

# A Tense Syria in a Changing Arab World

**This article was written before the recent escalation of protests in Syria. For an update, it is followed by an interview with the author. [Editor's note]**

Successive revolutions in a number of Arab countries have become the run of political events receiving the widest attention and greatest enthusiasm in the Arab world in decades. More than one Arab generation has lived without experiencing the kind of good news it has witnessed and followed since the beginning of this year. Perhaps, these events are the second most important in the history of each country after its independence from colonial rule six decades ago.

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The amount of attention given to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions followed by the large protest movements in Yemen, Bahrain and Libya, amongst others, has also led to fierce competitions between parents and their children over the television. Whereas previously it was sufficient to follow news coverage sporadically, today this generation of parents wants to follow the latest news constantly, switching between Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, the BBC and other stations – a matter which is of course contrary to the interests of their children who want to watch children's shows and music stations.

Family negotiations vary and fluctuate but nonetheless a fair amount of the news on the revolutions has begun to echo in the minds of

children, fermenting inside them. Last February a brave Syrian journalist wrote that he found his child, who is not yet two years old, chanting the call to overthrow the regime! And, in one school in the city of Homs, eighth graders were playing and began to chant the slogan, "The People Want to Overthrow the Regime and... Miss (their teacher)"! ... This of course occurred before the school's administration was quick to show there would be merciless punishment for such reckless play.

In the meantime, this rare political activism amongst a wide and diverse public throughout the Arab world has been met with apprehension and awkwardness on the part of the rulers and governments of these countries. It is clear to everyone – the ruled and the rulers – that these revolutions are targeting the aggressive practices of the authorities, and the intimate relationship between the authorities and wealth. It is clear to everyone that the driving spirit behind these revolutions is a democratic spirit that is aspiring for equality, freedom and dignity – these revolutions are not Islamic, nationalist or Arab, nor are they revolutions demanding bread.

When it comes to matters of money and authority, the differences between the Arab regimes are negligible. These regimes are all united by their shared ambition to monopolize all power for all time. As such, they all share the desire to bequeath their power to their heirs in addition to monopolizing all the wealth. Indeed this kind of wealth is not amassed independently, and perhaps it has led to



**Yassin al-Haj Salih**

Yassin al-Haj Salih is a Syrian writer and dissenter based in Damascus. He was a political prisoner in the years between 1980 and 1996. He is the author of "Syria in the Shadow: Looks inside the Black Box" (Arabic, 2009). He writes for several Arab newspapers and journals outside of Syria and regularly contributes to Al-Hayat newspaper.

developing an independent political resolve to achieve such aims; all this is notwithstanding the attempts to monopolize access to all sources of information. However, success in this area has been limited by the communications revolution, satellites, and particularly the internet. As for the foreign alliances of the Arab regimes, and the ideological disparities that exist between them, they have all been neutralized by these revolutions in a manner unprecedented.

Another party has been hurt by these ongoing revolutions, the Egyptian revolution in particular: Israel. A remarkable divergence in the approaches of the US and Israel emerges in this regard. The Mubarak regime was an intimate and trusted friend of Israel, where all political resolve and hope for independent aspirations were completely absent (on the part of the Egyptians). As such, one of the concerns of a democratic revolution such as the Egyptian revolution is to grant a larger margin for the voice of ordinary Egyptians in determining the political course taken by the regime, and in driving the policies of the new state towards aspirations and directions that are much more independent. It is no small matter that anti-Israeli slogans had little presence during this revolution. However it was clear that the general stand taken by the revolution was contemptuous of Israel. Many found that there was no better way of degrading and debasing Mubarak and his ability to comprehend the people's desire to overthrow him than by telling him so in Hebrew.

The American position was more positive and flexible. In part this posture was an attempt to avoid any clash with a revolution that was unquestionably just and exceptionally moral, and where any antagonism or apathy towards it could lead to great American losses, perhaps losses similar to those suffered in Iran over three decades ago. Perhaps there was a genuine element of sympathy inspired by the peacefulness of this revolution, as well as its courage and its non-ideological and non-Islamic nature. In this regard, the Americans were also more positive, forthwith and proactive than the

Europeans. Indeed the latter were hesitant and reluctant at first, taking on a negative attitude before they followed suit of the Americans.

