IS. Ankara eventually did allow Barzani-allied Peshmerga forces to transit its territory to join with the YPG (Itani and Stein 2016: 7).

Despite small other experiences of collaboration, for example in the Operation Room of Fateh Halab and YPG, in the northern countryside of Aleppo in December of 2015 (SOHR 2015b; Enab Baladi 2015), relations deteriorated once again between the various Syrian Arab armed opposition forces and the YPG. The YPG continued on its side to expand its domination in northern Syria and increasingly clashed with FSA, Islamic and Salafist jihadi groups. Additional PKK members, including non-Syrians, descended from the mountains of Qandil to join the struggle. At the same time, for Kurds looking for means to defend their communities, cooperation with the YPG was often the only option. Indeed, as battles expanded with Salafi and jihadist armed groups, the YPG's role as the unique viable protector of Syria's Kurds was further strengthened (ICG 2014a: 5-7). YPG expanded its control over Kurdish populated areas along the border with Turkey and throughout much of Hasakah province in the northeast.

The PYD's support for Russian military intervention in September of 2015 on the side of the Assad regime, the military assistance provided by Russian airplanes to the YPG against Arab armed opposition groups in February 2016 in Afrin's region to seize a number of opposition-held, Arab-majority towns in northern Aleppo, including Tal Rifaat, and the collaboration of the YPG to Assad's regime force to impose the siege of Eastern Aleppo city on 28 July 2016 by closing Castello Road following clashes with opposition armed forces, increased the hostilities between both groups. Throughout 2016 opposition armed forces and YPG in Aleppo clashed on different occasions, while Sheikh Maqsud was under siege for several months during this year by the opposition armed forces in Aleppo (Shocked 2016). By the end of November and the beginning of December 2016, during the pro regime force's offensive on Eastern Aleppo and eventually its capture, YPG forces, which characterized officially these clashes as "fighting between Syrian regime forces and Turkey-backed SNC" (ANHA Hawar News Agency 2016), participated in the battle by taking control of some neighborhoods and then handing in them over to the regime. In exchange, the YPG was allowed to retain control of Sheikh Maqsud and Ashrafia, which are predominantly Kurdish (Orton 2016; SOHR 2016).

Some of the Syrian armed opposition (both FSA units and Islamic fundamentalist forces) groups participating in the offensive against Afrin in January 2018 (see

chapter 7) under the command of Ankara justified their involvement, saying the Kurds were actually regime allies and that it was important to keep Syria united against separatist groups such as the PKK/PYD (Rudaw 2018d). In addition to this, videos emerged at this period showing racist and hatred discourses against the Kurds among some of the fighters, as well as slogans in favor of Saddam Hussein and Erdogan (Facebook 2018a, Facebook 2018b). They also attacked civilians and mutilated the corpses of Kurdish YPG soldiers and displayed it on social medias, notably of member of the Kurdish Women's Protection Units, fuelling ethnic tensions.

Tensions were heightened between PYD and the various opposition-armed groups leading as we see to increasing clashes, as well as deepening ethnic divisions between Arabs and Kurds.

6.11 Rojava self government

By November of 2013, the PYD assumed de facto governing authority, managing a transitional administration in what it - and Kurds in general – called at the time Rojava (Western Kurdistan), including three non-contiguous enclaves: Afrin, Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) and Cezire (Jazirah region in Hasakah province) (See Annexed 5 and 6). The “joint-interim administration” was composed of local and legislative assemblies and governments, and a general assembly including Kurdish, Arab, Syriac and Assyrian representatives from all three cantons. The stated goal was autonomous administration within a federated Syria (ICG 2014a: 15). In the end of September 2017, at the 7th congress of the PYD, participants actually confirmed federalism as the most appropriate solution for the region (Arafat 2017b).

The implementation of the Rojava project was characterized as a form of “democratic autonomy” or “self-administration” in order to provide security through its military and police forces, managed tribunals and prisons and provided humanitarian assistance. The PYD advocated empowering self-governance structures at the local level, unified only by a common vision of societal reform rather than by the rule of a centralized government (ICG 2014a: 2 + 12).

Furthermore, and despite public emphasis on pluralism, PYD sought to induce or compel cooperation with it rather than with representatives of other Kurdish parties or communities. As described by the International Crisis Group report (2014a: 13):

“Members and leaders of the people’s councils, theoretically responsible for local governance and including representatives of all Kurdish political parties as well as non-Kurdish population in mixed areas, are appointed by the PYD. Likewise, the movement maintains overall decision-making authority, consigning the councils other than for distribution of gas and humanitarian aid to a largely symbolic role”

Following the PYD leadership’s announcement of the interim government over Syria’s Kurdish areas in the northeast in November 2013, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq, Massoud Barzani, actually accused the PYD of autocracy by marginalizing the other Kurdish parties in Rojava and rejected its unilateral declaration of independence in Syria’s Kurdish northeast (Rudaw 2013).

The commune’s institution, whose role is to provide humanitarian assistance to the inhabitants in their neighborhoods was also one of the key elements in the new Rojava system to enforce the rule of PYD linked organizations. NGOs outside of PYD’s framework had to go through the commune system (or other Rojava institutions) to be allowed to operate in these regions (al-Darwish D. 2016: 18).

The PYD implemented similar policies in the expansion and institutionalization of its military forces. Recruitment campaigns were opened to individuals of various backgrounds, while making sure they remained under its command. The YPG opened military academies that provided recruits with three months of training, including ideology. The YPG also tried to integrate non-Kurds (eg. Arabs, Syrians and Assyrians) within its ranks and under its leadership. It eventually agreed for the participation of non-Kurdish fighters in the Rojava security system as independent brigades that maintained their own leaders but acted under YPG command (ICG 2014a: 14).

Rojava's administrations also established People's Tribunals, which lacked trained prosecutors and judges, as almost no Kurds were accepted for these professions in the Syrian Ba'th system and a police force, the Asayish, to implement law and order (Human Rights Watch 2014: 14). The tribunals, constituted of PYD-selected personnel, administered justice across the Rojava, conducting investigations and issuing arrest warrants under a hybrid penal code. Both, tribunals and police forces, were heavily criticized by rival Kurdish factions, activists and human rights organizations for their violations of human rights (ICG 2014a: 14).

In March the "social contract of Rojava" was published and intended to act as a provisional constitutional charter for the region. The Social Contract charter devoted articles 8 to 53 to basic principles of rights, representation and personal freedoms that matched the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition, the PYD promoted a progressive gender equality standard in its governance structures, with equal gender representation in all administrations and the establishment of a ministry for 'Women's Liberation' – a standard that has been largely adhered to, including within the military (Sary 2015: 11-12; Perry 2016). Article 28 stated that "women have the right to organize and to remove all kinds of discrimination based on sex" (cited in Sheikho 2017).

The charter emphasized the cultural and ethnic equality of the various populations in Rojava. The charter also pointed out that decentralization was a response to the multitude of religious, ethnic and regional conflicts in Syria, and to the dictatorship, while emphasizing the full integrity of Syrian territory within a federal system (Sary 2015: 11-12; Perry 2016). The diversity of the population living in PYD's controlled areas demonstrated this inclusiveness. This did not prevent tensions between PYD administrations and other communities, as we will see with the Arab populations. Christian representatives and churches also protested at several decisions by the PYD administrations on various occasions, when they felt their interests were endangered. In September of 2015, 16 Armenian, Assyrian and Christian organizations published a statement opposing the bill of the Legislative Council of the Jazirah region – an institution established by the PYD to legislate in one of the three districts under its control – confiscating the properties of residents who left the region

officially to "protect" these assets from seizure from third parties and to use them to the benefit of the community. Within a few weeks, the PYD was forced to backtrack and assets owned by Christians that were seized were handed over to the Church (Ulloa 2017: Yazigi 2017:10). In the same statement, the organizations also argued "any interference into church private schools in Jazirah province is unacceptable" (cited in Ulloa 2017:10). Intimidation and violence against Christian and Assyrians opposition personalities similarly occurred at the hands of YPG forces, including the assassination of David Jendo, an Assyrian leader in the Khabour region in April of 2015 (Ulloa 2017:11). They were however targeted because of their political opinions and not their ethnic or sectarian origins.

YPG forces had been accused as well on several occasions of discriminatory and repressive policies against Arab populations in some villages in the northeastern regions of Syria, over claims of residents' links with the IS (Nassar and Wilcox 2016). However a UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria in March 2017 found no evidence to substantiate allegations and accusations by some Syrian Arab opposition actors and AKP's members in Turkey that YPG or SDF forces systematically sought to change the demographic composition of territories under their control. The report covered human rights abuses in Syria between July 21, 2016 and February 28, 2017 (Rudaw 2017a). Military offensives led by YPG forces nevertheless at some occasions resulted in the forced displacement of populations. For example in the capture of the city of Tal Rifaat by SDF forces with the help of Russian air power in February 2016 from Arab opposition groups led to the displacement of the local Arab population, around 30,000 persons, who fled to the Turkish border. Only a small number of them, approximately 1000, were allowed to come back by YPG forces in the following months (al-Homsi 2017).

The PYD's effectiveness in the provision of services was also a critical factor in building local legitimacy. The PYD local administrations, called the Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA), was able to provide services including fuel, education, job provision, electricity, water, sanitation, customs, healthcare, education, and security. The DAA was quite successful in providing key local daily needs by notably building bakeries and covering shortages in key items like gas cylinders and in food material unavailable in the market, like sugar (Khalaf R. 2016: 17). New

institutions were also created to license business investments, schools, and media outlets, among others. It also established new educational structures like that of the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy. The region's first university was established in October of 2015 in the Afrin district, west of Aleppo, with 180 students (Yazigi 2016c: 5; Khalaf R. 2016: 17). In the summer of 2016, the University of Rojava in Qamishli was inaugurated, which taught in Arabic, Kurdish and English and included a faculty of medicine, a college of education and science, and a college of engineering (Abdulhalim, Mohammed and Van Wilgenburg 2016).

In the schooling system, an entirely Kurdish school curriculum for the first three years of schooling was introduced in September of 2015 in Qamichli, while the old Ba'thist curriculum had been replaced. In the school year 2016-2017, a brand new Kurdish curriculum was implemented and primary education was taught in three languages: Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac-Assyrian. The overwhelming majority of the schools in Syria's northeastern Hasakah Governorate were controlled by the PYD led administration. The exceptions were a handful of schools inside regime-held areas and a number of private Christian schools in Hasakah and Qamishli (Shiwesh 2016). According to journalist Mahir Yilmazkaya (2016), who sympathized with the PYD, the Kurdish Language Institution went from one teacher and 12 students in 2012 to reaching 1700 teachers and 20,000 students in 200 schools in May 2016.

The DAA's administration also promoted women's rights and participation at all levels, an accomplishment even recognized by its critics although with contradictions. Civil activist Mahwash Sheiki (2017) from Qamichli, one of the founders of Komela Şawîşka, a women's association established in Syria after the beginning of the uprising in 2012, acknowledged the improvements in the conditions of women, despite characterizing the PYD as a "totalitarian ideological party that doesn't accept others with different ideologies":

"In theory and according to the laws and general principles issued by the DAA, the accomplishments are great. As women civil activists, perhaps we used to call for these rights without having much hope of seeing them recognized. Unlike the current Syrian law, and especially the Personal Status Law

which is mainly based on Islamic Sharia, Hanafi jurisprudence and other Islamic sources, what the DAA has approved matches laws passed in first world countries relating to women's rights.

For example, women can no longer be forced into marriages and dowries [given by the groom to the bride's family] have been banned as they rendered women to be the property of their husbands. Now both parties are required to work equally to provide for themselves as a couple; polygamy has been banned; marriage licenses have been organized in accordance with civil law, in addition to many other issues that benefit women now.

Yet the most important principle the DAA has stuck to was the principle of equal participation in all institutions. This has been followed to the letter as it is also part and parcel of the structure of the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

However... things are different on the ground. In truth, the PYD has been able to [mobilize] and include marginalized groups in the area, including women as they were thrust into the military and political life. This change was not natural but forced, and it was not accompanied by the development of women as independent entities with their own needs, rights or obligations. Also, the change did not come about due to a change in the socio-economic system. In fact, it was the result of a top-down party decision to bring women in large numbers into the fold of the ideology. This has been greatly successful because it's always easier to win over the oppressed and the undermined masses."

In this perspective, she went on explaining that women's rights and participation from the Rojava experience was better and "special and different than others across Syria, be it under the regime or the "liberated" areas especially when it comes to passing laws related to women's rights and to empowering women militarily and politically", while adding that "this doesn't mean women are fully empowered because

empowerment to people and individuals also means economic and social empowerment as well as spreading democracy” (Sheiki 2017).

This testimony could be extended to other areas of the PYD’s interventions in the three cantons of Rojava characterized by dynamics from above, rather than radical change from below, although there were not always complete separations between the two. As argued by activist Shiyar Youssef regarding the PYD’s rule of these areas (2014):

“On one hand, it seems that the experience has begun to achieve commendable gains, such as secular management of the state apparatus, ensuring greater rights for women and the participation of minorities in administration, a greater participation and more agency for the local population in the management of their affairs, especially with the absence of a strong, established state. And we should remember here that the PYD is leaning from a rich experience of self-governance that their comrades in Turkish Kurdistan have been living through. On the other hand, however, the experiment may well end with the strengthening of the PYD’s dominance and the increase of oppression in the name of protecting these gains, along with their gradual squandering in return for narrow political interests. This is a real and possible danger.”

Some actors however did not recognize PYD’s administrative bodies or saw them with suspicion. A majority of KNC parties condemned these institutions as dominated by PYD-affiliated organizations, comprised of an assortment of Kurdish, Arab, Syriac and Assyrian personalities who had little to lose from entering the project (ICG 2014a: 15). For a far majority of Kurdish political parties and activities, this was only a new form of authoritarianism rather than democratic confederalism in action. As evidence of this, many of them pointed out the exclusion of opposition parties within Rojava (Sary 2015: 13). The PYD strengthened its position by the provision of services through the DAA, consolidating its power and creating a dependency upon it. On the other side, KNC affiliates also established their own local

councils to provide services, but except from the infrequent provision of some relief aid and health services, their contribution was limited (Khalaf R. 2016: 20).

These new institutions lacked legitimacy as well among some sections of the Syrian Arabs in these areas, although Arab individuals could be found in them. For instance, Sheikh Humaydi Daham al-Jarba, the head of the Arab tribe al-Shammar, was nominated as the governor of the Jazirah canton in Rojava in 2014. His son became the commander of the al-Sanadid Forces, one of the main Arab militias fighting alongside YPG forces. Al-Sanadid Forces were previously known as Jaysh al-Karama and were accused of expulsing and arresting people for supporting the revolution (Orient News 2015). As early as 2013, Dahham al-Jarba had made an alliance with the YPG to try to keep the opposition and jihadi-salafists organizations out of the Shammar areas on the Iraq-Syria border (Orton 2017). The Shammar tribe of Humaydi Daham al-Jarba in the Hasakah province maintained relatively good relations with the Kurdish population in the Jazirah, since it was seen by large sections of the Kurds as one of native tribes in the region. It is also one of the tribes that refused to fight the Kurds on behalf of the regime after the Kurdish uprising in March 2004 and had good relations with Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani before his nomination as President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in 2005 (Van Wilgenburg 2014c). Dahham resided in Erbil from 2003, and returned to Syria in 2009 (Orton 2017). His collaboration with the PYD allowed him to maintain his control over oil resources following the withdrawal of the regime's forces and of local security agencies (Khaddour 2017c).

His role was however mostly symbolic in order to show the inclusion of different ethnicities. Real power remained in the hands of the PYD. Even Ciwan Ibrahim, general head of the Kurdish security police in northern Syria, said "only few Arabs support this tribe (Shammar)" (cited in Van Wilgenburg 2014c).⁵⁴

Other Arab tribal populations in the region actually preferred to deal with the PYD rather than the Shammar. For example, some Arab tribes sought to provide security

⁵⁴ The Shammar was nowadays a relatively small tribe in Syria (its main branches are in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula), but it is historically prestigious and powerful, and it exerted effective control over the northeast of what is today Syria before the establishment of the modern Syrian state (Khaddour 2017c).

for their areas in collaboration with the Kurdish militia. Yet when Dahham's Sanadid's forces suggested cooperation in all the actions of all local Arab groups, both the local Arab residents and the PYD rejected this, unwilling to hand such power to the Shammar (Khaddour 2017c). Politically, they were also far from sharing anything, as we can see with the response of Hediye Yusuf, co-president of Jazirah canton, regarding the political views of Daham al-Jarba, "Hadi is certainly not a feminist... but he supports us" (cited in Enzinna 2015). In a question regarding his collaboration with Yusuf, Daham al-Jarba answered "I didn't ask to share power with a woman... They (PYD) made me do it" (cited in Enzinna 2015).

Similarly following the conquest by SDF of Manbij, in August 2016, and of Raqqa in October 2017, both cities occupied by IS, the PYD appointed new local councils, which respected the ethnic and religious diversities of the city, had a gender quota / dual leadership (Ayboga 2017) and in which some of the tribal dignitaries of the city were represented. The Raqqa civil council was led by a dual leadership: Leila Mustafa, a Kurdish woman from the border town of Tal Abyad, and her male Arab counterpart Mahmoud al-Borsan, a former member of the Syrian parliament and a leader of the Walda tribe, which is influential in Raqqa (al-Hayat 2017; Lund 2017d). In Manbij, the main Arab representative in the Council was Faruq al-Mashi, who was Muhammad al-Mashi's cousin, an MP in the Syrian parliament. The al-Mashis, who collaborated with PYD prior to the SDF's recapture of Minbej and came back to the area after they took control, were actually accused of having violently attacked demonstrators at the beginning of the uprising in 2011 in their role as 'shabiha' in the city (Khalaf R. 2016: 20). On his side, Faruq al-Mashi's denied in an interview any support for the regime declaring:

"together with my tribe positioned myself against the regime, but rejected armed aggression. But many were in favour of them and the Arabs were of divided opinions. Hardly anyone was on the side of the regime" (cited in Ayboga 2017)

However in both cases, PYD was the dominant actor. As a symbol of this situation, huge portraits of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan were displayed in Raqqa's central square, Naeem, while SDF commanders dedicated the victory to Öcalan and

Women's (Reuters 2017j), following the conquest of the city in mid–end October 2017, and expulsion of IS by SDF forces supported by USA aviation.⁵⁵

The prominence of tribal leaders in the Rojava institutions was therefore generally preserved, rather than challenged. Researcher Khedder Khaddour (2017c) explained that the YPG:

“relied on local tribal networks to manage the populations under their control, but leaders of tribal communities frequently have used these armed groups to pursue their own material interests and position themselves advantageously with respect to other tribal actors... the efforts of the PYD to deal separately with each Arab tribe—and the similarity of this strategy to that adopted by the Islamic State—reflect a legacy of Syrian state policies that aimed to create divisions between the tribes and even among their members. It displays a concern for the threat, however remote, that a unified Arab tribal population might pose to outside actors.”

Despite the nomination of Dahham as a co-governor of Jazirah canton and other tribal leaders in civil councils, many heads of local Arabs tribes remained fearful of the designs of the PYD and were drawn to Operation Euphrates Shield, a Turkish military initiative coordinating FSA and Islamic groups to prevent the SDF and Kurdish forces from expanding west of the Euphrates River, (see chapter 3), or remained close to the regime. In addition to this, scholar Kheder Khaddour explained that the PYD had also faced difficulties in co-opting educated urban elites who operated in autonomy from their tribal belongings, even in cities like Qamishli that was under its control for several years, since the Summer 2012 (cited in Lund 2017d).

⁵⁵ The cost in terms of human lives and infrastructures was however terrible. Overall, at least 1,800 civilians were killed in the fighting,⁵⁵ while more than 80 percent of the city was uninhabitable and / or destroyed (Oakford 2017). Around 312,000 people had fled Raqqa province as a whole as a result of the military offensive of the months before, and many of the city's former inhabitants were in overcrowded camps living in miserable conditions in the outskirts north of Raqqa in SDF-controlled territories (Lund 2017d).

At the same time, the decentralized decision making process promoted by the Rojava administration were far from being completely successful as Asayish and other security forces generally bypassed other organizational structures, citing security reasons. This led to delays in project implementation as well as affecting economic growth (Sary 2016: 14). The revenues of the PYD administered areas depended mostly on oil and gas production to cover its expenses. According to a report issued by Jihad Yazigi (2015) in 2015, oil revenues were reaching 10 million USD per month. The other sources of income were the provision of its services, for example, from its water and electricity operations, food and other products that it sold. The DAA also increased taxes from sources such as construction permits, land, business revenue, cars, agricultural income, border trade and even from the passage of people to and from Rojava. Furthermore, it continued to receive financial support from diaspora networks and support groups (Khalaf R. 2016: 18).

The PYD local administration however still lacked in 2016 control over large sectors of the economy that were once heavily managed by the Syrian regime. The provision of wheat remained closely monitored by the administration, but merchants and importers, as well as those benefiting from the war economy and the monopoly of goods, became the decisive power in the market (Sary 2016: 13). The PYD self-administrations regions, despite calling for social justice and establishment of some agricultural cooperatives, did not witness any significant change. Private property was officially enshrined in the Charter, a provision that safeguarded the privileges of landowners, while encouraging them to invest in agricultural projects sponsored by the Rojava authorities (Glioti 2016).

6.12 Announcement of the federal system

On March 17, 2016, the “federal democratic system of Rojava – Northern Syria” in areas controlled by the PYD, was officially established following a meeting of more than 150 representatives of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian parties in the city of Rmeilan in northeastern Syria. Participants voted in favor of the union of three “cantons” (Afrin, Kobanî, Jazira). During the Rumeilan meeting a constituent assembly of 31 members was elected with two co-presidents, Hadiya Yousef, a Kurd who was jailed for two years prior to the uprising, and Mansour Salloum, an Arab (Said 2016;

Kurdish Question 2016). A few months after in July, Qamishli was designated as the new capital of the federal system in Northern Syria and Rojava. Diyar Qamislo, a member of the diplomatic relations office of the TEV DEM declared “having Qamislo as a capital is not wrong, the city contains Arabs, Christians, and Kurds, and represents all the nations in northern Syria” (Van Wilgenburg 2016b).

The Assad regime and the Coalition both stated their opposition to this announcement, while Washington (despite its support for the PYD), Turkey and the Arab League declared they would not recognize this federal entity (Said 2016; Sly 2016). 69 armed opposition groups, including the Army of Islam and various FSA forces, also signed a statement opposing the Kurdish federalist project (DW 2016). The majority of the Syrian Arab forces opposed to the Assad regime saw federalism as a step toward separatism and division. This view was expressed on many placards in demonstrations on Friday, March 18th 2016, in various opposition held areas of Syria such as Aleppo, Douma or Da’el (al-Souria Net 2016a; Syria Freedom Forever 2016).

Opposition member Michel Kilo declared on his side in reaction to this announcement that the Syrians will not allow the establishment of an entity similar to Israel on Syrian soil and that there is no Kurdish land in Syria, but only Kurdish citizens. Kilo’s statement was reminiscent of the discourse of the 1960s comparing Kurds to Israel as mentioned in chapter 2 (ADN Kronos International 2016)

In July 2016, the provisional charter was replaced by an updated version, the ‘Federal Democratic Rojava Social Contract’ (Sary 2016: 11).

Although the demand for a federal system in Syria is a demand of the majority of Kurdish parties in the country, the KNC opposed this announcement and others criticized the way it was established. The KNC argued that such a federalist system had to be established following discussions with and explanations for the actors of the Syrian Arab opposition. It was a decision primarily taken by PYD, with no democratic dynamics, while other Kurdish parties in the Rojava region were excluded and continue to be repressed. This opinion was reflected by many Kurdish activists, for example journalist Shyar Youssef (2016):

“The founding document of the announcement of the “federal democratic system of Rojava – Northern Syria” did not even mention the ongoing Syrian revolutionary process, while it only talked about war and Islamic fundamentalist forces backed by regional powers. There should have been a long process of consultation and negotiation followed by a general referendum, which are clearly not possible at the moment, rather than a hasty two-day conference clearly dominated by the PYD to ‘discuss’ and agree an equally badly written and quite confused founding document deciding important issues that affect all Syrians. It was clearly a politically motivated move.”

Even Riza Altun, considered as the PKK party’s foreign minister, was critical declaring that

“We (PKK) also criticized them for announcing it prior to the completion of a proper groundwork for its announcement, which gave the impression that it was being imposed as a fait accompli, and that is harmful. The plan should have been explained prior to the announcement being made. We prefer the use of North Syria Federation and call for the removal of Rojava from the name because Rojava denotes a federation of Kurdish identity. North Syria is home to all of its constituents, and the freedom of Kurds there is contingent upon the degree of liberty enjoyed by other inhabitants of the region” (cited Nouredine 2016)

In December 2016, the federal system switched its name to the "Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria". The removal of the word Rojava sparked a wave of anger among various Kurdish groups within the country and in the diaspora.

In July 2017, the PYD led self-administrative unit announced the organization of elections in the three federally administrative provinces (named al-Jazirah,⁵⁶ al-Furat,⁵⁷ and Afrin)⁵⁸ divided into three rounds (Arafat 2017a). The first round of voting was held on September 22, for the leaders of all local communes, around 3,700. The second round, on November 3rd, for representatives to the town, city and regional councils. The third and final round, was to be held in January 2018 but was postponed for the People's Democratic Council.

However, some criticisms were raised by Kurdish opposition parties for the lack of free participation in the process. The KNC announced that it was boycotting the elections, describing them as illegitimate. Another problem occurred with Arab population called Al-Ghamar Arabs ("The Arabs of the floods"), who were relocated from Raqqa province to Hasakah province in advance of the creation of the Euphrates Dam in the 1970s and were barred from the third round of voting. Fouzah Youssef, co-president of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria's Executive Committee, characterized the arrival of the al-Ghamar Arabs to Hasakah province in the 1970s as "a racist and unfair policy against the Kurds" (cited in Abdulssatar Ibrahim and Schuster 2017).

Rojava areas governed by the PYD administration were characterized by repressive campaigns and measures against critical components of Kurdish society, while some independent local medias were also targeted by YPG forces such as the radio Arta, on two occasions at least (2014 and 2016). Members of various Syrian Kurdish parties, especially the Yekiti Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) and the Azadi party, the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) and KNC members have suffered from the repression by the authorities in the autonomous regions of Rojava for their peaceful activism and criticism of the PYD (Human Rights Watch 2014: 1-2). The KNC's president, Ibrahim Berro, was arrested in August 2016 at an Asayish checkpoint in Qamishli, and exiled to Iraqi Kurdistan the day after. A

⁵⁶ Jazirah included Hasakah and Qamishli cantons. Hasakah canton comprises the towns of Hasakah, Darbasiya, Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn), Tel Tamir, Shadi, Arisha and Hula. Qamishli canton comprised the towns of Qamishli, Derik, Amuda, Tirbesiye, Tel Hamis and Tel Barak.

⁵⁷ Al-Furat included Kobani canton and its towns (Kobani and Sirrin), and Tal Abyad canton and its towns (Ain Issa and Suluk).

⁵⁸ Afrin includes Afrin canton and its towns (Afrin, Jandairis and Raqqa), and Sheba canton and its towns (Tal Rifaat, Ehraz, Fafeyn and Kafr Naya).

legal complaint was brought against him by one of TEV-DEM's parties, regarding the opposition of Berro and other KNC leaders to the 'Kurdish revolution in Rojava' (Sary 2016: 13).

In fact, there have been occasional protests against the PYD and their practices in Rojava until the end 2017.

Furthermore, since October 2014, mandatory conscription was decreed for citizens between 18 and 30 to enlist in the Defence service, and join the YPG for six months in areas under its control. The KNC rejected the conscription law and argued for a voluntary appeal otherwise this would leave to major youth migration (Yekiti Media 2014), while a number of Syriac Christian, Arab and Kurdish political parties, as well as civil society and human rights organizations have also opposed this law. This decision had caused the departure of some young people from all communities to escape imprisonment for refusal to serve (Syria Direct 2014; Ahmad and Edelman 2017). Similarly, in some Arab majority inhabited conquered territories, mandatory conscription was often refused, especially as infighting between PYD and FSA forces increased. Residents and activists in November 2017 in the city of Manbij in Aleppo's eastern countryside for example, which came under the control of SDF in August 2016 after the eviction of IS, organized a strike, after several demonstrations in the weeks before, in protest against a new law on forced conscription issued by the SDF's legislative council. The SDF issued a statement the day after the strike, on November 6, suspending the decision to impose compulsory conscription on the inhabitants of Manbij and called instead on the residents to voluntarily join "the self-defense army" (Osman 2017).

Some autonomous actors in the Kurdish political and social scenes from the PYD were still trying to make their voices heard. An independent media scene was trying to develop in PYD controlled areas, despite facing tough competition from better resourced and more numerous party-affiliated media outlets (such as Ronahi TV, Orkes FM, and Hawar News Agency, among others) (Issa 2016: 13).

As we have seen, the DAA were more led by a dynamic from above and controlled by the PYD in an authoritarian way. The many portraits of the Kurdish PKK leader

Abdullah Ocalan that covered the walls of the government centers of PYD controlled areas symbolized this fact. However changes and participation from the local populations from below on the ground were also occurring, particularly regarding the important rise of women's participation in various aspects of society, while other achievements were realized such as secularization of laws and inclusion of religious and ethnic minorities.

6.13 Combination of interests, support from the USA and Russia

The PYD's lack of international legitimacy – a by-product of its association with the PKK, characterized as a terrorist organization by the USA and most European states – has always been its Achilles heel since the beginning of the uprising, preventing its participation in the Geneva conferences, including in 2016 and 2017. The KNC's participation in the Coalition and opposition bodies such as HNC as the official Kurdish opposition moreover isolated the PYD and challenged its overall aspirations (ICG 2014a: 21-22).

In the middle of 2015, things started to change and closer relations and collaborations, although limited mostly to the military field, started to appear with some international actors. In the framework of the strategy of "IS first" and the complete failure to assist FSA forces to combat the IS, Washington, on the initiative of the Pentagon, increasingly supported the PYD and the YPG led coalition known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) established in October 2015 officially as a response to fight the "terrorism represented by the IS, its sister [organizations] and the criminal Ba'th regime" according to its statement (Jaysh al-Thûwar 2015). This new group was dominated by YPG, while other groups (Syriac and FSA groups like the army of revolutionaries Jaysh al-Thûwar (Mustapha 2015) within it played an auxiliary role. The SDF was actually established to provide a legal and political cover for American military support for the PKK affiliated group PYD in Syria (Lund 2015d). The YPG led SDF became Pentagon's premier partner force against the IS in Syria from this period.

In December 2015, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) was formed as the political branch of the SDF. The new coalition, also led by the PYD, was co-presided by Riad

Darar,⁵⁹ and Ilham Ahmed, a member of TEV-DEM. The SDC was mainly comprised of Arab, Kurdish and Assyrian political forces along with others from the Kurdish region in northern Syria. The SDC supported a federal, democratic and secular state, but its political importance remained relatively weak and mostly symbolic (Drwish 2017).

6.14 Limited and threatened support to SDF... changing regional and international political dynamics

Despite having been supported by Russia and the USA since mid 2015, the PYD was submitted to increasing pressures. Moscow expressed the necessity for YPG Kurdish forces to collaborate directly and in a more systematic way with regime forces against IS (Rudaw 2015). The rapprochement between Erdogan and Putin did not arrange its situation following the failed military coup of a section of the army in Turkey in July of 2016. In August 2016, the Turkish army intervened directly in Syria in coalition with Syrian armed opposition forces acting as proxies for Ankara, in a military campaign called “Operation Euphrates Shield” with the support of various international actors (See chapters 5 and 7). The Deputy Prime Minister Nurettin Canikli even acknowledged in the beginning of December 2016 that Turkey “would not have moved so comfortably” without the rapprochement with Russia, which effectively controlled parts of northern Syrian air space (Osborn and Tattersall 2016).

Similarly, interactions between US officials and YPG commanders remained largely informal and limited to the fight against IS. The USA maintained PKK on its terrorist list throughout these years and voiced strong support for Turkey's fight against the Kurdish group. They also avoided providing economic support to YPG-PYD controlled areas, which would further upset Turkey (ICG 2017: 14). On several occasions, Washington even pledged to take back weapons supplied to YPG after the defeat of IS, but without any measures taken into this direction (Reuters 2017e). As expressed in 2016 by PKK leader, Riza Altun, regarding the US's behavior

⁵⁹ He was a political activist from 2000 onward, working with civil society groups. He was imprisoned by Bashar al-Assad's regime for five years (2005-10) for his political views and accused of supporting the Kurdish cause. He was a founding member of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, from which he later resigned in August 2014. He is a prominent member of the democratic Islamist current (Drwish 2017).

towards the Kurdish issue in Syria “the US’ role is double-edged depending on its interests, and the relationship with Washington is therefore tactical in nature” (cited in Nouredine 2016).

PYD faced contradictory interests by Russia and the USA, both actors supporting the armed branch of the party, YPG, used a proxy force to achieve their own political interests (Barrington and Said 2016), but they were however not ready to jeopardize their relationships with Turkey. The rapprochement at the end of 2016 between Iran, Turkey and Russia threatened its interests even more. Russia was unable or unwilling to override a Turkish veto of PYD participation in January 2017 peace talks in Kazakhstan (Stewart 2017). During the Astana talks, both the representatives of the opposition and of the regime rejected any Kurdish autonomy, while the head of Jaysh al-Islam, Muhammad Alloush voted for the PYD and YPG to be listed as terrorist groups. On his side, Bashar Jaafari, the head of the regime’s delegation at Astana, declared that most Syrian Kurds opposed federalism and that those Kurds who dream of federalism “need Panadol and Advil (analgesic drugs)” (Van Wilgenburg 2017a).

The regime’s military advances in 2016 and 2017 also demonstrated its unwillingness to accept a rival actor in the recaptured territories. Following the official announcement of the total conquest of Aleppo by the regime in December 2016, in which PYD had a role, relations between both actors were tenuous. Asayish leaders complained regime checkpoints hindered the movement of goods and services into Sheikh Maqsood and that the regime treated the area as a military one (Mcdowall 2017). The regime however did not push to retake full control of these areas as the PYD could have threaten to remove the security square in Qamishli and Hasaka where the regime’s security and intelligence establishments were based (Behlewi 15 2017).

Russia was trying to regulate relations between the PYD’s forces and the Assad regime in 2016 and 2017 (Yalla Souriya 2016, Haid 2017a). Russian military officials actually hosted at the end of 2016 a meeting in their airbase at Hemeimem with various representatives of the Kurdish movements, including both the Tev-Dem, implicitly representing the PYD, and the KNC to mediate future relations between

them and the Assad regime. The regime's authorities submitted a list of conditions that would regulate relations between Damascus and the Kurdish enclave, which the regime refused to recognize. The regime notably conditioned its support for the Kurds in the country if they abandoned their demand for a federal system and hoist the Syrian flag on all government buildings and offices (Rudaw 2016). These demands however remained unheeded.

In mid-June 2017, new clashes occurred between regime forces and the YPG led SDF, as both actors were capturing IS held territories and therefore getting dangerously close to each other. U.S. warplanes also shot down a SAA jet during this period in the southern Raqqa countryside, because it dropped bombs near SDF positions (Al-Khalidi and Spetalnick 2017).

In August 2017, in response to the announcement a few weeks before by the PYD led self administration of the organizations of local councils and regional assemblies elections in territories under its control between late summer and January 2018 in order to consolidate its power, Syrian Deputy foreign minister Faisal Mekdad dismissed this move as a "joke". He added that Damascus would not allow them to threaten the country's territorial unity and that "those who will move in those directions know what price they have to pay" (Reuters 2017f). In response to these threats, Hadiya Yousef, chairwoman of the founding assembly of a new federal system of government for northern Syria declared

"The regime's insistence on renewing this authoritarian, centralized regime will lead to a deepening of the Syrian crisis...If (the government) insists on this position, the regime will steer Syria toward partition" (cited in Perry 2017c)

One month later, in mid September, Russian air forces targeted positions of the SDF, causing injuries, in the East of the Euphrates River in Syria near Deir-Zor. The alleged bombings occurred few days after a statement by the Syrian regime and Iran-backed Shi'a militias, announcing an operation towards Abu Kamal to clear out the Syrian border, bringing them on a clashing course with the SDF force (Van

Wilgenburg 2017b). Similarly, at the same period, regime's high official Bouthaina Shaaban actually declared that the Syrian government was ready to fight the SDF:

“Whether it's the Syrian Democratic Forces, or Daesh (Islamic State) or any illegitimate foreign force in the country ... we will fight and work against them so our land is freed completely from any aggressor... I'm not saying this will happen tomorrow ... but this is the strategic intent” (Dadouch and Perry 2017)

SDF forces suffered a new attack carried out by the Russian and regime forces against their positions in Deir Zor province on September 25 (SDF General Command 2017).

