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Reading the Arab Revolutions: Authoritarianism and the Implications of Change

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This paper presents a reading of the Arab Revolutions, through research and books published by the ACRPS. In particular, it reflects on the events in Syria, in all their complexity, while remaining well aware of the constraints entailed in analyzing an event still ongoing in the present day. The discussion will focus on three books: Azmi Bishara's *Syria's Via Dolorosa to Freedom: An Attempt at Contemporary History*, Mohammed Jamal Barout's work *The Last Decade in the History of Syria*, and Hamza Mustafa's *The Virtual Public Sphere in the Syrian Revolution*. In addition it will address an edited volume entitled *Backgrounds to the Revolution*.

Arab Revolutions

Arab Spring

Syria

Authoritarianism

Sectarianism

Civil War

This discussion begins with Azmi Bishara's book *Syria's Via Dolorosa to Freedom: An Attempt at Contemporary History*,⁽¹⁾ an informative work derived from a close analysis of Syria's developments. The book observes the course of the revolution and covers its first two years from March 2011 to March 2013. At this time the crisis was still open to the unforeseen divisions yet to come, i.e. those that led to the appearance of fanatic groups, whose only function was to lead the Syrian people into a trap by threatening them with the inherent dangers of confronting the regime.

Syria's Via Dolorosa

Syria's Via Dolorosa to Freedom does not just provide information about the uprising but goes further in its exposure of the revolution's downward spiral and the appearance of fractures within the opposition. The book follows the course of the revolution and observes its "societal dynamics, and its transformation into an armed revolution, and the manifestations of revolutionary, criminal, or sectarian violence that resulted beyond this" (p. 37), by adopting "a socio-historical analytical method" which writes the history of the spread of the revolution, the strategy devised to suppress it, the manifestations of societal violence, the roots of sectarian phenomena, and the geostrategic factors and positions of the various states influencing its course (p. 15).

In addition to the investigative method, the author documents, in wide-ranging detail, the events of the revolution, which gives this book precedence as a reference among a catalogue of published works on Syria. The book "reproduces the development and structure of the peaceful protests and their transformation into a fully-fledged patriotic revolution against authoritarianism", retaining the hypothesis that the revolution was spontaneous, civilian, and authentic (p. 601).

Syrian society is highly composite and complex. The problem with the revolution, argues Bishara, was that it erupted "against an oppressive, autocratic regime" that relied "on the permeation of security, politics, and the economy, generating corruption from top to bottom" (p. 12), in a manner resembling a militarily organized group spirit, which succeeded in

Then, using Mohammed Jamal Barout's work *The Last Decade in the History of Syria*, the political and economic background that contributed to the eruption of events is reviewed. Next explored is the role of online networks in the progression of the revolution through Hamza Mustafa's *The Virtual Public Sphere in the Syrian Revolution*. Finally, the discussion turns to the book *Backgrounds to the Revolution* by a group of Syrian authors, whose various perspectives present the relationship between the Syrian revolution and the reasons behind it.

establishing "a clientelist relationship and reciprocal services" with the economically powerful social classes (p. 30). The regime failed to put forward a political solution to the crisis, gambling instead on suppressing revolt, and on the cohesiveness of this approach, due to "the difficulty in separating the state from the regime, particularly when society, army, and the quasi-military regime interpenetrate through family or geographic affiliations that bind these elements together" (p.169). Assad kept the "army and security in the hands of those directly loyal to him, including those loyal for geographic or sectarian reasons" (p. 178). These bonds of sectarian and non-sectarian loyalty form the "cartel" that combines "the security forces, the ruling dynasty, those with economic interests, and the administration of the state into a common destiny" (p. 603).

Bishara's reliance on the socio-historical method and his analysis of documents and information meant that he was able to perceive the threat of the revolution turning from a non-violent movement into an armed one, and of being dragged into "sectarian fracturing" early on, as well as predict the emergence of "warlords" and jihadist elements "who did not share the goals of the revolution" (p. 605). The mistake of the opposition was to slide into formulating "demands in sectarian language", which led to conflict "akin to civil war" because of the sectarian nature of the regime. Sectarianism in Syria "is not a fabrication but inherent in the ruling regime" (p. 609) given the entanglement and complexities of the situation, and particularly the ethnic and racial components found in Syrian society (p. 475).