### Syrian Impressions

It was only at a later stage in the Egyptian revolution that the Syrian media began to show interest in these revolutions, and began to respond positively to them. However the Syrian media would also hasten to interpret and present these revolutions as being directed against regimes allied to the West in an attempt to label these revolutions and symbolically seize the moment, as well as to thwart and undermine any unpleasant fallout from entering Syrian minds.

In parallel, the Syrian authorities also adopted a policy of denial: We are not like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya... and so on. But, in

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reality, it has behaved in a manner that shows that we are exactly like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya... Suddenly, the conduct of the police and of state employees towards ordinary Syrians has become more courteous and cooperative. And, suddenly rumors have begun to circulate about the intention of the authorities to employ university graduates and to raise the salaries of state employees. It is not unlikely that government bodies are responsible for promoting these rumors as a measure to pacify and calm the general public mood.

In any case, the authorities have not limited their actions to such measures alone. In parallel, the state security's grip has been seriously tightened and any form or possibility of public protests is dealt with severely. On

February 23, activists planning to gather and rally before the Libyan Embassy in Damascus were beaten, with 14 of them detained for short periods of time. In the first week of February, activists lighting candles in solidarity with those martyred in the Egyptian revolution were beaten and humiliated. The Syrian authorities are certainly well aware that any Syrian empathy towards the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions involves some form of opposition to the Syrian regime, when taking into consideration that the situation against which the Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans revolted, is the same as the situation which prevails in Syria today..

Accordingly, talk abounds about a return to “public sector” economics, and about activating the role of the Ba’ath Party and the “Union of Revolutionary Youth”, (an organization affiliated with the Ba’ath Party that has a monopoly over youth employment in Syria but which has been neglected for the last ten years). If what is taking place is true in this regard, then it is an indication of a predilection to adopt a holistic solution in confronting the wave of democracy. Meanwhile, it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy and truth behind all the rumors circulating. But what can be said with a certain degree of confidence is that there are many rumors and, that many of these rumors contradict each other, all of which are strong indicators of the general atmosphere of confusion and disorder prevailing in the country.

While it is difficult to speak about what Syrians are actually thinking, one would not be mistaken in stating that some are more honest, today, in expressing their opposition and in expressing their desire for political change. These voices are no longer limited to the usual narrow circle of political dissidents and activists, but also include youth of both sexes who are speaking out with unprecedented audacity and boldness on the pages of Facebook or within their own circles. A restless and eager hum about change can be heard from diverse circles that once used to be more discreet. It appears that no one is seriously contemplating the idea that we are different from Egypt or Tunisia, or

that we cannot have a revolution, or that there is nothing to justify the eruption of a revolution.

This does not negate the fact that there are genuine differences between Syria and these other Arab countries, which in any case also differ from one another. But, the differences are in the types of obstacles, challenges and problems facing the prospects of revolution. Among these factors, fear of the regime is

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not the most important. Of course, this fear is present. However, the situation was the same in Tunisia, in Egypt and in other countries but perhaps, to a lesser extent. At the same time, it has been proven that peaceful, popular protests can triumph, especially if tens and hundreds of thousands participate in them. Indeed, the simplest lesson to be drawn from the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions is that the cost of change is much less than the cost of maintaining the status quo; and that the moral and political gains of change are immeasurably higher than what the status quo has to offer and perhaps at a later stage, in material gains as well. It may well be that the hopes of Arab governments in deferring this lesson, or in raising the cost of changing these regimes – including tipping the balance in favor of the status quo –, are hanging on the fate of the Gaddafi regime. All this is being carefully monitored on an extensive scale in Syria by the authorities and by many different segments and generations of Syrian society.

But perhaps we should ask whether the Syrians fear one another? Syria is a Near Eastern country comprised of diverse religions, sects and ethnicities. The level of national consensus is not ideal in Syria. Moreover, all Syrians are aware of this reality and fear it. Syrians live adjacent to the painful Iraqi experience, and to the Lebanese example, which is also not encouraging. And, although

it increasingly appears that these communal differences and disparities do not carry in themselves the risk of civil strife and conflict, there remains a framework for conflict that is not immune to manipulation by internal and external forces, which may find a fertile environment for exploitation. This is what haunts any prospective hopes and aspirations for extensive political change in Syria.