In the midst of worsening military and political tensions between Damascus and its allies on one side and the PYD on the other side, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem however affirmed in the end of September that the Syrian government was open to negotiations with Kurds over their demand for autonomy within Syria's borders. This declaration was merely rhetoric, as it did not provide any political content to the meaning of “autonomy” used by officials in Damascus. The ambiguous statement of Walid Moallem sought rather to seek a form of understanding with the PYD on a short term by possibly providing the Kurdish movement with a sort of political arrangement; to try to avoid a scenario of complete separation similar to Iraqi Kurdistan; and to pressure the Turkish government that saw as a great danger a Kurdish autonomous region under the leadership of PKK sister organization. The statement of the Syrian Foreign Minister was actually made on the same day of the Kurdish independent referendum in Iraq, which was completely rejected by the Syrian regime that supported Iraqi unity (Reuters 2017g; Tejel cited in Souleiman 2017).

Despite cautious readiness of some PYD officials to engage in dialogue with the regime (Zaman 2017), such as PYD's Moscow representative Abd Salam Muhammad Ali who, for instance, declared beginning of December that the SDF could be integrated into the Syrian army if a political solution that satisfied all parties was found (Tastekin 2017), top Syrian Kurdish PYD politician and the co-chair of the

Syrian Democratic Council, Ilham Ahmed, nonetheless revealed in September 2017 that PYD officials had already met with the Assad regime twice, but the Russian-brokered dialogue went nowhere. At both meetings, Damascus' officials "did not appear serious" about talks over the future of the autonomous regions and the demand for a federal system for Syria, she said (Francis 2017).

In Mid December 2017, Bashar al-Assad actually characterized the SDF as "traitors", an "illegitimate foreign force" supported by the United States that must be expelled. The SDF General Command responded to Assad's statement, stating that his dictatorship is "the definition of treason" and the people rebelled against his "authoritarian oppressive security regime" (Rudaw 2017c). The regime also repeatedly declared that Raqqa, under SDF control after IS' expulsion, was still an occupied city and promised to restore the authority of the state throughout the country (SANA 2017h).

The Turkish military offensive, assisted by Syrian armed opposition forces submitted to Ankara, on Afrin (see chapter 7) in January 2018 showed the growing threats on the territories ruled by the PYD, but more generally on Kurdish populations. The Turkish led attack against Afrin increased considerably the popularity of the PYD forces, seen more than ever as the defender of the Kurds. At the same period, the two main Syrian Kurdish political actors, PYD and KNC, boycotted the Sochi conference in Russia, called the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, in order to advance peace negotiations in Syria held at the end of January 2018. The PYD considered the Sochi congress was rendered meaningless after Russia did not oppose Turkey's military offensive in Afrin and on the opposite collaborated with Ankara. The KNC decided not to participate after Moscow refused to accept their demands which mainly included the Kurdish cause in Syria to be one of the key agendas of the congress and furthermore after Moscow's cooperation with Turkish offensive against Afrin (Rudaw 2018c).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the agreement concluded between PYD and the regime to let some pro-regime militias to enter Afrin did not halt Turkish military enterprise against the area. In mid March 2018, Turkish army and its Syrian proxies took over the city of Afrin, following the withdrawal of YPG forces of the city.

Following the conquest and occupation of the city, fighters of the Syrian opposition armed groups linked to Anakara plundered and looted civilian residences and shops, while they tore down a statue of Kawa, a central and symbolic figure in a Kurdish legend about the new year celebration of Newroz. More than 130,000 people also fled their homes after the invasion of Afrin district (UNHCR 2018).

6.15 Conclusion

The eruption of the popular uprising in Syria allowed for the emergence of the Kurdish national question in ways unseen previously in the history of the country on many aspects. Kurdish youth independent groups and networks initially played an important role in the protest movement, but they were weakened considerably through the years.

It was the PYD that took the opportunity of the uprising to become the dominant Kurdish political actor in Syria. The experience of PYD managed areas was hailed for the high inclusions and participation of women in all sectors of society, including the military struggle, the secularization of laws and institutions and to some extent integration and participation of various ethnic and religious minorities. The authoritarian practices of the PYD forces against rival Kurdish political actors and activists and opposition members from other communities were however criticized.

The increasing insularity of the Kurdish popular movement within the protest movement was the result of two elements. First, the PYD pursued a policy of strengthening its political influence through its own armed forces to control Kurdish majority inhabited areas and enforce a form of Kurdish autonomy, and to try to link the “Rojava” cantons geographically. This was made by maintaining a non confrontational attitude towards the regime, which was busy fighting on other fronts and saw the expanding influence of PYD / PKK as a tool to pressure Turkey, and without any cooperation with Syrian Arab opposition forces, and sometimes even against them, because of the hostile attitudes of the vast majority of them towards Kurdish national demands and their collaboration with Ankara.

The other element explaining the increasing isolation of the Kurdish issue from the uprising was indeed the belligerent political positions of the Syrian Arab opposition in exile, represented first by the SNC and then Coalition, dominated in both cases by the MB and forces allied or sympathetic to Turkey's AKP government, and within the country among the far majority of Arab armed opposition groups against the political demands of the Kurdish people in Syria and their political representatives. This included refusing the modification of the name of the country from Arab Republic of Syria to republic of Syria or to take into considerations demands such as federalism. They also supported military offensives from Turkey or / and opposition armed groups against YPG and targeting Kurdish civilians. This was accompanied by an Arab chauvinist discourse against the Kurds. The SNC and the coalition more generally failed as we have seen in the previous chapter to propose an inclusive program that could appeal to the Kurds. This resulted as well in increasing and deepening ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds. This situation pushed increasingly young Kurds in the arms of the PYD, seen as the sole defender of the Kurdish population in Syria.

From the middle of 2016, the Rojava cantons were increasingly under the threats of political changes on the International and regional scene, especially following the failed coup of a fraction of the Turkish army against the AKP government leading to more authoritarian policies and measures in Turkey, particularly against the Kurds. This would have consequences on PYD held areas and the subsequent rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow. The successive victories of pro regime forces in 2016 and 2017 in the northern regions also complicated the situation for PYD, while threats were mounting against it.

Just as the rise of the uprising in Syria had pushed the regime to seek punctual and temporal agreements with the PYD, this threat was increasingly disappearing as its position strengthened and it recovered new territories with the assistance of its allies. The regime could therefore once more turn its forces against Kurdish regions or undermined increasingly its autonomy, especially with international actors, Russia and USA, progressively abandoning the Kurdish group as their objectives differed with this latter after periods of collaborations.

The destiny of the Kurdish people in Syria was intrinsically linked as we have seen to the dynamics of the Syrian uprising and therefore its future was in danger, just as with the rest of the protest movement.

Chapter 7: Syria, International Relations and, Interventions

7.1 Introduction

The internationalization of the Syrian revolutionary process occurred quite rapidly with the direct involvement of international and regional actors within the country early on. In this chapter, I will analyze the reasons and nature of these interventions.

Prior to the uprising, Syria was in a process of rapprochement with Western countries, following the policies of France and the USA, which isolated Syria on the international political scene. In 2008, this situation changed with the election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, breaking with his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, and the US policy of isolating Damascus. US President George W. Bush's administration departure and the election of Barack Obama also opened new opportunities for Damascus. By 2009, Syria had actually been successful in positioning itself between two networks: it maintained close relationships with Iran and Russia, its two closest allies, while reviving a period of détente and even rapprochement with Western states such as France and the US. Obama's administration actually nominated an ambassador, Robert Ford, in Damascus in February 2010 for the first time in five years. This partially explained the hesitation from US officials in taking a strong stance against Damascus' repression of the demonstrators following the beginning of the uprising in mid March 2011.

This position between Damascus' allies and Western states, or at least Assad's attempts to reach it, was challenged very rapidly with the eruption of the uprising in Syria and the development of protests throughout the country. The challenge of the protest movement and subsequent deepening of the militarization of the uprising pushed Damascus to be more and more dependent on Russian and Iran's assistances.

The influence of Russia and Iran grew militarily, politically, culturally and economically, with consequences on Syrian society and institutions. I will also

analyze the role of the so-called “friends of the Syrian People”⁶⁰: the Gulf Monarchies, Turkey and Western states in the uprising and the evolution of their policies through the conflict. Their lack of unity and coherent political project for Syria nurtured divisions within the opposition.

The subsequent expansion of ISIL changed the orientation and focus of Western countries, and to some extent those of Arab states in the region, towards the “war on terror”, while the development and consolidation of Kurdish regions under PYD leadership also progressively modified the priorities of the Turkish government towards Syria.

The main dynamics of international imperialist and regional interventions were motivated by geo-political considerations rather than economic objectives. Syria was at the center of many geo-political games in the region and its overthrow could change the balance of forces in significant ways. Assad’s regime benefited from these divisions on the international scene and the assistance given by his allies to remain in power. It was certainly the most important aspect in the resilience of the regime.

The regional political environment in the Middle East has been witnessing some major changes at the eve of the uprisings, especially with the failures of US led military invasion in Iraq in 2003 and the willingness of the Obama’s administration to withdraw partly from the region. Similarly, the USA was trying to reach out to Russia and Iran before 2011 seeking improved relationships. This situation allowed other international and regional actors to play an increasing and significant role in the region.

7.2 Assad’s regime seeking allies in the war and against international sanctions

The international sanctions imposed on Syria by mostly Western state powers, Turkey and Gulf monarchies and the deepening of the war in Syria obliged the

⁶⁰ The name these countries gave to the conferences in support of the exiled opposition SNC and then Syrian Coalition.

regime to rapidly seek help from its allies on the regional and international scene. Throughout the war, Syrian officials were trying to increase relations and meetings with investors and officials from states characterized as friendly especially the BRICS⁶¹ countries, which stood by diplomatically on the side of the regime (The Syria Report 2015b). Russia was certainly the most important ally of the BRICS' states, but China's relations with Syria during the uprising proved important as well.

Prior to the uprising, China was ranked as Syria's third-largest importer in 2010. It supplied notably weapons to Syria, delivering \$300 million in arms from 2007 to 2010 (Human Rights Watch 2012). From the beginning of the uprising in 2011, Beijing repeatedly referred to its policies of mutual non-intervention, respect for sovereignty, and non-aggression in its decision to side with the Assad regime during the war. Chinese officials actually stood with Russia by vetoing six out of seven resolutions submitted to the UNSC to condemn the Syrian regime for using force against their civilians between March of 2011 and April of 2017 (Hindy 2017). China became by 2017 Syria's biggest trading partner. Chinese companies provided various equipment and raw materials to Syria, especially to Syrian industrialists, because of the European sanctions imposed on Syria (Euro News 2017).

China also increasingly worried that Uighurs, a mostly Muslim population from western China's Xinjiang region, would end up in Syria and Iraq fighting for jihadist groups there, travelling illegally via Southeast Asia and Turkey (Blanchard 2016). In August of 2016, the Chinese military announced its intention to increase military cooperation with Syria, including training (Hindy 2017).

China however played only a small role in international attempts to end the war, including through the UNSC and the International Syria Support Group, despite having appointed a special envoy to the crisis in March 2016. Similarly, in terms of material support for Damascus, China sold only 500 anti-tank missiles to Damascus in 2014 (Hindy 2017).

⁶¹ Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa and China

Considering China's participation, the regime was above all dependent on its close allies Russia, Iran and Hezbollah and this situation would grow throughout the uprising at all levels.

7.3 Russia

Russia has been an old ally of the Assad regime and has long supplied its forces with the vast majority of their weaponry. Moscow's commitment to Damascus's regime and Assad himself has been very clear since early on at the beginning of the uprising in March 2011. Russia has continuously vetoed and blocked repeated attempts within the UN Security Council to impose sanctions and other punitive measures on the Assad regime. They publicly justified this position as a defense of the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. The official political propaganda aside, Russia considered the possible overthrow of the Syrian regime as a major threat to its own regional interests. Moscow viewed such an outcome as weakening its influence in the region and bolstering the US's position and that of its allies, while expanding the influence of Islamic fundamentalist movements, which the Russian government observed as a potential challenge to its position not only in the greater Middle East but also in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Heydeman 2013: 4-5).

This did not prevent Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) from facilitating Islamic fundamentalist networks and their safe passage from the North Caucasus to Syria, notably as a way to get rid of them. *Novaia Gazeta* journalist Elena Milashina documented that the FSB assisted Chechen and Dagestan Islamic fundamentalist travel to Syria on safe routes via Turkey. The number of terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus was actually reduced between 2014 and 2015, from 525 to an estimated 260. Russian special services, however, were worried about returning jihadists (cited in Valenta J. and Valenta L. F.: 2016).

The Western military intervention and overthrow of Libyan dictator Mu'ammar Qaddafi also contributed to Russia's position of refusal of any UN resolution that could allow an intervention against the Assad regime, because Russian officials considered they had been deliberately misled in this case. Washington had

persuaded Moscow not to veto a Security Council resolution against Libyan dictator Qaddafi, which launched what Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described as a "humanitarian mission" to prevent the slaughter of Libyan civilians by the regime's forces. But as NATO forces increased and expanded their air bombing campaign, it became clear that the international intervention was mainly focused on getting rid of Qaddafi's regime (Valenta J. and Valenta L. F.: 2016). Russia's defense sales company, Rosoboronexport, lost at least \$4 billion worth of contracts, and Gazprom lost several billion more in energy exploration and extraction deals signed with Qaddafi's regime before his 2011 overthrow (Blas and Champion 2016). Moreover, Russia had lost a regime with relatively good political relations with Moscow.

The Assad regime has long been a consumer of Russian weaponry, and the arms trade only increased after Assad and Putin came to power in 2000. In 2004, Moscow also agreed to write off \$9.8 billion in Syrian debt owed to the former Soviet Union (Rainey 2015), in other words to scrap 73 percent of the \$13.4 billion owed by Syria and to reschedule the remaining \$3.61 billion (Yeates 2017). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia represented 78 percent of Syria's weapons purchases between 2007 and 2012, while from 2007 to 2010, Russian arms sales to Syria reached the total sum of \$4.7 billion, more than twice the figure for the previous four years. Beside these sales, Russian companies had \$20 billion worth of investments in Syria at the eve of the uprising (Borshchevskaya 2013). With the liberalization of the Syrian economy after 2000, Russian investors and companies started to invest into the Syrian market, in particular in the energy sector (Syria Report 2017h).

The Russian naval center in the city of Tartus was also an important asset for the country's geopolitical interests as the only military base outside the former Soviet Union and as a direct access to the Mediterranean Sea. This naval center boosted Russia's operational capacity in the region because the warships based there were capable of reaching the Red Sea through the Suez Canal and the Atlantic through the Strait of Gibraltar in a matter of days. Following Bashar al-Assad's visit to Moscow in 2005 and the growing relationship between the two countries, renewed Russian-Syrian military cooperation occurred, including upgrading the port of Tartus for larger ships. In 2008, work to expand and modernize the Russian naval site in

Tartus started by accommodating heavy warships after 2012. According to Navy experts, the facility was being renovated to serve as a foothold for a permanent Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean sea (Global Security 2016). Putin had made the expansion of Russian sea power a pillar of his third presidential term (Borshchevskaya 2013).

So even prior the uprising, the importance of the naval base in Tartus was already on the rise in Syria. The Russian military expanded its small naval facility at Tartus to handle bigger warships and transport vessels amid a general buildup of Russian forces. 1,700 Russian military specialists were deployed in mid 2015, which was a dramatic increase in personnel at a facility that until 2012 was staffed by a handful of military men and civilian contractors (Bodner 2015). The military expansion in Syria was part of a bigger Russian expansion that included establishing military bases in several other countries, including Vietnam, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Seychelles, Singapore, and Belarus (al-Saadi 2015b).

Though the IRI became the primary weapons-provider to the Syrian regime instead of Moscow during the conflict, the Russian state continued to ship substantial volumes of small arms, ammunition, spare parts and refurbished material to pro-regime forces (Heydemann 2013: 4). In January of 2014, Russia stepped up supplies of military gear to the Syrian regime, including armored vehicles, drones and guided bombs (Saul 2014). Russian advisors were also training some soldiers of the SAA and advising officers serving Bashar al-Assad (Kureev 2016). In August of 2015, new military Russian equipment arrived in Syria, while Moscow was enhancing its intelligence-sharing program with the Syrian regime. In the same month, a deal was signed between Moscow and Damascus allowing Russia to establish its Hmeimim airbase to launch operations (Stratfor 2015).

Another level of Russia's military involvement was reached on September 30, 2015, when Russian jets conducted their first raids in Syria. The military operation would be aimed at recapturing territories lost by the Assad regime to various opposition forces (Bassam 2015). The Russian state justified its direct massive military intervention in Syria in the framework of the "war against terrorism", particularly against the IS, and to protect the Syrian state and religious minorities against terrorism and foreign-

backed jihadi groups. The main motivation however was to support the crumbling Assad regime politically and militarily and crush all forms of opposition to it. This was witnessed in the proportion of Russian airstrikes in Syria targeting the IS, which constantly fell in 2016. In the first quarter of 2016, 26 percent of Russian airstrikes in Syria targeted IS (AFP 2016c). That dipped to 22 percent in the second quarter, and 17 percent in the third quarter. As argued by Alex Kokcharov, principal Russia analyst at Information Handling Services Markit's company,

"Russia's priority is to provide military support to the Assad government and, most likely, transform the Syrian civil war from a multi-party conflict into a binary one between the Syrian government and jihadist groups like the IS" (AFP 2016c)

Moscow built up substantial ground forces in various locations in Syria, with estimates putting in 2017 to at least several thousand troops, more than 4'700, including several Private Military Companies ([E.N.O.T Corp and Morgan Security Group PMC) (Hayek and Roche 2016) and Russian military police, along with modern weaponry and infrastructure (Moscow Times 2016). They deployed the latest S-300 air defense missile system to Tartus. Moscow also sent three missile ships to reinforce its naval forces off the coast of Syria (The New Arab 2016c). In January 2017 Russia and Syria signed agreements to indefinitely prolong Moscow's control of the strategic Tartus port. The 49-year agreement allowed Russia to dredge the Mediterranean port, install floating berths and carry out repair works. The deal could be automatically extended for another 25-year period if neither side objected (DW 2017).

By the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017, Russian military police, which are part of the Russian defense ministry and tasked with protecting key Russian installations and ensuring troop discipline, started to be deployed in Syria to train their Syrian colleagues to carry out joint patrols in some areas, including "de-escalation zones",⁶² and maintain law and order. Chechen soldiers were also recruited to serve in the military police to protect Russia's Hmeimim air base in Syria (AFP 2017a). By July

⁶² Agreements signed by Russia, Turkey and Iran calling for end to hostilities between armed opposition and pro-regime forces in four regions.

2017, four battalions were operating in Syria, for a total of almost 1,200 individuals (Galeotti 2017). In addition to this involvement of the Russian military, reports published in a St Petersburg newspaper, Fontanka, stated that a private Russian mercenary company known as “Wagner” was taking part in the Syria war. It lost members in both Ukraine and Syria - and the Russian President personally honored them, despite private military contracting firms being illegal in Russia (Spencer 2016). At the end of December 2016, Vladimir Putin signed a legal amendment regarding Law No. 53, which permitted the deployment of Russian mercenaries around the world and allowed for augmenting the Russian military with private military firms (Dobbert and Neumann 2017). The Russian military also developed relations with some pro-regime militias for example the Palestinian Quds Brigade in Aleppo (Toumaj 2016) and Jaber brothers militias, Desert Hawks and the Sea Commandos/”Navy Seals” (Hayek and Roche 2016).

Russia’s economic role in Syria increased progressively after 2015, although not to tremendous levels. New trade and market opportunities for Russian investors opened from this period. In the summer of 2016, the state cereals procurement entity Hoboob, had contracted two Russian wheat suppliers for the supply of 200,000 and 150,000 tons (The Syria Report 2016o). In February of 2017, the Syrian government awarded a contract for total supplies of 1.2 million tons in batches of 200,000 to a Russian company named Adyg Yurak, based in the Russian province of Adygea. This came in addition to wheat supplies in the form of humanitarian aid by Moscow. Adyg Yurak increasingly became a key actor in Russian-Syrian economic relations and also established privileged relationships with some regime figures, especially rising businessman Samer Foz, the owner of Aman Group (see chapter 8) (The Syria Report 2017j).

The key issue was however to seize the opportunities in Syria’s oil and gas resources and which industries were among the rare sectors that managed to attract the interest of Russian companies. Gazprom issued a press release confirming a meeting with Syrian officials on a proposal by the Syrian Government to participate in the rebuilding of oil and gas projects, infrastructure development and pipeline construction (The Syria Report 2016g). In June 2017, Damascus awarded Stroytransgaz, a Russian engineering company, a contract to extract 2.2 million tons

of phosphate per year from its mines in central Syria. Prior the uprising, Sroytransgaz was among the most active Russian companies in Syria. It won several contracts to build infrastructure projects, including two gas processing plants (The Syria Report 2017k).⁶³ A few months before, in December 2016, a deal had been concluded with the Russian company Europolis, owned by Evgeny Prigozhin, a businessman close to Vladimir Putin. The deal stipulated that Russia would receive a quarter of all oil and gas from Syrian territory recaptured by the regime in exchange for contributing to evict IS from these areas, notably by providing Russian mercenaries (The Syria Report 2017k).

The Assad regime's dependency on Russia increased considerably throughout the war, while closely coordinating military and diplomatic moves with Moscow. This has not prevented some small disagreements or incidents between the two actors. Damascus has for example not hesitated on several occasions for example to undermine Moscow's efforts to form a national unity government in Syria by indicating their unwillingness and repressing all opposition — even opposition groups and figures that called for dialogue with the Syrian regime and maintained close connections with Russia (al-Saadi 2015b). Similarly Russia was more willing to promote national ceasefires in the country and encourage an international political settlement of the conflict, while the Assad regime did not favor these actions. Damascus notably preferred local ceasefires, rather than national one, achieved on favourable terms and then apply relentless collective punishment to opposition-held areas, while at the same time exploiting the resulting calm to shift forces toward escalation elsewhere (Bonsey 2017).

Assad's ability to obstruct these initiatives demonstrated it maintained some levels of limited autonomy and the difficulties for Moscow to try to dominate the higher leadership structures of the Syrian regime.

⁶³ The mine had total estimated reserves of some 1.8 billion tons, but the deal covered a specific block that had reserves of 105 million tons. The share of profits was split on a 70/30 basis in favour of the Russian company. The Syrian party to the agreement was the General Establishment of Geology and Mineral Resources, which was the parent entity of the General Company for Phosphate and Mines (GECOPHAM), the state company directly involved in phosphate extraction (The Syria Report 2018g).

The military intervention in Syria however helped Russia to become the key actor in the country and its post-conflict settlement, while demonstrating Russia's fundamentally new military and political capability on the international scene. More generally, it also pushed the frontier of geo-political rivalry and competition between Moscow and the West (or NATO) away from the Russian border, while making clear that any action of the USA and / or NATO needed to take into consideration Russian's interests in order to reach a viable solution to resolve a number of conflicts and tensions. According to researchers Nikolai Silaev and Andrey Sushentsov (2017:5) "the frontier (of geo-political competition) now lies in the Middle East, the Balkans and the domestic policy of the United States and the EU".

Russia also used its military intervention in Syria as "a way to showcase its weaponry for export sales," according to Omar Lamrani (cited in Brown 2017), an analyst with Stratfor, especially their SU-34 fighter jet and cruise missiles. Former Russian commander and now MP, Vladimir Shamanov mentioned in February 2018 in parliament that more than 200 new weapons - developed by Moscow scientists - had been tried out in Syria (The New Arab 2018c).

7.4 Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)

The Iranian regime had increased considerably its standing and influence in the region, primarily through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in the decade prior to the Syrian uprising. The failure of US and British intervention in 2003 and subsequent occupation of Iraq permitted Tehran through proxies and close allies, particularly Shi'a Islamic Fundamentalist movements, to have a major influence in the country. The rule of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a member of the al-Da'wa movement, between 2006 and 2014 implemented pro Iranian policies, especially increasing Iranian domination on various institutions of the state and expanding its religious and militia networks in the country. Iran also augmented its influence through the growing popularity of Hezbollah in Lebanon, particularly after its "victory", or at least presented this way, following Israel's war against Lebanon in 2006, and strengthening relations with other political parties in the region, including in Yemen and the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

The expanding influence of Iran in the region has been led in particular by the IRGC, which constitutes a military-political force and to some extent a state within a state in Iran. They control a major sector of the national economy and are the armed expression of the expansionism of the Iranian regime that intervened in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (Houcarde 2008; Achcar 2018).

Iran has been a key ally of the Assad regime and to Bashar al-Assad, warning against its overthrow and saying his fate was a "red line". Iranian officials have been officially calling for negotiations and reforms, while at the same time accusing since the first days of the uprising many Syrian opposition groups of being "terrorists" and of being backed by Western and Arab states (Aboudi 2013). Syria has been Iran's principal strategic ally in the region for a long period now and has been essential for providing and resupplying Iran's proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon, which plays an important role in achieving strategic security depth vis-à-vis Israel and the US. Because the Assad regime protected these supply routes, officials in Tehran were unlikely to entertain the possibility that any non-Assad Syrian entity would do the same (Lister and McCants 2014). Tehran also saw the Syrian uprising as providing its regional rivals, especially the Gulf monarchies, with an opportunity to diminish the standing of an important ally and undermine its power and influence in the Middle East.

On the ground, the security and intelligence services of the IRI were advising and assisting the Syrian regime since the beginning of the uprising. These efforts evolved into an expeditionary training mission using IRGC Ground Forces, Quds Force, intelligence services, and law enforcement forces. The IRI provided essential military supplies to Assad and has also been assisting pro-regime militias. From mid-2012 to mid-2013, Iran helped the Assad regime establish and form numerous local and regional militias, including the Damascus-based factions within the Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFa) network, whose commanders were Iraqi Shi'a living in Syria. Some thousands of Shi'a pilgrims and refugees, most of them from Saddam Hussein's Iraq, had settled in the country starting in the early 1980s, some receiving Syrian nationality (Hage Ali 2017). The various militias of LAFa network increasingly recruited foreign fighters, particularly Iraqi Shi'a, but also Pakistanis and Afghans (10-20,000 Afghan Shi'a (Spencer 2016; Majidyar 2017a)). The LAFa factions were

sent throughout Syria to fight armed opposition fighters alongside other pro-regime militias. The Iranians, estimated at around 1,000 to 1,500, were travelling in Syria on behalf of the IRGC. Iran's head of IRGC, Qasem Suleimani, also took a direct role in the establishment of the NDF, one of the earliest examples of Tehran taking a lead at the local level in structuring and backing Assad regime forces (Hayek and Roche 2016).

Iran increased the IRGC contingent in Syria to approximately 3,000 in the autumn of 2015, parallel to the beginning of the direct military intervention of Russia. Iranian media started at that period a propaganda campaign aiming to persuade the population that an intervention in Syria was morally just and preserved Iranian national interests. According to one estimate, some 160 Iranians were killed and 300 injured between October 2015 and February 2016, nearly doubling the number of Iranians who had died in Syria since 2011. The casualty lists also included a larger number of mid- and low-ranking officers, in addition to senior officers (Lund 2016b). The Iranian regime increased once again deployments to Syria over the course of 2016 to participate in the operation to encircle and recapture the city of Aleppo. These armed contributions were predominantly comprised of IRGC Ground Forces, although they also included contributions from the Quds Force, Iran's conventional military known as the Artesh, and the Basij paramilitary organization (Bucala 2017:4).

Iranian officials also decided to allow Russian troops to use its Shahid Nojeh Air Base in Hamedan to bomb targets in Syria, which was an unprecedented move by the IRI, and a further testament that securing the upper hand in Syria was crucial to Tehran's regional foreign policy (Geranmayeh and Liik 2016: 4).

The Iranian intervention in Syria has been very costly for its economy, spending between \$9 billion and \$15 billion in Syria between 2011 and 2016 (Hafezi 2016). The IRI provided 4 important loans to the Assad regime between 2013 and 2017:

- The first loan, which amounted to \$1 billion, came in January 2013 after regime revenues had already plunged to 50 percent of their pre-war levels. The Assad regime dedicated this first loan to pay for imported food commodities and to prop up the Syrian regime's official foreign reserves, which had been depleted by the

increasing pressure of the military expenses since the beginning of the uprising. The agreement was signed between the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) and Bank Saderat, which is Iran's export finance bank. The two institutions are state-owned and under U.S. sanctions.

- The second loan occurred in August of 2013. This one was more robust reaching \$3.6 billion. This loan was earmarked mainly for the purchase of crude oil and derivatives. The agreement came following the loss by the Syrian regime of the East of the country, where almost all of the country's oil fields are located. According to the International Energy Agency, Syria imported an average of 30,000 barrels of crude oil per day from Iran in 2013.

- In June 2015, the IRI gave its approval for a new credit line to the Syrian regime for \$1 billion, which was used to help finance imports. This loan, however, was meant to offset the sharp drop in the value of the Syrian pound. This necessitated pumping more money into the market to avoid the collapse of the local currency.

- In January of 2017, a new credit line of USD 1 billion was granted to the regime. The new loan was provided to pay for Syria's imports. Half of it would be allocated to oil supplies, while the other half would pay for agricultural and industrial inputs, all of which had to be procured from Iran or through Iranian companies (Saadi 2015a; The Syria Report 2015f, The Syria Report 2017c).

These agreements increased economic and investment agreements between the two regimes, which was relatively small and remained mostly unimplemented until the outbreak of protests in 2011. Trade between the two countries grew from approximately \$300 million in 2010 to \$1 billion in 2014 (Saadi 2015a). According to the Ministry of Economy, Iran was Syria's main supplier in 2014, representing some 34 percent of the country's total imports. In 2010, the year prior to the uprising, imports from Iran reached only USD 297 million, representing less than 2 percent of Syria's total imports (The Syria Report 2015g). Iranian exports surged again following the two Iranian credit lines granted to Damascus in 2013 and 2015 (The Syria Report 2016h). In some sectors, such as electricity equipment and machinery, Syria became strongly dependent on Iran (The Syria report 2015f). However, Iranian private

companies showed little interest in investing in the Syrian market. Iranian investors established only one limited liability company between 2011 and 2015, while another Iranian company opened a representative office in the Syrian capital (The Syria Report 2015g).

In April 2016, the preferential trade agreement between the two countries finally came into force, with customs duties applied on all goods traded between the two countries down to 4 percent. Tehran was clearly favored as Iranian exports were 20 times larger than Syrian exports in 2016 (The Syria Report 2016h). Syria's reliance on Iranian funds allowed Tehran to secure an agreement in 2011 to create a pipeline that would transport Iranian gas through Iraq and Syria, destined for Europe (Saadi 2015a), while providing it with new economic opportunities.

In mid-January 2017, five main economic agreements were concluded between Damascus and Tehran although they still needed to be formally implemented, which was not the case at the time of the writing, while a sixth was expected to be finalized in relation to the possible transfer of the management of one of Syria's ports to an Iranian company. All the agreements involved the transfer of significant Syrian resources and assets to Iran without clear compensation. One of the five agreements pertained to the transfer to Iran, on a long-term lease basis, of the significant al-Sharqiyeh phosphate mines located near Palmyra.⁶⁴ The other three agreements involved the transfer of Syrian lands on a lease basis to Iranian companies.⁶⁵ Finally, an agreement led to the award of a mobile phone license to the Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran (MTCI), which was also known under its brand name Hamrahe Aval.⁶⁶ MTCI is a subsidiary of the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI), which has a monopoly over Iran's landline network, and was privatized in 2009. The company is owned and operated by a consortium of companies, including Mobin Trust Consortium and Toseye Eatemad Mobin, who are both affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (The Syria Report 2017a; Francis and Sharafedin

⁶⁴ Syria has among the largest phosphate reserves in the world at 1.8 billion tons, a majority of which is located in the Sharqiyeh mines, although the volumes extracted have been regularly below capacity because of a lack of investment ((The Syria Report 2017a; Sharafedin and Francis 2017).

⁶⁵ Some 5,000 hectares will be used for the development of agricultural crops, another 1,000 ha will be used for cow breeding and 5,000 ha for oil storage tanks and reservoirs – the location of these lands were not specified (The Syria Report 2017a; Sharafedin and Francis 2017).

⁶⁶ In Persian, it stands for The First Companion – a reference to Ali bin Abi Taleb, a companion of prophet Muhammad and the first Imam in Shi'a Islam

2017). According to sources, the new company split into three shares: 40 percent will go to the company and Iranian businessmen, another 40 percent will go to other businessmen and the Martyrs Support Fund (a fund for those killed in battle), and 20 percent for the Government Telecommunications Organization (Hamidi 2017).⁶⁷

These agreements demonstrated the increasing influence of Iran in the Syrian economy and an evolution in the relation of the two actors in favor of Tehran, but also in terms of security with the control of a telecommunications network by a company affiliated with the IRGC. It is interesting to note that in 2010, the Damascus government started a process to award a third license as part of a drive to attract global companies and expand the size of the Syrian market. Six companies presented bids - France Telecom, Turkcell, Etisalat, Qatar's QTEL, Saudi Telecom and Iran's Toseye Eatamad Mobin. The government shortlisted five of these, excluding the Iranian company at the time. In early 2011, several bidders withdrew, citing unhappiness with the terms of the contract before the beginning of the uprising eventually led the government to scrap the deal altogether (Syria Report 2016u).

In February 2018, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's top military adviser, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, actually declared that Iran will recover the costs of its investments in the Syria war by exploiting the war-torn country's natural resources, showing Tehran's economic interests for spoils of war in Syria (The New Arab 2018b).

The increasing reliance on the Iranian regime also had consequences on other sectors of the economy. Some reports in Arabic media sympathetic and/or well connected to the regime, mentioned that Iran demanded collaterals in the form of land and real estate assets. In August 2015, because of the persistent rumors of Iranian buying lands and real estate properties in Damascus and elsewhere in the country, Sheikh Muhammad Karim Rajeh, an influential opposition Islamic scholar, issued a fatwa forbidding the sale of Syrian land and properties to Iranian nationals

⁶⁷ In September 2017 during the Damascus International Trade Fair, the Syrian Minister of Telecommunications Ali al-Zafir however raised doubts about this contract arguing that his government was discussing "with several countries that are friendly with Syria, including with Iran, the prospects of investing in a third mobile phone operator" (cited in The Syria Report 2017m).

on the basis that this would serve an Iranian plan to take control of the country and spread Shiism in Syria (The Syria report 2015g). A story in the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat*, mentioned that the collaterals sought by Iran were valued at some USD 20 billion, including both civilian and military aid, in the form of land and real estate assets in exchange for its assistance (cited in The Syria Report 2015h). New rumors were raised in 2016 of rich Iranian business people with ties to the government buying expensive homes in Damascus, and were looking to invest in projects in the central Syrian city of Homs (Jedinia and Kajjo 2016).

Meanwhile, Syrian security services lifted the obstacle to the proselytism of Tehran's particular Shiism understanding among the Alawi population, especially in the coastal areas, since 2012, few years after having put an end to it. Institutions linked to the IRI multiplied, providing social and educational activities all under the same name, "al-Rasul al-Aazam": mosque, scouting, women's schools, and even a university. The institutions of the al-Rasul al-Aazam mosque in Lattakia and Tartus organized visits to holy places in Iran for converts to Shiism and Alawi sheikhs. Some of these visits provided young people with military training and theology courses. Iran managed to break the exclusivity that the regime had arrogated over the Alawi population and religious hierarchy (Jaber N. 2015).