1 Azmi Bishara, *Syria's Via Dolorosa to Freedom: An Attempt at Contemporary History* (Beirut/Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, August 2013)

The Responsibility of the Regime

Syria's Via Dolorosa to Freedom: An Attempt at Contemporary History opens with an introduction, has 13 chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction highlights the fact that “the Syrian revolution is an extension of the Arab revolutionary condition” and “could have been avoided by reform” (pp. 24-5). However, the regime chose “the path of armed force” because of the nature of its power and the role of the security agencies and institutions (four main bodies), their involvement in all spheres of Syrian society, and their participation in “political decision making” (p. 29). This pushed them to confront the protest movement “with a discourse of sectarian sedition and of a conspiracy targeting the stability of society” (p. 34).

The structural similarity between the Arab regimes does not do away with difference. The essence of this difference is the presence of these fractures in the mosaic of the states in the Arab Mashreq (p. 27), which are made up of societies that are a religious, sectarian, and ethnic composite. This hinders “the crystallization of a unifying national identity permitting the separation of society from the regime, and the regime from the state” (p.31). Diversity is not a source of discord and weakness “if it is well managed, but it becomes a factor for weakness if badly managed” (p.28), since it drives people to lose confidence and to fear “what the structure of Syrian society, with its sectarian diversity, could produce should the revolution explode” (p. 92).

From the beginning, the regime resorted to violence to quell the protests that were at once deemed “a conspiracy”. From the time he inherited power in July 2000, until the launch of the protest movement on March 15, 2011, Bashar Assad dealt with the people from the position of “we know best” and the platform

Blood-Filled Scenes

The accelerating pace of events and the repeated scenes of daily clashes between the authorities and the people pushed urban neighborhoods, whose inhabitants had “Bedouin roots”, to gradually expand the scope of the revolution to distinct areas, thereby influencing the uprising’s general course, “its trend to the armed path” (p. 110), and the beginning of the fireball’s rolling. It pushed the protests to move

of a “teacher” (p. 49), particularly in his second term in 2007. This period marked the starting point of “new and unprecedented social dynamics” (p.61) that gave him the ability to shirk his promises of reform, continuing until he gave his first speech on March 30, 2011 after the protests had escalated, “thereby shocking wide swaths of Syrian society” (p. 103).

The tremors thus began at the end of February 2011, when Syrian security forces launched a campaign of detentions against those who took part in writing slogans on the walls, and the brutality that followed against the children of Deraa, which prompted the first demonstration in the Hamidiya souq in Damascus on March 15, 2011. This was followed by a sit in, the next day, in front of the Interior Ministry in Damascus. The scope of protests spread and escalated after civilian deaths and funerals on March 19, 2011 (pp. 81-5).

From those moments on, non-violent protests persevered. They spread to Latakia (pp. 97-8) and Homs (p. 108) as the regime remained “unyielding in burying the local mobilization in its cradle before it could gain strength and become a revolution” (p. 86). It “ignored the people’s demands and their dignity and failed to investigate the main reasons that led to the uprising” (p. 91). It gave the security institution an exceptional function as “the link between the president, the regime, and society” (p. 95). The adoption of the use of force helped to push “things to take the form of popular reactions that were not anticipated in security terms” (p. 98). Thus, the course of protests developed within the three-fold structure of victims–demonstration–victims or demonstration–victims–demonstration (p. 113). This dynamic contributed to the sparks that spread from the cities to the countryside and, thereafter, from the countryside to the cities.

from open public spaces to private and isolated neighborhoods “with high population density” (p. 118), and led to “increasing sectarian tension”, “the emergence of armed manifestations in peripheral neighborhoods”, and finally “the entry of the army into events” (p. 119).

In Bishara’s opinion, “the Homs sit-in marked a turning point in the course of the revolution. Its

break up led to clashes in the neighborhoods” (p. 119). Attempts to quell the centralized urban protests did nothing to crush the revolution “but helped to transform its course towards other areas, such as the countryside and peripheral neighborhoods, and the gradual transformation from peaceful demonstrations with many victims to armed action ... and the deviation of the course of protests to other armed and sectarian contexts” (p. 120).

This transformation of events led to a worsening of the crisis and its shift to the countryside around the cities (Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo). The regime, persistent in its “security solution”, made a decisive contribution to transform the revolution from civilian and non-violent to one resorting to arms, initially legitimately, that is the people acting in self-defense, until it became a full-fledged armed revolution” (p. 185). The author holds that the uprising did not turn into a “stage of armed revolution until the beginning of 2012” specifically the middle of January 2012 “after armed elements in al-Zabadani appeared as an ‘example’ that people and political activists saw could be generalized” (pp. 198-9).