Syria is also different from other countries in the region in that it is the only Arab “republic”

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in which hereditary rule was actually imposed. The Syrian president is a young man in his mid-forties. This is in contrast to the fact that hereditary rule was one of the first tenets brought down by the Egyptian revolution, and before it the Tunisian revolution; it was overturned before the two leaders in these countries actually fell from power. It also seems that this same principle has been brought down in Yemen by an explicit pledge made by Yemen's president himself. The same is true of Libya where its patriarch and all his successors have lost all legitimacy both domestically and externally.

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Another important difference is that Syria is a “rejectionist”<sup>1</sup> country. It has opposed peace with Israel and has long been a supporter of resistance movements in the region, particularly Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, in addition to having maintained a close alliance with Iran in confronting the American-Israeli

axis. This is an important matter. The regime in Syria has a “cause”, and no real differences exist between Syrians on these issues. This was not the case with the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and uprisings against other regimes. In Syria, as in other Arab countries, there is a lack of individual and collective dignities. However the lack of collective dignity in Syria is less severe due to Syria's open enmity and hostility towards Israel's occupation of Arab territory.

Thus due to the concerted influence of all these factors, different sectors of Syrian society identify with the regime and stand by it. The question is whether this support is greater than that enjoyed by the Ben Ali and the Mubarak regimes amongst Tunisians and Egyptians? There is no definitive answer to this question, but it is most likely in the positive. Mubarak and Ben Ali supporters are opportunists. In Syria however, ideological elements factor into the support shown for the existing regime, in addition to the gains and privileges enjoyed by opportunists. Besides the “rejectionist” policy, the regime espouses elements of “modernity” and “secularism” that are welcomed by religious and sectarian minorities within a pluralistic Syrian society comprised of diverse religions and faiths, which is also includes a not insignificant part of the Sunni Islamic community that also embraces these values.

Ultimately, it is difficult to predict the possibilities and prospects for Syria in the near future. The grievances regarding freedoms, justice and dignity do exist, as do grievances about corruption, unemployment, mismanagement and poverty. However, factors also exist that partially mitigate these grievances.

The number of youth in the Syrian age pyramid exceeds that of most other Arab countries, with unemployment amongst youth aged between 15 and 25 years currently being very high, at over 25% of Syrian youth. Moreover, in recent years, poverty has increased. A United Nations study conducted seven years ago estimates that the number of people living

<sup>1</sup> The Arabic term “*mumana'a*” refers to the act of rejecting or opposing the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries.

under the poverty line is high, with 31% of the population (or over 23 million people) at the higher end of the poverty line living on two U.S. dollars per day, while over 10% of the population is at the lower end of the poverty line on \$1.00 per day. It is likely that these numbers have grown today with the reduction in the

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state’s role in the country’s social and economic development. There is also no doubt that the numbers of those marginalized have increased as well. This is especially the case after the exodus from the Syrian Peninsula that has taken place over the past three or four years, as a result of rising fuel prices, poor agricultural seasons and the growing shortage of land due to high population growth in that region, which also suffers from the lowest economic growth in the country.

Is it possible that the impact of youth unemployment, poverty, corruption, marginalization and humiliation will triumph over fear, “rejectionism” and the preference of security over freedom, and give rise to a popular intifada<sup>2</sup>? Can the educated middle class engage in a peaceful, popular intifada that alleviates the apprehensions associated with fractional and factional identities, and expands the popular base of social and political protests?

Calls were made on Facebook for two “days of rage” in Syria on the 4th and 5th of February 2011. However, this call met with little resonance and instead led to a rigorously

heightened security alert. In part, the reason for this failure was the fact that those calling for the protests included names of people who live abroad, carry little weight in Syria, and do not enjoy broad respect. Another reason was that the call appeared to come “from above”, with little heed paid to the opinions of those most concerned, or with little understanding of their psychological and political readiness. Moreover, the call was made prior to allowing enough space for people to absorb the experience of the Egyptian revolution, which at that time had not yet achieved its primary objective, the overthrow of Mubarak.