Since 2012, Syria's Shi'a community also developed institutionally nearly simultaneously with the Iranian, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi'a interventions in the Syrian uprising. This ranged from setting up scout movements, for example in Homs and Damascus, to the community's own religious authority, namely the Supreme Islamic Ja'fari Council in Syria, which was established in 2012 along the lines of the Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shi'a Council. The Supreme Islamic Ja'fari Council in Syria, headed by Sayyed Muhammad Ali al-Misky, developed a Khomeinist discourse and was close to the pro-Iran militias fighting in Syria (Hage Ali 2017).

Iranian influence on Syrian society was also increasingly seen in the streets of Damascus before the establishment of Iranian sponsored Shi'a fundamentalist militias and those loyal to them, especially in particular religious Shi'a events such as the Ashura (Al-Souria Net 2016c) or in high-profile celebrations of Iran's Islamic Revolution across Syria, including Aleppo, Damascus and Latakia, organized by

Iranian government entities or Iranian-funded cultural and religious organizations. All these events showed the increasing political and cultural influence of the IRI (Majidyar 2017b).

More generally, through the Syrian uprising, Iran was able to expand its regional network of Shi'a militia-type organizations:

- Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), an Iraqi Shi'a proxy of Iran that funneled fighters to Syria;
- Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), initially a shadowy Iran-backed organization based in Iraq, which announced its main goal of defending all Shi'a shrines worldwide, but limited its involvement in Syria and Iraq alone;
- the Iranian proxy Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), which announced the creation of Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir (LAIY), an Iraqi Shi'a militia whose name echoed a shrine in Raqqa to Ammar ibn Yassir that was destroyed by Sunni jihadist forces;
- Badr Organization, which was originally the military arm for the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's predecessor, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and served as a main IRGC conduit for manufacturing proxies in Iraq (Smyth 2015: 1-5).

The fighting also permitted Tehran to diffuse the state's fundamentalist ideology more widely, with the presence of Shi'a militants of many nationalities fighting in Syria demonstrating Iran's power projection in Shi'a communities worldwide (Smyth 2015: 1-5).

Throughout the conflict years, Syria continued to be presented as a strategic asset for the IRI as it was reflected by Ali Akbar Velayati, a top adviser to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who declared that Syria was "the golden ring of resistance front", while adding "if Assad and the Syrian people fail in their fight against Takfiri groups... their next target will be Iraq, followed by Iran" (Hafezi 2016). Tehran increasingly considered Syria as the first line of defense against a joint effort by its regional and international enemies, not only to provoke regime change in Damascus and the end of its alliance with Iran, but also as a way to isolate and overthrow the IRI as part of a longer-term strategy.

7.5 Hezbollah

Hezbollah has long had a close relationship with the Syrian regime, which only became stronger over the years to become a firm alliance with deep collaboration between the two actors, especially following the death of Syrian ruler Hafez al-Assad in 2000 and his son Bashar's ascension to power. Hafez al-Assad treated Hezbollah as a useful tool for strengthening Syria's relations with the IRI, while also exploiting Hezbollah's attacks to pressure Israel during peace negotiations. This situation changed under Bashar al-Assad, especially following the withdrawal of Syrian armed forces from Lebanon in 2005 and the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The Syrian regime increasingly viewed the relationship with Hezbollah not as a tactical and temporary alliance, as it was under Hafez al-Assad, but as a strong and strategic alliance. Bashar deepened collaboration with the group both politically and militarily. In this manner, Hezbollah became an important ally for the Syrian regime in Lebanon (Blanford 2011:337).

The eruption of the Syrian uprising in March of 2011, and the subsequent military intervention by Hezbollah in support of the Assad regime, demonstrates that the relationship between the two actors had become a strategic one. In May of 2011, during Hassan Nasrallah's first speech on Syria, he declared that the overthrow of the regime in Syria, which he characterized as "the spine of the resistance", was in favor of American and Israeli interests (Al-Muqâwama al-Islâmiyya 2011). In addition to this, Nasrallah claimed that Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime was not only in the interests of Hezbollah and the Shi'a, but also for the sake of Lebanon and all its various religious communities, against the threats of *Takfiri* 'terrorist' forces (al-Manar 2012). Since mid-2011, Hezbollah began training thousands of Lebanese and Syrian youths in several combat camps (Itani 2014). Hezbollah's presence was confirmed with the first 'martyrs' in Syria, as soon as June 2012 (Ashkar H. 2014). In the middle of 2012, Hezbollah was increasingly accused of providing technical and logistical support to Damascus and helping some of Syria's Shi'a population to develop their own self-defense militias (ICG 2014b: 1).

In November of 2013, Hassan Nasrallah finally publicly acknowledged Hezbollah's presence in Syria and added that 'the presence of Hezbollah fighters on Syrian soil

aims at defending Lebanon, the Palestinian cause, and Syria, which defends the resistance' and 'as long as there is a purpose for our presence there, we will remain there' (al-Manar 2013). Hezbollah's increasing military role in Syria took various forms ranging from veteran Hezbollah fighters commanding squads of Syrian soldiers, essentially acting as Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO), to the less experienced Syrian regular troops in street fighting (Blanford 2013b). They also took care of the training of some pro regime militias known as 'popular committees', (Nakhoul 2013), of some of the new recruits in the Syrian army (AFP and Orient le Jour 2014b) and later on of some NDF units.

Further on in the war, Hezbollah established several Syrian militias in Syria. Quwat al-Ridha was considered as the core nucleus for Hezbollah in Syria, operating militarily under the leadership and supervision of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The new group was composed of native Syrian young fighters, mostly Shi'as from Homs province, but also Alawis and Sunni, the majority of them from countryside areas (Homs, Aleppo, Deraa and Damascus countryside) (al-Hadath News 2014). Hezbollah also participated in the establishment of smaller Shi'a militias such as Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain, active in Deir Zor (Al-Tamimi 2016b), or the Jaysh al-Imam al-Mahdi al-Muqawama al-Watani al-Aqaidiya fi Suriya (Army of Imam al-Mahdi, the National Ideological Resistance in Syria), which incorporated Hezbollah symbols and a public loyalty to Hassan Nasrallah but also combined Khamenei, Khomeini, and Bashar and Hafez al-Assad into a grand framework of Syrian and Iranian "resistance (Smyth 2015: 47). The Lebanese Islamic movement was responsible for organizing, training and equipping between 10,000 and 20,000 militiamen, mostly Shi'as, but also from other religious denominations, including Alawis, Sunnis and Druze (Alipour 2015; Alami 2017).

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria alongside the Assad regime was increasingly presented to its supporters and more largely to the Lebanese Shi'a population as an 'existential battle' against the Sunni extremists qualified as '*takfiris*' (AFP and Orient le Jour 2014a). This feeling among the Shi'a population was especially strengthened following the multiple attacks by jihadist groups targeting Lebanese Shi'a populated areas and more particularly Dahyeh since 2013. This discourse increasingly went hand in hand with religious and sectarian Shi'a propaganda among its members to

legitimize and justify its military intervention in Syria, while reports signaled that Hezbollah soldiers wore headbands adorned with 'O Husayn', an exaltation to Husayn ibn Ali, a revered Shi'a figure (Blanford 2013b). The involvement of foreign Shi'a fighters from Hezbollah, and also Iraq and Iran exacerbated these Sunni grievances.

In September of 2015, Nasrallah welcomed Russia's military expansion and airstrikes in Syria in support of the Assad regime, saying it was the failure of a U.S.-led campaign against IS that had forced Moscow's hand (Reuters 2015). Hezbollah was participating in various military offensives alongside pro-regime forces throughout the country in 2016 and 2017, including the offensive of Eastern Aleppo in the end of 2016. In September 2017, the deputy chairman of the Hezbollah executive board, Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, continued to justify the intervention of the Lebanese Islamic movement in Syria and the need to carry on the fight against jihadist forces in various areas of Syria such as Deir ez-Zor, Idlib and al-Badia (Orient le Jour 2017).

Estimates of Hezbollah fighters in Syria since 2013 numbered between 7,000 and 9,000 including elite fighters, experts and reservists. They were rotating in and out of the country on thirty days deployments (AFP and Orient le Jour 2014b; Alami 2016). The party published no official numbers for Hezbollah fatalities in Syria since the beginning of its military intervention, but according to various estimates they exceeded the 2,000 to 2,500 killed and some 7,000 injured in the beginning of 2017 (Alami 2017). The military importance of Hezbollah in Syria was also translated politically and socially, only increasing sectarian tensions. Some of the Syrian Shi'a militia, constituted with the help of Iranian and Hezbollah cadres, adopted the name *Hezbollah fi Suriya* (Hezbollah in Syria) and the ideology linked with it: *wilayat al-faqih*⁶⁸ (Smyth 2016). Hezbollah also increasingly expanded its range of activities in Syria by establishing a branch of the Imam Mahdi Scouts in Syria, which was operating since at least 2012. The Imam Mahdi Scouts engaged in similar activities than its counterparts like swimming trips, hiking and religious lessons including the promotion of the *wilayat al-faqih* (al-Tamimi 2016a).

⁶⁸ The theory of the *wilayat al-faqih* is that a guardianship of the jurisperit or jurisconsult should hold ultimate political power. It was initially Ayatollah Khomeini and then Ayatollah Khamenei.

7.6 Assad's regime allies, deep understanding, but minor differences

Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Russian-Iranian relations had been deteriorating for a number of years, notably because President Medvedev had supported UN sanctions against Iran in 2010 and signed a ban on the Russian delivery of the S-300 missile defense system to Tehran (Notte 2017: 25). However, Russia and Iran, the two main allies of the Assad regime, have seen their mutual interests and dependence increase throughout the years with the Syrian uprising and the major assistance provided to Damascus. Their collaboration has proven much effective and strong, despite the existence of minor differences. The best proof of it was the process of preparation of Russian military aviation intervention in the end of September 2015 as explained by analyst Arun Lund (2016f):

“In July 2015, the Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani reportedly visited Putin in Moscow to prepare for a joint intervention. A bilateral Russian-Syrian agreement legalizing the intervention was signed on August 26, 2015. Iran then opened its air space to Russian planes en route to Syria and began airlifting reinforcements well in advance of the first Russian airstrikes. In late September, the Iraqis announced the establishment of a joint Russian-Iranian-Iraqi-Syrian intelligence coordination center in Baghdad. Bombing began on September 30 and two weeks later Iran launched an offensive near Aleppo under Russian air cover. The following month, Putin flew to Tehran for a meeting with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, after which the two leaders praised each others' policies and stressed their “complete agreement” on the Syrian issue”

Iranian military cooperation with Russia in Syria considerably increased Tehran's capacity to plan and conduct complex conventional operations. Close cooperation between Russian and Iranian military personnel at the operational and tactical levels allowed military knowledge transfer between the two armies (Bucala and Casagrande 2017).

Political relations between both countries also improved. Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, declared in an interview in June 2017 that Russia and Iran had cultivated closer diplomatic, commercial and military ties after the removal of most nuclear-related sanctions on Iran in January of 2016. Since then, Tehran has received advanced weapons from Russia, including the long-delayed S-300 missile defense system. Moscow and Tehran were also negotiating the supply of around \$10 billion worth of arms and military hardware to Iran. The volume of trade between Russia and Iran increased by about 80 percent, reaching 2 billion in 2016, following the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions (Majidiyar 2017c).

The outcome of the war was without any doubt more important for Tehran, pushing it to be less flexible than Moscow on various issues relative to peace and ceasefire negotiations or that would endanger its interests in Syria directly. This resulted in some divergences.

The leaders of the IRI consider the Syrian regime as essential to its regional security structure and a key supply route to delivering weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah, having developed a close alliance with the Assad family and its security apparatus for over three decades. They repeatedly said that Bashar al-Assad was a "red line" for Iran. With the successive military victories of pro regime forces, especially after the conquest of Eastern Aleppo, Russia was increasingly seeking to find a political solution to end the war in Syria as long as its strategic interests were secured, while Iran still favored a total military victory and the consolidation of its proxies in the country for its broader regional agenda, both against Israel and regional rivals such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Majidiyar 2017d).

Another point of contention is Russia's relation with Israel. Russia constantly avoided the risk of seriously alienating Israel, let alone to be associated with the anti-Israel rhetoric characteristic of the Iranian leadership. Russian-Israeli relations have evolved positively under Putin's presidency with closer collaborations. Since the start of Russian airstrikes in Syria, Russia and Israel have been careful to coordinate their military activities along the Syrian-Israeli border in order to prevent accidents (Notte 2017: 28). Israeli authorities also publicly stated its opposition to see any Iranian or

Hezbollah troops close to its borders and called on Russia to prevent this from happening. In this context, Israel multiplied attacks, especially from 2017, against Hezbollah and pro-iranian targets in Syria.

As a possible gesture to appease the apprehensions of the Israeli state, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stressed at the end of February 2018 that his country's presence in Syria at the invitation of Damascus was not aimed at creating a new front against Israel, but at combating terrorism (Asharq al-Awsat 2018b). This was however not enough to appease Israel's fears, which airplanes bombed in April the military airbase Tiyas, or T-4, near Homs used by troops from Iran. 14 soldiers of various nationalities were killed in this raid, including four Iranian military personnel according to Iran's Fars news agency. This base had already been the target of Israel in February, in response to a drone sent by Iran according to Israeli government (Reuters Staff 2018).

Russia also witnessed improved political relations with Saudi Arabia throughout the war in Syria (see chapter 7), which was an archenemy of Iran.

The influence on the ground within the country is also distributed and implemented differently with consequences for the future. Moscow's forces have taken hold in economically strategic areas (through one military base in Hemeimem near the port of Tartus for the control of economic trade, and one in Palmyra in the center of Syria for the control of gas and oil fields, in addition to one big military base in Hama), and they worked on the reformation and reconstruction of a SAA's nucleus (through the establishment of the 4th and 5th Corps). On the other side, Tehran mainly relied on Shi'a fundamentalist militias (Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan) and Syrian paramilitary auxiliary forces (the NDF).

These disagreements nevertheless did not generally translate with rival or competing interests in Syria, except some rivalries on the field of economy where appetites were however growing on both sides to benefit from the reconstruction process in Syria and of the natural resources of the country, but would most probably not turn into strategic disagreements. Both states continued to stress their strong cooperation and mutual interests in Syria at the time of the writing. More generally, Russia and Iran

had common shared interests on many other issues, as argued by academics Leonid Issaev and Nikolay Kozhanov (2017):

“While Russia and Iran have a lot of issues to argue about, they also have a number of common interests in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, in Eurasian transit routes, the situation in Transcaucasia and Central Asia as well as in oil and gas markets.”

7.7 USA, no Libya scenario in Syria

At the beginning of the uprising and following a policy of rapprochement with the Assad regime, Western states were particularly cautious in their criticisms of the repressions of the protesters in the first weeks. A US congressional delegation by Sen. Richard Shelby visited Syria as late as February 2011. On March 28, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described Bashar al-Assad as different as his late father and predecessor Hafez and added “many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he’s a reformer” (Goodenough 2011). She declared as well “the U.S. would not enter the conflict in Syria as it has in Libya”, arguing that “each of these situations is unique”.

Indeed, the U.S. had less of a strategic interest in regime change in Syria than in Libya. Syria was not a major oil exporter, unlike Libya, which had important proven oil reserves. Syria was mostly significant regarding its location bordering Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel, for its relationship with Iran and role in the Israeli-Arab conflict. Syria was far from a top priority at this period for Washington. Obama’s administration had broken away from Bush’s policy of isolation of Damascus because it served other USA’s objectives in the region, including helping stabilize Iraq before US army’s withdrawal and make certain Damascus did not allow the reactivation of the flow of jihadi fighters through its territory and networks. In addition to this, the President Obama’s was also elected on the criticisms of his predecessor’s military interventions, especially in Iraq in 2003 for which he was opposed. US army withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, after Baghdad and Washington signed an agreement in

2008 requiring Washington to withdraw its forces.⁶⁹ Obama diminished generally US activity in the region prior to the uprisings in 2011, pursuing however counter-terrorism policies through increasing the use of drone warfare and ordering the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 (Phillips 2016: 23-27).

In the following months, as the regime continued the crack down on protests and soldiers began to peel away from the army, U.S. intelligence officials identified officers from Mr. Assad's minority Alawi sect who potentially could topple Bashar al-Assad. Washington's policy in 2011 was to get to the point of a transition in Syria by finding cracks in the regime and offering incentives for people to abandon Assad, but regime cohesiveness held, and the crackdown intensified (Lee and Malas 2015). At the end of April 2011, Washington took its first concrete steps in response to the bloody crackdown on protests by imposing sanctions on personalities deemed responsible for human rights abuses notably in the Syria's intelligence agency, including two relatives of Bashar al-Assad, his brother Maher al-Assad and cousin Atif Najib, and the IRGC as well accused of assisting Damascus in the repression of protesters. US officials were however still not calling on Bashar al-Assad to step down (Hosenball and Spetalnick 2011). In August 2011, Mr. Obama publicly called for Assad to step down, but without changing the core of USA's policy regarding Syria as explained above: the regime must be maintained with only superficial changes.

At the end of the Summer of 2011 and the following Western led military interventions to help overthrow the Qaddafi regime, the specter of the Libyan model was mentioned in Syria and even encouraged by sections of the Syrian exiled opposition in the SNC supported by Gulf Monarchies and Turkey. For varying reasons, Western policies were hesitant and cautious and limited their involvement. The policies of the USA and most of the Western States, except France at least rhetorically, would be characterized by passivity and inaction towards the uprising in Syria with regards to challenging the Assad regime. They were reluctant, to say the least, to intervene militarily against the Assad regime throughout the uprising. Early

⁶⁹ At the time of the announcement of the withdrawal, there were fewer than 3,000 troops, and one base - Contingency Operating Base Adder, 300 km (185 miles) south of Baghdad (Logan 2011). The rise of the IS in the following years would increase the numbers of US soldiers in Iraq.

on from Washington to the NATO headquarters in Brussels, they made clear they had no intention to intervene in Syria in order to overthrow the Syrian regime.

The objectives of the USA and Western states have been to try to reach an agreement between the Assad regime (or section of it) and the opposition linked to Western, Turkey and Gulf monarchies, represented by the SNC first and then the Coalition.

In August 2012, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta explained that

“The best way to preserve that kind of stability is to maintain as much of the military and police as you can, along with security forces, and hope that they will transition to a democratic form of government. That’s the key” (Reuters 2012b)

He added that it was important not to make the same mistakes Washington made in Iraq, referring to the disbanding of security forces. In other words, the priority was to maintain the regime and its structures with only superficial changes at its head.

Israel favored a similar option in Syria, unwilling to see any radical change at its borders. The main priorities of the Israeli state were firstly to prevent the civil war in Syria from spreading across its borders and secondly to prevent chemical weapons from falling into the hands of extremist Islamic groups or the transfer of significant arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In September 2017, former Israeli air force chief Amir Eshel declared Israel had hit arms convoys of the Syrian military and its Hezbollah allies nearly 100 times since the beginning of 2012 (Lombardi 2014: 121; Dadouch and Heller 2017). Assad’s regime, unwilling to provoke Israel, never responded to these interventions, except in February 2018 when an anti-aircraft fire downed an Israeli warplane returning from a bombing raid on Iran-backed positions in Syria. Israel then launched a second and more intensive air raid, hitting what it stated were 12 Iranian and Syrian targets in Syria, including Syrian air defense systems. Following this confrontation, both Israel and Syria signaled they were not seeking

wider conflict, while Russia and the USA were concerned of any more violent escalation (Barrington and Lubell 2018).

This unwillingness to radically change the status quos vis-à-vis the regime in Syria was notably reflected by the absence or the lack of any kind of “large”, organized and decisive military assistance of the USA and/or Western states to the Syrian armed opposition groups. Western governments provided only ‘non-lethal’ support and humanitarian assistance while resisting pleas to arm opposition forces or establish safe zones or no fly zones. The Wall Street Journal published an article in January 2015 on this CIA aid saying: “Some weapons shipments were so small that commanders had to ration ammunition” (Entous 2015). Worse than this, the United States was opposed to supplying various FSA forces with anti-aircraft missiles or Manpads, capable of taking down warplanes (Reuters 2014), which would have curtailed to some extent the murderous and destructive airstrikes, particularly of low altitude. U.S. officials had opposed since the beginning of the rise of the armed conflict in Syria in the mid-end of 2011 the introduction of such weapons in the country, citing long-standing fears that they may fall into the hands of groups that may use these weapons against Western targets or commercial airline. In July 2012, the U.S. actually halted the provision of at least 18 Manpads sourced from Libya (Malas 2012).

In the Obama administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, along with then CIA director and former US commander in Afghanistan and Iraq, David Petraeus, differed with this line and recommended training and equipping Syrian armed opposition groups. This position was however promoted and defended not in order to overthrow the Assad regime, Clinton was also very keen in maintaining the institutions of the state and its integrity, especially its security infrastructures, to not repeat a similar chaos witnessed in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein and the dismantlement of the Iraqi army and government. The objective of arming some sections of the opposition armed groups was to create a partner in Syria that Washington could work with and that had the capacities to persuade Assad and his backers that a military victory was impossible (Clinton 2014:386-394).

The rise of ISIS and the establishment of its caliphate in June 2014 following the conquest of Mosul pushed Washington to engage its forces more deeply in the region.

In this perspective and alongside the creation of an USA led International coalition to combat IS in Autumn 2014, there was a plan by Barack Obama's administration, which was approved by the U.S. Congress in 2014, to provide the equivalent of \$500 million to arm and equip 5,000-10,000 Syrian opposition armed forces. The objective was not aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime, but to concentrate in fighting ISIS as written in the text of the resolution:

“The Secretary of Defense is authorized, in coordination with the Secretary of State, to provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, and sustainment, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals for the following purposes:

- Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and securing territory controlled by the Syrian opposition.
- Protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria.
- Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.” (Belasco and Blanchard 2015)

This program was however never truly implemented and was a total a failure, with only between 100 and 120 fighters trained by September 2015 (Ackerman 2015). In addition to this, numerous fighters withdrew from the US Defense Department's train-and-equip program after refusing to sign a contract guaranteeing not to fight against the Assad regime's forces (Hamidi 2015). In the end of September 2015, the program was completely terminated following the attacks of Jabhat al-Nusra on the two small groups of trained fighters that were sent into northern Aleppo, and who could not face its brutal power.

In October 2015, even Senator Lindsey Graham challenged Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair General Joseph Dunford on the U.S. strategy in Syria. He asked about the possibility of overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, saying, “This is a half-assed strategy at best” (C-Span 2015).

More generally, as argued by Gilbert Achcar (2016: 20-21):

“Rather than lack of confidence in the opposition’s military skills, there are some grounds to believe that Washington did not seriously support any particular group of the Syrian opposition because it could not guarantee their loyalty to US interests.”

The election of Trump as US President and arrival to power in January 2017 did not change the strategic positioning of Washington in Syria (the priority was still “the war on terror”, in other words IS and jihadist groups, and to try to reach stability in Syria in maintaining the regime), despite a more aggressive and firm policy towards the Assad regime to make it respect the boundaries set by the US administration in the country. Iran’s influence in some regions of Syria was also checked. Washington did not hesitate to bomb the Syrian regime’s military bases or forces for example in April of 2017 in response to the chemical attacks in Sheikhoun city in Idlib governorate carried out by Syrian air force, killing more than 70 civilians (Lynch 2017).⁷⁰ The way the US bombing however occurred showed that they did not want to hit Damascus too “hard”. Moscow officials confirmed that they received advanced warning from the U.S. about its strike on Syria, while still condemning it. According to some testimonies, regime soldiers were informed by Russian officials for the strike in

⁷⁰ The chemical attack also showed that the deal between the USA and Russia to get rid of the chemical weapons in the hands of the regime had been a failure. No more than 72 hours after the chemical attack against Khan Sheikhoun city in Idlib governorate, the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in an attack on al Qaboun neighborhood in Damascus according to SNHR (2017). Since the chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta in 2013 until the gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017, many attacks with chemicals products occurred. This despite the fact Bashar al-Assad declared in June of 2014 that chemical weapons had been removed from Syria to be destroyed. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR 2016) has documented 139 attacks using a toxic substance since the first U.N. resolution between September 2013 and August 2016. The Syrian regime actually focused its use of poison gases on opposition-held areas where 97 percent of its chemical attacks targeted opposition-held areas while 3 percent of the attacks were carried out in IS-held areas, showing once again the priority of the regime’s repression (SNHR 2016).

advance and evacuated personnel and moved equipment out of the area (The Daily Beast 2017). Within 24 hours of the strike, the regime's warplanes were taking off from the bombed Shayrat air base.

A second example of this firmer policy was the U.S. military strikes on Syrian and Iranian pro-regime militias heading towards the al-Tanf military base in southern Syria - near the Syria-Iraq-Jordan border - used by U.S. and U.S.-backed opposition forces fighting against the IS in mid-May 2017. U.S. officials justified the strike as a purely defensive measure to protect groups supported by Washington (Reuters 2017d).

At the same time, following the election of Donald Trump as US President, the U.S.-led coalition in its struggle against IS boosted support for the SDF, supplying armored vehicles for the first time as they were preparing for a new phase in a campaign led by SDF forces, dominated by the YPG contingent, to capture Raqqa controlled by the IS (Perry 2017a). Commander of the YPG, Sipan Hamo, actually declared that the US army established military bases, airports and centers in seven locations controlled by the SDF and the YPG, east the Euphrates River, mainly in Kobani, where a large and developed airport was already built. US soldiers participated in the SDF led military offensive on Raqqa. In July, 2017 Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency provided detailed information about 10 U.S. bases in northern Syria, including troop counts and a map of the U.S. force presence (Bilgic and Harvey 2017).

In mid-June of 2017, a US warplane shot down a Syrian army jet in the southern Raqqa countryside, because the jet had bombed positions of SDF forces. The US declared in a statement that it did not seek to fight the Syrian regime, Russian or pro-regime forces but would not hesitate to defend itself or its "partnered forces from any threat (Al-Khalidi and Spetalnick 2017). A few days later on June 23rd, the US military coalition fighting the IS declared they would welcome a joint effort by the Syrian government or its Iranian supported partner forces to defeat IS in its remaining strongholds in Eastern Syria (Burn 2017).

7.8 Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the GCC

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies have not been completely united in their views of the Syrian uprising, although prior to the uprising many Gulf monarchies enjoyed relatively good relations with Damascus, especially the two main protagonists Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Qatar's relations with Damascus before the uprising were good, with high levels of investments in the country. Sheikh Hamad actually championed the international rehabilitation of Assad against Damascus' ostracizing by the US, Europe and other Arab states. Damascus and Doha worked very closely together on a number of regional issues throughout the 2000s. When the Syrian uprising erupted in March of 2011, Qatar's first reaction was very cautious and al-Jazeera, the Qatari-owned television channel, was criticized for downplaying the first demonstrations. Both the emir and crown prince Sheikh Tamim advised the Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad against a military and repressive solution, but were unsuccessful. In August of 2011, following the public opposition to Damascus expressed by Riyadh for the first time since the beginning of the uprising, Doha also began opposing the Syrian regime and as the conflict expanded, they worked initially mostly through members of the exiled MB to identify opposition armed groups that should be supported (Fielding-Smith and Khalaf 2013). They assisted them and other armed groups, particularly with Islamic credentials.

Saudi Arabia's relations with Syria were improving prior to the uprising after a period of high tensions, especially following the assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2005 in Lebanon, because of the strong political and economic links between Hariri and Saudi rulers, in which Syria was accused of being the orchestrator of the operation. This animosity reached its highest level with the boycott of the Arab League Summit in Damascus in March of 2008 by Saudi Arabia and many other states following Riyadh. Later in 2008, relations gradually began to improve. Bashar al-Assad and Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz exchanged a series of letters, political delegations and even personal visits. Relations warmed considerably between 2009 and 2010, with Assad visiting Riyadh three times and the Saudi king visiting Damascus (Hassan H. 2013b). Muhammad al-Jasser, Governor of the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, announced in March of 2010, new loans to Syria worth \$ 140 million, following a second visit of the Saudi monarch to Damascus. At the eve of the uprising, relations between the

two countries were stable. The Syrian regime even supported the Saudi led military intervention of the GCC Peninsula Shield Force to crush the uprising in Bahrain in March of 2011, while Iran opposed it (Wieland 2012: 55). In April of 2011, Saudi Arabia signed a contract to finance the construction of a power plant in Deir Zor, worth \$ 375 million. As late as August of 2011, Saudi Arabia and the UAE put four billion dollars in the Central Bank of Syria (Said 2016).

In the early stages of the uprising, Gulf rulers tried to engage with the regime to facilitate a peaceful solution and were not ready to see Assad ousted from power, while Saudi Arabia was worried of strengthening even more the regional trend of uprisings. Saudi King Abdullah sent his son, Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah to Damascus three time, while Qatari Emir Hamad sent his son Tamim to try to convince Bachar al-Assad to end the repression and engage in some superficial reforms and for Qatar to include the MB, which were linked to Doha, in an unity government (Phillips 2016: 68-69). This situation changed however gradually however with the impossibility of reaching a sort of understanding with Bashar al-Assad and above all failed attempts by Gulf Monarchies to steer Damascus away from Tehran to strengthen their regional influence.

Undermining Iran's influence was the core issue for Saudi Arabia in relation to Syria. Since 2003, Riyadh has been worried of the growth of Tehran's influence in Iraq and in the region, perceived as a military and an ideational threat for providing another Islamic model of rule. Saudi Arabia, which had generally in the past relied massively on its financial power to conduct its foreign policy objectives and neutralize rival actors allowing it not to intervene directly, took increasingly the leading role in opposing Iranian growing role in the region following the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the weakening of Egyptian regime on the regional political scene. The Saudi Kingdom for example supported from 2005 political forces opposed to Hezbollah, Syria and Iran following the assassination of Rafic Hariri, a close ally of Riyadh, and the withdrawal of Syrian armed forces. In Iraq, they backed various Sunni political actors, including Islamic fundamentalist actors, to try to counter-balance the hegemony of Iraqi fundamentalist Shi'a forces allied with Tehran. Another significant case of Saudi attempts to counter perceived Iranian growing influence was in Yemen. Saudi officials assisted financially the Yemeni regime headed by Ali Abdallah Saleh

that was leading a war against the Houthis, which Riyadh claimed were funded and armed by Tehran. The Saudi Kingdom eventually started its own military campaign against them in 2009-2010. The arrival to power of Barack Obama in the USA in 2009 did not appease the fears of Riyadh, on the opposite, as the new president wanted to progressively disengage from the region and try to seek some form of detente with Tehran (Phillips 2016: 19-20 + 33-37; Matthiesen 2017: 46).

In the background of the Saudi Iranian cold-war, Qatar had deepened considerably its influence in the region in the years prior to the uprisings in the MENA. The decision in the early 1990s to build up Qatar's energy infrastructure to exploit the country's massive reserves of natural gas allowed Doha to increase its foreign influence and power. Its wealth expanded massively, with a GDP passing from \$25 in 2001 to \$200 billions in 2013. Long-term liquefied natural gas (LNG) contracts linked foreign partners' energy security needs to Qatar's domestic stability, while large accumulations of capital were invested both in Qatar and abroad in the form of high-profile acquisitions and investments. LNG gave the possibility to Qatar to diversify its international relationships by making a range of countries stakeholders in Qatari stability. This massive wealth and diversification of international and regional relations enabled the Qatari Emirate's leaders to become an important regional actor by playing a very active role of mediation in regional crises and conflicts, including three significant instances of Qatari mediation for example in Yemen (2008-2010), Lebanon (2008), and Darfur (2008-2010). In addition, its television channel al-Jazeera also brought the Emirate a lot of popularity in the region for its anti-Israel and anti US coverage, despite welcoming the largest US military base in the region, the al-Udeid Air Base and hosting of U.S. Central Command after 2003 and becoming the first GCC state to grant Israel de facto recognition, when the first Israeli trade office in the GCC opened in Doha, following a visit by the Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres in 1996.

The beginning of the uprisings in the MENA was a new opportunity for the Emirate to advance its regional power and influence, first by its direct participation in the military intervention in Libya and assistance to Islamic fundamentalist groups, particularly through its political and economic support to the movements of the MB throughout the region, notably in Egypt and in Tunisia once in power (Ulrichsen 2014;

Matthiesen 2017: 54). In Egypt for example, Doha delivered a total of \$5.5 billion to the MB President Morsi government, made up of \$4 billion in deposits at the Central Bank of Egypt and the rest in cash grants and shipments of LNG. In addition, Qatar announced in 2012 that it would undertake an investment program in Egypt worth \$18 billion over the next five years, although there were no further words on this commitment (Khan and Lebaron 2013), especially following the military coup in July 2013 ousting from power the MB.

Riyadh and Doha therefore saw for different reasons an opportunity in Syria to establish a “Sunni” friendly regime, as a great way of increasing their standing in the region. In Iraq, this would pressure the al-Da’wa led government, a Shi’a Islamic fundamentalist party allied to Tehran, which allowed Iran’s expanding influence after the USA and UK led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and at the same time strengthened the marginalization of Iraqi Sunni parties. Similarly in Lebanon, the fall of Assad’s regime would help bolster Saudi allies, the March 14th coalition led by Saudi Protégé Saad Hariri, at the detriment of Hezbollah and other Syrian allied parties. As argued by Hassan Hassan (2013a):

“For the Gulf States, the Syria conflict is thus a critical battle for control of a key pivot state in the region. Drawing Damascus away from the Iranian camp is seen as a way of cementing broader regional influence in the Levant, and reestablishing the more favorable regional balance of power that they lost following the US occupation of Iraq in 2003.”

In mid-end summer of 2011, Saudi Arabia, alongside Qatar and Bahrain, became the most important and vocal actors demanding the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power. It was indeed in large measure as a result of Saudi and Qatari pressure that regional and Muslim world organizations aligned themselves against the Assad regime, including the Arab League – which in March 2013 awarded Syria’s seat to the Syrian Coalition –, the Organization of Islamic Conference, and the GCC (Heydemann 2013a:10). With the deepening of the militarization of the uprising, Saudi Arabia and Qatar became the main financial and military backers of the Syrian armed opposition, by shipping military materials via Turkey to the various armed

groups as early as the beginning of 2012, although they had differences over which armed groups and which elements of the political opposition to support. As we have seen, Saudi Arabia and Qatar funded various opposition-armed groups, from the FSA to Islamic fundamentalist movements.

Indeed Saudi Arabia and Qatar did not see eye to eye in the Syrian conflict and divergences remained. Qatar collaborated more closely with Turkey in Syria than it did with Saudi Arabia, while Doha saw an opportunity to promote the interests of its longstanding regional client in the movement of the MB and other Islamic Fundamentalist movements in Syria. Saudi Arabia on its side sponsored opposition members that would serve its interests, while it sought to prevent the rise of two main forces in Syria: the MB and jihadists forces. Although it did not oppose radically the Syrian MB as its regional counterparts, the Saudi Kingdom still considered the Brotherhood movement as a threat, notably influencing the Saudi Islamic fundamentalist opposition al-Sahwa (see chapter 5). Saudi Arabia supported the MB between the mid 1950s until 1991, when relations were broken following the support of the Brotherhood to Saddam's Hussein regime against the Western led intervention backed by the Saudi Kingdom. In 1992, the Emirate of Qatar, which had a longstanding relationship with the MB for decades by notably hosting one of its most influential members Youssef al-Qardawi, then replaced Saudi Arabia as the Brotherhood's main supporter after 1991 (Achcar 2013: 149). In 2002, Saudi Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, then minister of interior, openly accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being the "source of all evils in the Kingdom" (Cited in Lacroix 2014a). Similarly, it was the deployment of US army on Saudi soil for the military intervention against Iraq in 1991 that led al-Qaida to oppose the Saudi Kingdom, while it was funded by Riyadh in the 1980s in the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. Leaders of al-Qaida and afterwards IS have both launched attacks within Saudi Arabia and called for the overthrow of the Saudi Kingdom (Porter 2017).

In March 2014, Saudi Arabia actually named the MB as a terrorist organization, alongside major jihadist groups fighting in Syria including Jabhal al-Nusra, al-Qaida branch in Syria (Lacroix 2014a).

This is why, except in Bahrain, in which both Saudi Arabia and Qatar intervened to assist the crushing of the popular protests, Riyadh and Doha have had different policies regarding the uprisings in the region. Saudi Arabia generally supported the maintenance of the old regimes throughout the region and opposed protests movements, with the exception of Libya where it remained neutral and Syria. Saudi Arabia's top Islamic scholar, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Al al-Sheikh, actually condemned in February 2011 anti-government protests in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere as a plot by enemies of Islam to break up Arab Muslim nations and to spread instability (Reuters 2012a).