Taking up arms was not part of the plan nor the attitudes of the uprising, but it began to turn into embryonic form once the regime used excessive force

Specifics of the Cities

The security strategy of the regime, as made clear in Deraa, Damascus, and its countryside, and Homs, “was based on preventing and ending any mass sit-in, out of fear of replicating the scenes of the Arab revolutions that succeeded in bringing down regimes” (p. 151). In this way, the protests formed a lever for the growth of an alternative societal force to that network of relationships that formed the regime and its security structures, as happened in Deir Ezzor when the uprising removed “the tribal leaders aligned with the regime from the equation of influence in the city in favor of figures and leaders opposed to them” (p. 151).

The Syrian regime’s strong network of familial–geographic–sectarian relations gave it impregnability. It also supplied it with energy that it could rely on during periods of tension and at critical moments. Under the shadow of security control that formed a point of equilibrium to restrain the tempo of the

(p. 191) and simultaneously with “the emergence of officers and enlisted men deserting from the regular Syrian army” (p. 193). This was further compounded by the growth of an anarchic media which was one of the “reasons behind the inability to think deeply and objectively about the revolution” since “the Arab media supporting the revolution helped mislead by spreading unmediated accounts without any real journalistic fact-checking” (p. 195).

The absence of a unified political and military strategy also played its part in weakening the advance of the revolution. The “Free Syrian Army remained a prisoner of the strategy of imposing itself on the revolution ... any liberated area was thus also emptied of its population” leading to their displacement and the emptying of cities in fear of destruction and death at a time when this strategy did little to change “the strategic military balance with the regime” (p. 205). Matters were made worse by “the behavior of some armed elements associated with the revolution who threatened workers and businessmen or forced them to donate money, and the appearance of kidnappings and other brutal actions. This distanced the main social forces from the revolution and made them feel it was not to be trusted and might lead to chaos” (p. 206).

uprising and potential changes to the balances on the ground, the uprising stood little chance to develop into an all-out revolution.

As the regime showed its true colors and its indifference to the destruction of neighborhoods and the emptying of cities of their population, the harbingers of the arming of the uprising appeared. “To begin with, arms were taken up in primitive and traditional fashion, emerging out of tribal and traditional social structures ... This response was defensive and legitimate in every respect, since it was self-defense in the face of the Shabiha militias” (p. 191). However, matters began to change after the events in the city of Jisr al-Shughour, which marked “a turning point during the revolution” since they coincided with the declaration “by the dissident Major Hussein Harmoush of the formation of the Free Officers Brigade on June 9, 2011” (p. 196). Afterwards there were more and more breakaways from the army, and there began to be “calls on social

media and from some opposition figures to take up arms and support those deserting to secure and protect peaceful demonstrations” (p. 196). “Armed struggle became the main component of the Syrian revolution” after “large sections of the Syrian people” reached the “conviction that peaceful demonstrations would not be able to bring down the regime” (p. 198).

This point of view was based on the realization that the regime was unwilling to make concessions. This was the nature of the regime, which had originally come to power via a coup and illegitimate and illegal means. Those who come by force will only leave by force. For this reason, the view that weapons were the means capable of removing the obstacle to change gained strength. The view of the need for counter violence was reinforced after Assad’s speech

on March 30, 2011. On January 18, 2013 the regime began to form militias “as a counterpart to regular forces” (p. 262). The term “Shabiha” spread after the demonstrations in Latakia which “were permeated by an atmosphere of social tension and fears of clashes between protestors and some civilians who supported the regime” (p. 264). The “mobilization of the Shabiha from the Alawite villages in the Latakia countryside” led to “serious sectarian polarization” with the backing of the regime that gave cover to the popular committees and organized them “into an autonomous body with a leadership independent of the security apparatus” (p. 268-9). This encouraged the Shabiha to carry out egregious acts that served to “increase the sectarian tension in the cities and regions” (p. 270).

The Cover of Authoritarianism

Three developments occurred and led to the emergence of more strident sectarian expressions than before. These were first, the violent suppression of civilian activists in the first stages of the revolution; second, the regime’s insistence in reading the revolution as either a foreign conspiracy or as sectarian sedition; and third, the emergence of regional axes affecting the discourses of the Syrian crisis (p. 317). For its part, the regime “was concerned with instilling fears of sectarian strife, to the level of incitement”. Likewise, “revealing the cover of authoritarianism led to the opening of sectarian hatred” (p. 318). Counter-sectarianism (Mamoun al-Homsi, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Adnan al-Arouf) began to grow through sectarian and confessional incitement (p. 319).