In what direction has the collective Syrian psychology shifted in recent weeks? Perhaps, it has become more daring and more confrontational across wider circles. It has been repeatedly said that slogans against the regime have appeared on the walls of several cities. People with direct links to anti-regime activities have been arrested, some of them teenagers in the Southern city of Daraa (during the first week of March).

Despite this, it remains impossible to predict the course of events. All possibilities exist. Diverse age groups from the educated middle class appear motivated and ready to engage in protest activities. What is not clear is how these agendas will be met, and when and how they will rise above the wall of fear and submissiveness. From a personal perspective, it appears that the situation is more fluid than what appears on the surface, and the prospects of taking to the streets seem greater than ever before.

A great margin of the uncertainties in our assessments is induced by the general surprise generated by these revolutions; and, it is likely that these revolutions surprised Tunisians and Egyptians as much as anyone else. Moreover, there are factors involved that were previously not so clear to intellectuals and political activists, such as the role that youth would play, the impact of communications technology and the fact that strong aspirations for dignity and freedom existed en masse in our countries.

<sup>2</sup> The Arabic term for “*uprising*” that has been adopted by most contemporary Western dictionaries.

Furthermore, the transformations are taking place in a number of Arab countries and Egypt in particular, which in itself is a catalytic factor whose ramifications are difficult to assess now. These conditions make it even more impossible to predict Syrian possibilities. Indeed, a success for the Libyan people in bringing down their tyrant and his regime would be an encouraging step for other countries, including Syria.

### The Role of the Opposition

Two contradictory points can be made vis-à-vis the Syrian opposition. The first is that in this century, it has been able to establish a definitive presence over the years – the kind of presence that the local opposition in Tunisia and in Egypt was also able to establish. At the same time, the influence wielded by this opposition has been limited, and its impact weak with regard to the course of events unfolding in the country. It has succeeded in positioning demands for democracy, general freedoms and state reform in the minds and thoughts of the public. However, it has been incapable of communicating and connecting with broader social forces or with the country's youth. Moreover, the opposition's thinking has remained strongly focused on the question of authority. Whatever the developments will be in coming months for Syria, no one expects that the local "secular" opposition will have a proactive or catalytic influence, in much the same way as was the case in Egypt and Tunisia.

The situation of Syrian Islamists resembles that of their Tunisian counterparts, yet differs from that of the Egyptians. Syrian Islamists suffered from extremely harsh suppression in the early 1980s; for over thirty years, the penalty for being affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood was the death sentence (in recent years, this has been reduced to 12 years imprisonment). Accordingly, leading Syrian Islamist figures reside outside the country, in Europe or in certain Arab countries. Thus it is difficult to assess what the socio-political weight of the Islamists would be if they actually enjoyed a legal presence in Syria; however, it is safe to

say that they are probably much less influential than local state security forces claim or would like to imagine.

One of the gains made in the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions is that, in part at least, the efficacy of the "Islamist dread" was undermined. It was proven that the Islamists were not the only alternative to the regime and that the general sentiments for prospective intifadas were nationalist and civic, not Islamic. Moreover, the Islamists actually joined these intifadas as followers – indeed, in the case of the Egyptian Islamists, they showed a willingness to stop early on, and it was the dynamics of the revolution that actually drove them forward.

The Syrian-Kurdish component has a unique place in the general Syrian context. Making up about 10% of the population, Kurds in Syria suffer various forms of discrimination that have culminated in the state not recognizing them as an ethnic group. They are not allowed to teach or speak their language, and are prohibited from developing or pursuing their cultural characteristics and identity. At the same time, over 300,000 of them are denied Syrian citizenship, and do not possess any other form of citizenship. Due to this discrimination and prohibitions, the Kurdish community in Syrian society is highly politicized and is strongly opposed to the regime. However this opposition to the regime often overlaps with an opposition to Arabs in general – the signs of which appeared in 2004, during an incident at a football game which ignited a widespread Kurdish intifada in the cities of Qamishli and Hasaka that spread to areas in Aleppo and Damascus with Kurdish presence.