Qatar on its side welcomed rethorically the uprisings, except in Bahrain where it backed the crushing of the revolt by the regime, by boosting its support to the movement of the MB and other Islamic fundamentalist movements, in order to expand its political and economic influence in the region, especially at the expense of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The relations between Doha and Riyadh continued to worsen through the years because of competing objectives in the uprisings leading to a first crisis in 2014, but moreover in June 2017. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic and transport ties with Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of fomenting regional unrest by backing movements such as the MB and Hamas, supporting terrorism and getting too close to Iran, all of which Doha denied. Saudi Arabia wanted above all to put an end to Qatar's independent policies and submit it to Riyadh's regional agenda. This crisis rendered even weaker the position of the Syrian opposition, both armed and political, by deepening its divisions.

Throughout the uprising, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were increasingly isolated and less and less keen and able to expand or deepen their support to armed opposition forces in Syria. Saudi Arabia was stuck in a quagmire in Yemen, while Qatar would rhetorically support the armed opposition forces without action (Finn and Maclean 2016). At the same time, a series of agreements between Russia and the Gulf states to cooperate in areas where their interests met were concluded in 2016, despite continuous differences on the Syrian issue. Gulf monarchies were nonetheless less and less vehement against Moscow rather seeking a consensus with it. In December

of 2016, Russia brokered the first deal between the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and non-OPEC countries in 15 years to cut oil production, and secured a \$5 billion investment by Qatar in oil giant Rosneft PJSC (Blas and Champion 2016).

In late May of 2017, following a visit of Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman to Russia to discuss the oil market and the situation in Syria with President Vladimir Putin, officials in Moscow said that "relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia are going through one of their best moments ever". Two months later, Moscow and Riyadh signed a preliminary military cooperation agreement worth \$3.5bn (Issaev and Kozhanov 2017). In September 2017, Saudi Arabia assured Russia that it supported the gradual processes of negotiating local cease-fires and establishing "de-escalation zones" in Syria (Akram 2017). More generally, relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia continued to improve as they agreed at the same period on output cuts under an OPEC deal aimed at bolstering prices (Carey and Meyer 2017). In October, it was the turn of Saudi Arabian King Salman bin Abdulaziz's to visit Russia. Alongside discussions on various political files, including Syria and Iran, billions of dollars of contracts were concluded in investment deals in energy and defense, including the purchase of Russia's advanced S-400 Triumf missile defense system (Schearf 2017). In the same month, Moscow and Doha signed a joint intergovernmental agreement on military technical cooperation on the sidelines of the Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Doha (Middle East Monitor 2017a).

7.9 Turkey, expanding its role in Syria

The relations between the Turkish government of the AKP and the Syrian regime after Bashar al-Assad's arrival had improved considerably, particularly since 2004. Both states organized common cabinet meetings and spoke of "family bonds" when they referred to bilateral relations. The authorities of both states abolished each other's visas and established free trade across their borders. Erdogan used to spend vacations with Assad's family (Wieland 2012: 57). The 2007 Free Trade Agreement and the 2009 Visa Exemption Agreement further reinforced Syrian-Turkish relations. Trade volume rose from \$796 million in 2006 to \$2.5 billion in 2010, greatly at Turkish advantages as mentioned in chapter 2, while tourist visits doubled. As late as

February 2011, Erdogan was declaring during the foundation stone for a joint “friendship dam” on the Orontes with Syrian officials “we have always said that there should be no problems between brothers” (Davis and Ilgit 2013).

Prior to the uprisings in 2011, Turkey under the leadership of the AKP had more than generally increased significantly its political and economic influence in the region following the USA-British led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Its export driven economy expanded considerably with new markets particularly opening in the Middle East. In addition to Syria, relations were greatly improved with Iran, Libya, Egypt and Gulf monarchies (Phillips 2016: 35).

Following the beginning of the Syrian uprising in mid March 2011, Erdogan advised Assad to make some concessions to the protesters in the form of minor reforms in order to appease the demonstrators rather than radically modify the Syrian state’s composition. Relations however started to worsen following a visit of Turkey’s Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu on August 9th, 2011 in Damascus, in which he delivered an “earnest” message from Erdogan that called for an end to violence, and the approval of a Turkish sponsored peace plan. Assad and regime officials rejected Turkish’s mediation and propositions. Eventually, the Syrian regime’s refusal to any Turkish recommendations, coupled with strong official encouragement from the United States, prompted then-Prime Minister Erdogan to publicly call on Bashar al-Assad to step down in early September of 2011. A last attempt occurred in October with another visit of the Turkish Foreign Minister, but once again no political settlement sponsored by Turkey could be found (Wieland 2012: 57).

From the beginning of 2012, arms purchased by Saudi Arabia and Qatar were delivered to various opposition armed forces through the Turkish airport of Esenboğa in Ankara. The Turkish government was of course aware and part of the operation, monitoring shipments as they moved by land into Syria. Very rapidly however, the main concern of Turkey was the empowerment of the PYD and its control of Syria’s Kurdish-majority regions following the regime’s withdrawal in the summer of 2012 of some areas close to the Turkish border. To counter the growing influence of PYD forces, the Turkish government tolerated foreign fighter flows across the Syrian border from the end of 2011 to 2014. This provided Islamic fundamentalist and

jihadist groups with recruits and freedom of movement, and allowed cross-border networks to develop, which assisted these groups to sustain economically (Chivers and Schmitt 2013; Itani and Stein 2016: 7-8). The Turkish government did not consider Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups such as IS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and other as strategic allies, but saw in their development some benefit as they were fighting the PYD and the Syrian regime. Turkey also supported other key-armed groups in northwestern Syria, including Faylaq al-Sham and al-Jabha al-Shamiyeh, which had connections to the MB, several Turkmen armed groups, which were raised and armed by Turkey.

As part of extra security measures and prevent new mass arrival of refugees, Turkey started building a wall with Syria in 2014 (Rudaw 2017b).

The Turkish government also resisted moves to join the USA led International coalition against ISIS, arguing the war should not be limited to the jihadist group, but should also include a focus on overthrowing the Syrian regime. They also refused the US and its allies the use of the Turkish Incirlik and Diyarbakir airbase to carry out bombing operations against IS targets in Syria until July 2015. But following the killing of Turkish soldier in an IS attack and moreover a suicide bombing in the Turkish town of Suruc on July 20 against the cultural centre of Amara, which was hosting a meeting of 300 young of Kurdish leftists, members of the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations (SGDF, by its initials in Turkish), by a Turkish citizen member of IS that resulted in the death of 32 people, led to a change in Turkish's position. In mid 2015, Turkey therefore finally took the decision to launch a bombing offensive against a number of IS sites in Syria and allowed the use of its military bases to US planes. Turkish airforce continued however to prioritize Kurdish targets, over that of IS (Ricketts 2015).

Ankara maintained however an ambivalent attitude towards the other main jihadist group, Jabhat al-Nusra, providing support to the Jaysh al-Fateh coalition, which was dominated by JFS led Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, with various other small groups affiliated with the FSA (Itani and Stein 2016: 8; Tokmajyan 2016: 5). Similarly, in October 2017, Turkish soldiers were even provided an armed escort into Idlib by the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This occurred officially in the general

context of the de-escalation zones, but served primarily to place Turkish troops in a prime position to monitor and contain the YPG units in their stronghold of Afrin.

The successive direct military interventions of Turkish troops within Syria from the summer 2016 in the framework of the “Euphrates Shield operation” increased considerably Ankara’s influence over the newly conquered regions. They assisted in the return of services such as medical facilities, hospitals and schools, while imposing their own rule by disregarding at some occasions local governance structures, for example in Jarablus after the eviction of IS in 2016 (Haid 2017b: 9). They trained as well hundreds of Syrians to establish a new-armed security force, made up of regular police and special forces. At the inauguration ceremony on January 24, 2017, soldiers of the new “Free Police of Jarablus” wore a Turkish flag patch on their uniforms, while the new police cars and station had both Turkish and Arabic writing on them. The governor of Gaziantep, a Turkish city near the border, attended the opening ceremony and volunteers chanted “Long live Turkey” and “Long live Erdogan” on the orders of the new captain of this police (Ashawi 2017; Shaam Network S.N.N. 2017).

They were increasing accusations levied against Turkish forces and the Sultan Murad Brigade, a majority Turkmen opposition armed group established by Turkey, of favoring the Turkmen minority of the Jarablus district in receiving better services and occupying most of the jobs, while Turkish interferences in local affairs were condemned on numerous occasions for example when protesters demonstrated against the raising of Turkish flags over a school in Jarablus (Enab Baladi 2016b; Haid 2017b: 18). Turkey also restricted or simply ban humanitarian work by Syrian, local or outside, and international organizations in Jarablus and other areas under its control, allowing in majority only Turkish organizations to carry out activities (Haid 2017b: 15). Turkey opened on the other side a branch of the Turkish national post directorate PTT in Jarablus with placards in both Arabic and Turkish (All4Syria 2017c) and in setting up towers for Turkish communications companies.

Mulham Jazmati, a researcher at the Syrian Economic Forum, stated that Turkey’s aims were also economic and not only military in this area in order to benefit from reconstruction. He cited as an example large investments such as in the city of

Qabsein in the al-Bab region in December 2017, where the local council signed a memorandum of understanding with a Turkish construction company to establish a residential project in the area, including 225 residential apartments and about 30 shops in the Turkish mold. He argued Ankara wanted “to impose their stewardship on the northern region as it has strategic value, most importantly preventing the formation of a united Kurdish state on its borders in the future” (cited in Enab Baladi 2018b). The construction under Turkey's auspices in northern Syria of First Industrial City, a few miles northwest of the city of al-Bab was also launched in February 2018 with the cooperation of al-Bab's local council and a large group of industrialists and traders from al-Bab. First Industrial City was expected to boost the local economy and provide work opportunities for thousands of young people (al-Khateb 2018).

Through these policies and building of infrastructures, they also envisioned the possibility of sectors of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey to come back to these areas. In March 2018, 140,000 Syrian refugees from Turkey had returned to these areas (Uras 2018). It still was a small portion in comparison to the approximately 3.4 million Syrian refugees in Turkey.

In mid March 2018, the Azaz Local Council signed an agreement with a Turkish company called ET Energy to establish a power generator with a capacity of 30MW to provide electricity to the city and its surroundings, demonstrating Ankara's willingness to invest and remain in this region (Enab Baladi 2018c).

Turkey's ambitions and interests in Syria changed throughout the conflicts focusing increasingly on Kurdish PYD forces preventing its influence in securing a zone under its influence through its multiple interventions and proxies in the northern border areas.

7.10 Focus on IS and jihadist groups of the West

Following the large expansion of the IS over large portions of territory both in Iraq and in Syria, including the conquest of Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities, and capital of its self-proclaimed 'caliphate' in the eastern Syrian city of Raqqa, US President, Barack Obama, announced on September 10, 2014, the establishment of a broad

international coalition, composed of nearly 60 states at its peak, to defeat the jihadist group. Obama emphasized that their objective was to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, IS through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy” (US Department of State 2014).

The United States developed a strategy of “IS first” with the objective of defeating the group, which former U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called the “preeminent terrorist threat” to the United States (Stein 2017: 5). By February of 2015, of the 60-plus members of the international coalition, only a few had conducted the more than 2000 airstrikes against IS’ targets in Iraq (eight states) and Syria (five states). The US dominated the military campaign having flown approximately 85 percent of total combat missions in both Syria and Iraq in 2015 (European Parliament 2015: 8).

The initial declared objective of the USA led coalition was to target IS military facilities and training camps, but more particularly its oil facilities to try to stem a source of revenue for the group. By September of 2014, the group had managed to control many of Syria's and Iraq's oil fields, producing revenues in the order of US\$1 to 2 million daily (European Parliament 2015: 2) (See Annex 7).

In the opposition held areas of Syria, many criticised this campaign for focusing on IS solely, while ignoring the crimes of the Assad regime’s forces. Many demonstrations and mobilizations were organized in various opposition-controlled territories against the intervention of the coalition led by the United States.

The Assad regime on the other side welcomed these strikes from the USA led coalition (Makieh 2014), while adding that the airstrikes should be expanded to include all other militant groups in Syria (Zaman al-Wasl 2014).

In the framework of the strategy of “IS first”, and following the complete failure to assist FSA forces in northern areas, the USA increasingly supported the YPG forces through the coalition known as the SDF, as mentioned in chapter 7. The U.S., and French and British allied forces as well, advised and assisted local ground forces, provided situational awareness through battlefield intelligence, and facilitated the

delivery of arms and ammunition to SDF forces on the ground (Stein 2017: 5). Washington considered the SDF as the most effective fighting force on the ground in Syria against IS (The New Arab 2016a), although it was not ready to support Kurdish national rights in Syria.

The USA policy of IS' first led some form of rapprochement with the Russians to seek an end to the war in Syria and concentrate on the "war against terrorism". The US president clearly stated in his speech on September 28th, 2015 at the UN General Assembly his willingness to work with Russia and Iran to find a solution in Syria while emphasizing the implausibility of maintaining "a pre-war status quo" (Halawi 2015). The beginning of the Russian airstrike campaigns on September 30th in Syria to assist the Assad regime was also not objected to by the USA (ISW Research Team 2015). A similar tendency was observed among European states to concentrate on the "war on terror" and not demand the departure of Bashar al-Assad for the short to mid-term at least.

On December 15th, 2015, Kerry told reporters in the Russian capital after meeting President Vladimir Putin "the United States and our partners are not seeking so-called regime change" (Taranto 2015). The various truces negotiated between Russia and the USA during 2016 confirmed the willingness of Washington to seek collaboration with Russia in the "war against terror". These ceasefires however failed mainly because they did not tackle the political roots of the problem in Syria in the eyes of the opposition forces: the Assad regime. These political agreements actually led to the stabilization of the Assad regime under the so-called pretext of the "War against terrorism" for the political interests of the USA and Russia. That is why these agreements were rejected by large sections of the opposition, whether armed or civilian.

On their side, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were increasingly facing obstacles in their campaigns to politically and diplomatically isolate the Assad regime in the MENA region. Egypt and Jordan long indicated ambivalence about the future of Assad, while formally supporting measures against this regime in the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (Ibish 2016: 21). The Egyptian State showed actually signs of rapprochement with the Syrian regime. In October of 2016, Egyptian

officials at the UN rejected the resolution led by France at the UN Security Council demanding the end of all bombing in Aleppo, instead favoring the Russian resolution, while Syria's national security chief Ali Mamlouk met a senior Egyptian intelligence official, Khaled Fawzi, in Cairo. In their meeting, the two sides agreed to coordinate politically and on fighting the terrorism both countries faced (Aboulenein 2016). In November of 2016, the secretary general of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit said in an interview on Egyptian TV that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad could stay in power if he was elected in future elections, while advocating for a unity government comprised of the government and the opposition (Middle East Eye 2016).

Even Saudi Arabia was less and less able to push on the agenda, and interested as well, for the departure of Assad of power, but Riyadh maintained however its main focus on countering the influence of Iran in Syria as reflected in an interview of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in March 2018 saying that Bashar al-Assad was staying, but he hoped he would not become a “puppet” for Tehran (Hennigan 2018).

7.11 Ankara’s targets: the PYD and the Kurds

Even Turkey did not consider the fall of Assad as a priority, but rather defeating the Kurdish national movements whether within Turkey or in Syria. After the failed coup d’état of a fraction of the army in Turkey in July 2016, the AKP government operated a new rapprochement with the Russian government after nearly a year of tension, while diminishing its opposition to the Assad regime, by notably saying it would accept Assad in a transitional phase, wishing to normalize its relationship with Damascus (Nashashibi 2016). Russian jets actually assisted Turkish military forces for the first time in the end of December of 2016 in their military operations in the northern areas of Syria in the framework of Euphrates Shield campaign, bombing IS targets (Coskun and Karadeniz 2016).

The operation Euphrates Shield succeeded both in rooting out IS from the Turkish border and in preventing the PYD-YPG from connecting its main territory in northeastern Syria with the city of Afrin. By Summer of 2017, Afrin and areas of the

northern Aleppo countryside controlled by YPG forces were increasingly the target of offensives and attacks of the Turkish army and allied Syrian armed opposition groups, FSA units and Islamic fundamentalist groups, acting as proxies in favor of Ankara. In the words of a senior Turkish official

“Afrin has become a threat to the security of Turkey. In the past, most of the terrorists infiltrated into Turkey from this area and provided weapons to the PKK [Kurdistan Workers’ Party]. That is why Afrin must be cleared from terrorists.” (Rudaw 2017b).

In January 2018, Turkish military assisted by pro-Turkish Syrian opposition militia groups launched a large scale air and ground offensive, dubbed « Operation Olive Branch », on Afrin. The Turkish army used as a pretext, an announcement by a military spokesman for the US-led global coalition against the IS to build a 30,000-strong border force under the command of SDF. In Ankara’s opinion, the US decision meant that the US-YPG partnership would not end with the collapse of the IS, as the Turkish government had hoped (al-Monitor 2018). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the Afrin operation would be followed by another against Manbij and all the way to the Iraqi border to clear the YPG from its frontier (Gumrukcu and Perry 2018). On its side, large sections of the Syrian Arab opposition, at its head the Syrian Coalition, supported the Turkish military intervention (Syrian Coalition 2018).

This intervention occurred with the relative passivity and acceptance of the main powers involved in Syria. Despite a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry expressing “concern” and calling on the parties “to show mutual restraint”, Moscow, which controlled large parts of Syrian air space, gave Turkey the green light for this invasion and withdrew its armed forces⁷¹ from the areas targeted by Turkish forces toward the cities of Nubl and al-Zahraa, both of which were under regime control.

⁷¹ In September 2017, Russia had deployed military forces to operate as a military police in order to prevent new clashes and possible conflicts between the Syrian opposition armed units (FSA and Islamic fundamentalist movements), backed by Turkey, and Turkish army on one side and on the other side the SDF. They were therefore sent to enforce a new buffer zone in the Tell Rifaat area (Iddon 2017). The Russian decision was similar to the one taken in March of that same year when it sent forces close to Manbij to prevent a military confrontation between the two same actors. This move prevented a Turkish takeover of Manbij and left the SDF's Manbij Military Council in control of the city.

Russian officials had demanded that the YPG handed over Afrin to the Syrian regime to “stop” the Turkish attacks on the region (Asharq al-Awsat 2018a; Shekhani 2018). Russia also saw the operation as a way to deepen the wedge and contradictions between the NATO allies Ankara and Washington in light of the latter’s support for the YPG. Furthermore, Russia probably estimated that threatened to be invaded by Turkey and its proxies, Syrian opposition armed groups, the YPG would become more open to Moscow’s earlier demand to hand Afrin back to the Syrian regime.

On its side, the USA remained rather passive stating that it understood the security concerns of Ankara that gave advance warning of their operation, only urging Turkey to exercise restraint and ensure that its military operations remain limited in scope and duration (Gall, Landler and Schmitt 2018; Rudaw 2018a). On January 31, Turkey however urged once more the United States to halt its support for YPG fighters or risk confronting Turkish forces on the ground in Syria. In Washington, the Pentagon answered that it carefully tracked weapons provided to the YPG and would continue discussions with Turkey, while adding that Ankara’s operation into Afrin was not helpful and was taking focus away from fighting Islamic State (Gumrukcu and Nehme 2018).

In mid February, a month into the Turkish military operation on the region of Afrin, Damascus and the PYD reached an agreement allowing regime-aligned militia forces to enter the city. YPG forces refused to cede however the total control of Afrin to the regime, as it was demanded by Damascus and would have been welcomed by Ankara, or to handover heavy weaponry. The deal only signified that pro-regime militias would join YPG fighters in manning their checkpoints. In this situation, the Turkish government was not satisfied with this agreement maintaining Afrin under PYD’s control, while Ankara had not yet completed the establishment of the security belt near Afrin. Turkish military forces therefore pursued its military offensive to achieve its initial objectives of putting an end to PYD’s presence and domination in Afrin (Hassan 2018).

The city of Afrin as mentioned in the previous chapter was conquered in mid March 2018 by the Turkish army and its Syrian proxies. The YPG and the Afrin administration, condemned Russia and Turkey directly for the occupation, and

blamed international silence for the situation of the city. They also promised that ‘the resistance in Afrin will continue until every inch of Afrin is liberated, and the people of Afrin will return their village’ (cited in ANF News 2018). Erdogan on his side reiterated that Turkish forces would press their offensive against Kurdish YPG fighters along the length of Turkey’s border with Syria and if necessary into northern Iraq (Caliskan and Toksabay 2018).

US passive attitude in Afrin, where it had no military presence, towards its Kurdish allies of the SDF was however very different in the territories of the North East of the country held by SDF, where it had between 2,000 and 4,000 US troops (Savage 2018; Snow 2017). During Turkish military led invasion of Afrin, a major incident took place on the night of February 7 to 8, 2018, between US forces and their FDS allies on one side and pro regime forces composed of Russian mercenaries and with a few Syrians and Iranians in support roles on the other side in the province of Deir Zor. About 300 men working for a Kremlin-linked Russian private military firm were either killed or injured (Tsvetkova 2018). Damascus called this act an "aggression" and "massacre". After this event, a Pentagon spokesman declared however that "Washington" did not seek a conflict with the regime." Hostilities began when fighters affiliated with the Assad regime crossed the Euphrates, in violation of the Russian-American agreement that made the river a dividing line: in the West the pro-regime forces, supported by Moscow, and in the East the SDF, supported by the United States (Barthe, Kaval Paris and Zerrouky 2018). The US air strikes that killed hundreds of Russian mercenaries in Syria marked the bloodiest confrontation between the two states in decades.

Washington at this period still wanted to maintain its influence in this area of Syria for various political purposes, including the complete elimination of IS and countering Iranian influence, and this meant protecting its local allies of the SDF. US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson in mid January 2018 had indeed declared that US troops would remain in Syria even after the elimination of IS in order to curb Iran influence and prevent the Syrian regime from reconquering these areas controlled by SDF (Savage 2018). A month later, in the end of February, CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel stated before the House Armed Services Committee that although the US troops’ objective was on defeating the IS in Syria and not countering

the influence of Iran or entering with it in a military confrontation, it could block and thwart indirectly Iran's growing influence in the country by sticking with the SDF, which is supported by Washington (C-Span 2018).

There was however a debate within the US administration at this period to maintain or not American troops in Syria and continue the collaboration with Kurdish led SDF forces. Robert S. Ford (2018), former US ambassador in Syria, in his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in February 2018 regarding US policy in Syria for example stated:

"the Congress should also instruct the Administration to identify benchmarks and timelines for when political conditions in Syria are such that American forces can withdraw from eastern Syria. In the end, our Syrian Kurdish and Syrian Arab allies must strike a deal with Assad. Unless we are prepared for an indefinite military presence, that deal will largely be on Assad's terms because he will wait us out"

Few weeks after, Ford's position seemed to be the one preferred by the White House, especially after Mr. Tillerson was replaced by Mike Pompeo, the C.I.A. director and former Tea Party congressman, and US president Trump declared in April that he wanted to get USA forces, about 2,000 troops on the ground, including special operations forces, out of Syria relatively soon, agreeing only to keep them a little longer to defeat IS, but unwilling to back a long-term commitment (Holland 2018).

This was not encouraging for PYD's future, nor for the Kurds in Syria more generally.

7.12 Peace Talks sponsored by Russia, Iran and Turkey

The rapprochement between Iran, Turkey and Russia following the conquest of Eastern Aleppo by pro regime forces in mid-December of 2016 led to new opportunities for talks to end the conflict. The Foreign and Defense ministers of these countries met in Moscow to discuss the future of Syria on December 20th, while the

United States was not invited. A common declaration was issued following the meeting in which a roadmap was suggested for a ceasefire and potentially an end to the war in Syria. The declaration broadly affirmed that Russia, Turkey and Iran were ready to help broker a peace deal, including this crucial point: that the priority was to fight "terrorism" in Syria and not regime change (Reuters 2016). Following this meeting, a nationwide ceasefire (excluding jihadist forces of IS and JFS) sponsored by these three powers was implemented in Syria on December 29th, 2016, although it was violated by regime forces and their allies (Al-Khalidi 2017a).

On its side, the United States backed the Syria peace talks being prepared by Russia in the Kazakh capital Astana and hoped they would produce a step toward peace declared the Secretary of State John Kerry (Wroughton 2017). In mid September 2017, following new talks in Astana, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to deploy observers on the edge of a "de-escalation" zone in Syria's Idlib province, which was largely under the control of HTS. Three other zones of "de-escalation" were included in the various Astana meetings: Eastern Ghouta, northern rural Homs, and southern Syria (Quneitra and parts of Daraa governorate) (Beal 2017; Majidyar 2017e). These agreements did not however stop regime's forces and its foreign allies to attack and / or besieged these regions.

In July of 2017, Washington and Moscow negotiated a cease-fire and de-escalation zones in southern Syria, after a meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Germany during the G20 (Azizi 2017; Bhojani and Walsh 2017). In the same months, the CIA's covert program to arm and train some Syrian opposition groups battling the Syrian regime was ended, a decision long sought by Russia, according to U.S. officials. The move however did not include a separate Pentagon-led effort to work with U.S.-backed Syrian armed opposition groups fighting the IS, including the most important entity in this strategy the YPG (Entous and Jaffe 2017).

Similarly, relations between Turkey and Iran also witnessed a new rapprochement in August 2017 following the meeting of the chief of the Iranian Armed Forces with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Defense Minister Nurettin Canikli in Ankara to discuss ways of strengthening bilateral defense relations, coordinating joint

counterterrorism efforts, notably by launching common military operations against PKK and its branches in Syria and Iran, and reconciling the two countries' policy differences in Syria and Iraq. Both sides also agreed that the Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum, which resulted in a victory of the "yes" at over 92 percent in favor of the independence in September 2017, destabilized Iraq and adversely affect the broader region (Majidiyar 2017d; Medawar 2017a). Tehran and Ankara were the most vehement in their rejection of the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan and they both multiplied actions against Erbil in collaboration with the central government of Baghdad.

Russia, Iran and Turkey continued to collaborate to advance parallel conference discussions to the Geneva Negotiations under the auspices of the UN, notably with the Syrian National Dialogue Congress sponsored by Russia and held in January 2018 in Sochi. The conference was however boycotted by large sections of the opposition, both armed and political, within and without the country, notably the Coalition, and the Kurdish political parties, including the PYD and the KNC.

In April 2018, in a new summit in Ankara hosted by Turkish President Erdogan, Turkey, Russia and Iran reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a "lasting ceasefire" that will "protect civilians" in Syria and finding a political solution to the conflict in Syria (AFP 2018).

7.13 Conclusion

The failure of the American invasion of Iraq, and the global economic and financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 were severe blows both economically and for the prestige of the American neoliberal model on a global level, causing a relative weakening of its overall power, which not only left more space for other global imperialist forces like Russia to operate, but also benefited regional powers that acted increasingly with greater independence. As a result of the relative weakening of American power after its failure in Iraq, regional states like Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar played a growing role in the region and in the revolutionary processes in several countries after 2011 by supporting various actors to increase their own political influence or by

intervening directly. Sectarianism was also a useful tool to mobilize particular constituencies to serve political objectives by these states.

At the same time, the USA was less keen than in the past to intervene militarily massively in the region as a result of its defeat and the catastrophic consequences in Iraq. The objectives of the USA were generally to maintain structures of the regimes by reaching agreements between ancient regimes (or section of it) and the opposition linked to Western, Turkey and Gulf monarchies. The Syrian case was no different.

It was in this framework that the various interventions in Syria occurred. The assistance of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah to the regime has been absolutely indispensable for its survival at all levels: political, economic and military. These actors massively invested their forces to protect their own interests, mostly geopolitical. The assistance given by these actors has allowed the regime to benefit from an authoritarian knowledge transfer and thus produced significant adaptations in the scale and organization of the Assad's regime coercive apparatus, ameliorating its capacity to counter a popular armed insurgency. Damascus' expertise and training in specific modes of repression were enhanced (Heydemann 2013b: 67).

The deepening of their interventions increased their influence in the country, both in the society, economy and on state institutions. As a result, these actors had even more interests than at the beginning of the uprising in the remaining of this regime.

On the other side, Turkey and the Gulf Monarchies, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, radically changed their relations with a regime considered as friendly before the uprising, after failed attempts to negotiate the inclusion of sectors of the opposition, close to their interests. Saudi Arabia more particularly, and to a lesser extent Qatar, also saw the uprising as a tool to weaken Iran regionally and promote actors serving their political and economic interests, rather than assisting the inclusive and democratic sectors of the protest movement. The policies of all these actors to support mostly Islamic fundamentalist forces, while participating in the division and fragmentation of the FSA by their various financial sponsoring and selectively choosing a brigade over another ready to serve their interests, amplified and strengthened the sectarian effects of Iranian and Hezbollah's policies and massive

interventions. They contributed to the “Islamization” of the armed opposition, and deepening of sectarianism and Kurdish-Arab tensions among the opposition.

With the growing victories of the regime’s forces and its allies against various opposition armed forces, the so-called friends of Syria increasingly concentrated on issues directly related to their national interests. Turkey focused its efforts on undermining and defeating PYD Kurdish forces in Syria, while trying to stabilize its own country by putting an end to the freedom it once gave to IS and other jihadist groups. The Gulf monarchies diminished their assistance to opposition armed forces following several defeats against pro regime forces and sought a solution limiting Iranian influence and of jihadist actors such as IS.

At the same time, the Western States led by the USA concentrated increasingly on IS and the “war on terror”, which served Damascus’ agenda, and in trying to encourage a resolution of the conflict to stabilize the country but that did not challenge Assad’s regime.

Despite the rivalries between the various imperialists and regional powers, they collaborated to seek that the Syrian civil war did not extend to the region and to limit the capacity of jihadist forces. They increasingly all had common interests in putting an end to the uprising in Syria, but very far from the initial objectives of the protest movement that erupted in March 2011.

Chapter 8: War economy, reconstruction and challenges

8.1 Introduction

After several years of a destructive and murderous war, the situation in Syria was catastrophic at all levels, especially in terms of human loss. An estimated 2.3 million people, approximately 11.5 percent of the population within Syria, were killed, injured or maimed as a result of the armed conflict in 2015 (SCPR 2015: 51). With the increase in the mortality rate, life expectancy diminished significantly for all age groups, especially the young, where a male's life expectancy at birth declined from 69.7 in 2010 to 48.4 in 2015 (SCPR 2016b: 9). More than half of the population of Syria was displaced internally or outside of the country, or forced to leave their homes as a result of the war. The situation for the majority of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries was characterized by poverty, exploitation and discriminatory policies.

The Syrian economy suffered as a result of the numerous and large destructions through the country. Large sectors of the economy were destroyed, particularly in industry. The regime's resources, reserves and fiscal revenues were reduced considerably through the years and in response the government engaged in new austerity measures and diminution of subventions on essential products, worsening the condition of life of the country's popular classes. At the same time, the rise of the black-market started soon after April of 2011, a month into the Syrian uprising, when the USA imposed via executive order the first of four sets of economic sanctions on Syria. The war, alongside the development of a black market and trafficking of all kinds, resulted in the surge of new economic actors affiliated with the regime, while some armed opposition forces also engaged in these affairs and enriched themselves.

The Assad regime, as it was accumulating new military victories and capturing new territories with the assistance of its foreign allies, started to envision the issue of reconstruction and establish the conditions for stabilizing territories under its control. This situation faced however numerous challenges ranging from the lack of national capital for the reconstruction, to crony capitalist's continuous willingness to expand

their wealth and moreover the behavior of the numerous pro-regime militias throughout the country and finally the continuing existence of salafists jihadists forces.

8.2 Human development indicators severely worsened

The Human Development Index measure of 0.472 in Syria fell from the “medium human development” cluster of nations into the “low human development” group, largely as a result of weakening performance in education, health and income. The healthcare system was severely affected through damage and destruction to medical facilities and healthcare infrastructure, the flight of healthcare professionals, the death and injury of medical staff and the collapse of the pharmaceutical industry (SCPR 2014: 6). In 2016, almost half of the total 493 hospitals in the country had been directly impacted in the five years of fighting. In 2015, 170 hospitals (34 percent) were out of service and 69 (14 percent) were only partially functioning. One third (165) of the country’s hospitals (88 percent of them private) had been destroyed by 2015, and a further 11 percent had been partially damaged. As a result, the number of persons per doctor in the country rose from 661 in 2010 to 1,442 in 2015 (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 31).

In terms of education, the portion of the population with access to education fell from 95 percent prior to the crisis to less than 75 percent in 2015, a result of the loss of infrastructure and a shortage of teachers. More than 27 percent of schools reported staff shortages in 2015, as opposed to 0.3 percent in 2010 (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 30). It was estimated that 45.2 percent of school age children did not attend school in the 2014-2015 school year. The school non-attendance rate was the highest in Raqqa and Deir Zor where it reached 95 percent, as a result of the decision taken primarily by IS to close schools in areas under its domination. The highest levels of school non-attendance were followed by Aleppo (city and province) with approximately 74 percent, rural Damascus with 49 percent and Idlib (city and province) with 48 percent. This situation reflected the continuation and intensification of military confrontations in these areas, while in relatively safer governorates the school age non-attendance rate was comparably low, almost zero percent in Tartus, 16 percent in Damascus and 17 percent in Lattakia (SCPR 2016a: 48). In 2015,

according to the Syrian Ministry of Education, 5,800 schools (26 percent of the national total) were out of commission, as a result of the destruction and inaccessibility (5,200) or because they were being used as shelters for IDPs (600) (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 30). Economic factors also played an important role, with the increase in prices and inflation and the decrease in job opportunities, more families resorted to child labor to provide basic needs. Begging and child-marriages also increased for the same reasons through the years (Syria Untold 2016a; Syria Untold 2016b).

Millions were deprived of the essential necessities of life: 13.5 million were in need of human assistance and 12.1 million lacked adequate access to water, sanitation and waste disposal (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 7). By the end of 2015, 85.2 percent of Syrian people lived in poverty (SCPR 2016a: 37+ 45-46). While the poverty rate increased in all governorates, it varied among regions, those governorates that witnessed intensive conflict and had higher historical rates of poverty suffered most from poverty. Thus, people in Raqqa were the poorest with 91,6 percent of its inhabitants living below the overall poverty line, while those in Idlib, in Deir Zor, and rural Damascus, also suffered from high rates of overall poverty. The lowest rate was in Suwayda at 77.2 percent, followed by Lattakia, Damascus and Tartus respectively. Extreme poverty reached 69.3 percent of the population by the end of 2015, rising from 66,5 percent in 2014 and 51,6 percent in 2013. The most affected governorates were Deir Zor, Raqqa, Idlib and Hasakah with 80.9, 80.3, 79.5 and 75.8 respectively, while the lowest rates of extreme poverty were in the regions of the country which had suffered less from direct and massive military actions such as Lattakia and Suwayda with 53.1 percent and 54.1 percent of extreme poverty respectively (al-Mahmoud 2015).

In Syria at the beginning of 2018, there were more than six millions IDPs, and more than six millions refugees, including five millions in neighboring countries and around one million in Europe (Norwegian Refugee Council (2018) (See Annex 3). The displacement of civilian populations was continuing at the time of the writing. According to a report of the Norwegian Refugee Council (2018), while the number of Syrians returning – mostly from internal displacement inside Syria – rose from 560,000 to 721,000 between 2016 and 2017, for every returnee there were three

more newly displaced because of the war. Some 2.4 million people in Syria – more than 8,000 every day – fled their homes in the first nine months of 2017 and the UN predicted a further 1.5 million Syrians would be displaced in 2018.

Nearly fifty percent of IDPs lived in rented houses, thereby adding to their financial burden; relatives and friends hosted around 30 percent, while 13.5 percent live in formal and informal shelters (SCPR 2016b: 9). On this last issue, only 7.2 percent of all IDPs were living in shelters registered and supervised by official authorities (SCPR 2016b: 72).