The conflict thus becomes both social and political, “but it takes the form of sectarian conflict in a society with a composite identity” (p. 325). This explains why the regime resorted to bombing cities, destroying neighborhoods, and perpetrating massacres against civilians on the pretext of defense and repelling the foreign conspiracy. The regime, once the cover came off, no longer cared about its reputation and proceeded to wipe out or expel. This led to the massacres of Karm al-Zeitoun, Al Rifai neighbourhood, Maarzaf-al-Kabir neighbourhood, al-Turaymsa, al-Shammas neighbourhood, al Thiyabiya, Jdaidet al-Fadl, Banyas, Khirbat al-Sawda, Basateen al-Waer, Hamouriya 1, Hamouriya 2, Zamalka, Muadamiyat al-Sham, Jdeidet Artouz al-Balad, and Darayya (pp. 334-40).

The narrative of the book ends on May 18, 2013, but as this piece goes to print the massacres and the policy of daily murder continues in force without respite. The fact that “some forms of political violence are, in their manifestations, based on the dynamics of societal violence, including the presence of social divisions or social group identities of various kinds which motivate violence” (p. 343) does not help. Societal violence includes “crimes and criminal acts and some sectarian actions” (p. 346), including the emergence of extreme religious trends that form a danger to the revolution because of their difference “in methods and objectives” (p. 348) and also in their level of awareness and their treatment of the people in the areas where the regime was absent (p. 360-6). This sometimes led to the merging of “criminality and sectarian violence” (p. 372) and in other cases the mixing of “the political position with sectarian motives and an inverted consciousness which was aided by some Salafist proselytizing channels” (p. 373).

After the failure to implement the Arab initiative, Syria was turned into “a field for geostrategic interactions and future ambitions of the major and regional powers” (p. 455). “The Western states, frustrated with the fact they were not supplying the revolution with weapons, were also denying it the provision of any heavy weapons that could change the balance of forces” (p. 459). Israel continued “to prefer the attrition of the regime without its collapse”

(p. 461). The American position on the revolution “came as part of its previous strategy of not becoming directly involved” (p. 473). Russia on the other hand took “an assiduous position in support of the regime” (p. 480) right from the start. Iran “has acted with the Arab revolutions in a manner that fits its national interests” and chose to side with the regime (pp. 518-19), while the Syrian regime’s relationship with Iran has gone beyond “an alliance to become absolute subordination” (p. 526).

The Last Decade

The socio-historical and political analysis of the narrative of *The Via Dolorosa to Freedom* is complemented by the socioeconomic approach of the author Mohammed Jamal Barout in his book *The Last Decade in Syrian History: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform*.⁽²⁾

The book is divided into two parts: the first covers the period of Bashar al-Assad after he took power from his father; while the second covers the uprising and its trajectory in terms of splits in both population and geography, which prevented the reaching of a political solution to the crisis.

In the year 2000, Bashar inherited from his father “a ‘critical’ socioeconomic, political, and institutional situation, and large, complex, and insoluble sociopolitical problems” (p. 29). When giving his inaugural address, Assad tried to “adopt a ‘reformist’ institutionalized approach to get out of the crisis” (p. 33). However, he clashed with the class that owned “the state by means of ‘its grip’ over its apparatus” (p. 35). Therefore, he adopted a method for administration “based on a distribution of roles” (p. 37) and an attempt to open up to society. But the limits of openness were restricted to “replacing political pluralism with economic pluralism” (p. 40). By the end of 2005, most of the “correctivists” and “conservatives” had been “pensioned off” (p. 46). The tenth five-year plan (2006–2010) was set out as a “plan to guide the operation of the deep socioeconomic transformation to shift Syria from the stage of a centralized economy to a social-market economy” (p. 49). However, the plan “met the strong

In the face of this closed loop, concluded Bishara back in 2013, “the Syrian revolution is a unique case in the region because of the entanglement of the factors influencing it, which might lead to catastrophic scenarios as long as a political settlement is not achieved” (p. 608). Bishara makes sure to distinguish here between an impossible peaceful resolution and a possible political resolution. However, he holds that “the option of a political solution” remains distant “up to the writing of these lines, two years after the eruption of the revolution” (p. 608).

opposition of many actors, each for its own reasons” (p. 50).

In 2006 and 2007, large holding companies emerged “to act as investment funds to create businesses and own the assets of the private companies founded”. The head of the Mashreq Investment Fund, Rami Makhlouf, acted as the “dynamo founding these companies” (p. 70). This opened the door to major competition “between big businessmen over the management of the holding companies” (p.71) and led to “the concentration of wealth in the pockets of a small group of the new businessmen, in the absence of competition” (p. 80). This contributed to the decline in the traditional overall level of savings from 23 percent in 2000 to 13 percent in 2008, and “in consequence the decline in the amount of traditional savings used to fund investment in 2008 to less than half its level in 2000” (p. 94). It was therefore no surprise that “poverty increased and became concentrated in rural areas and in the slums, with the north-east (Idlib, Rif Aleppo, and the provinces of al-Riqqa, Der Ezzor, and al-Hasaka) accounting for the largest share of the poor compared with 2004 – which might explain why the spark of protests took off from the least developed regions and was fiercest in Deraa and its towns, and Rif Damascus” (p. 97).