And, although certain Kurdish organizations participated in the opposition coalition of the "Damascus Declaration" (for National Democratic Change), the influence of these organizations on the Kurdish public is not a foregone conclusion. In the spring of 2004, Kurdish parties were reluctant and hesitant about how to proceed. They put a foot amongst the protesting public and a foot outside, in fear of the authorities. The question today is would

the eruption of Kurdish protests stimulate wider protests in which Arabs would participate; or, the contrary, would they incite Arab concerns that the authorities could exploit these protests to raise fears on a national scale, and thus thwart any prospects of a wider popular intifada? It would be difficult to say for sure. But undoubtedly an intifada instigated by the Arabs, in which the Kurds participate, would surely be more in accordance with the public's interest.

Recently, there has been talk about promises made by the authorities during a meeting with Kurdish leaders in Aleppo, to address Kurdish grievances. How? When? The exact details are unknown.

### The "International Community"...!

The modern Arab experience has engendered a deep suspicion about the intentions of the "international community", which both generally and specifically means the West. The case of Palestine and the 2003 Iraq war justifies these suspicions to the utmost degree. And, despite the abhorrence felt by Syrians towards the crimes committed by the Gaddafi regime, they do not want to see Western intervention in their country.

In addition to old suspicions, there are fears that the democratic and nationalist nature of these revolutions will be corrupted or manipulated. And no one believes that the flowing red blood of Libyans and not their black petrol is what has given rise to the fragile sympathies of Western powers. Finally, there is nothing in the memory of current generations that can detract from this mistrust. This applies to Syrians, like other Arabs – perhaps even more so due to the deeply hated Israeli occupation regime in a part of the country.

Indeed, the US-Israeli alliance is one of the main obstacles to democracy in Syria. This is the case especially since the militarization of political and cultural life has been facilitated by this axis. Feelings of injustice and alienation are channeled towards isolationist currents and interests that exploit factional identities, and

ideas of law and justice are undermined by the justification (by the West) of everything Israeli does, despite the vast similarities between Israel and Arab regimes, in its tyranny, in its belief in the use of force, and in its refusal of the principle of equality.

Ultimately, the best one could hope for is that the "international community" will play no role in any political developments that may unfold in Syria. The greatest gift to democracy in Syria would be for the West to oblige Israel to withdraw from the Occupied Golan Heights, after it has remained silent or supported that occupation for almost 44 years. Is the aim of the democratic Arab revolutions to encourage American and European positions that are more advantageous to Arabs and Arab interests? It is too early to judge in this regard. The revolutions, which rose up in the name of

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dignity, anticipate respect from Western powers and expect them to rectify negative cultural representations and perceptions about Arabs. For Arabs, and naturally Syrians, there is great interest in reducing the psychological, political and cultural barriers that exist between them and the West, which is still today the cultural and political center of the world.

Finally, some aspects of Western interest in Syrian affairs can be less controversial and less suspicious from a Syrian point of view, for example those related to media coverage and humanitarian affairs. Everything else can be counterproductive.

**Translation from Arabic by Mona Abu Rayyan.**

The following interview “On Syria: Interview with Yassin al-Haj Salih”, conducted by Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon, was published by Al-Jadaliyya on 4 April 4 2011.

**Antoon: What is your analysis of the current situation in Syria? More specifically how the regime is handling demonstrations and their consequences?**

AL-HAJ SALIH: Syria is going through an acute national crisis. We have a closed and intractable political system facing unprecedented peaceful popular demonstrations, and the system only applied security solutions to political problems, which is why it is endeavoring to portray the popular uprising as the work of “armed gangs”, or terrorists. The system needs that type of diagnosis, because it knows no other cure than

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violence for national problems. Briefly, Syria is at a crossroad. Either it takes the hard path towards democracy, or the even harder and costlier Fascist option. Going back is no longer possible.