Females represented 57 percent of the total number of IDPs in Syria, exceeding 70 percent in some districts in Damascus city such as Tishrin, in Zakye, and al-Tall in Rural Damascus, Salamiyah in Hama province, Drekish in Tartus, Qurayya and Shahba in Suwayda, in addition to Ghabagheb and Hrak in Dar'a (SCPR 2016b: 69). The number of Syrians in neighboring countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey) was thought to exceed 6 million by the end of November of 2015. Almost 5 million refugees were officially registered (SCPR 2016b: 76). Around one million sought refuge in Europe between April of 2011 and January of 2016 (Hogg 2015; SCPR 2016b: 77).

The worsening economic situation had social consequences with the increase of the rates of divorce and polygamy in Syria. According to official figures, polygamous relationships accounted for 30 percent of marriages registered in Damascus in 2015, up from just five percent in 2010 (AFP 2016b). Lana Khattab and Henri Myrtilinen (2017) argued as well that

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

Syrian women both within the country and in refugee contexts encountered substantial barriers as they tried to establish new livelihoods and increasingly exposed to protection risks. At the same time, the consequence of the shortage of men in Syria, because they mostly died or emigrated, and their unavailability for the labour market, as a result of fighting, injuries or imprisonment, led however women to occupy more space in society and in the workforce, by notably inadvertently opening the door to previously male-dominated employment sectors or being a far majority in some sectors. According to 2015 FAO estimates for example, 65 percent of the economically active population in agriculture in 2015 were women, representing an increase of six percent since 2009. In some areas, women could constitute up to 90 percent of the agricultural labor force (cited in Aniyamuzaala and Buecher 2016:31). The result was that by 2016 female-headed households constituted 12-17 percent of the population in Syria and up to one-third in refugee-hosting countries (Aniyamuzaala and Buecher 2016: 4) Female entrepreneurship rose at the same time from 4.4 percent in 2009 to 22.4 percent in 2016 (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2017). However this was far from meaning equality, as women received generally substantially lower pay and other forms of discriminations existed and remained. Income in female-led households tended “to be below that of male-headed households,” according to the research assessment “Women, Work & War” published by CARE (Aniyamuzaala and Buecher 2016:5) in 2016.

8.3 A destroyed economy, austerity measures and rising cost of living

By the end of 2013, total economic loss since the start of the conflict was estimated at USD 143.8 billion, which was equivalent to 276 percent of the GDP of 2010 in constant prices (SCPR 2014:4). This amount increased to USD 254.7 billion by the end of 2015, representing 468 percent of the GDP of 2010 in constant prices (SCPR 2016a: 6). GDP, which in 2010 stood at \$60.2 billion, was in 2016 at \$27.2 billion (2010 prices), representing a contraction of 55 percent (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 7). The destruction of housing and infrastructure was estimated at around \$90 billion by 2016. The construction sector sustained the heaviest damage, reaching \$27.2 billion, then manufacturing with capital losses estimated at \$15.9 billion, mostly in facilities in Aleppo, Damascus and Homs, followed by the

destruction of oil and gas fields, estimated at \$8.4 billion, and that of electricity, water and sewage installations at \$8.2 billion (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 15). The total area under cultivation fell by 40 percent and one third of the population inside Syria did not have food security (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 7).

Syria's national currency reserves dwindled from \$20 billion at end-2010 to \$0.7 billion by the end of 2015 (World Bank 2016), while the Syrian Pound was collapsing in value, the regime was increasingly pushed to seek economic assistance from its allies. In 2014, the regime's public debt measured against GDP reached 147 percent, including 76 percent in domestic debt and 71 percent in foreign debt, while in comparison the total debt measured against GDP was estimated at 23 percent in 2010. In November 2016, Syria's public debt had multiplied by 11, Adib Mayaleh, the Minister of Economy declared, without providing a specific number (The Syria Report 2016t). The government also became increasingly dependent on Central Bank advance payments, in addition to foreign assistance, which have been increasing during the war because of the very limited fiscal income base. Oil revenues, which represented the bulk of revenues until 2012, were non-existent while tax revenues had diminished considerably. In 2015, at least a third of the government expenses were funded by long-term borrowing from the Central Bank of Syria (The Syria Report 2016m).

The government tried to compensate this deficit by increasing the prices of some products and decreasing subsidies on some goods throughout the years, while at the same time increasing the salaries of public and private registered workers in order to appease them but often without success. Rising criticisms could be increasingly heard and seen among the population in regime held areas.

In June 2016 for example, the Syrian government decided once again to impose a new sharp rise in the price of oil products, which led to wide complaints in regime-held areas. This reflected the exhaustion of the population, who had to bear with double-digit inflation and saw its purchasing power consistently declining since the beginning of the uprising (The Syria Report 2016i). In an attempt to appease public criticisms, a Presidential decree granted a monthly bonus of 7,500 pounds to civil

servants and to private sector employees, which came on top of a SYP 4,000 bonus called the "living standards compensation" granted in January of 2015. In reality, the large majority of private sector employees was not registered with social security and therefore did not benefit from the measure (The Syria Report 2016i). These measures, curtailing subsidies on essential products while increasing salaries in the public sector, were actually part of the concept of 'subsidy rationalization' (*'aqlanat ad-da'm*), which was typical of neo-liberal schemes in the region in order to better target subsidies to reach those in "most need" (Arslanian 2016).

At the same time, the SYP also lost some 90-100 percent of its value, falling from 47 per dollar to 520 SYP in September 2016. In 2010, the average worker in Damascus for example received a minimum of 11,000 SYP a month—approximately \$220, while in autumn 2016, his salary was around 26,500 SYP, approximately \$53 (Samaha 2016). One of the consequences of the decline of the Syrian Pound was an increasing use of the dollar as a medium of exchange, particularly in opposition areas. Regime-controlled areas also saw a rise of foreign currencies. Investors and consumers were more and more mistrustful of the capacity of the Central Bank of Syria to reverse the decline of the SYP. This had consequences on wide sectors of the economy. The sale of assets particularly suffered of the dollarization trend. Owners of real estate and land, which are the two most commonly held valuable assets in the country, were priced based on their dollar value with prices going up as the pound fell. Although property owners had to accept significant write-downs relative to the pre-2011 value of these assets, the use of the dollar as a reference helped avoid the risks associated with the daily changes in the exchange rate (The Syria Report 2016b).

In March 2018, the value of the SYP had improved by reaching SYP 430 to the US dollar, but was still very far from its level of before the war (around SYP 50 to the US dollar).

This situation had consequences on the cost of living in the country and increased the hardship for many families. Between 2011 and 2016, there was a 769 percent increase to the cost of food and nonalcoholic beverages, 649 percent for vegetables and legumes, 733 percent for clothing, 618 percent for electricity, gas and heating

fuel and 481 percent for healthcare services, according to data from by the Syrian government's Central Bureau of Statistics released in July 2017 (cited in Samaha 2017c). In September 2017, average monthly cost of living (including rent) in Damascus was around 311,000 SYP (just over \$600) per month. The average monthly salary of a government employee hovered however around 40,000 SYP (less than \$80) (Samaha 2017c). Even if both parents worked full time, their wages were not enough to get through the month. As a result, people had to make up for the rest in various ways: having several jobs, increasing their revenues by demanding bribes, etc... Other methods included withdrawing children from school and making them work, renting out rooms to refugees, selling cars and valuables, demanding financial assistance from relatives abroad, and using whatever money was saved before the war (Lund 2016a).

Moreover, the closure of many workplaces since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011 led to massive job losses. The economy lost 2.1 million actual and potential jobs between 2010 and 2015. Unemployment in 2015 reached 55 percent. Youth unemployment increased from 69 percent in 2013 to 78 percent in 2015 (ESCWA and University of St Andrews 2016: 28). The high level of unemployment and the higher cost of living encouraged sections of the youth to get involved in the army or pro regime militias, especially when the salary, additioned with the bribes, of a militiaman could be four times higher than a university teacher (All4Syria 2017a). This would have harsh consequences for the future.

At the same time, at the end of 2017, businessmen in various Syrian industries were complaining of a lack of manpower despite the country's massive unemployment rate as a result mainly of massive outflow of working-age skilled, and less skilled individuals (dead, injured arrested, in exiles, etc...) and the lack of mobility of Syrians because of insecurity. Similarly few months before, in April 2017, a report by the FAO and the World Food Programme cited as well a shortage in farming labourers as a challenge faced by the Syrian agricultural sector (The Syria Report 2017p).

Remittances, which were sent by Syrians to their families inside the country, became one of the most important sources of income in the uprising. According to World Bank data, the value of Syrian expat remittances in 2016 reached about \$1.62 billion

– an average rate of about \$4 million daily. This amounted to around 651 billion SYP (according to the exchange rate officially set at 434 Syrian pounds to the dollar), which was above the annual total for salaries and wages, estimated at about 478 billion SYP. Remittances sent to Syria were often the main source of cash for tens of thousands of families in need of assistance (Damas Post 2018).

8.4 Structure of the economy

The structure of GDP changed dramatically since the beginning of the uprising, with agriculture and government services together accounting for 50 percent of total GDP in 2013 and 46 percent in 2014, with each becoming a growing share of a shrinking productive base (SCPR 2014: 4). The share of employment of the public sector represented around 55 percent in 2014, indicating that the majority of formally employed persons were working in the government sector (SCPR 2015: 34). These sectors remained significant throughout the uprising, with agriculture still accounting by end of 2016 for an estimated 26 percent of GDP and was an important safety net for 7.6 million Syrians, including IDPs (Enab Baladi 2018e). These sectors, the agricultural and the public sector, however contracted in real terms by more than 40 percent (Butter 2015: 13).

Agriculture in Syria suffered tremendously from the war. In 2012, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization sent a mission to assess the situation across Syria. The mission concluded in its report that agriculture had sustained \$1.8 billion in losses, that 30 percent of rural households were displaced, and that 60 percent of families in rural Homs, Hama, and Dar'a lived on loans from relatives after the prices of meat, chicken, and milk had increased by 300 percent (al-Mahmoud 2015). By 2016, the World Food Program stated that the losses of the agricultural sector in Syria amounted to \$16 billion since 2011, while estimating at the same period that 70 percent to 80 percent of Syria's population required humanitarian assistance, and half of Syria's population was in full needs of food assistance in particular (Enab Baladi 2018e).

In addition to this, before 2011, Syria could produce 4 million tons of wheat in a good year, with around 2.5 million tones going to the state and the surplus exported, while

in contrast in 2015 farmers sold just over 450,000 tons of wheat, a fraction of the 1-1.5 million tons that was needed to provide enough bread to regime-held areas of the country alone. In 2014, Syria imported 1.5 million tons of wheat, along with 400,000 tons of maize and 200,000 of barley, according to the International Grains Council. The FAO estimated in 2015 that Syria's wheat deficit for that year stood at around 800,000 tons. Farms, seed distribution, milling and bakeries were all wrecked and disrupted by the conflict. The breadbasket provinces of Hasakah, Raqqa and Deir Zor, which were largely outside regime control for years, represented around 70 percent of total wheat production (Butter 2015: 14; El-Dahan 2016).

The most severely affected sector was mining (including oil production), which observed a diminution of 94 percent in real terms since 2010. Manufacturing, domestic trade and construction also decreased by more than 70 percent on average (Butter 2015: 13). The manufacture sector witnessed a dramatic reduction. By the end of 2013, manufacturing GDP was just 18.6 percent of that of 2010. The deepening of the war resulted in widespread closure and bankruptcy. This was associated with the widespread destruction of firms and infrastructure through increasing pillage and looting; there was large-scale flight and migration by the qualified labor force. The massive decrease in manufacturing production occurred in both public firms and private enterprises, while the latter was most seriously affected and accounted for the largest share of output (SCPR 2015: 19).

Faced by this situation, in the beginning of 2013, the Syrian government planned the transfer of state factories to “safe areas” in the country such as the coastal areas or Suwayda to enable them to continue production, while encouraging private manufacturers to also relocate to these areas (The Syria Report 2013a). However, on the whole, the manufacturing sector was falling apart, becoming either fragmented small workshops with low productivity and lack of competitiveness or scattered industrial establishments with mutual interests to subjugating powers and thus the recipients of support and protection from them (SCPR: 2016a: 6).

The cost of the destruction of the industrial sector was estimated by the Ministry of Industry at 1 trillion SYP in July 2016, evenly divided between the private and public sectors. Replacing the industrial capacity of the public sector alone would be much

higher and would cost some 2.6 trillion SYP, which was equivalent to around USD 5.8 billion at the exchange rate of the time (The Syria Report 2016j). In a 2016 BTI (2016: 15) report, the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) stated that up to 90 percent of industrial enterprises in the main conflict areas, such as Aleppo, have closed down, while the remaining ones operated at only 30 percent capacity. In the city of Aleppo itself, known as the main manufacturing center of Syria, only 10 percent of the city's factories and plants were still operating, according to data from the Ministry of Industry in March 2016. Some 70 percent of the manufacturing base, i.e. around 28,000 factories, were damaged to a more or less serious degree, while the rest were either relocated to other parts of the country, mainly the coast, or outside, particularly Turkey or Egypt, or simply stopped because of the economic or security conditions (The Syria Report 2016d). A slight improvement was witnessed in 2016 in the manufacturing sector, as the regime's forces increased their control of the territory (The Syria Report 2016v).

The year 2017 also saw an improvement in the Syrian business environment after years of steep decline with revenues of companies increasing in different sectors, luxury hotels (Cham Palaces and Hotels⁷²), transport and logistics companies (Syrianair, Al-Ahliyah Transport⁷³, Lattakia International Container Terminal,⁷⁴ and Damascus Cargo Village⁷⁵), etc... Al-Badia Cement, the only private sector cement company still operating in Syria, for example had its revenues almost doubled from SYP 13.8 billion in 2016 to 26.7 billion last in 2017, around USD 61.5 million (The Syria Report 2018c; The Syria Report 2018e).

The total conquest of Eastern Ghouta by pro-regime forces in April 2018 would also have positive impact on the economy for the regime by restoring in a near future the production of hundreds of factories, still not destroyed or too severely damaged by regime's bombing especially, that were located in the Ghouta, while bringing more security to Damascus. This region was a major supplier of food products to Damascus, in addition to many factories in sectors such as textile, chemicals and

⁷² Cham Palaces and Hotels manages the largest chain of high-end hotel properties in Syria

⁷³ Al-Ahliyah Transport operates a fleet of intercity passenger buses.

⁷⁴ The company managing the container terminal of the Port of Lattakia

⁷⁵ Damascus Cargo Village operates a storage and logistical centre at the Damascus International Airport

furniture. According to the Syria report (2018h), this would “boost economic production, resorb partly unemployment and contribute to a decline in prices in the capital”. A week prior the SAA’s victory in Eastern Ghouta, the Syrian government had actually put forward the necessity to establish rapidly a program that would address the reconstruction, restoring services, and investment in Eastern Ghouta, as well as organizing the return of the displaced people to their cities and villages (SANA 2018b).

8.5 Regional changes

The war created new economic centers of investment, as military conflicts were raging in traditional areas of investments such as Aleppo, Hama and rural Damascus. The regions that were insulated from the extensive destruction and unrelenting violence occurring elsewhere in the country profited economically from this situation. The Wadi al-Nasara economy, for example, boomed as a result of a large influx of Syrian Christians, mainly from the city of Homs. This demographic shift led to more investments flowing into Marmarita, Hwash, Mishtaya and even Kafra, a small village that benefited from its proximity to the main regional highway (Masouh 2013: 91).

Suwayda also benefited from a greater share of investments throughout the years of the uprising because of its relative safety and proximity to the Syrian capital. In December of 2013, two projects by private investors were implemented in the governorate at a total value of some SYP 1.2 billion, including a large powder-milk manufacturing plant with an annual production capacity of 4,800 tons. Besides milk, the factory also produced some 48,000 tons of various children-dedicated food products (The Syria Report 2013c). In 2015, Suwayda hosted 17 investment projects by the SIA, followed by Tartus (12), Damascus countryside (8), Aleppo (4), Lattakia (3), Hama (2) and Damascus city (1). Together, Suwayda, Tartus and Lattakia hosted 68 percent of all the projects licensed by the SIA. In 2010, their combined share was only 11 percent (The Syria Report 2016c).

It was Syria’s northwest coastal region that benefitted economically from its relative stable situation throughout the war, with the exception of some protests at the

beginning of the uprising in Baniyas, Lattakia city, and several villages in the Lattakia countryside (north of Lattakia and in the Haffe areas), which were by 2013 all repressed by regime forces. The coastal areas remained relatively calm compared to the rest of the country because protests were both restricted and rapidly contained (Khaddour 2016b: 6).

Tartus observed an inflow of people fleeing other regions of the country many of whom brought their savings with them. Investment in the province was higher than in other areas of Syria, although it was believed to be well below its levels prior to the uprising (The Syria Report 2015d), while many private companies relocated there. The majority of the population of Tartus was however dependent on the regime for their economic survival, whether as public servants or as employees of the army or security apparatus. The public employees, for large sections of them, often had a second job as well. Tartus witnessed from mid 2012 and 2013 the multiplication of construction sites for luxury hotels, restaurants, and shopping malls (Khaddour 2013b: 29-32).

In 2015, the provinces of Lattakia and Tartus attracted most real estate transactions in Syria, according to official data. Statistics from the General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Local Administration, indicated that in 2015 the number of real estate contracts involving the transfer of property in the provinces of Tartus and Lattakia stood at 46,000 and 40,000 respectively. The two provinces were the most attractive followed by Hama, Damascus countryside, Damascus city, Aleppo and Suwayda. In 2010, the year preceding the uprising, Damascus countryside (90,000) came first followed by Aleppo province (75,000), which comprised both the city and the countryside. Overall, 219,000 real estate contracts were signed in Syria in 2015, down by 54 percent from 2010 when they reached 477,000 (The Syria Report 2016f).

Data from the SIA showed that 32 percent of the private investments it licensed in 2015 were on the coast, while slightly less – 27 percent – were in the traditional economic powerhouses of Damascus and Aleppo. In the province of Tartus, for instance, the number of new individual companies increased in 2015 to 1,752 from 867 in 2014. The total registered capital value of these projects was SYP 530 million,

around USD 1.23 million, although the actual value of the investments were likely much higher as not all the value of investments were usually declared (The Syria Report 2016a). In contrast, in 2010, Damascus and Aleppo attracted 40 percent of the projects, while a meager 4.5 percent went to Latakia and Tartus (Yazigi 2016c: 4+7). The number of investment projects licensed by the SIA diminished through the years, in 2015 reaching the combined value of only SYP 10.1 billion, while in 2010, the year preceding the uprising and which followed more than ten years of gradual liberalization of the Syrian economy, 398 projects worth a combined SYP 90.7 (USD 1.9 billion) had been licensed (The Syria Report 2016f).

The economic growth witnessed in Tartus encouraged some business elites of the area to call for more economic opening. Wahib Merei, the President of the Tartus Chamber of Commerce and Industry and a businessman close to the Syrian regime, called on the Government to declare the province of Tartus a free trade zone. He added that that this measure would help Tartus play a major role in the reconstruction of the country and allow it to become an important regional economic center similar to Dubai (The Syria Report 2015f).

8.6 Rise or benefits from the war economy

The war situation also created a new and growing economic sector: violence and illegal activities. The Syrian research center explained that armed groups and security services

“tried to directly recruit people to be part of their armed battalion, or indirectly through “organizing” illegal activities like smuggling, monopoly, theft, pillage, weapons trade, and people trafficking. These illegal activities attracted around 17 percent of the active population inside Syria in 2014” (SCPR 2016a: 37)

Checkpoints became a formidable source of income via bribes. In Damascus, about 140 checkpoints were spread throughout the city managed by the army, security agencies and NDF. One of them was called the “Two Million Checkpoint” and

crossing through it cost a high toll because it led to the main consumer market, while another was called the “1,000 checkpoint” because it led to the nightclubs. At some checkpoints, “escort fees” could reach some 200,000 Syrian pounds, or close to 400 US dollars. The phenomenon of kidnapping was on the rise throughout the war, as well as the crime rate, turning the checkpoints into a sort of trade and a source of wealth (Hamidi 2016, Enab Baladi 2017b).

This situation participated in the development of “war commanders” and of the emergence of a “new guard” of nouveaux riche businessmen who accumulated enormous wealth since the beginning of the uprising. To launder their money, war traders turned to a number of methods, most importantly buying real estate, while also buying and trading luxury cars, gold and land, or trading in currency and dollars. This led to the emergences of new centers of power, although the regime was still the main one, with the entanglement between the new guard of businessmen and the army and security (Hamidi 2016).

In addition to this, these new war traders did not hesitate to sell products of poor quality. In December 2016 and January 2017 in Damascus for example, while suffering from a water crisis, there were cases of poisoning of children who were exposed to polluted water sold in the markets without any oversight by some war traders (Hamidi 2016; Sada al-Sham 2017b). By accumulating such profit and power, they came to exert a large degree of control over the lives of Syrians living in regime-controlled areas.

In war zones and regions suffering sieges in opposition held areas, local populations were lacking of food, water, electricity, and fuel. As prices rose, pro regime army and militias, merchants and military opposition factions exploited the situation for profit, especially from the sieges. The pro regime armed forces erected checkpoints on strategic entry points to the besieged area, providing them with ample opportunities for many illegal economic practices such as allowing goods in exchange for bribes. During the spring of 2014, soldiers from the Presidential Guard and Air Force Intelligence took \$2 for each kilogram of food allowed into eastern Ghouta at the Wafideen Checkpoint, which later became known as the ‘One Million Crossing’ as soldiers were believed to make SYP 1 million per hour (roughly \$5,000) from bribes.

In the besieged city of Deir Zor, seats on military aircraft to escape the siege became a lucrative source of revenue for the regime officials, with civilians paying between 150,000 SYP and 300,000 SYP (\$625-\$1,360) (Todman 2016: 4+8).

Some traders, businessmen who lived or worked in the besieged areas before the conflict often having local connections with regime security forces, also benefited from this situation. These traders tried to secure contracts from the highest levels of the regime to have an effective monopoly over the supply of a certain good in a besieged area. The traders inside the besieged areas also had to have a relationship with the opposition-armed groups operating there and fees or goods had to be paid for the trader to pass between the checkpoints. Once these goods were within the besieged area, the traders often hid or kept them and sold them strategically to maximize their profit (Todman 2016: 4).

Muhy al-Din al-Manfush (known as Abu Ayman) became one of the most prominent merchant smugglers in Damascus province. He collaborated with the regime and played an important role in providing food and fuel. Abu Ayman was a trader from the city of Mesraba near Douma and continued to manage a dairy there. He provided Eastern Ghouta with food and fuel, relying on personal relations with regime officials to get his supplies through the Harasta checkpoint (northeast of Damascus city). He then delivered the products to customers in the city, charging prices up to 20 times higher than in the capital Damascus. He used some of funds to try to win over the local residents, for instance by paying salaries for teachers and administrators in several areas of Ghouta, while the regime benefited as well by taking a cut of his profits and maintaining networks of influence in opposition held areas. Al-Manfush protected his facility with a private militia. Around 1,500 people worked in his factory, which also supplied Damascus with cheese and dairy products. Al-Manfush was able to develop his facilities to produce canned and baked goods sold in Ghouta and Damascus (Sadaqi 2016). Meanwhile, his local area of Mesraba was not the target of the regime's military attacks, seemingly part of the arrangement. A resident of eastern Ghouta estimated that before the tunnels came into regular use, he made a daily profit of at least \$10,000 (Todman 2016: 5-8).

In Aleppo, Hussam Qaterji, a trader who was little known before the beginning of the uprising, operated as a middleman for the trade of oil and cereals between the regime and the Kurds and IS (Yazigi 2016c: 4). For example Qaterji and traders working for him bought up wheat from Raqqa and Deir Zor and gave IS 20 percent (El-Dahan and Georgy 2017). He used the business network established by his father, who had made a small business providing loans to farmers from Eastern Syria and then purchasing their harvests to sell back to the markets in the country's west, and carried on organizing purchases of wheat from these areas through intermediaries (Khaddour 2017d: 12). He was rewarded by the regime through his "election" as a member of parliament, representing the Aleppo Governorate. H. Qaterji was also trying to increasingly formalize his business ventures throughout the uprising. He established two limited liabilities together with his brother, officially in agricultural trade and economic consultancies. The two companies were fronts for their different business activities (The Syria Report 2016am). Qaterji's regularly posted on his facebook pictures of him with Bachar al-Assad, who he described as "a beacon of light for pan-Arabism, patriotism and loyalty" (El-Dahan and Georgy 2017). He was part of a new business class filling the gap of the traditional or former bourgeoisie of the city that had left during the war and used their contacts with the regime to become prominent economic actors.

Some armed opposing factions also profited from the sieges in particular situations. They did not hesitate to seize the best and most crucial supplies for battalion members, while popular organizations and local councils struggled to meet civilians' basic needs.

For example, some opposition armed groups in the besieged region of Eastern Ghouta dug tunnels to the Barzeh and Qaboun neighborhoods, and engaged in different profitable trafficking. The Jaysh al-Islam and its surrogate businessmen gained near-monopolistic control over food imports throughout the period they were dominating these areas, especially after 2016. Traders were allowed to bring nonfood items, like cigarettes, into the Eastern Ghouta and sell these privately at a higher profit (Lund 2016e). Merchants sent and received supply orders on opposite ends of the tunnel. The battalions allowed goods to pass through the tunnels in exchange for a percentage of the sale value, which varied by type of good. In 2016, it cost \$1,500

per person to leave through the tunnels. The battalions did not allow any medical personnel, doctors, nurses, and pharmacists, to leave Ghouta, even if they signed a pledge to return within a specified period, because of the high need for medical support in the area (Sadaki 2016a).

The control of the tunnels resulted in internal conflict between different armed opposition groups. The Ghouta was the scene of many street protests of civilians accusing different armed opposition groups of profiteering and of seizing food and other products for themselves, while also denouncing these internal conflicts between armed opposition groups for the control of these lucrative tunnels, instead of fighting the regime (Lund 2017c).

Riots and protests against opposition-armed groups in besieged areas often occurred against what they saw as war profiteering at the expense of civilians. In the summer of 2015, civilian activists accused various leaders of armed opposition forces in the region of the Ghouta of fighting more over money than against Assad, attributing their misery not only to the regime siege but also the hoarding of food, corruption, and theft (Lund 2016e). As late as the beginning of September 2017, protesters in Douma, in demonstrations demanded the end of the siege on the Eastern Ghouta, but blamed as well the high prices of products on some local traders monopolizing the market (SMART News Agency 2017). Activists and local population in the Eastern Ghouta protested and criticized on numerous occasions the role of traders and armed opposition groups in the region accusing them of monopolizing food stocks and inflating prices for their own benefits.

In other areas, it was the control of border crossings with Turkey that became a priority for some armed opposition groups to accumulate capital, turning into a source of conflicts among them. The Northern Storm Brigade, affiliated with the FSA, was using its seizure of the Bab al-Salama crossing with Turkey in 2012 to control key supply and distribution routes for the opposition armed groups in what became a profitable side business to its smuggling and kidnapping activities. This crossing was by far the most important on the Syrian-Turkish border as most trade and humanitarian assistance passed through it. After rising tensions with other battalions over this situation, the group was finally forced to negotiate an agreement with the

Liwa al-Tawhid to share control over the border and presumably its profits, while diminishing its taxes and expenses imposed on objects and people travelling through this crossing (Abboud 2016; Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2016: 140). Ahrar al-Sham then became the sole controller of the Bab al-Hawa crossing through time, and in 2015 through 2016 was earning between 3.6 to 4.8 USD million a month (Tokmajyan 2016: 3). The border crossings were often one of the main reasons behind various military infighting between opposition armed forces, notably in the case of the conflicts between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in July of 2017.

Throughout the uprising, regime and armed opposition forces also did not hesitate to turn a blind eye on goods crossing between areas of their control and they imposed customs fees on them. These unofficial commercial crossings benefited both sides economically. Among the most important of these roads and economic routes, which were the biggest smuggling routes between Turkey and Syria in general, was the route between Hama and Idlib. This crossing witnessed the largest daily commercial traffic between the two sides, with dozens of loads crossing both ways (Sada al-Sham 2018).

The oil economy also became the center of attention and confrontations between various opposition groups. Between 2012 and 2013, a new oil economy emerged in eastern and northern Syria. Tribes and clans in Deir Zor and southern Hasakah took over the wellhead operations of dozens of fields. Most of these were in the former operating areas of Shell (al-Furat) and Total (Jafra) (See Annex 7). These operators negotiated agreements with the dominant military groups in the region over the sale of crude to traders, who then transported the oil to trading and refining hubs close to the Turkish border, at Manbij, Ras al-Ayn (Serekaniye) and Tal Abbyad. Opposition armed groups and their local warlords established clusters of basic refineries in these regions, placing orders with Turkish steel fabrication plants for the pipes, cylinders and tanks required (Butter 2015: 7).

Various groups benefited from huge amounts of money from the exploitation of these oil fields. Initially, the oil economy in the Jazirah came under the domination of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, under the patronage of the Sharia courts that these movements established in the main towns. ISIL began to penetrate the oil

business in early-mid 2013, at the same time as it drove out its rivals from the city of Raqqa (Butter 2015: 18). By the end of 2014, the oil and gas fields were divided between the Syrian regime, PYD Kurdish forces, and IS. IS controlled the majority of oilfields as well as several gas fields in the country in 2015, which they progressively lost through the years as a result of the military advances of pro-regime forces and the SDF.

8.7 Reinforcement of Crony Capitalists and clientelism

Crony capitalist businesspeople and elites affiliated with the regime largely maintained and expanded their operations in the country. Their sustained support allowed them opportunities to improve their socio-economic status by affording them preferential access to industries and sectors that were abandoned when competitors fled Syria (Kattan 2014). Sanctions did not change the situation. After Western powers imposed sanctions on Syria's oil sector early in the war, Aymen Jaber became the only importer of oil products in the country.⁷⁶ Muhammad Hamcho is also believed to have expanded his businesses, relying on his links with Maher Assad (Younes 2016).

In the beginning of 2015, the new licenses governing the operations of Syria's two mobile phone companies, MTN and Syriatel (a company owned by Rami Makhoulf),⁷⁷ were replaced by new 20-year licenses in which a one-time fee of SYP 25 billion was paid by each company for these licenses along with a general reduction of the taxes imposed on these companies in the next three years from 60 percent to 20 percent in 2014. This decision would actually generate huge losses for the Syrian State in the

⁷⁶ With fiscal revenues declining and foreign currency reserves largely spent, the government was also being forced to lift gradually its long-held monopoly over the oil sector and call the private sector for help. In December 2014, the Syrian government actually offered investors the possibility of importing crude oil, refining it at one of the two refineries in Homs or Baniyas, and reselling it either in the local or export market. The government would collect a fee for the processing, which could be paid in kind, in the form of the oil derivatives produced. A few weeks before this decision, it had already allowed private traders to import oil derivatives, only restricting their sale to manufacturers (The Syria Report 2014c).

⁷⁷ Syria's mobile phone sector has been marred in controversy for a long time starting from the award in 2000 of the initial contracts to two companies associated with people close to Bashar al-Assad. One of the licenses went to Syriatel, a company established by his maternal cousin, Rami Makhoulf, while the second went to Areeba, a company owned by the Mikati family of Lebanon, close to the Assad family. Areeba's mother company later merged with South Africa's MTN with the Mikati family holding a share in the newly established group.

coming years, while increasing the profits of the two companies, Syriatel and South Africa's MTN, official records showed. On an annual basis, the government was giving up an average of SYP 81 billion, or the equivalent of USD 270 million at the market exchange rate of 300 pounds per dollar. The net loss was therefore SYP 1,665 billion, only very partially compensated by the SYP 50 billion paid for the fees. This decision was particularly surprising as the government was in need of revenue, while at the same time it guaranteed higher long-term profits for the individuals associated with the regime such as Rami Makhlouf (Syria Report 2015c).

The war did not stop the regime's policy of deepening neo-liberal reforms and therefore increasing the control of its crony capitalists on the Syrian economy. This was the case especially in the perspective of benefiting from the reconstruction of the country. Indeed, a number of well-connected Syrian investors were reportedly awarded licenses by the government to collect and sell the metal scrap from the cities and towns that had witnessed massive destruction, overwhelmingly from the bombing by the regime's artillery and air force (The Syria Report 2016r).

In a similar vain, in July of 2015, the government approved a law that allowed the establishment of private sector holding companies by city councils and other local administrative units to manage public assets and services. As commented by the economic website The Syria Report (2016ag):

“the law was controversial because while it states that the holding created to manage these assets will fully owned by the local authority creating it, the companies affiliated to the holdings and that will manage the public assets can be established jointly with the private sector without any ownership ceiling, opening the way for regime cronies to generate business from public assets”.

In October / November of 2016, a holding company named Damascus Cham Private Joint Stock Company, was established with a capital of SYP 60 billion, which would be completely owned by the Damascus governorate (The Syria Report 2016r). This

holding was in charge of funding the reconstruction of the Basateen al-Razi area in Damascus Governorate.

In mid-December of 2015, the regime implemented two new decisions demonstrating again that the crony capitalist associates of the Assad family were already preparing themselves for the reconstruction period. Firstly, Bashar al-Assad issued a decree enacting a new urban Planning and Construction Law, which among the main provisions of the text was the greater ease provided for the expropriation and redevelopment of illegal housing areas. As such, the decree would ease the destruction of the many urban areas of Syria's largest cities that supported the uprising against the regime, giving the law a political as well as an economic flavor (The Syria Report 2015n).

Secondly, the Syrian Metals and Steel Council was established with the aim of lobbying for a sector that would benefit from any reconstruction drive. The Council would have the role of both a lobbying group and of a regulator for the sector. The Council was made up of a board of 17 members including four representing the state and the public sector: the ministries of economy and trade, the General Organization for Cement and Building Materials and Hama Steel. The President of the Council, which was designated by the Prime Ministry as all the other members of the board, was known crony capitalist Muhammad Hamcho, who was already active in the metal industry (Ri'âsa majlis al-wizarâ` 2015). His company, Syrian Metal Industries, had a production capacity of 630,000 tons a year and was located in the industrial city of Adra near Damascus. The other members of the board also included a collection of the best-connected Syrian investors, three of whom were under Western sanctions: Ayman Jaber and the two Hamcho brothers, Imad and Samir. The Hamcho Group ran a major plant in Latakia with an annual capacity of 500,000 tons of reinforced steel, while Mr. Jaber was a shareholder in Arabian Steel Company, based in Jableh near Lattakia. The building industry was expected to boom during the reconstruction drive and the metal industry would particularly benefit from it. In addition to the demands generated by new projects, many metal-related companies would also benefit from the removal of all the scrap metal from the destroyed areas. The regime seemed to be positioning its capitalist associates in order for them to reap the benefits from this new opportunity (The Syria Report 2015k). However, this council

was cancelled by the new government of Prime Minister Khamis in August 2016 without any reasons with various other councils, most probably for their lack of activities (SANA 2016a). This did not prevent these personalities close to the regime to continue to dominate this part of the economy.

In January of 2016, the Public Private Partnership (PPP) Law was passed, six years after it was drafted, authorizing the private sector to manage and develop state assets in all sectors of the economy, except for oil. Economy and Foreign Trade Minister Humam al-Jazaeri declared that the law was “a legal framework for regulating relations between the public and private sectors and meets the growing economic and social needs in Syria, particularly in the field of reconstruction”, while also providing “the private sector with the opportunity to contribute to economic development as a main and active partner” (cited in Sabbagh 2016c). This law was cited as a reference for the “new economic strategy” of the National Partnership launched one month later in February by the government, which replaced the social-market economic model developed prior to the uprising. In practice, no details were provided about the objectives or policies that would guide this new strategy. At the same time, the new PPP Law raised many fears of regime cronies and other well-connected individuals capturing public assets on conditions widely favorable to them at the expense of the larger interest of the state and of its citizens (Yazigi 2016a).

The degree of control of the economy by close associates of the regime indeed increased throughout the war. This was also the case in the trade sector, more specifically the import sector, which the Syrian economy became increasingly dependent upon as a result of the collapse of other sectors and the need for specific goods like foods, pharmaceuticals and oil derivatives (SCPR 2015: 29). Criticisms over this situation were even raised among circles close to the regime. A Syrian pro-regime publication, called *Sahibat al-Jalala*, claimed in mid 2016 that a handful of traders controlled as much as 60 percent of all Syria’s import trade, indicating it was their connections with top regime individuals that allowed them to control such a large share of the market. The same publication already had a few weeks before indicated that two importers controlled 20 percent of all import trade, two others controlled 10 and 5 percent respectively and the last two controlled 3 percent each (Salam 2016). The publication of this kind of information in a media supportive of the

regime reflected the tensions existing between Syrian businessmen over the control of import trade.