In parallel came “a rise in youth unemployment for those with a high school education and above” (p. 109) and a rise in the unemployment rate to about 16.5 percent in 2009, representing 3.4 million unemployed, as well as a rise in those living in poverty to “6.7 million people, or 34.3 percent of

2 Mohammed Jamal Barout, *The Last Decade in Syrian History: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform* (Beirut/Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, March 2012).

the Syrian population” (p. 110). In 2008, the inflation rate also hit 15.9 percent (p. 118). Remittances from migrants abroad, which were estimated between USD 1 and 1.4 billion annually, fell to “about half” (p. 120). This worsened any chance “to close the development gap” between the center and the periphery, leading “to the creation of regional development gaps in Syria” (p. 136) because of the limitation of Assad’s reform formulation to “the liberalization process led by the alliance between the bureaucracy and a section of the new businessmen, recreated for this purpose” (p. 142).

Officially, the Baath Party remained “the leader of state and society”, but this role declined, in reality, in favor of the “the Higher Political Committee”. The change in roles of the actors may be understood as “the result of a process of social change” appearing “within the rules of the theatrical game mediating social power relations and the authorities” (p. 145). The process of redefining the roles of players resulted in “the birth of a new liberalized authoritarian regime, whose engine to raise the growth rate was investment and alliances with foreign investments provided by ‘the new businessmen’” (p.147). The process of liberalization assumed “the revival of the role of civil society or the third sector, to mediate between

the state and the private sector” (p. 149) - something which failed to happen, since the dynamic sectors of the middle classes compensated for the fragility of civil society by creating a kind of “virtual assembly on social media networks, forums, and websites that formed a new kind of public space on the internet” (p. 153). Social media websites succeeded in disrupting “the traditional mechanisms of hegemony employed by the ruling authorities to dominate the public sphere” (p. 157).

In addition to social media, satellite channels undertook “the most important role as media platforms in the process of influence and creating the attitudes of public opinion across crisis-ridden Arab societies” (p. 158). This drew up a road map for the protests at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011. The Arab protests were the result of common factors and responses to the failure of the programs of economic liberalization that failed to do away with authoritarianism or end the pursuit of the opposition, but rather increased the fragility of the state, which then resorted to direct force to compensate for the structural weakness and to keep stagnant institutions afloat (pp. 164-5).

The Eruption

The political paralysis governed by the socioeconomic background led to the growth of protest movements that erupted in Syrian cities, represented, to begin with, by the al-Hariqa incident on February 19, 2011. This marked the beginning of the eruption and its spread throughout Syria. This situation could not have developed “without the presence of an already existing environment ready to receive it and engage with it” (p. 178). At the time, the regime was still torn “between the political solution, and the use of ‘soft power’ and the security solution, which opted for ‘hard power’. It quickly chose the policy of open violence, thereby adding fuel to the fire” (p. 187) on the grounds of “preserving the prestige of the state” (p. 188). Such response fits with “the essence of Syrian security logic to be suspicious and read every ‘major event’ through the lens of foreign conspiracy” (p. 195). This gradually pushed the country towards sectarian incitement, starting with tense relations between “the Sunni and Alawite

neighborhoods in Banyas, and between Sunni Banyas and its surroundings” (p. 232). At this period also emerged “sectarian tensions in the form of sectarian solidarity ... in the conservative neighborhoods of Homs ... an important part of whose inhabitants were of Bedouin descent” (p. 237).

This is the context giving rise to the “conspiracy” theory used by the regime, which proceeded to employ “the strategy of the security solution to contain the crisis using the methods of ‘hard power’, and suspended the political solution until the tasks of the security strategy had been achieved” (p. 249). During this period the operations of the army expanded ... with the aim of quelling the protest movements under the rubric of “fighting Salafism” (p. 251). This reflected “the descent of actual authority into the hands of security and military types” (p. 254), which led to the expansion of the circle of clashes, the destruction of neighborhoods, the emptying of cities of their inhabitants, and the flight of families to

neighboring countries out of fear of “an atmosphere infected with ‘hatred’ ... whether it was from this side or that” (p. 269). Hatred prompted “members

of every sect to flee mixed neighborhoods where the other sect was in the majority” (p. 287).