**Antoon: What is your reading of Assad’s speech? Does it indicate that lessons have been learned from Arab revolts and other events in the region, or the opposite?**

AL-HAJ SALIH: As far as analysis goes, the speech was stern: A conspiracy from the outside, and sedition inside. This kind of reading only allows for a violent security treatment of the problem, which is how the government has proceeded within days of the speech, specifically in the town of Duma, but also in Daraa and Homs. As far as promises are concerned, there is nothing specific. In reality, the mood preceding the speech (“spontaneous popular marches” in all Syrian cities), and the

disgraceful scene that accompanied it in *Majlis al-Sha’ab* (the People’s Council), as well as the atmosphere that followed in the media, and city streets all pointed to a country in a state of war, not in a state of reform or the like. You’re not reforming when you’re provoking an atmosphere of hysterics that is neither valid nor conciliatory in the country – an atmosphere of fear, hostility, and psychological distancing between Syrians. In my opinion, all the talk about reforms in Syria, while protesters are being killed and arrested every day, is irresponsible and self-deceiving. The speech doesn’t show that we’ve learned lessons from the Arab revolts. One would think that a revolution in Tunisia, and another in Egypt are reason enough for the Syrian regime to implement even wider reforms than it has promised. But after more than ten days of demonstrations in Syria, the president’s speech and the official Syrian discourse are out of touch with reality, and caught in a great state of denial: denial of any similarity with Tunisia and Egypt, denial of the legitimacy of internal demands. The regime gains its support from its ideology of “opposition”, which incorporates standing up to the American-Israeli axis regionally – a winning point in Syria and the Arab world –, and the doctrine of cultural difference and hostility towards the foreigner, which approaches the Islamic fundamentalist Asala doctrine, albeit a secularized version of it, under the general banner of Arab nationalism in its more traditional and isolationist form. Claiming that the uprising is a great external conspiracy can only emanate from this ideology.

**Antoon: What options will the regime resort to, should the demonstrators step up their demands for change?**

AL-HAJ SALIH: It seems to me that the regime is torn between the traditional logic of suppression on one hand, implementing reforms in appearance, that have with no real content, such as lifting the emergency law, and creating a new party law, and new media law, and on the other hand a Fascist nihilistic logic. The latter incorporates a wide crushing suppression

with the mobilization and incitement of loyalists against the mass of protestors, a strident national discourse that equates patriotism with loyalty to the regime (and thus opposition with treason), and finally the cult of the ruler. Syria has already experienced this, three decades ago, and the memory of the widespread intimidation during those crazy years is still fresh in the mind of my generation and the older one. And because of that costly memory, you see the youth spearheading the democratic mobilization that the country is witnessing today. They do not remember the years of horror.

The first option is more pragmatic, its underlying motto: There's no problem changing anything as long as everything remains the same. This has been the dominant orientation of the country in normal times. I doubt this can go on after today. But everything depends on the development of the popular uprising, and its ability to impose serious political change in Syria, which would turn the page on single-party and perpetual rule, and open the door for democratic progress.

**Antoon: Do you think that the regime's allies and its new friends will play a role?**

AL-HAJ SALIH: Turkey has generally played a positive role. It advised the Syrian government to implement serious reforms early on. It is believed to have a hand in the promise of the government to deal with the issue of 300,000 Kurds who are deprived of Syrian nationality, due to a chauvinist survey conducted 50 years ago. Turkey wants a stable Kurdish situation in Syria, to rehabilitate and repatriate hundreds of fighters from the Kurdistan Workers Party, which has origins in Syria. The Syrian-Turkish relation is based on reason and mutual interests, add to that a sense of cultural similarity. This gives Ankara a degree of influence, but it seems to me that the current crisis has revealed its limit, due to the quality of the Syrian political system and its weak mechanisms' for rational decision-making. In contrast, there are no confirmed reports about the possible role of Iran and Hizbollah in the current Syrian events.

I have no doubt both parties stand behind the regime. But they are being cautious. The talk about alleged participation of members of Hizbollah or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in crushing Syrian demonstrations in Daraa and other cities, is irresponsible, in my opinion, and smacks of black propaganda, which could have corrupt sectarian motivations. When it comes to suppressing demonstrations, the Syrian regime does not import; it exports. It is true that Hizbollah is closer to the regime than it is to the Syrian people's demands for freedom, which is at odds with its description as a resistance and liberation movement. The same applies to Hamas, which claims solidarity with Syrian leadership... and people!