The import trade became a major source of lucrative business deals in the country because of the very low levels of economic production and the absence of regime investments.

The crony capitalists, who generally benefited from their connections with the regime to earn high-margin government contracts, exclusive import deals and, since 2011, smuggling and other deals associated with the war economy, were not ready to let go of their dominating economic power, which increased even more throughout the war, making them even more ready to support the regime.

8.8 The issue of Reconstruction

In April of 2017, the cost of reconstruction was estimated at \$350 billion (Heydemann 2017), creating an appetite from national and foreign actors although the war was not finished. In July of 2016, in Beirut, two business events were organized to discuss the opportunities that the reconstruction could bring (The Syria Report 2016q). In late July of 2017 Jordan's capital, Amman, hosted an international reconstruction conference, "Syria ReBuild 2017," under the auspices of the Jordan Construction Contractors Association and the Ministry of Public Works (Heydemann 2017).

In mid-end August 2017, the regime organized the Damascus International Trade Fair, after six years of absence, in a bid to bring back foreign investors and promote an image of normalcy in the country. In the months before, government officials were promoting the fair, inviting foreign business delegations, organizing business events in friendly countries and holding events across the country, while the official media advertised it at great length. To boost the attractiveness of the fair, the government also announced a few measures such as allowing participants to sell in the local market the products they were exhibiting free of customs fees. Many companies from Russia, Iran, China, Iraq, India, South Africa, Lebanon were participating among more than 40 countries. Very few and only small Western, Turkish and Gulf

companies were present and did not receive any support from their states, while they were by far the largest investors in Syria prior to 2011 (Al-Frieh and Said 2017a).

One month later, between 19 and 23 September, the Rebuild Syria Exhibition 2017 was held, attended by 164 companies from 23 countries of the Arab world and elsewhere (SANA 2017f). On October 23-25, the sixth International Energy Fair took place in Damascus, attended by some 45 Syrian, Arab and other companies (Mozes and Peri 2017).

There were several challenges for the regime in reaching political and economic stability and securing funds for reconstruction. Some of these challenges were also rooted in the internal contradictions and the nature of the regime as a patrimonial state and its need to satisfy divergent interests of its popular base, especially militiamen and crony capitalists.

8.9 Reconstruction, or consolidate the power of the regime

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

In the perspective of reconstruction, Decree 66 (Cham Press 2012), which entered into force in September 2012, allowed the government to "redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas" and replace them with "modern" real estate projects with quality services (Ajib 2017).

Initially the decree promulgated by Bashar al-Assad allowed the Damascus governorate to expel the populations of two large areas in Damascus,⁷⁸ including Basateen al-Razi, in the district of Mazzeh, where the development of the high-end

⁷⁸ Two areas in Damascus, in its southern suburbs are concerned: the first, already started, included Mazzeh, residential area near the presidential palace, and Kafr Soussa. The area of the second zone, included Mazzeh, Kafr Sousseh, Qanawat, Basateen, Daraya, and Qadam, reaches 880 hectares, or 10 percent of the area of Damascus. The evacuation of its inhabitants is announced for 2018 (Cham Press 2012).

real estate project of Marota City (which in the Syriac language means “sovereignty and nation) is under construction. The inhabitants of these areas were mostly working and lower middle class people, who lived in rural areas and migrated in recent decades. This decree, according to the Syrian authorities, aimed at improving the living conditions of the inhabitants by eliminating properties built informally and replacing them with comfortable and modern properties. However, the decree selected two areas that supported the opposition while the areas inhabited by supporters of the regime, and where life conditions were not better, were left intact.

Decree 66 is inspired by some aspects of a 2007 Damascus Master Plan that had not been implemented because of the beginning of the popular uprising in March 2011. This area was and still is considered as an immensely lucrative real estate opportunity: undeveloped farmland and informal housing in some places within walking distance of the center of Damascus (Rollins 2017).

The programs of reconstruction planned the construction of 12,000 housing units for about 60,000 people, targeting mainly high-income households in the neighborhoods of Basateen al-Razi, renamed "Marota City". The reconstruction process includes schools and restaurants, places of worship, and even a multistorey car park and a shopping center. According to the Syrian authorities, 110,000 job opportunities and 27,000 permanent jobs will be created by this project (Ajib 2017; Sabbagh 2017).

Under Decree 66, residents who were entitled to new housing, built in an unspecified location, would receive the equivalent of an annual rent, paid by a special fund created by the Damascus governorate, until it was completed. Those who were not eligible would receive the equivalent of two years' rent, paid no later than one month after the eviction notice. The decree did not specify under what conditions the inhabitants were considered eligible or not to a new home. Many inhabitants of the areas have complained throughout the years of reconstruction, including on regime or pro regime televisions, of the absence of any alternative housing and that other areas lacked any housing and / are too expensive to live (Channel Sama 2015; Syria TV Channels 1 2015, ORTAS Videos 2017), while others, who became refugees and lived outside the country, did not receive anything.

In October 2017, Qassioun, the online media run by one of the branches of the communist party that is supportive of the regime, announced that Jamal Youssef who headed the large real estate development project managed by the Damascus Governorate acknowledged that no alternative housing had yet been provided for the inhabitants of the project that were expelled under Decree No. 66 of 2012 (Syria Report 2017n). Another option suggested by Jamal Youssef, was the possibility of offering to buy a property in Marota City on preferential terms: residents would have the right to buy their properties at cost, and to benefit from flexible loan terms (The Syria Report 2018b).

However, there was still a problem in the latter solution. The former residents of Basatin al-Razi were mostly from lower or middle classes background, they could not afford a property in the new real estate project of Marota City nor easily access bank financing. The authorities of the governorate knew this reality perfectly. In other words, the vast majority of former residents would probably not be compensated in any way and would not receive any other housing despite the provisions of the law.

The reconstruction plan in Homs focused on three of the city's most destroyed districts — Baba Amr, Sultanieh and Jobar — and would rebuild 465 buildings, able to house 75,000 people, at a cost of \$4 billion, according to Homs' governor, Talal al-Barrazi (cited in Mroue 2018). The new urbanism plan took its inspiration over the past "Homs Dream" (MsSyriano 2010) project directed by the former governor of Homs, Muhammad Iyad Ghazal, dismissed by Bashar al-Assad at the beginning of the demonstrations in 2011, because he was the main target of protesters at that time in the city. This project was announced in 2007 by Mr. Ghazal who planned the destruction of parts of downtown to rebuild more modern buildings and skyscrapers. This urban plan was presented at that period as an opportunity to embrace modernization and urban improvement, but was rejected by important sectors of the local population. For example, the project did not guarantee residents the right to stay in the traditionally middle-class neighborhood. Instead, the municipality had suggested alternative housing in another neighborhood or "financial compensation", which raised fears that the master plan would result in a form of gentrification and prevent residents from returning home (Aldeen Syria Untold, Syrian Independent Media Group 2018). Many locals also accused the former reconstruction plan of

using urban planning to push Sunnis and Christians out of central areas, while Alawi areas remained untouched (Solmon 2017).

Aleppo, various suburbs of Damascus and other areas could see the imposition of similar projects. In Aleppo, more than 50 percent of the buildings and infrastructure had been partially or totally destroyed, according to a preliminary assessment of the municipality in January of 2017 (cited in Syria Report 2017b), while large sections of eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo's population had been forcefully displaced to other areas or left as a result of the war. Some inhabitants of Eastern Aleppo started to come back, but they remained a minority at the time of the writing.

In addition, of the 15 "priority areas" put forward by the Syrian government for reconstruction, eight of them were not located in eastern Aleppo. The priority areas were neighborhoods in the west and center of the city that did not suffer the same level of destruction as the 52 neighborhoods in the East taken over by the regime's armed forces and their allies in December 2016 (Beals 2017).

In the same way as in Homs, the reconstruction and rehabilitation of buildings have for the moment prioritized districts that were historically favorable to the regime, and not the most damaged areas, formerly under the control of the armed opposition.

The Syrian newspaper SANA reported in July 2017 that the government had allocated 25 billion SYP (\$ 48.5 million) worth of contracts for reconstruction in Aleppo. The figure is only a fraction of the billions of dollars needed for the reconstruction of the city, estimated at more than \$ 5 billion and could even reach tens of billions (SANA 2017b). Following a visit by Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis accompanied by 16 ministers to Aleppo in early January 2018, the Syrian government announced that Aleppo's share in the 2018 budget would be 40 billion SYP, or about 80 million dollars, dedicated to the rehabilitation of infrastructures and services destroyed in the city and to reconstruction projects (Iqtissad 2017; SANA 2018a).

Another city that had suffered massive destruction is Raqqa. More than 80 percent of the city was destroyed and / or uninhabitable and basic infrastructure was practically

non-existent. The visit of Saudi Arabia's Gulf affairs minister, Thamer al-Sabhan, to Raqqa on September 19, 2017 after the capture of the city by SDF supported by US led international coalition, to meet with the civil council to discuss the reconstruction of the city (Lund 2017d) did not materialize in any concrete plans at the time of the writing.

In the beginning of 2018, Decree 66's expansion was approved by parliament and was waiting to be officially implemented to the rest of the country.

By allowing the destruction and expropriation of large areas, Decree 66 was used as an efficient instrument for rapid and large development projects that would benefit regime cronies, while at the same time operating as a punishing measure against populations known for their opposition to the regime. They would most probably be replaced with higher social classes and new elites of war, who were generally less inclined to rise up against the regime. The development of the residential projects that could be built in these areas would actually be carried by holding companies owned by governorates or municipalities, but the construction and management of the projects would likely be contracted to private sector companies owned by well-connected investors (Syria Report 2017b; La Libre 2016). As explained by the Syria Report (2017b) if this law was implemented on the whole of Syria

“it would also serve a number of other purposes: as a means of pressure on populations living outside regime control; as a source of enrichment for regime figures; as a means of attracting funds and investors; and as a carrot to attract capital from various countries that wish to profit from Syria's reconstruction drive”.

The return of civilians to certain areas was also made difficult by the various measures requested by the different regime's security institutions. An individual first had to possess the necessary documents to access their destroyed property. The war demolished many Syrian land registries, including at the deliberate initiative of pro regime forces in some recaptured areas of the country such as Zabadani, Daraya, and Qusayr, in addition to Homs, making it complicated for residents to

prove home ownership (Chulov 2017). According to approximate prewar estimates by the Ministry of Local Government, only about 50 percent of land in Syria was officially registered. Another 40 percent had boundaries delimited but had not yet been registered. The multiple land registries were paper-based and often not properly stored (Prettitore 2016).

In addition, a significant section of displaced people had lost their ownership documents or lacked them in the first place, according to Laura Cunial, a legal and housing expert at the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). Nearly half of Syrian refugees surveyed by the NRC and the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said that their home had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the war, while only 9 percent had their property title deeds with them and in good condition, according to the survey published in 2017. Wide sections of those refugees actually came from informal areas, which represented around 40 percent of all housing units in Syria— where property records were often absent. Analysts estimated that it was likely that more than 2 million lawsuits by Syrians to seek restitution for lost and damaged property could be filed at the end of the conflict. Property restitution is a right under international law (Yazigi 2017: 6; Zweynert 2018).

However, even those who had the necessary documents often find it difficult to access their properties. The process of entry into the areas controlled by the regime often required obtaining entry permits from various branches of security to cross checkpoints. This process involved blackmail, bribes and threats of detention. If a resident received a security clearance to enter the city, another permit was required before the reconstruction of a destroyed house could begin. Residents were also required to pay electricity, telephone and water bills for the years of absence during the war, which equated to nearly 50 percent of the cost of these assets (Aldeen, Syria Untold, Syrian Independent Media Group 2018).

Not to mention opposition activists and supporters not likely to return out of fear of detention and torture or who do not see any possibility of compensation by the regime because of their political activities.

8.10 New personalities emerging

Some businessmen linked to the regime also started to appear and rose to more prominence. They were usually individuals who were outside of both the crony capitalists' circles and the dependent business elite networks built in the past decades, but who had accumulated some level of wealth before the uprising. This was particularly observed with the reconstruction process.

The most important rising figure was Samer Foz, who became throughout the war one of the country's most powerful businessmen. He was the son of a former Sunni member of the Ba'th party in Latakia during the 1970s, and his father was very close to Hafez al-Assad (Eqtissad 2017a). Multiple Syrian and Dubai-based businessmen interviewed by the Financial Times stated that Mr Foz had close ties to the Assad regime. Prior to the uprising in 2011, he owned Aman Group⁷⁹, a contractor for real estate developments and food commodities. According to their website, the Group had "strategic relations with an extensive network of suppliers in over 30 countries" (Aman Group 2017). He was also involved in the purchase of assets of businessmen that left Syria such as Imad Ghreiwati at low price, including the KIA dealership and a cables manufacturing company. Throughout the war and through his close contacts with Bashar al-Assad, he benefited massively from government contracts and acted as a broker for grain deals with the state buying company, Hoboob (Saul 2013; Enab Baladi 2017f). He also owned a pharmaceutical plant, a steel making plant and a car assembly plant. In March 2018, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal sold his stake, representing 55 percent, in the Four Seasons hotel in Damascus to Samez Foz.⁸⁰ According to the Financial Times (cited in (Kerr and Solomon 2018), the transaction generated a larger sum than \$115 millions. The Four Seasons Damascus was popular with UN agencies, aid groups and visiting diplomats. It was believed to be at the time the best-performing asset in Four Seasons' portfolio of 17 Middle East and North African hotels.

⁷⁹ The company had two subsidiaries: Foz for Trading, the group's commercial foundation, was one of the region's largest importers of basic commodities. Al-Mohaimen for Transportation & Contracting, the group's operational arm, provided unlimited logistics support to Foz for Trading through a large ground fleet.

⁸⁰ Other shareholders in the Syrian Saudi Touristic Investments Company, the company that owned the property, included the Ministry of Tourism, the Damascus Governorate and Kuwaiti Syrian Holding Company, which was affiliated to the Kuwaiti Kharafi group (The Syria Report 2018f).

Alongside his business activities, Foz also founded “the Association of the FOZ charity”, which carried out charitable projects in Latakia and its rural areas, and was planning to expand their services to Damascus and its countryside (Swedeh 2017). He was accused of funding the “Quwat Dir’ al-Amn al-Askari (“The Military Security Shield Forces”), which was affiliated with al-Amn al-Askari (“The Military Security”), and to use it also for personal affairs (al-Sharq al-Awsat 2017).

His company Aman Group also announced in August of 2017 its contribution in partnership with Damascus Governorate and Damascus Cham Private Joint Stock Company in the reconstruction of Basateen al-Razi area, in the Mazzeh district of Damascus, Basateen Al-Razi development, which was renamed Marota City. Aman Damascus, the company established by Aman group for this project, announced a capital of USD 18.9 million (Damascus Cham 2017, Enab Baladi 2017f). In November, Samer Foz’s Aman Group was granted by Damascus Cham Holding the right to develop real estate properties worth around USD 312 million in the Basateen al-Razi project (The Syria Report 2017p). Damascus Cham Holding was the entity that undertook the management, construction and investment works of this area in the capital.

Before the deal with the Aman Group, Damascus Cham had established a similar joint-venture with Zubaidi and Qalei LLC owned by Khaled Al-Zubaidi and Nader Qalei, a Sunni Damascus-based powerful businessman with connections to the regime and whose company Castle Investment was awarded a long-term contract to manage the Ebla Hotel in the outskirts of Damascus, a 5-star resort with a conference center, in 2017 (Eqtissad 2017b; The Syria Report 2017e).

Other business characters also benefited from lucrative contracts with Damascus Cham Holding as part of the reconstruction of Basateen al-Razi. In early 2018, Kuwait-based businessman Mazen Tarazi, active in a variety of economic sectors,⁸¹

⁸¹ In early January 2018, the Syrian Civil Aviation Authority granted a license to an airline established by Mazen Tarazi. Mr. Tarazi will hold 85 percent of the shares of the company, his two sons, Khaled and Ali, holding the rest. The company operating the airline has a capital of 70 million SYP. Mr. Tarazi has demonstrated his support for the regime on a number of occasions. In 2014, he allegedly financed the transport of many Syrians based in Kuwait to Damascus to vote in the presidential election. In

established a joint venture with Damascus Cham Holding to build a 120,000 square meter shopping center and six other properties (Damascus Sham 2018a). The estimated value of these investments was \$ 250 million and according to the details disclosed, Mr. Tarazi would hold 51 percent of the shares of the joint venture, while Damascus Cham would own the rest, meaning that the effective control of the company would be in the hands of Mr. Tarazi. In addition, it would purchase five other parcels worth an estimated \$ 70 million (Iqtissad 2018; Abd al-Jalil 2018; The Syria Project 2018a).

A few days later, it was the turn of Talas Group,⁸² owned by businessman Anas Talas, to also sign a partnership agreement with Damascus Cham holding worth 23 billion SYP (approximately \$ 52.7 million) for the construction of four parcels within Marota City that would be divided into residential and mixed residential and commercial sectors. The distribution of investments in this partnership was as follows: Talas group had 25 percent, or 5.7 billion SYP, and the rest, or 75 percent or 17.3 billion SYP, under the control of the governorate (Damascus Sham 2018b, Eqitissad 2018).

The last two individuals shared certain characteristics, including having accumulated wealth in the Gulf and being relatively unknown before 2011 in Syria, and their main activity until these deals had not been related to the real estate sector.

In January 2018, Damascus Cham Holding established a new joint venture with Exceed Development and Investment, owned by private investors Hayan Muhammad Nazem Qaddour and Maen Rizk Allah Haykal. The capital of this joint venture SYP 9.2 billion (equivalent to around 21 \$ million at the time). The company Exceed, which was established just a few months ago, would hold 51 percent of the shares, representing SYP 4.7 billion, and would fund in cash, while Damascus Cham would own 49 percent (SYP 4.5 billion) and contribute with plots of land. The plan of the developers according to Damascus Sham Holding's website (2018c) was to develop

2015, he was credited by the Syrian official media for "providing financial assistance to the families of the martyrs and wounded of the Syrian army" and for "renovating schools in the suburbs of Homs and Damascus".

⁸² The company is mainly active in the production and distribution of food products from its base in the United Arab Emirates. The company has developed its own food brand, Tolido.

three plots of lands in Marota: two devoted for housing with a total built-up area of 11,000 square metres, while the third would be a commercial centre used for the sale of building materials of 2,956 square metres.

Another significant business personality emerged during the war was Wassim Qattan. In the Summer 2017, Mr Qattan was assigned the management contract of the Qassioun Shopping Mall at an annual cost of SYP 1.2 billion. Few months later, in mid March 2018, the Ministry of Tourism awarded to a company called Murooj Al-Cham Investment and Tourism Company, owned at 47 percent by Qattan,⁸³ a 45-year contract to develop a prime real estate location known as al-Jalaa, in Damascus, which included the building of a large five star hotel and a shopping mall. According to Enab Baladi, he was most probably acting as a front for several businessmen connected to the regime (Enab Baladi 2018d; Syria Daily News 2018).

The fact that all these personalities were issued from the Sunni community did not prevent them from having very close links to the regime and to benefit from it, showing once again the multiple strategies and tools of the regime to constitute a diverse popular base through clientelism, tribalism and sectarianism.

These new business elites were able to capture opportunities left by the gaps created from the departure of the dependent business elite networks. Fares Shehabi, the head of the Aleppo Chamber of Industry and a known supporter of the regime, was elected President of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry in June 2012 (Abboud 2013: 6). Muhammad Hamcho on his side entered the Board of Directors of Damascus Chamber of Commerce at the beginning of 2014 as an alternative to Bassam Ghraoui by ministerial decision, where he assumed the position of Secretary. He also served as Chairman of the Syrian-Chinese Businessmen Council (Iqtissad 2015b). Wassim Al-Qattan, mentioned above, was nominated in February 2018 as president of the Damascus Province Chamber of Commerce, after the minister of domestic trade and consumer protection, Abdallah Gharbi, dissolved the former board of directors (Sahibat al-Jalala 2018)

⁸³ The company's nominal capital was at the time SYP 15 million: 47 percent owned by Qattan, 47 percent by Basil Darwish and 6 percent Fares Naim Sabbagh.

Elections at the Chambers of Commerce in Aleppo and Damascus at the end of 2014, for instance, saw a significant change in the membership of these chambers. In Aleppo, 10 of the 12 elected board members were new investors, many of whom were unheard of prior to the uprising. In Damascus, 7 of the 12 were in the same situation (Yazigi 2016b: 4). Already in the beginning of 2014, the Ministry of Industry had nominated new individuals to sit on the board of various Chambers of Industry, in Hama, Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, in a move largely seen as a reprisal against investors supporting the opposition or deemed as not sufficiently supportive of the regime. Just as the parliamentary “elections” results in 2016, with some 70 percent of new entrants in the chamber, reflecting the significant change that affected the powerbase of the Syrian regime. In Aleppo, among the better-known new names, were the head of the Chamber of Industry, Fares Shehabi, as well as film director Najdat Ismael Anzour, both of whom were strong vocal supporters of the regime since the beginning of the uprising. At the same time, some of those re-elected included investors such as Muhammad Hamcho, Samer Dibs and Nabil Tomeh, all of whom have been loyal defenders of the regime and were suspected of having provided financial and other forms of support (The Syria Report 2016k; Sabbagh 2016c).

8.11 Lack of national and foreign investments

These large real estate projects were expected to attract foreign capital, crucial for Syrian reconstruction. The investments of public and private actors were indeed insufficient to rebuild the country, while the state as mentioned above was seriously indebted. The doubling of the reconstruction tax (called the National Contribution for Reconstruction), which was introduced in 2013 and was initially supposed to be applied for three years only on various taxes and fees,⁸⁴ in December 2017 from five to ten percent did not fix the problem. This tax did not generate much revenues, bringing the equivalent of SYP 13 billion, a mere USD 31 million, in the 2017 budget (The Syria Report 2017r).

⁸⁴ Taxes on business profits, on exit fees, car license plate fees and real estate license fees were among the many on which the tax was imposed. The income tax on wage earners was however exempted.

The government had also become increasingly dependent on the Central Bank's early disbursements, in addition to foreign aid, which increased during the war because of very limited tax revenues. Oil revenues, which accounted for a large portion of revenues until 2012, were non-existent, while tax revenues had declined considerably. In 2015, at least one-third of public spending was financed by long-term borrowing from the Central Bank of Syria (Cochrane 2017). The national budget for 2017 was 2.6 trillion Syrian pounds (\$ 5 billion) and increased slightly in 2018 to 3.1 trillion Syrian pounds, an increase of 527 billion Syrian pounds (SANA 2017g).

Foreign currency reserves declined sharply from \$ 21 billion in 2010 to less than \$ 1 billion (0.7) at the end of 2015 (De Foucaud and Plummier 2017). Moreover, there were problems of funding as Public–Private Partnership (PPP) schemes relied on financing from banks, which was clearly unavailable as the total assets of 14 private-sector commercial banks operating in the country reached SYP 1.7 trillion at the end of 2016, equivalent to only around USD 3.5 billion (based on the end of the year market exchange rate) – in 2010 they reached USD 13.8 billion. In terms of assets, some of the six state-owned banks were actually larger than their private sector counterparts, in particular the Commercial Bank of Syria. However, these banks had large bad debt portfolios (The Syria Report 2017I).

Therefore, the reconstruction needed foreign funding, which would benefit the countries that most supported the Assad regime, particularly Iran and Russia. In February of 2017, the Syrian Minister of Economy at the time, Adib Mayaleh, declared that companies from Iran and other allied countries would be rewarded while European and American companies would need to have their governments apologize first before getting any benefit. Other officials have had similar statements. Following the recapture of Eastern Aleppo in December 2016, Aleppo governor Hossein Diyab also stressed that Iran was going to “play an important role in reconstruction efforts in Syria, especially Aleppo”. The Iranian Reconstruction Authority publicized in March of 2017 the renovation of 55 schools it planned to restore across the Aleppo province (Schneider 2017). Iran also had the largest presence at the International Trade Fair in Damascus with more than 40 Iranian companies participating (Heydemann 2017). In mid September 2017, Iranian officials declared that they would rehabilitate and reconstruct electricity infrastructure in

Damascus and Deir Zor, and an Iranian company was awarded a contract to supply electricity to Aleppo. Tehran was also slated to build a power plant in Lattakia province. These deals were worth hundreds of millions of dollars if finalized (Al-Jazeera English 2017).

Electricity supply had actually been severely restricted and irregular across various areas of the country for the past few years as a result of the conflict. Improving electricity supply was a key issue to help the Syrian regime restore economic growth in territory under its controls. Bassam Darwish, head of the electricity ministry's planning unit in the Syrian government estimated that direct damages in the power sector throughout the war correspondent to approximately between \$4 and 5 billion. Meanwhile indirect losses resulting from the lack of electricity to various sectors, residential zones, and institutions, amounted to nearly \$60 billion (Reuters 2017h).

Regarding Moscow, already in October 2015 a Russian delegation visited Damascus and announced that Russian companies would lead Syria's postwar reconstruction. Deals worth at least €850m emerged from these negotiations. A further Russian parliamentary visit to Syria in November of 2016 resulted in Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem reportedly offering Russian firms priority in rebuilding Syria (Haeur 2017). In mid-December 2017, a Russian delegation made up of heads of major Russian companies headed by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin was again in Damascus for talks with Bashar al-Assad on investment and reconstruction in the country, referring to "major economic projects", including "on oil, gas, phosphate, electricity and petrochemical industries", as well as on transport and trade (AFP and Le Figaro 2017). In February 2018, Syria and Russia signed an agreement on cooperation in the electrical power field in the "framework of developing the electrical system through reconstructing and rehabilitating Aleppo thermal plant and installing Deir Zor power plant, in addition to expanding the capacity of Mharda and Tishreen plants" (Jazaeri and Ghossun 2018).

The Chinese government, in August 2017, hosted the "First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects," during which a Chinese-Arab business group announced a \$2 billion commitment from the government for the construction of industrial parks in Syria (Heydemann 2017). Qin Yong, the vice president of the China-Arab Exchange

Association, estimated in December 2017 investments in Syria of similar value and explained that the companies he had accompanied to Damascus, Homs and Tartus - including the China National Heavy Duty Truck Company- planned to build roads, bridges, airports and hospitals and restore electricity and communications (Abu-Nasr, Arkhipov, Meyer and Shi 2017).

Projects could also be awarded to India (The Indian Express 2017) and Brazil⁸⁵ - a reward for their position rather in favor of Damascus. In January 2018, the Indian Ambassador in Damascus noted that India started formulating modalities to facilitate business between the two countries, so that Indian companies could participate more actively in reconstruction (Sabbagh 2018).

On the Arab political scene, few countries expressed their willingness to take part in the reconstruction process of Syria, such as Egypt. The Egyptian Ministry of Trade and Industry launched wide-ranging appeals to Egyptian companies to help rebuild Syria, according to a spokesman for the Export Materials Council in November 2017. Egypt also participated in the Damascus International Fair in August and, according to the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce, 30 Egyptian companies were present to highlight the role of the Egyptian private sector in rebuilding Syria. A union delegation of Egyptian engineers visited Syria in early 2017 and met with Bashar al-Assad (Abd al-Haleim 2017; Ray al-Yawm 2017). Oman on its side signed in November 2017 with Syria a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation in the energy sphere, making the Syrian-Omani company a “springboard towards establishing other investment projects between the two countries”. The cooperation between the two countries sought to aid in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of damaged oil facilities. Omani officials had maintained a neutral position during the uprising refusing to join the rest of GCC countries against the Syrian regime, and refused to write off relations with Damascus. In August of 2015, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem actually visited his Omani counterpart in Oman’s capital, Muscat. Few months later, in October, Foreign Minister Alawi travelled to Syria and met with Bachar al-Assad (Madan 2017; al-Frieh and Said 2017b).

⁸⁵ In October 2017, Brazil announced its intention to reopen its embassy in Damascus and restore full diplomatic relations with Syria in the hope of participating in the war-torn country’s reconstruction (Adghirni 2017).

Other regional countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, were also preparing themselves to benefit for the reconstruction period in Syria. Raya al-Hassan, a former finance minister from northern Lebanon and who was directing the Tripoli Special Economic Zone project that was planned to be built adjacent to the port, declared in August 2017 for example that "Lebanon is in front of an opportunity that it needs to take very seriously" regarding the benefits of reconstruction in Syria. The city's location close to the Syrian border also attracted increasing foreign investments. Tripoli port signed a 25-year lease with the Emirati port operator Gulftainer in 2013, to manage and invest in the terminal. The CEO of Lebanon's subsidiary of Gulftainer, Ibrahim Hermes, actually argued "our aim was to invest here in anticipation of Syria's reconstruction" (Associated Press 2017).

The level of destruction and the need for foreign capital raised questions, specifically if Iranian, Russian and even Chinese capital would however be enough.

The absence at the time of the writing of main actors, such as Western states and Gulf monarchies, in their willingness to invest in Syria posed a series of problems, while regime officials had repeatedly declared that priority of investments in Syria would be to "the businessmen from the friendly and brotherly countries which stood by Syria in its war against terrorism" (SANA 2017c). In his August 2017 speech, Assad even declared that the regime would not let its enemies "accomplish through politics what they did not succeed on the battlefield and through terrorism" (cited in al-Frieh, Sabbagh and Said 2017), implicitly referring to Riyadh, Ankara and Doha.

The Syrian authorities stated as well that European and American companies would first have to ask their governments to apologize for supporting the opposition before claiming a place in this market (SANA 2017c). A similar position was adopted vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

At a side event in New York in September under the auspices of the UN, these countries declared that support for Syria's reconstruction would depend on a credible political process leading to a real political transition - requiring departure from Assad -

and which could be supported by a majority of the Syrian people (Bayoumy and Irish 2017).

In December 2017, the US Congressional Foreign Affairs Committee unveiled No Assistance for Assad Act, which would prevent the Donald Trump administration from using non-humanitarian US aid funds for the reconstruction of Syria in areas held by the Assad regime or associated forces (USA Congress 2017).

It is therefore difficult to imagine in the near future a strong involvement of these states in the reconstruction process, except for the financing of small local projects in areas beyond the control of the regime. This was already the case for Turkey in certain areas controlled by its armed forces and Syrian proxies, for example in Jarablus and al-Bab as mentioned earlier, and for some Western institutions and states, which also provided financial support, especially for local governance and the rehabilitation of basic services, to areas under the domination of the PYD or certain areas controlled by non-jihadist armed opposition groups. These projects, however, were isolated and limited and could not replace an extensive reconstruction process.

Changes in the international and regional political scene could, however, happen rapidly, as we have seen on several occasions, so attention would have to be paid to various political developments. Despite the purchase by Kuwait Syrian Holding Company, established in July 2002 to invest in Syria, in the beginning of 2018 of a plot of land in the upscale Yaafour suburb of Damascus estimated at a investment value of USD 12.2 million, out of which KSHC was investing 5.5 million, this did not represent the premise of any political changes of Gulf monarchies to invest in the country. Firstly, KSHC was part of the Kharafi group of companies, a multi-sector group whose owner is believed to be close to Maher Al-Assad, according to several Syrian businessmen contacted by Syria Report (2018b). Secondly, the company said that the investment was carried out in joint-venture with Syrian investors it did not reveal the names. The plot of land was adjacent to another it already owned in the area and that it planned to build a large residential complex on the two plots, which had a combined area of 180,000 square metres (Kuwait Syrian Holding 2018; The Syria Report 2018e).

The reconstruction funded by foreign capital remained as we can see insufficient at the time of the writing. Russia and Iran were running out of capital to help in the immediate future, while China was reluctant to engage massively in such an unstable country.

For Beijing, investments in emerging countries were often, as in Africa, conditioned on privileged access to natural resources. However, Syria was quite weak in raw materials and they were promised in priority to Moscow and Tehran.

The issue of reconstruction was also connected to the capacities of the regime to provide stability in the regions under its control and a business friendly environment favorable to investments. This was endangered by three main elements: militias, jihadists and crony capitalists.

8.12 The issue of stabilization of the regime and centralization of power

The capacities of the regime to stabilize the situation in the areas it controlled and put an end or at least control the various militias, whose grievances against them had increasingly become public and outspoken, were an important challenge at the time of the writing. We have seen in previous chapter that they have been involved in various criminal activities such as robbery, looting, murder, infighting, and especially checkpoint extortion, resulting in higher prices and further humanitarian suffering, as well as creating apprehension about recreating a favorable business environment.

Already at the establishments of pro-regime militias and then the NDF units, local populations often complained at their behavior. In regime held areas, the behavior of these militias caused increasing frustration. They carried out “thuggish” (tashbihiyyah) abuses against harmless regime supporters, who were unable to confront them. Following the establishment of militias in the Zahra neighborhood in Homs for example at the beginning of the uprising in 2011, sectors of Alawi residents of the areas could be heard complaining that they were being coerced into helping fund the war effort of the shabiha. They feared for their security or were scared that their children could be kidnapped for ransom if they did not pay the shabiha for what they called “protection money” (Reuters 2012d). Similarly, an elderly Alawi cleric in

2013 from the village of Masyaf in central Syria stated “The head of the NDF here is a dirty man. Two years ago he had nothing. Now he has land, cars, houses. That is all from stealing under the name of “nationalism”” (cited in Reuters Staff 2013). Coastal residents from Lattakia and Tartus also expressed anger on several occasions’ towards the silence of the local police and security forces towards the rise in crimes, kidnapping and looting by pro regime militias, neglecting their safety (Zaman al-Wasl 2016a, Zaman al-Wasl 2016d).

In September of 2016, local populations in regime-controlled areas of western Aleppo city expressed frustration against regime officials as a result of an increase in the looting of homes by loyalist shabiha groups after residents evacuated the area. Pro regime militias also looted hundreds of factories and workshops in Ramouseh industrial neighborhood in Aleppo. Fares Shehabi (2016), a member of parliament and head of Aleppo’s Chamber of Industrialists, even complained about the incident on his Facebook page:

“What happened in Ramouseh was very wrong, shameful... either we live in the jungle with no laws, or we live in a nation that respects itself and its laws... No one is above the law, do not waste your victory, nor disrespect the blood of your martyrs”

The pro-regime Imam of Aleppo’s al-Abara Mosque mentioned the matter in a Friday prayer following these complaints and explained that trading stolen products was banned under Islamic law. In reaction, Ibrahim Ismael, a shabiha commander, stated that he considered the stolen items as “war prizes” for people who defended Aleppo (Zaman al-Wasl 2016b). NDF members often justified these actions as “war spoils” (*ghana'im*) they had earned through their efforts to defend the homeland against the enemy (Syria Untold 2016d).

In May of 2017, the Syrian government was trying to cancel levies extorted by regime checkpoints following growing protests from traders and transporters alike reflecting the exasperation of the population in various areas under the control of the regime. Businessmen in Aleppo were increasingly critical of these levies, while lorry drivers

outside the city of Suwayda closed the motorway linking to Damascus for two hours in protest at the “fees” imposed by the various checkpoints along the road. In mid-May, Zeid Ali Saleh, the head of the Military and Security Committee in Aleppo, which groups all regime security branches and militias in the city, finally issued an order forbidding the levying of “fees” by regime checkpoints on lorries transporting goods within and outside the city under the pretense of providing protection (Enab Baladi 2017c). A few days after, the Damascus Chamber of Industry also demanded a similar ban in the capital (Enab Baladi 2017d).

In response to this growing unrest, the Prime Minister declared that he would ban these practices, but resistance from militias was still ongoing (al-Fayha Net 2017). This situation reflected the fact that as the war was ending in large sections of the country, the justification for these checkpoints was less and less valid.

In Mid-June 2017 in Aleppo, following a number of crimes connected to pro-regime militias and which were even reported in the pro-regime media, a major crackdown was launched against these forces. The presidential palace sent Lieutenant General Muhammad Dib Zeitoun, head of State Security and one of al-Assad’s most powerful intelligence chiefs, in order to put an end to militia lawless behavior. State Security and Air Force Intelligence troops started rounding up popular committee members in the Adhamiya, Akramiya, and Seif al-Dawla neighborhoods, with small skirmishes in some cases. In addition to this, the local head of the Ba’th Party, Fadel al-Najjar, also issued a decree tightening regulations on the Ba’th Battalions. Meanwhile, the Aleppo security chief, Zaid al-Saleh, had withdrawn government IDs provided to militia fighters and forbade armed groups from operating in many areas, as part of an effort to restructure and centralize local forces (Lund 2017e; al-Watan online 2017).