Center and Periphery

Barout holds that the demonstrations and protests that took place on February 19 and continued until the end of July 2011 (around five and a half months) erupted and developed in medium-size and small cities and in the poor and marginalized suburbs and unplanned peripheries of the large cities, indicating that “poverty in Syria is a regionalized phenomenon characteristic of those cities and the periphery of the big cities” (p. 309). Similarly, the tribal (semi-Bedouin) factor had a role in “stoking the protest movements” (p. 303). Whenever “the security treatment was harsh and caused deaths and arrests, the protest movements grew stronger and more intense and widespread, as a result of civic, family, tribal, and geographic solidarity” (p. 308). This means that the protest movements “clearly indicate that they are a movement of the marginalized and poor periphery in revolt, as opposed to the ‘dormant’ centers” (p. 322). On the constitutive or deep level of their internal structure “they are characterized by the dynamic of polarization between the poor and marginalized semi-urban periphery and the affluent and dominant urban centers, and the stifled presence of some dynamics of the periphery raiding the center and trying to revolutionize it” (p. 340).

Barout ends with the demand for a “historical settlement” that considers the presence of “many sects within civil society” who identify with the Syrian regime (p. 388). This is the case because societies such as Syria have “a complex identity in terms of religion, confession, and nationality, since, on the level of confession–religion, civil society comprises no less than 17 sub-groups or more correctly sectarian groups” (p. 389). Therefore, “the collapse of the political regime in countries with composite identities in general, which include Syria and the societies of the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Peninsula in particular, makes possible the collapse of the entire social body along with social, ethnic, sectarian, and geographic fragmentation” (p. 392). Barout holds that the protest movement produced a new balance of forces that can be summarized as “the impossibility of the regime’s returning to what it had been before March 2011” (p. 396). This calls for an orientation towards “a historic settlement” to launch new dynamics in the process of change, in the context of “the conditions of Syrian society which is both of composite identity and divided at the same time.” “National understanding” is the required direction “to emerge from the current structural crisis” (p. 399).

The Revolution in Cyberspace

With the launch of the revolution and the absence of real-world space, activists in Syria found cyberspace as a refuge to convey their protests and their political values in the absence of organized opposition political forces able to frame the popular movement on the ground. The absence of the on-the-ground aspect gave cyberspace an opportunity to mobilize and institute a space in the public political sphere and urge for action on the ground in a context merging the real and the imaginary. In his book, *The Syrian Revolution: Features, Attitudes, Mechanisms for Forming Public Opinion*,⁽³⁾ Hamza Mustafa tries to clarify the symbols of this imaginary space by observing the work and actions of communication and social media networks.

Hamza Mustafa observes the development and expansion of communication and social media networks following the lifting on the ban imposed on them by the authorities on February 8, 2011 (p. 331). Lifting the ban led to a greater number of users, and provided an opportunity for youth mobilization in cyberspace, which had previously been limited to the “Syrian Revolution” website, which was created on January 18, 2011 (p. 39). After that site the “Sham” news network was set up and come online in March 2011 (p. 67). The “Ugarit” news network was also set up in March “by a group of activists in Syria and abroad” (p. 87). This soon snowballed and stations

3 Hamza Mustafa, *The Virtual Public Sphere in the Syrian Revolution: Features, Trends and Mechanisms of Public Opinion Formation* (Beirut/Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, April 2012).

of all kinds began to appear, bringing with them discourses of incitement (Salafist, religious), vilifying the other (the discourse of Qaradawi, rationalized discourse, Salafi-like discourse—al-Arouf) to set the conflict within the framework of civil paralysis and sectarian—confessional divides; “despite the fact that the Syrian revolution took off in rural areas, it extended to the big cities like Homs, Hama, Deraa, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, and Latakia [...] nevertheless, the military operations and widescale detentions undertaken by the authorities [...] had a major effect in the tempo, which the authorities were imposing and regulating by any possible deviations, running out of control” (p. 103).

In the author’s view, “the appearance of this scene was predictable in a society like Syria where the state has failed to produce a unifying national identity able to inhibit the effect of secondary allegiances. In the shadow of this isolation, a populist discourse appears which carries sectarian slogans that impinge on a specific section of people with considerable influence to make the majority think and act as if they are minorities (p. 105). Even “the choice of slogan for Friday protests did not solely emanate from the squares of the revolution, but was snatched by the cyber realm and monopolized by a specific side with political attitudes that tried to impose its mores and political beliefs on to the protesting street” (p. 128). Like the other Arab revolutions, the Syrian revolution did not start “as a reaction to major issues of sovereignty; rather, the protest movements emerged as a result of the refusal of the existing regimes to reform and the continuation of authoritarianism” (p. 132).

The obstinacy of the regimes and their refusal to reform peacefully contributed to the taking up of arms in the womb of a heterogeneous society, as happened in Syria in the early months of the revolution “even though it was of a primitive and traditional character reflecting the reality of the social,

tribal, and traditional structures that it started from ... This led to the emergence of armed ‘Islamic’ youth aiming to respond to the constant security incursions” (p. 137). In turn, it also “led to the emergence of the ‘militarization’ of the Syrian revolution, which these media (cyberspace) could not efface or deny” (p. 141). Because of the ongoing protests “it was natural that pockets of protest should produce local leaderships who took on the organization of the mobilization and publishing media facts via YouTube or on websites to spread to the media to be pumped back, in a circular movement, as new symbols in society” (p. 145).

Mobilization on the ground played a role in pushing platforms in cyberspace to demand the formation of coordinating committees, after people discovered the difficulty of overthrowing the regime, unlike what had happened in Tunisia and Egypt. This encouraged the formation of “local leaderships” who spread and expanded in the provinces and regions until “they grew excessive” (p. 147) and until the formation of the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union in May 2011, although its founding statement was released on June 1, 2011” (p. 150). Following its founding statement, the Union faced a series of obstacles, most importantly the youths’ lack of political experience ... It was, however, able to overcome some of these obstacles as the field and media experience of coordinators in the Union grew” (p. 151). Nevertheless, these virtual/on-the-ground bodies “have failed until now to create a cohesive entity on the ground able to impose the features of the political stage of the revolution for now or in future” (p. 159). The reason for deviations “goes back originally to the deviation in the discussions within the virtual public sphere ... The larger part, however, falls on the authoritarian regime which pursued the intellectual class who joined the protests, prevented sit-ins, foiled the creation of slogans internally, and used excessive force to a degree that neutralized rational thinking about the future” (p. 166-7).

Backgrounds to the Revolution

More than two years after the outbreak of the Arab revolutions, interpretations have branched out following the changes that have occurred on the political scene. The one uprising raising most questions has undoubtedly been the Syrian one because of its geographic location and regional role. Differences in reading the Syrian scene have led to conflicting viewpoints about the background and ramifications of the event.

In this context, comes the book *Backgrounds to the Revolution – Studies on Syria*.⁽⁴⁾ It comprises 14 papers by Syrian researchers (p. 19) and tries as far as possible to “go further than what is apparent in the direct course of historical events and actions to approach some trends in the deep social structure in the full sense of the term (p. 18). The chapters of the book are divided into three approaches: the first concerns “questions of development in crisis and the revolution”; the second, “questions of authoritarianism, opposition, and political mobilizations”; and third, “questions of the geopolitical dimensions to the transformations of the revolution (pp. 19, 23, and 28).

In Chapter 1 of the book’s 14 chapters, researcher Nabil Marzouq attempts to delineate the implications of “the lost development in Syria” since the mid-1980s, which intensified the suffering of the people, moving on to the years 1992 to 2009 during which the annual economic growth rate failed to exceed 2.46 percent (p. 35). Munther Khaddam takes a similar approach in Chapter 2 which deals with “the economic foundation of the Syrian crisis”. He believes that “the current crisis raging in Syria, even if its headline is the popular demand for freedom and dignity, has deep roots in Syria’s lived economic reality” (p. 72). Samir Saifan in Chapter 3 also thinks that policies for income distribution played a role in the social explosion in Syria, given that its action was focused on a sectarian, confessional, and regional basis. In Chapter 4, Husni al-Azma takes the Damascus Ghouta as a model to read “the dichotomy of environmental degradation and declining living standards.” The chapter goes into the relationship between the collapse in living standards and environmental degradation (desertification, urban blight, drought, deforestation) which has made the Ghouta “akin to a crucible for the interaction of many

failures, deformations, and contradictions ... on the political, developmental, environmental, and social levels” (p. 185).

Chapter 5 deals with “the authoritarian structure of the Syrian regime,” and Jad Karim Jibai gives a reading of the emergence, development, and outcomes of the war raging today. This confirms that “the family, tribe, or sect, if the gains made by their members are considered as their gains, rally around the dominant sense of group feeling that holds the reins of power. Whenever the number of individuals benefitting increases, whatever the nature and extent of that benefit, then allegiance of the family, tribe, or sect to the authorities also grows” (p. 222).

In Chapter 6, Khodr Zakaria writes about “the traditional opposition parties in Syria” and explains their positions and attitudes despite the fact that they are “dispersed inside Syria and in many countries abroad” (p. 243), while Hazem Nahar in Chapter 7 criticizes “the political discourse of the opposition during the revolution” which revealed “the phenomenon of all against all, constant campaigns of vilification against blocs and individuals, the phenomenon of the individual setting himself above the group, the country, and the revolution, and the phenomenon of conflict over positions” along other negative developments and shortcomings (p. 269).