There were significant challenges to curbing the power of militias on a national scale. The intervention, according to businessman Fares Shehabi, of Bashar al-Assad twice to get the ball rolling was decisive in these measures (All4Syria 2017b). The main challenge was, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that leaders of militias were generally linked to the powerful security service agencies and high military officials, preventing municipal and city officials from acting against them without the support of top-level decision makers.

On July 6th, 2017, a demonstration, organized by industrialists and businessmen of the city, of hundreds of protestors was organized in the industrial zone Sheikh Najjar, denouncing the practices of the regime's militia in Aleppo. Demonstrators accused the militias of killing civilians and deliberately disrupting the return of key services such as water and electricity by maintaining their control over services and prices. The protestors also condemned the extortion of money against workers by militias at military checkpoints inside and outside the city, by notably threatening them with forced entry to the military service if they did not pay. Meanwhile, a similar demonstration took place in the city of Nubl in the countryside of northern Aleppo, a stronghold of Shi'a pro-regime militias, demanding that the authorities stop armed robberies by pro-regime militias and the removal of military barriers (Shabaka âkhbar nubl w al-zahrâ` al-rasmîyya 2017; Enab Baladi 2017e; al-Modon 2017).

Aleppo was an important test for the rest of the country for the regime to prove its capacity to guarantee “stability” in cities recaptured by its armed forces. This therefore moved forward the issue of reconstruction and welcoming foreign investments. However, this was only the beginning of a long battle to discipline and put an end in the mid term to the militias in the country numbering around 150,000 soldiers in 2017, including local militias such as NDF and those controlled by Iran. As argued by a Syrian official in 2013, foreseeing the problem

“After this crisis, there will be a 1,000 more crises — the militia leaders. Two years ago they went from nobody to somebody with guns and power. How can we tell these shabiha to go back to being a nobody again?” (Baker 2017)

In the summer of 2017, lawless and violent pro-regime militias were still spreading chaos and creating insecurity in various regime held territories. By the end of August, fighters from the Nusur Homs paramilitary group refused to be inspected on their way into the city of Homs, instead opening fire on the police patrol and brutally beating a police officer (Zaman al-Wasl 2017h). Furthermore, the number of checkpoints managed by militiamen throughout the country generally did not decrease, with some new ones popping up, leading to an increase in costs for producers and consumers

alike. In the military campaign to recapture the city of Deir Zor and to cleanse IS from the area, territories falling under the control of regime's forces were also subjects to looting by regime forces, in a similar fashion of Aleppo, at the end of 2017 (Deir Ezzor 24 2017). In early 2018, a medical student at Aleppo University was severely beaten by a Ba'th Brigade militia fighter at the main gate of the university. The incident sparked angry reactions, relayed on social networks by pages of the regime's supporters in the city, about the abuses committed by militia members in Aleppo against civilians, launching the hashtag on social media. #togetheragainstshabiha " (al-Souria Net 2018).

The power of militias important and the heads of these groups were acting in near total impunity in the country. They had powerful patrons in the country's ruling family and among its allies, and the profits from stolen property and bribes collected at checkpoints tended to trickle upwards, which made it dangerous for local officials to interfere in their affairs. The regime also depended on these militias to manage its security challenges. Thus, instead of trying to confront the problem, al-Assad's regime responded by censoring criticism. In March of 2017, for example, the Ministry of Information forbade the popular pro-government reporter Reda al-Pasha, who worked for an Assad-friendly Lebanese television station, from operating in Syria. This was a result of his public criticism of militia leaders such as Ali Shelli, a notorious Air Force Intelligence-backed commander linked to looting, kidnappings, and killings (Lund 2017b). The recapture and stabilization of many territories under pro-regime forces started to change the situation regarding the behavior of the regime towards militias, as their utility was less and less needed, while they were badly perceived by civilians, even among pro-regime supporters, creating increasing tensions.

The pro-regime militias and the NDF, although respecting to some extent Assad's regime authority, introduced forms of fragmentations at the local level and some of these groups often engaged in violent inter-militia rivalries for control of territory and resources (Balanche 2018: XV).

Other security challenges also existed for the regime, including the probable change in strategy of retreating jihadist groups, such as HTS and the IS, towards a shift in suicide bombings in civilian areas, which would create as well a lack of stability.

8.13 IS and al-Qa'ida loosing ground...but still constituting a threat

Throughout the year 2016, IS's territories were under attacked by various local, regional and international forces. IS operatives internationally were however still able to carry out more than 1,400 attacks in 2016 and killed more than 7,000 people, a roughly 20 percent increase over 2015, according to the university's Global Terrorism Database. The increase occurred even as overall militant attacks worldwide and resulting deaths fell by about 10 percent in 2016 (Bhojani 2017).

The year 2017 was however a turning point. IS was first defeated in the city of Mosul in June following a nine-month offensive with air and ground support from a US-led multinational coalition and then Raqqa in mid October after a four month offensive of the SDF supported as well by US aviation. The IS controlled in autumn only 10 percent of Syrian territory - against 33 percent at the beginning of 2017 – which more than half was situated of the province of Deir Zor (AFP 2017b). After Raqqa, the IS was at target of two separate offensives in Deir Zor: one led by the Assad regime's troops and its allies, supported by Russia, the other by the SDF supported by the United States. In November, the Syrian army and its allies took full control of Deir Zor city from IS.

However, these lost of territories did not prevent IS from multiplying suicide attacks and car bombings in different regions of the country, in addition to murders against civilians in the areas in which its soldiers were withdrawing (Reuters 2017i). The IS for example claimed in December 2017, a public bus bombing killing eight people and injuring 18 more in the neighborhood of Akrama, in Homs, mostly inhabited by Alawi (Nassar, Nelson and al-Zarier 2017).

Similarly HTS, which lost territories at the profit of pro-regime's forces from the beginning of 2017, also returned increasingly to its tactic of suicide attacks in the objective of regaining momentum. In the end of February 2017, it executed suicide

attacks on two security installations in the city of Homs, killing 50 people and injuring 24. In the month of March, 2 main suicide attack operations targeted Damascus. First on March 11, a double bomb attack targeted Shi'a visiting a pilgrimage site in Damascus, murdering 74 people (Perry 2017b). A few days after, on March 15, two suicide bomb attacks killed at least 31 people and wounded dozens more in central Damascus (Reuters 2017b).

In the audio statement of April 23, al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri actually called on Syrian Sunni jihadists to wage guerrilla war ranging from Assad's regime and his Iranian-backed allies to Western powers and to prepare for "a long battle with the Crusaders and their allies the Shi'a and Alawis" (Reuters 2017c). In a new message in February 2018, Zawahiri called on jihadists in Syria "to unite and agree and gather and merge and cooperate and stack together as one rank", and urged the different factions to "bury the reasons of disagreement". He concluded by warning once again that the fight in Syria was "a battle which may last for many years and perhaps decades", thus requiring the unity and concentrated efforts of the entire umma (Dayan 2018).

The gradual lost of large space of territories under the control of these organizations did not mean their end or their capacities to strike regime-dominated areas through terrorist attacks.

8.14 Crony Capitalists as rapacious capitalists

The militias were certainly one of the biggest challenges for the regime in restoring "stability", but they were not the only ones to put an obstacle in the issue of reconstructing the country's economy. The crony capitalists, empowered throughout the war, were also impeding the possibility of enabling the return of sections of the bourgeoisie to re-invest in the country, and therefore of creating a business environment favorable for reconstruction. The regime's military victories and increasing re-control of large portions of Syrian territory encouraged Damascus to try to bring back investors and businessmen who had left the country because of the war. Damascus' motivations were based on attracting investment and increasing

business activity, while manufacturers reduced the need for imports, a crucial aspect as foreign currencies were very rare.

Crony capitalists did not hesitate to criticize some government measures trying to bring back Syrian businessmen in the country. In February of 2017 for example, the Minister of Finance, Maamoun Hamdan visited Egypt to meet with the “Syrian Businessmen Group – Egypt”, (Tajammu‘ Rijal Al-A‘mal As-Suri Bi-Masr) (SANA 2015), many of whom were manufacturers. He offered them many incentives such as a reduction in customs duties on production inputs, an exemption of all duties on machinery as well as on sales tax, in addition to a rescheduling of any debt owed to state banks – a law passed in 2015 enables investors to reschedule their debts with attractive conditions. Mr Hamdan also announced that the government was providing funds to establish an 8 MW power generating set for the Sheikh Najjar Industrial City in Aleppo as well as completing works on the Aleppo Airport. The investors answered with a list of requests, including a grace period of two years for their debts, and an extension of the age of the used machinery allowed back in the country from seven to ten years. They also raised several questions with regards to customs duties and other business regulations. A week after, a delegation of Syrian investors based in Egypt visited Damascus to meet with various government officials (SANA 2017a; The Syria Report 2017d).

A week after the Minister’s visit to Cairo, the newspaper *Al-Watan*, owned by Rami Makhlouf, published a commentary piece on February 26, titled “The Egyptian Industrialists” (Hashem 2017) strongly condemning the investors for their alleged arrogance, the fact that they conditioned their return to Syria to the incentives provided by the government, and for the fact that they returned “only after the liberation of Aleppo”. According to the Syria Report (2017l), this piece aimed

“at pressuring those in the government that want them back. The mention that they should pay back all their dues, i.e. debt arrears and taxes, is a clear threat to the investors as to what they should expect were they to come back”.

Syrian investors who left Syria during the war were from very diverse backgrounds and operated in a variety of business sectors, but they had in common less favorable connections with the regime. Those located in Egypt, for example, were mostly industrialists in the textile sector; many of them came from Aleppo, meaning from an urban Sunni background; and the origin of their wealth was little connected to their relation with state institutions but rather based on their capital investment (Syria Report 2017d).

At the time of the writing of this text, there were no signs of massive returns of Syrian industrialists, while the Egyptian regime announced in March of 2017 its intention to establish an integrated industrial zone and other facilities for Syrian industrialists in Egypt as a counter initiative against attempts by the Syrian regime to re-attract Syrian industrialists based in Syria (Syrian Economic Forum 2017). Many elements certainly prevented the return on a mass scale in the Summer 2017 of many Syrian businessmen, but the behavior of crony capitalists did not help in any willingness to come back to Syria.

In the beginning of 2018, Egyptian ruler Abdul Fattah al-Sisi inaugurated a large textile factory Sadat City, an industrial zone north of Cairo, by one of Syria's most prominent industrialists, Muhammad Kamel Sabbagh Sharabati, who was listed in the 100 most important businessmen in 2009 in Syria and headed the Aleppo Chamber of Industry between 2001 and 2009 (Kabawat 2018 Eqtissad 2018).⁸⁶ He left Syria in 2012 following his refusal to fund the repression and war efforts of the regime and was accused of supporting the revolution (Zaman al-Wasl 2017j). His factories were eventually burned in Aleppo. In 2018, Mr Sharabati owned and ran in Sadat City four large plants on a total area of 180,000 square metres under the name of Fourtex or Al-Roubaia Textile Company for Spinning, Weaving and Dyeing. Fourtex complex of textile factories in Cairo was the largest in Africa and its value was estimated at two billions \$ (Sharabati-denim 2018; Abd al-Hamid 2018).⁸⁷ Mr Sharabati notably declared in an interview on Egyptian television that improving

⁸⁶ He was also one of the founders Arab Bank Syria, and one of the most important investors in Arabia Insurance and Cham Holding.

⁸⁷ His company produced up to 50 million running metres of denim and flat fabric per year while they employed some 2,600 people. His products were sold under the Sharabati Denim brand across Africa, the Middle East and Europe (Sharabati-denim 2018).

business conditions and regulations in Egypt had encouraged him to increase his investments in the country (ON Live 2017).

In these conditions, the call by Foreign Walid Muallem in August of 2017 for an “active economic diplomacy for preparing the right groundwork for the reconstruction phase in service of national interests” and “the importance of prioritizing expatriate contributions in the reconstruction process through enhancing communication and constructive interaction with the Syrian communities abroad” was rather difficult to materialize, except if collaborations with crony capitalists and other regime officials were directly made (SANA 2017c).

8.15 Conclusion

The humanitarian, socio-economic and political situation of Syria was catastrophic at all levels. In the current conditions, this seemed rather optimistic. More than half of the population in Syria was displaced, within the country or outside, living often in very harsh conditions and facing discriminations. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the Syrian population inside its borders suffered from unemployment, increasing inflation and worsening living conditions. The structure of the economy was modified considerably with regions with the lowest military confrontations benefiting from the transfer of companies and industries, while the amount of public and private investments also witnessed significant growth in these areas. The future socio-economic situation of Syria was far from good, while the human loss and displacement of populations continued to have dire consequences on society.

The possible end of the war in the near future with the consolidation of the Assad regime with the assistance of its foreign allies did not mean the end of the problems for Damascus, quite on the contrary. The regime would have to deal with a series of contradictions and challenges: on one side, satisfying the interests of crony capitalists and militias, on the other, accumulating capital through economic and political stability, while granting its foreign allies the major shares in the reconstruction business. These objectives were rarely overlapping at the time of the writing and some contradictions and rivalries were already appearing. Mounting criticisms were levied increasingly by civilians in regime held areas against the

criminal practices of the pro-regime militias. This is without forgetting the high potential of destabilization of jihadist forces turning increasingly to terrorist actions targeting particularly urban populated areas with the loss of territories.

The resilience of the regime in its war against any kind of dissent has come at a very high cost, above all in terms of human lives and destruction, but also politically. In addition to the growing dependence on foreign states and actors, some features of the patrimonial regime were strengthened and its authority was diminished. Crony capitalists and militias increased considerably their power, while the clientelist, sectarian, tribal features of the regime were reinforced, especially its Alawit feature / identity. The war also allowed for the rise of new businessmen linked most of the time to the regime. At the same time, the far majority of the Syrian businessmen in the diaspora were not ready yet to come back to the country and moreover to invest in these conditions.

Therefore, the absence of democracy and social justice, which were at the roots of the uprising, were still very much present and were even deepened. However, these internal contradictions could hardly transform into political opportunities for opposition forces to capitalize on them and transform them into connected struggles on a national level, because of the absence of an inclusive and structured Syrian political opposition on the ground appealing to all popular classes, and of social actors, such as independent trade unions or peasant associations. This was in addition to a general and important fatigue among large sectors of society just seeking to come back to a form stability in the country.

Conclusion

I have tried to point out and analyze the origins, characteristics and evolution of the Syrian uprising in relation to the economic and political developments in Syrian society and in the regional and international arena. The Syrian revolutionary process, and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa more generally, can be indeed analysed with the same theoretical and conceptual tools used to examine other similar popular mobilizations or revolutions in different regions of the world. I sought to analyze the Syrian uprising in its totality from local socio-economic and political developments to regional and international developments. This is where I differ in many respects from other studies, which often focused on some overly specific aspects or reduced the Syrian uprising to limited elements, while ignoring others.

A protest rooted in the absence of democracy and social justice

In this regard, the nature of the state built by Hafez al-Assad and the socio-economic and political developments during his rule had profound impacts on Syrian society. The Ba'thist regime had initially gained autonomy from the dominant elite and bourgeois classes by breaking their monopoly over the means of production and mobilizing sections of the workers and peasants through the Ba'th party. After 1970, Assad achieved autonomy from each of the factions in his power base by balancing them against each other: he first used his army base to liberate himself from party ideological restrictions. He then established and developed a *jamaa* (literally meaning the group or the alliance), a core of largely Alawi personal followers, usually from his kin, nominated to critical security and military commands, which provided him with even higher autonomy from the larger Ba'thist military. He widened the basis of the regime by including the urban middle class and bourgeois Sunni, especially from the capital Damascus, by coopting large sections of them into the top ranks of the party and many independent technocrats in the various governments. Progressive and gradual economic liberalization allowed him to promote a state dependent new bourgeoisie and build an alliance with a segment of the Damascene private bourgeoisie. Assad was therefore able to achieve autonomy within the state structure between the regime's center of power and autonomy from society by balancing statist and private sector interests (Hinnebush 2001: 67). At the same time, the Ba'thist

party structure still served as an instrument of mobilization, clientelism and control among popular classes, especially in rural areas.

It was also the first period in post independence Syrian history to witness such waves of violent repression against any form of dissent in society ranging from universities to various civil societies' organizations such as trade unions and independent professional associations, passing through opposition political parties. All political actors opposing the regime or refusing to fall under its domination suffered harsh repression. This led some activists and researchers to characterize since then Syria as a "kingdom of silence" (Wikstrom 2011).

The patrimonial state built by Hafez al-Assad was then transferred to his son Bashar. The corporative nature of the state was undermined considerably compared to Hafez al-Assad's period, as the new ruler relied massively on a smaller group of loyal personalities from his family, high officials in security services and crony capitalists. The power and role of corporative organizations were significantly weakened, reducing the social basis of the regime considerably. Bashar al-Assad's accelerated neo-liberal policies and consolidation of power against the old guard completely shifted the social base of the regime composed initially of peasants, government employees and some sections of the bourgeoisie, especially the "new class", to a social coalition with crony capitalists at its center, along with sections of the regime supporting faction of the bourgeoisie and higher middle classes of cities. These policies had significant consequences such as leading to increasing poverty and social inequalities, alongside increasing sectarian and ethnic animosities in some regions as a result of the growing scarcity of resources on one side and regime patronage policies and absence of democratic space to organize on the other.

Meanwhile the oppressive nature of the regime against any forms of resistance remained one of its constant features, preventing any organized independent political organizations to organize on a wide scale, or even as we saw in small circles. The only actors able to play an increasing role in society at this period were religious associations and institutions, notably to take over the role of the state in social services, which were constantly diminishing. In this framework, but moreover to serve regime's foreign objectives such as preventing stability in Iraq following the US

and British invasions in 2003, Islamic associations and fundamentalist organizations, including jihadist actors, had significant space to organize and act relatively freely in Syria for several years.

After the outbreak of the uprising in Mid March 2011, the despotic and patrimonial nature of the state made it prioritize the resort to violence against the protest movements and hindered any possibility of an opening to include sections of the opposition and demands of the protest movement. The impoverishment of large sections of the population, in an atmosphere of corruption, absence of democratic rights and growing social inequalities, prepared the ground for a popular insurrection and its radicalization that was only waiting for a spark, which would come from the regional uprising in Egypt and Tunisia and then a local one following the events in Dar'a.

The analysis of class and state formation in Syria allowed to show and to understand the origins and evolution of the uprising in Syria. The bulk of protesters originally came from the suburbs of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, mid-sized towns and rural areas, which were the regions where accelerated neo-liberal policies had affected them the most, while repression and corruption only added to their dissatisfaction towards the regime. At the same time, repressive and sectarian policies of the regime prevented large sections of the popular classes from religious minorities to join the revolt in great numbers, and demonstrations were limited. The previous sectarian strife and civil war in neighboring countries, Iraq and Lebanon, also acted as a foil to large sectors of religious minorities fearing to suffer a similar fate. Activists from religious and ethnic minority backgrounds were however not inexistent as demonstrated in this thesis, and some sectors of these groups did participate in the uprising or were part of the different opposition movements. This reality refuted the perspective of a protest movement uniquely sectarian or opposing Sunni to minorities. In addition to this, the far majority of peaceful protesters in Sunni populated areas did not mobilize on a sectarian basis nor had sectarian objectives in the first years of the uprising.

The examination of the nature of the state as a patrimonial one privatized by a family also permitted to understand the differences with other uprisings and the state's

violent reaction towards the protest movement preventing a similar situation to Egypt and Tunisia, namely, the resignation of the head of state. The Syrian uprising did not lead to the end of the regime. Its structures were not challenged and remained in place, although very much weakened and restructured, throughout the conflict. The repression of the protest movement and the lack of any opening of the regime led to a radicalization of the discourse of protesters starting with reforms and ultimately demanding the fall of the regime. Protesters had no other ability to make their voices heard (elections, parliaments, free press, etc...) and therefore chose to revolt. As argued by Trotsky (2008: 740)

“people do make revolution eagerly any more than they do war... a revolution takes place only when there is no other way out”.

Similarly, these conditions were also the root reasons in the progressive militarization of the protest movement.

Uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere inspired Syrians to take to the streets with similar demands for freedom and dignity, in other words democracy and social justice. Contrary to what expressed by Fareed Zakaria (2014), we saw that “radical Islamists” were not the core of the opposition to the Assad regime from the very beginning, quite on the contrary. Similarly, French Geographer Fabrice Balanche (2011), described the revolutionary process in Syria as “communitarist” (sectarian) according to the geography of the revolt, arguing that only Arab Sunni populated areas witnessed mobilization and only marginally Kurdish areas, and on corporatist demands relative to nationality issues. These claims were far from the reality; Balanche totally ignored the contradictions in religious minority populated regions such as Salamiyah and Suwayda that witnessed important mobilizations.

In at least the two first years of the revolutionary process, protesters among the civilian protest movement but also among the majority of FSA units, did not classify the regime as Alawi, as argued by Balanche, with the exception of small minorities, but rather as an authoritarian regime privatized by a particular family. This was actually demonstrated by the hegemony of an inclusive and democratic rhetoric of

large sections of the protest movement, in 2011 and 2012. Alongside this element, the alternative institutions established by the protesters such as the coordination committees and local councils, by providing services to the local population, generated attempts to a situation close to dual power where the domination of the state vanished. The protest movement through these two elements provided, especially in its first six months and before the mass militarization of the uprising, a political alternative that could appeal to large sections of the population. This situation was increasingly challenged as a result of the evolution and dynamics of the uprising. The inclusive and democratic message of the protest movement was progressively undermined throughout the uprising, although remaining in some sectors.

Weakening of the uprising and failure of the opposition to constitute an independent social and political actor

The harsh and violent repression of the regime against the protest movement weakened it and isolated activists and protesters in their respected regions rendering contacts and collaborations much harder and the constitution of a form of centralized leadership within the country nearly impossible. But moreover, the war launched by the regime against any form of opposition led to the gradual transformation of the uprising into a violent and destructive armed conflict. The initial successes in some regions of FSA units in both the military field against the regime's forces and some successful collaboration with the civilian protest movement raised some hope among opposition sections and local populations. The combination of the armed resistance and the "peaceful" or civil actions (strikes and other protest movements) was put forward as the strategy to fight the regime. As expressed by Hassan al-Ashtar, one of the FSA leaders in Rastan, in January 2012 in an answer to a journalist asking him how to overthrow the regime: by the tree pillars of resistance: the continuation of peaceful demonstrations, the FSA and civil disobedience (cited in Achcar 2013: 266).

The military asymmetry in favor of the regime as a result of the massive assistance of its foreign allies rendered however a military victory very difficult or nearly impossible. The FSA's networks lacked any organized and stable support, while FSA units were never able to become an effective centralized organization. This situation led to a

process of marginalization and weakening throughout the war against a violent regime and its allies (Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and other militias). Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements progressively dominated the opposition military scene. Foreign countries, which claimed to support the uprising, (Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) also weakened and divided the FSA units by providing them support on an unstable basis and under strict conditions, while increasingly turning their support predominantly to Islamic fundamentalist movements. They were more interested in building their own proxies on the ground and advancing their interests and political influence, rather than of the protest movement.

The FSA was never able to organize and represent an independent social force able to bring together people around a distinct and propose an inclusive political message. The diversity of FSA units in terms of geography and policies, although sharing in the beginning similar local dynamics, were never overcome. No leadership or centralization of power or decision-making was developed, allowing foreign countries and Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups to instrumentalize them for their own political interests or simply put an end to their existence.

Similarly, the opposition in exile first represented by the SNC and then the Coalition failed miserably to constitute a credible alternative. In both cases the MB, other religious fundamentalists and sectarian groups and personalities dominated these institutions, while trying to provide the media with an inclusive message by appointing secular and democratic personalities in visible positions as a way to appease fears among Western backers. Moreover, the democratic and secular personalities (George Sabra and Michel Kilo) and political organizations in the various opposition body in exile, first the SNC and then the Coalition, defended and justified the presence of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements on the Syrian political and military scene within the country. They remained silent on the violations of Human Rights committed by some salafist groups and then included them in the opposition bodies such as Jaysh al-Islam. The political head of this latter group, Muhammad Alloush, was appointed as the chief negotiator in Geneva 3 conference and remained an important personality in the HNC, or also other groups not involved directly with them like Ahrar Sham.

Both sides had an interest in this collaboration with the perspective of reaching power or at least having a role in the various negotiation processes. First, the democratic and secular personalities and groups in the Coalition saw the cooperation with Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups as a military necessity in the war against the regime, even if they were hostile towards democracy and ruled in an authoritarian way in the areas they controlled, including attacking and kidnapping democratic activists. On their side, the Islamic fundamentalist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhoods and salafist movements like Jaysh al-Islam, collaborated with exiled body of the opposition to demonstrate their moderation and reassure regional and western states. One actor was however the main beneficiary of this collaboration: the Islamic fundamentalist movements. The relationship was unequal as the Islamic fundamentalist movements had an organized political and military presence within the country and received massive funding and / or support from some states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey) and / or private networks from the Gulf Monarchies, while democratic and secular groups, which were already initially weak in terms of organized actors, were severely repressed at the beginning of the uprising by regime's forces and unable to organize later on.

The personalities and groups within the SNC and the Coalition believed the end justified the means, but the end is determined by the means used. These circumstances resulted in the absence of an organized democratic or progressive pole on a national level within or outside the country during these years, while letting throughout the years Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups occupy the political and military space. This led to the situation that the rhetorical commitments of the opposition bodies in exile to a civil and inclusive democracy were not credible enough to persuade large sections of the population to abandon the Assad regime and join the uprising.

The growth of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces further reduced the capacities and appeal of the protest movement to provide an inclusive and democratic message to large sections of the Syrian population, including the sectors who were not involved directly in the protest movement, but who had sympathies to the initial goals of the uprising. Moreover, they did not hesitate to attack the democratic and progressive components of the protest movement, while dictating

their own aims and imposing their domination. They opposed the initial objectives of the uprising, which they considered as heresy, notably democracy or equality between all citizens.

The inclusive and democratic message of the initial protest movement, as well as its vitality, was weakened considerably firstly by the regime's repression and war against democratic components of the protest movement, while the subsequent rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements weakened even more these sectors.

The Kurdish issue in Syria

The rise of the Kurdish national question also raised important questions to the protest movement and challenged the inclusiveness of some of its sectors. Despite an initial unity in demands and actions between Arab and Kurdish LCCs and protest movements, the various actors of the Arab Syrian opposition, whether within the country or outside, were unable to answer to the demands of the Kurdish population in Syria. They instead showed the same attitude of refusal and chauvinism as the regime, while the Coalition was allied with the Turkish government and supported its repressive policies against the Kurdish population in Turkey and Syria. The Kurdish national question was completely denied by the main actors of the Arab Syrian opposition, being the Coalition or military groups such as Jaysh al-Islam present among various peace negotiations. On its side, the PYD, with the benevolent attitude of Damascus, used the opportunity of the uprising to become the dominant Kurdish political actor in Syria, while trying to advance its own interests. They concentrated on building their own institutions and an organized society with an effective military force, with many advances and achievements in certain aspects, including secularization of laws, women's rights, inclusion and participation of women and religious and ethnic minorities in institutions and society. They however had authoritarian and repressive policies against rival Kurdish organizations. The PYD was certainly the most organized non-state actor in Syria with its own institutions and foreign relations.

The PYD also became an important actor through its links with international states actors such as the USA and Russia. These states however did not support Kurdish national demands in Syria, or elsewhere, but rather used the PYD to serve their own interests, especially in their war against IS. The Kurdish group, despite playing a proxy role for the interests of both Washington and Moscow in various periods, especially in the fight against IS, maintained its autonomy and advanced as well its own interests through these collaborations.

The Kurdish national issue had been able to re-emerge on the Syrian political scene through the eruption of the protest movement in March 2011. However, at the time of writing, this gain was being threatened by multiple actors who did not wish to see the rise and creation of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria's future. The near death of the democratic protest movement against the Assad regime, alongside the near end of the IS in Raqqa and North Eastern areas, put an end to the interests of tolerating or supporting the PYD. The regime reiterated on several occasions its refusal of any autonomous Kurdish region and increasingly came into conflict with PYD forces from mid 2016 in the North, while Turkey wanted to put an end to the PYD's presence at its borders. Washington and Moscow saw their relationship with Ankara and the stability of Syria as more important than Kurdish rights, which they never supported in reality. The Kurds, in the future will, most probably suffer once more, at the hands of international and regional actors, as well as the regime's willingness to control the whole of the country.

The climate of continuous war with the increasing militarization of the uprising on one side and the upsurge of sectarian and ethnic tensions in the country on the other allowed less and less space to organize for the protest movement and to provide an inclusive and democratic message. The initial objectives of the uprising were more and more challenged from all sides, as well as its capacity to present an appealing alternative for a majority of Syrians.

The various faces of counter-revolutions

The regime's capacity to control the population was severely undermined throughout the uprising and large paths of territories were lost to various opposition forces during

a period of time. As it did not dispose of any wide social basis or hegemony on the population, its main tool was to violently repress the protest movement and to mobilize its popular basis, while portraying the protesters as extremist terrorists and armed gangs seeking to destabilize the country. From the first days of the uprising, the regime dealt with the protesters using great violence. This led to the militarization of some sections of the protesters and the protest movement to defend themselves against the regime's forces. The violent repressive campaigns of the regime were nonetheless not enough to put an end to the protest movement and its foreign allies intervened increasingly in the country.

The peaceful, non-sectarian and democratic activists were the main targets of the regime, while its security forces prevented the meeting and unity of the Syrian people regardless of their religious affiliations by violently repressing demonstrations. Such was the case in the main square of Homs at the beginning of the uprising in April of 2011. At the same time, the regime freed significant Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist personalities with previous military experiences from Iraq and other countries and let them expand in order to realize its own prophecy of an uprising led by religious extremists.

The regime also adopted various strategies and tools of repression according to the region they were operating in and its sectarian and ethnic composition. The aim of the regime's high officials was nevertheless analogous: to suppress the protests, divide people according to primordial identities and instill fear and distrust among them in order to break the inclusive rhetoric of the protest movement. The massacres by pro regime militias and / or Shabihas, mostly from Alawi backgrounds in some particular areas, targeted impoverished Sunni villages and popular neighborhoods in mixed regions, particularly Homs and Hama Provinces and the Coast with Alawi and Sunni populations living side by side. These were executed for the purpose of stoking sectarian tensions.

Meanwhile, the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadi movements was the result of various causes including: the regime's initial readiness and facilitation for their expansion, the repression of the protest movement leading to a form of radicalization among some of its sectors, better organized movement structures and discipline and

finally support from foreign countries. In reality, the various Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces constituted the second wing of the counterrevolution after the Assad regime. They did not have the same destructive capacities as Assad's state apparatus, but their outlook on society and the future of Syria was completely opposed to the initial objectives of the uprising and its inclusive message for democracy, social justice, and equality. Their policies were repulsive to the most conscious sections of the protest movement and threatened groups like religious minorities, women, and Sunnis who feared their ascension to power because they did not share their view of society and religion. The ideology, political program, and practices of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements proved also to be violent not only against the regime's forces, but also against democratic and progressive groups, both civilians and armed ones, ethnic and religious minorities and civilians.

More importantly, the regional and international environment was a key element in the faith of the uprising, but moreover in the resilience of the regime. The assistance provided by Damascus allies, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, in addition to foreign Shi'a fundamentalist militias sponsored by Teheran, allowed the survival of the regime on a political, economic and military level. They viewed the protest movement in Syria and the possible fall of the Assad regime as a threat to their own interests, especially geopolitical. They intervened alongside the regime's forces early on and played a crucial role in the military fighting against the various opposition armed forces. At the same time, they provided the regime with the transfer of significant expertise on how to deal with internal dissents, whether civilians protests or armed resistance.

They substantially increased their political, economic and military influence in the country, both in society and in state institutions, as their interventions deepened. The continuation and stabilization of the regime became therefore even more important than at the beginning of the uprising, to preserve not only their geopolitical interests but their growing economic ones as well. Teheran and Moscow were particularly looking at future economic opportunities in the reconstruction process in Syria to benefit from.

The quasi majority of Western States led by the USA were not willing to get involved too deeply in the organization of the opposition to the Assad regime and especially in

its overthrow. They initially rejected any plans to assist armed opposition forces in their struggle against the regime, while opening the space to the Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to act and provide weaponry to various armed opposition groups. The unwillingness of the USA to envision a plan to overthrow the regime or intervene decisively against it led to the weakening and more divisions among the FSA units and the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements. In the meantime, the regime was not threatened militarily thanks to the military assistance provided by its foreign allies. Western states then became subsequently increasingly focused on IS and “the war on terror”, following the establishment of IS’ caliphate in 2014. This situation served the Syrian regime’s agenda.

Syria was not seen as a strategic interest for the USA, notably because it lacked proven important oil reserves. The significance of Syria was firstly mostly related to its geographic location in the region bordering Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel and secondly for its relationship with Iran and role in the Israeli-Arab conflict.

USA officials were also reluctant to intervene militarily massively in the region as in the past in the framework of a strategy of “regime change”, which it had abandoned at the eve of the uprising. This was a direct consequence of the lessons learned in Iraq and the numerous failures that followed. The objectives of the USA in the uprisings were rather to limit changes in the region by seeking most of the time initially agreements and understanding between ancient regimes (or section of it) and the opposition linked to Western, Turkey and Gulf monarchies. In the Syrian uprising, these attempts from multiple actors, whether Western states or Gulf monarchies and Turkey, were met with failures at the beginning of the uprising. This is when Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar on one side and Turkey on the other adopted a more radical position towards the Assad regime after Damascus refused any concessions.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and private networks from the Gulf monarchies funded and backed various military and political groups, particularly Islamic fundamentalist and some jihadist movements, as a mean to promote forces on the ground serving their interests. Riyadh’s main objective in the Syrian conflict was to weaken the Islamic Republic of Iran regionally, seen as its main enemy. Overthrowing the Assad regime,

the main ally of Teheran in the region, was in Riyadh's interest to strengthen a Sunni axis led by Saudi Arabia against Iran. On its side, Qatar saw the uprising as an opportunity to increase its influence in the region, notably through the MB and other Islamic fundamentalist actors. The Arab Gulf monarchies feared the establishment of a form of liberal democracy in Syria, which would threaten their own power and interests if democratic thoughts and spaces expanded in the MENA region. In this perspective, they preferred a sectarian war and encouraged a sectarian narrative through their media and funding, which assisted massively Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements.

Similarly, Turkey supported Islamic fundamentalist movements and other opposition armed groups, first against the Damascus regime, but then this objective was progressively abandoned throughout time. Their main priority became increasingly the defeat of the Kurdish PYD and the cleansing of its forces at the borders. FSA groups and other Islamic fundamentalist groups under Turkish influence were used as proxies in Ankara's war against PYD Kurdish forces. The policies of Gulf monarchies and Turkey promoted Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces, while dividing the FSA units through diverse sponsoring. This situation amplified and strengthened the sectarian effects of Iranian and Hezbollah policies and massive interventions. This contributed to the "Islamization" of the armed opposition, and the deepening of sectarian and Kurdish-Arab tensions in the country.

The various international imperialist and regional dominant powers, despite their disagreements, did not want the Syrian crisis to extend to the region with the deepening of the militarization of the conflict and rise of various Jihadist forces. They especially wanted to limit the growing capacities of the jihadist forces acting in Iraq and Syria. They all increasingly shared a common interest in putting an end to the uprising in Syria, and to achieve a solution in which the structure of the regime was not radically changed, which was quite far from the original goals of the protest movement. They were all interested in a stable political environment, which would allow them to build and develop their political and economic capital, regardless of the demands of the protest movement. This was reflected in July of 2017 on the international scene with neither U.S. President Donald Trump nor newly French President Emmanuel Macron calling for the immediate ouster of Bashar al-Assad; the

priority being the “war” on IS and other similar jihadist forces. This flew in the face of history, as these countries were previously the most opposed (at least rhetorically) to Assad remaining in power. In August of 2017, former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford declared in a similar manner "There is no conceivable military alignment that's going to be able to remove him... Everyone, including the U.S., has recognized that Assad is staying" (cited in Issa P. 2017).

There was a near consensus between all the international and regional powers around a certain number of points during the middle of 2017: to liquidate the protest movement initiated in March of 2011, to stabilize the regime in Damascus with Bashar al-Assad at its head for a short-to-medium term, to oppose Kurdish autonomy and to try to militarily defeat jihadist groups such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. There was a general global trend aimed at "liquidating" the Syrian uprising in the name of the "war on terror".

Regime’s mobilization of its popular basis and use of sectarianism, clientelism and tribalism

The other main element that permitted the resilience of the regime was the mobilization of its popular basis through its sectarian, tribal, regional and clientelist connections to defeat the insurrection, alongside the massive foreign support of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. The sectarian aspect of the regime through its mobilization of the Alawi minority was particularly significant. The so-called homogeneity of the Alawi population must nonetheless be challenged, and we can differentiate the political and socio-economic dynamics between Alawis from the “hinterland” (*dakhel*), i.e. the Homs-Hama region, and those from the Mediterranean coastal region (*sahel*), as I argued in this text. The differences between these two groups diminished with the development of the military conflict in the country, strengthening a sense of shared group affiliation and restoring social cohesion within the Alawi population as whole (Khaddour 2013a: 12), although without the elimination of the social disparities and diversity within the Alawi population.

Large numbers of Alawis in Homs and in the coastal areas relied on their employment in state-run economic and military institutions for their subsistence. At

the same time they worried for their lives as the uprising was increasingly presented as an Islamic and sectarian armed uprising and an anti-Alawi movement by the regime and its media, rather than as a popular revolution for democracy and social justice. This perception was reinforced with the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements with anti Shi'a and anti Alawi discourses. For a large amount of Alawis, the regime appeared as the only viable alternative for them to survive as a group, while opposing Bashar al-Assad could also have a devastating economic cost as many worked in state institutions or were employed by the army, the secret services or pro regime militias. In addition to fears of revenge and retortion actions against Alawi, economic and security dependence were the main reasons for standing with the regime, and not necessarily associated with any support for its policies. Finally, the lack of an alternative in the form of a credible opposition in exile and the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements did not encourage them to adopt a position in favor of the uprising.

The fear was not limited to the Alawi minorities but also extended to other religious minorities, especially the Christian population which feared the collapse of the state and a similar fate to Iraqi Christians, who left Iraq in droves after the US and British invasion of 2003. Similarly, the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements and the multiplication of actions targeting religious minorities also pushed the majority of them to abstain from joining the uprising, despite not necessarily being supporters of the regime.

The regime's popular basis was not limited to religious minorities but included Sunni supporters present throughout the country through various patronage and informal networks rooted in clientelist, tribal and regional connections. In the Jazirah region for example, the regime mobilized Arab tribes with historical links to the regime and that had historic dissensions with the Kurdish populations of the region. Those tribes feared the rise of Kurdish PYD forces and the establishment of Kurdish authority, which challenged their own social power. The regime was also able to mobilize some areas through its contacts with local notables and / or individuals working with the security services.

In other regions, the regime was also able to play on the social and the rural / urban divide, particularly in Aleppo and to some extent in Damascus. Large sections of urban government employees, the middle class strata and bourgeoisie in the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo were for example passive or did not involve themselves in the protest movement, although some might have had sympathies for it at the beginning of the uprising. There was also a general perception among large segments of the Syrian population, including Sunni sections, of being imposed an Islamic state or a society modeled on the rule of Islamic fundamentalists and jihadist groups in opposition held areas.

The main actors supporting the regime were the crony capitalists, security services, and high representatives of religious institutions linked to the state. The crony capitalists and security services were the main actor assisting the regime, helping to mobilize the demonstrations in favor of the regime to then funding various militias after the militarization of the uprising. This support for the regime came with expanding economic opportunities in the country, whether through the war economy or the formal economy. New businessmen and networks took increasing importance in the economic and political landscape in exchange for their loyalty and services to the regime, while other sectors of the bourgeoisie left the country and lost their networks and significance within the country.

The financial assistance given by the regime's allies, Iran and Russia, allowed the regime to maintain state institutions and their provisions. The state remained the main employer and provider of resources and services throughout the war. The catastrophic humanitarian and socio-economic situation in Syria reinforced the role of the state.

The near end of the war, but not the end of the problems for the Assad regime

Throughout the years, the regime had lost autonomy at the benefit of both foreign states and local actors on one side and of various sectors of society on the other. The regime's sectarian Alawi identity was reinforced through their massive presence in important institutions, particularly in the army, security forces and even more than before public administrations in some areas, which would raise sectarian tensions in

a country with scarce resources and public employment, as well as with a leadership trying to present an inclusive Syrian national identity. The expansion of militias throughout the years, despite their military utility, created growing problems as a result of their thuggish attitudes and criminal actions against civilians in regime controlled areas and not only in opposition recaptured territories. The recapture and stabilization of territories under the regime's domination made their utility less and less clear for civilians and businessmen in pro regime areas, who saw them as an obstacle to return to a form of normal life. Most of the militias were connected to high security officials who benefited from the maintenance of these militias and actions. They came into contradiction with the direct interests of the regime. Crony capitalists also acted, on some occasions, in opposition to the regime's interests or at least to the policies of the government, prioritizing their own interests. All these elements foreshadowed many problems to come for the regime.

In summary, the despotic Assad regime emerged from the war as an even more brutal, narrowly sectarian and militarized version of its former self. The popular uprising turned into a war forced Damascus to reconfigure its popular basis, to narrow its dependency on global authoritarian networks, adjust its modes of economic governance, and reorganize its military and security apparatus (Heydemann 2013b: 60).

The issue of reconstruction was an important challenge for the regime. From 2017, Damascus launched several projects related to the process of reconstruction in some areas of the country, as well as welcoming foreign investors to promote investment in the country. The absence of any political willingness from Western, Turkish and Gulf monarchies to invest and / or encourage investment in Syria was still a key problem for the regime with more than \$300 billion in projected costs for reconstruction, the destruction of health and education services, large-scale internal and external displacement of Syrians, the loss in human capital and the low level of international reserves.

Economist Osama Qadi argued "recovery might take 20 years, assuming Syria post conflict starts in 2018 at 4.5 percent growth" (FEMISE 2017). At the time of the writing of this text, this estimate seems unfortunately optimistic if one's look at the

challenges faced by Syria. The regime's policies in the socio-economic and political spheres will probably strengthen social and regional inequalities throughout the country, deepening problems in terms of development that were already present before the beginning of the uprising in 2011.

Syrian officials were also facing increasing tensions and frustrations from populations considered as pro regime, or at least had not joined the protest movement. In coastal areas, Damascus notably allowed the proliferation of private charity organizations, but linked with personalities connected to the regime most of the time, providing social services or some sort of social assistance instead of the state, which lacked increasingly resources. This was also a way to maintain a clientelist and dependent relation with local communities in these areas that supplied important manpower for the regime's army and militias. Criticisms from the popular base of the regime against some state institutions and those in leadership for their corruption or inefficiency also increased at this period. In the future, the regime might have to tolerate some form of criticism and autonomy among layers of the society, at the risk of alienating sectors of its popular base. Harsh repression would not be an option, or a very costly one, as it would create internal tensions within the state apparatus and institutions.

The end of the war did not mean the end of the contradictions and / or problems within the country for the regime to tackle. Many challenges were expected and at the time of the writing of this text the regime was hardly capable of dealing with them. The possible change of strategy of jihadist groups such as HTS and IS towards suicide bombings as they lost increasing amounts of territory would certainly create more instability.

The absence of a structured and independent democratic, inclusive and social Syrian political opposition, which appealed to the popular classes and social actors such as independent trade unions would prevent or render difficult the transformations of various struggles to come into connected and organized political battles challenging the regime on a national scale.

A long term revolutionary process

We can see that the material reality and conditions in which the uprising was located helps to explain its origins and development. This is a very different approach than those who argue that it is limited to a sectarian conflict or a conspiracy led by foreign actors, or ignoring the socio-economic and political system one lives in. Indeed, the weakness of Orientalist or foreign led conspiracy approaches that view religion or geopolitics as the main tools to analyse the uprising and as the driving force of history in this region, is that they leave out the reality of socio-economic and political dynamics. Following Nilsen's (2013: 183) call for

“a theory of social movement that is truly relevant to the needs and knowledge of activists that seek to contribute to what Marx referred to as 'the self clarification... of the struggles and wishes of the age'” source?

This thesis has sought to show the origins and developments of the Syrian uprising, while trying to understand its evolution and dynamics linked to the local, regional and international system.

These elements lead us to affirm that Syria, as well as the MENA region, was witnessing a revolutionary process. A revolutionary situation was clearly present in Syria with the initial mobilization of large sections of the population in opposition to the Assad regime, challenging its authority with the creation of various sovereignties, in other words of situation of attempts at dual and multiple power.

The protest movement was however faced by multiple forms of counter-revolutions opposing its initial objectives. The first actor of the counter-revolution was the Assad regime that lashed all its violence through its various armed apparatus to crush the protest movement struggling for democracy, social justice and equality and composed of large sectors of the Syrian population. The establishment and rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist military organizations then constituted this second counter revolutionary actor by opposing the initial demands of the rebellion, not

hesitating to attack democratic components of the protest movement and seeking to impose a new authoritarian and exclusive political system. Finally, regional powers and imperialist international states all acted in a counter-revolutionary manner, whether the allies of the regime by assisting and participating fully in the war against the protest movement, or the so called “Friends of Syria” in the region (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey) by advancing their own political interests, supporting the most reactionary elements of the uprising, the Islamic fundamentalist movements, and trying to transform the uprising into a full sectarian war to prevent the advent of a democratic Syria that could endanger their own regimes.

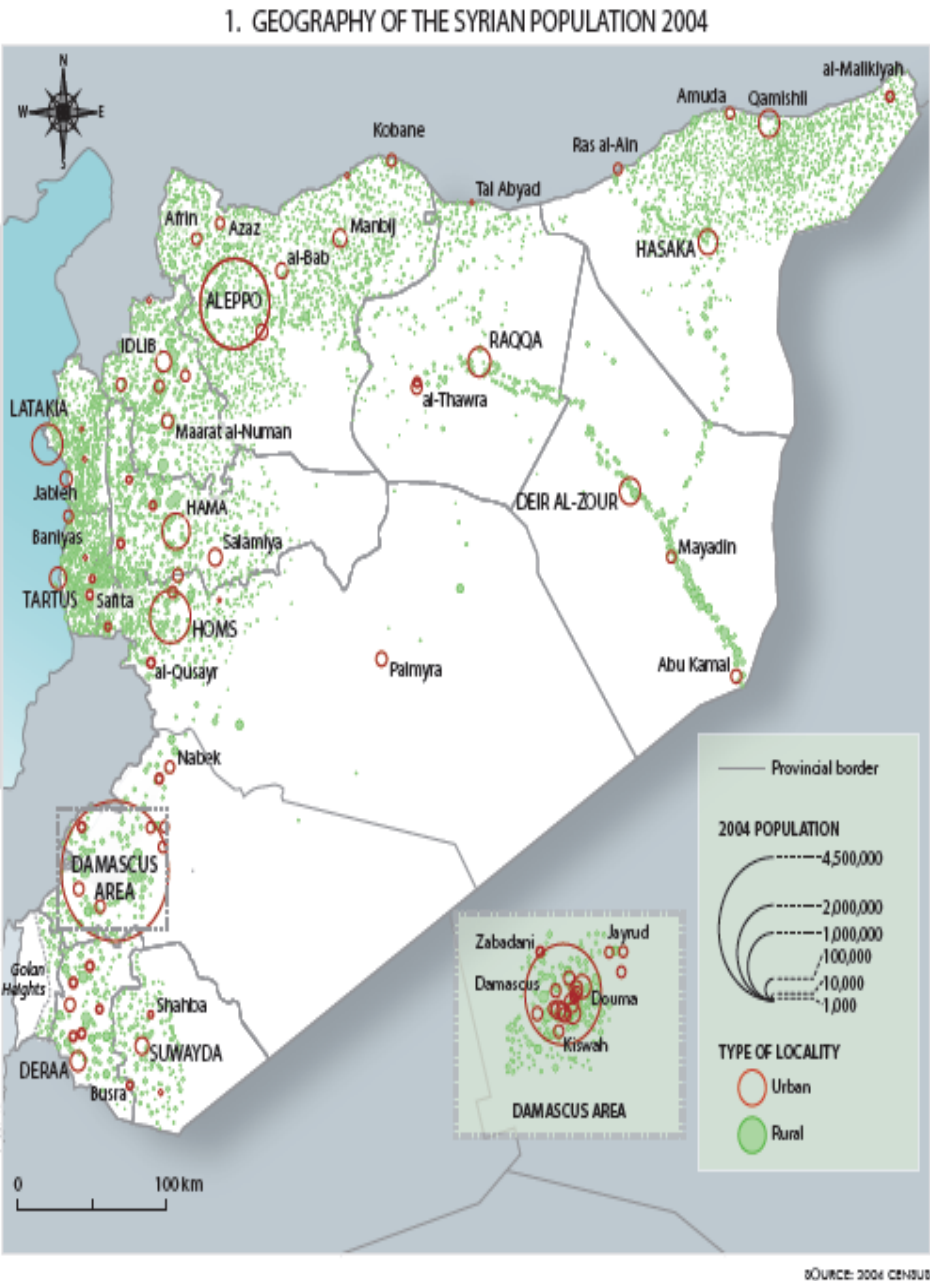
The multiple forms of the counter-revolution thereby enabled any radical social change of the class and political structure in Syria. The Syrian uprising combined therefore on one side a revolutionary nature by the mass involvement and participation of the Syrian population, which resulted in the regime’s structures and rule to crumble. On the other side the upheaval was characterized by its incompleteness, even to some extent its failure on the short mid term, as the regime was here to stay.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to outline the future of Syria, but the incompleteness of the uprising, in addition to all the other elements mentioned above, signifies that the regime will still have challenges to face despite the repression and possible annihilation of all forms of structured opposition within the country. The resilience of the regime had indeed come at a very high cost, in addition to the growing dependence on foreign states and actors. The sectarian and Alawi identity of some regime’s institutions have been strengthened, particularly the army and security services and to a lesser extent the state administration. The multiplication of militias has created problems because of their thuggish and criminal behaviors, while providing more autonomy to so called “pro regime” areas to ease increasing tensions and frustrations against regime’s officials. The catastrophic humanitarian and socio-economic situation in Syria also begs the question of how the regime will deal with a far majority of the population within the country suffering from unemployment, increasing inflation and worsening living conditions. Even the regions considered as “loyalist” witnessed increasing criticisms against officials.

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

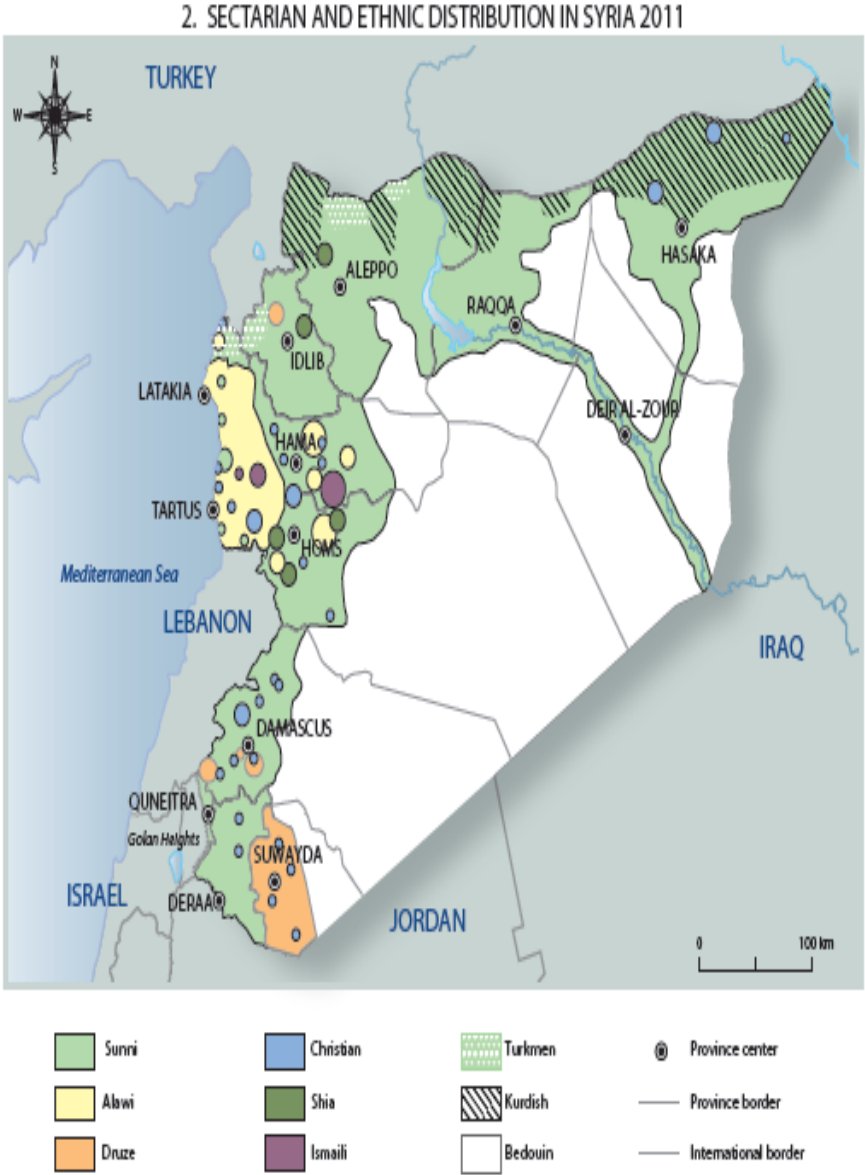
One positive element nevertheless in the midst of this terrible situation and that could play a role in shaping future events is the large documentation of the uprising that has never been seen before in history. There has been significant recording, testimonies and documentation of the protest movement, the actors involved and the modes of actions. In the seventies, Syria witnessed strong popular and democratic resistance with significant strikes and demonstrations throughout the country with mass followings, unfortunately this memory was not kept and was not well-known by the new generation of protesters in the country in 2011. The Syrian revolutionary process that started in 2011 is one of the most documented. This memory will remain and will not only be there to look at the past, but seizing this past to build on future resistance. The political experiences that have been accumulated since the beginning of the uprising will not disappear.

Annex 1: Geography of the Syrian population 2004



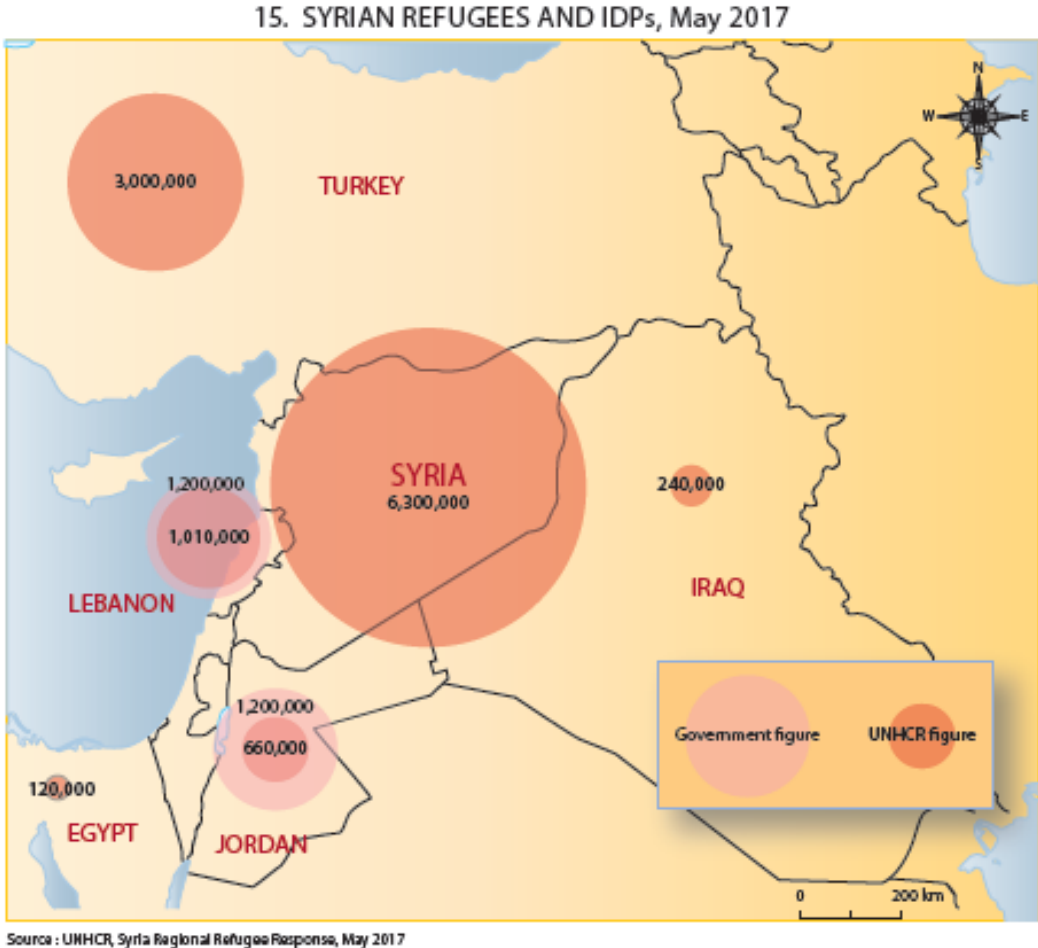
Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), “Sectarianism in Syria’s civil war”, *The Washington Institute for Neast East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. XII

Annex 2: Sectarian and ethnic distribution in Syria 2011



Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), “Sectarianism in Syria’s civil war”, *The Washington Institute for Neast East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. XIII

Annex 3: Syrian refugees and IDPs, May 2017



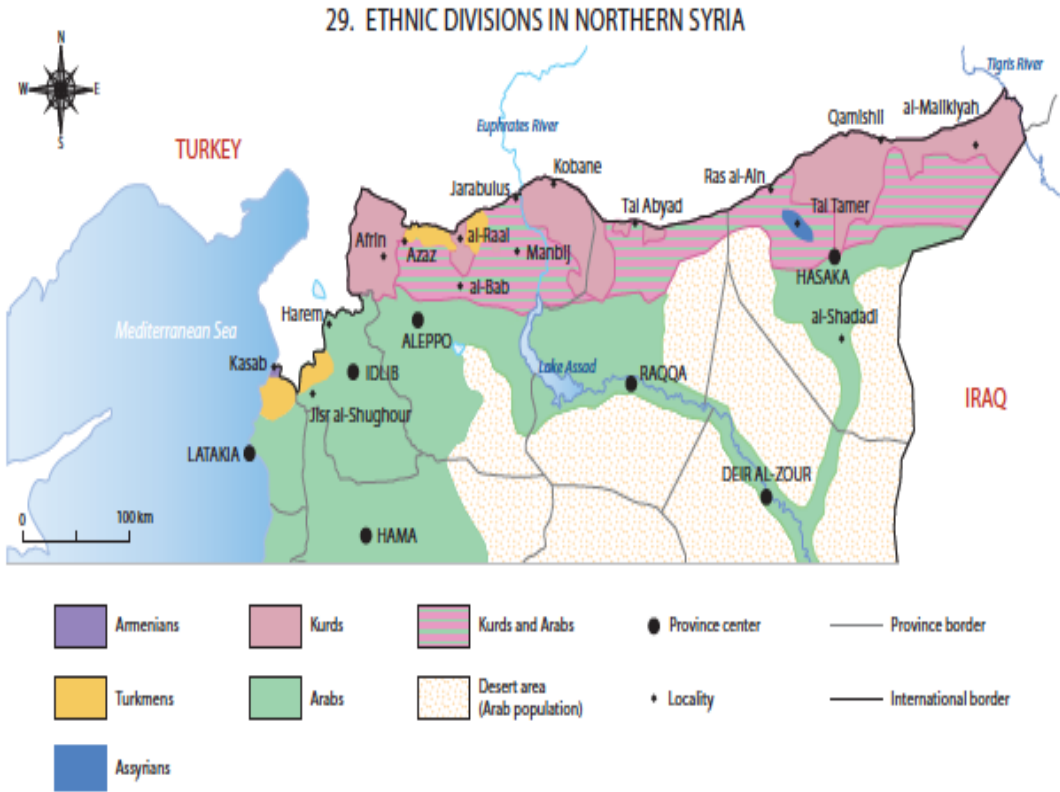
Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), "Sectarianism in Syria's civil war", *The Washington Institute for Neast East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. XII

Annex 4: East Aleppo vs. West Aleppo, January 2016



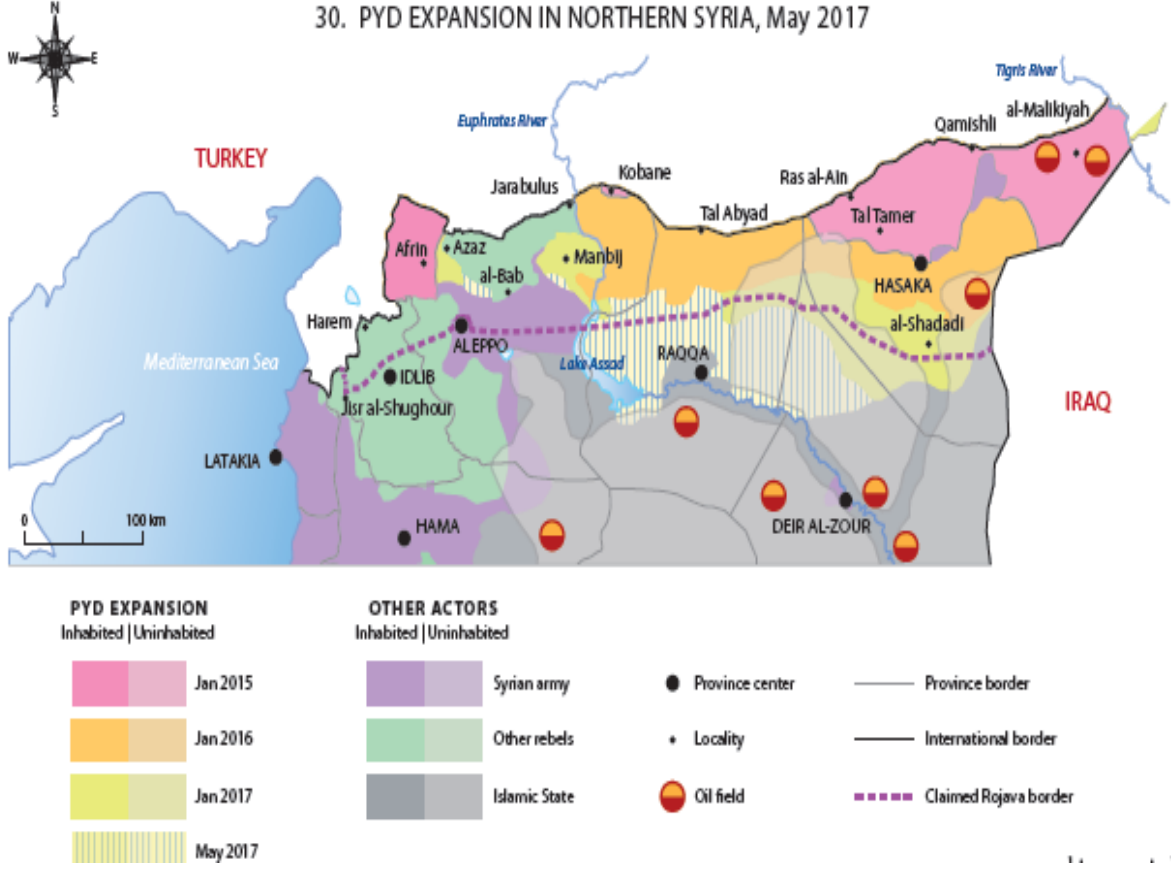
Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), “Sectarianism in Syria’s civil war”, *The Washington Institute for Neast East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. 45

Annex 5: Ethnic Divisions in Northern Syria



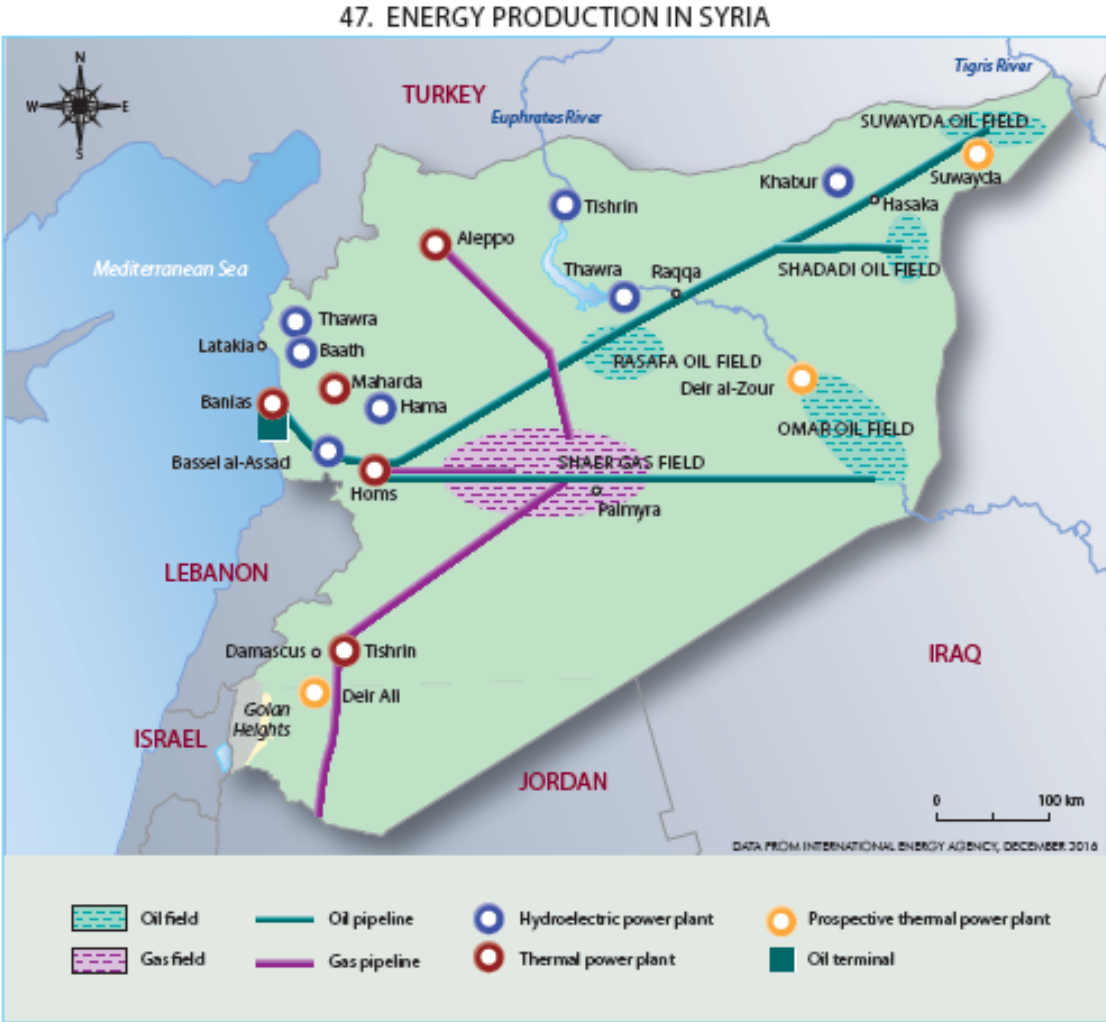
Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), "Sectarianism in Syria's civil war", *The Washington Institute for Neast East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. 52

Annex 6: PYD Expansion in Northern Syria, May 2017



Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), "Sectarianism in Syria's civil war", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. 53

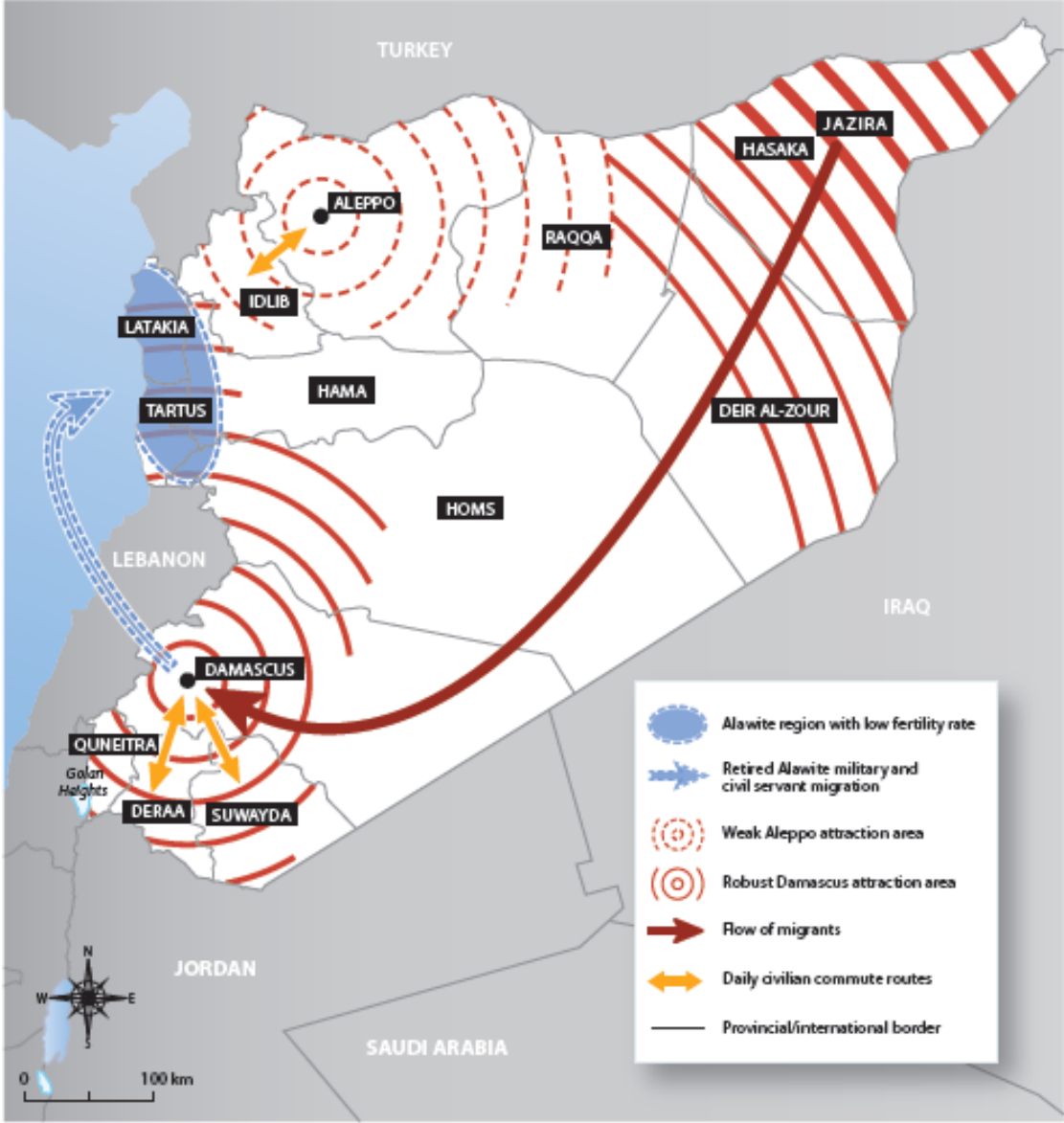
Annex 7: Energy Production in Syria



Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), "Sectarianism in Syria's civil war", *The Washington Institute for Neast East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. 86

Annex 8: Internal Migration in Syria 1990-2010

70. INTERNAL MIGRATION IN SYRIA, 1990–2010



Source: Balanche, Fabrice (2018), “Sectarianism in Syria’s civil war”, *The Washington Institute for Neast East Policy*, (pdf). Available at: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/SyriaAtlasCOMPLETE-3.pdf>>, (accessed 20 February 2018), p. 129

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