Chapter 8 gives a reading of “crisis management policies in Syria”. The author, Akil Mahfoud, derives a series of key concepts for understanding the crisis, which he summarizes as “the ostrich”, “gambler”, “adventurer”, “template”, “imaginary”, “value-based”, “Pandora’s box”, “the Sampson option”, “the flamingo”, “the Alexander option”, “the Gordian knot”, and “hybrid warfare”. He concludes with “signs and warnings” to ultimately affirm that the Syrian crisis “is a deep-rooted or formative issue” that resulted in a “developing or interactive situation” for managing the conflict “including the management of fears and dangers and the management of expectations” (p. 334), which is what the author terms “conflict management”.

Azad Ahmad Ali in Chapter 9 writes about “the role of the Syrian Kurds in political changes and the current uprising”. He considers the Kurds “a basic pillar of

4 Azad Ali et al., *Backgrounds to the Revolution – Studies on Syria* (Beirut/Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, August 2013).

the population of the Levant” (p. 335) whom it is not appropriate to describe as “the Kurdish minority” (p. 369). On the other hand, Neirouz Satik in Chapter 10 deals with developments and forms of “sectarianism in the Syrian uprising” and sees that sectarianism is “a sub-identity in the history of Syria” that entered into events and patterns during the Ottoman era (the events of 1860) culminating in “the colonial politicization of sub-identities” in the direction of “the nationalization of the sect” in 1920 (p. 384) and the failure of the statelets project and its absence in the post-independence period, since Syria witnessed “the beginning of the opening up of communities to each other” (p. 390).

Sectarianism during the uprising that started on March 15, 2011 manifested in successive scenes and stages. In its first stage it appeared rudimentary, then adopted forms of violence in stage two, and after that descended in stage three that saw kidnappings, assassinations, and expulsions. Stage four involved hate crimes that culminated in collective revenge at the end of 2011 (p. 409). The author holds the political regime responsible for the worsening situation because of its “sectarian incitement and excessive force in quashing the protests” (p. 418) as well as “the variation in living standards” because it reinforces “traditional ethnic, sectarian, and tribal loyalties” (p. 426).

In Chapter 11, Hamza Mustafa discusses the “binary of the real and the virtual between creation and influence” in an effort to explain the mediatization that dominated the uprisings from their beginnings in Tunisia and Egypt to their spread to other Arab states (p. 427). Despite the importance of communications platforms, the author considers that “no one can prove a causal link between the outbreak of the revolutions and protests and social media” (p. 433). Because of the absence of spaces for change in Syria, as distinct to what occurred in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, the “virtual public sphere” formed the alternative to “the authoritarian political realm” (p. 436). The Syrian Revolution page (463,000 followers and subscribers), the Sham Network (262,000), the Local Coordination Committees page (31,000) and other groups and

platforms were set up. This gave an impression that the Syrian revolution was a “social media” phenomenon when the internal situation (previously ignored by the media) turned into “a visual televised subject that led the news bulletins” (p. 446). However, once “armed struggle prevailed over peaceful, civilian protests, the influence of the virtual realm waned ... with precedence regained by the real over the virtual” (p. 457).

The last three chapters follow and interpret the conflicting and intersecting interests at play in the Syrian crisis. Marwan Kabalan in Chapter 12 discusses the place of international politics and relations in the conflict in Syria. The crisis, he maintains, has formed “an avenue to redraw regional alliances and balances” (p. 461). He states that “the international political order, just as nature, abhors a vacuum” (p. 500). In Chapter 13, Ali Hussein Bakir writes about “the geostrategic dimensions of Iranian and Turkish policy on Syria”, recalling the project of Mohammad-Javad Larijani formulated in the 1980s under the title “National Strategy: the theory of Umm al-Qura” and focusing on Iran’s geopolitical position in the region and the importance of its regional reach to defend its national security (p. 507), in contrast with Turkey’s ambition aiming to “minimize disputes”, openness, bringing Syria onto its side, and “the effort to play an influential and effective role in solving regional conflicts” (p. 514).

Munther Bader Halloum points to the same issues in Chapter 14 on “the pillars of the Russian position on the Syrian revolution”. He traces the roots of the Russian position and “looks for the points it rests on (p. 539), or what he terms “the interest-risk equation” passing from resistance to “Western and American imperialism” to end with the hope for the failure of the “Syrian revolution” so that Russia does not lose its recent influence in the Middle East (p. 545).

In conclusion, the Syrian revolution rolls on internally, and may extend like an oil slick to neighboring states. The solution requires a political or historical settlement as demonstrated in this book. As this piece goes to print, such options seem a distant prospect.