**Antoon: What are the different currents, political and social, which form the core of the opposition's political mobilization?**

AL-HAJ SALIH: The organized opposition did not have a role worth mentioning in leading the popular protests or directing them, or even attempting to shape their political vision. In my opinion, whatever becomes of the Syrian uprising, the traditional opposition that stemmed from Socialist and Arab Nationalist roots, has entered its final phase. That is one side of a process whose obverse is the aging and end of the power of the Syrian political system inherited from the early seventies of the 20th century. While the regime can compensate for its loss by forced expansion, the traditional opposition has no means at its disposal to counteract it. It appears to me, that the nucleus of the uprising is a varied popular group, and includes a high percentage of educated middle class youth, who have good knowledge of the world, a good relation to technology, very little social security, due to the lower chances of employment, and dwindling chances of immigration. The age pyramid in Syria is very young with 60% of the population under the age of 25, whereas the pyramid of power and influence is old, heavy and sclerotic. In Syria as in the Arab world more generally, the youth represent a social argument not an age argument. And the varied range of

people participating in the uprising, with the youth in the lead, have nothing in common with a closed oligarchic system, which is rude in its security, shut in its politics, and based on social privileges and discrimination. A sensitive issue in Syria relates to the religious and confessional configuration of Syrian society. And the question that arises here is: Are the demonstrators mainly or exclusively Sunni Muslims? Two things can be said about this: On one hand, the uprising and its aspirations for freedom and democracy speak to a wide variety of Syrian sensitivities; its supporters and its active members represent

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the whole Syrian spectrum. Detainees, men and women, have very different origins. On the other hand, some of the most important figures on the field began their demonstration in mosques. This understandably upset the non-Sunni, secular demonstrators, and we've already started hearing some voices raising objections. The lack of religious slogans in the demonstrations is supposed to calm a part of that unease. The main chant of the demonstrations has been: "God, Syria, and freedom only!" which is better understood in comparison with the dedicated counterpart that calls for: "God, Syria, and Bashar only!" Another important chant has been "The Syrian people will not be humiliated!" The most prominent chants at the Rifai mosque on April 1 were: "Our soul, our blood, we would sacrifice for you, oh Daraa" and then "One, one, one, the Syrian people is one!" These are all general patriotic chants, which steer clear of religious and confessional differences. Some divert traditional chants praising the authorities, by exchanging the name of the ruler for Freedom, Syria, or Daraa. And at the funeral procession for the martyrs in Duma, on April 3rd, which I personally participated in, the main chant was: "There is no God but Allah, the martyr is

God's beloved!" This is a traditional religious chant with no particular political orientation. It is also interesting to note that the slogan "National unity, Islam and Christianity" was chanted in this conservative Islamic town. The content of most chants refers to Syria, freedom, the martyrs, and to Syrian cities and towns, especially Daraa, Latakia, and Homs. The general feel of the uprising is that it is national and all-embracing, where Islam represents a general heritage and language rather than a particular ideology. On a separate note, there was no Kurdish participation in the first two weeks of demonstration. The Syrian authorities had contacted Kurdish leadership before any protests began in Syria and promised to right chronic injustices. Also, Kurdish leadership in Iraq has apparently advised Syrian Kurds against mobilizing. But Kurds did participate in the marches of "Martyrs' Friday" on April 1st, in the towns of al-Qamishli and 'Amuda. They chanted, held up slogans in solidarity with Daraa, and banners that claimed: "Freedom is not an external conspiracy." Will the Kurds increase their participation in the coming days? It's possible.

**Antoon: What do you hope for as a voice from the opposition?**

AL-HAJ SALIH: I aspire to a normal political life in Syria, where I would feel safe, and where I could go back to my daily habit of reading and writing that I got used to over the years. I was jailed for a very long time in my youth, and I intimately know the meaning of prison, the meaning of torture, and the meaning of humiliation. And I know the meaning of dehydration, and of horror so great that knees become brittle. I know what my detained friends are going through, like 'Amer Matar, and Zaher 'Amrayn, and my friend and fellow prisoner from Hauran in the 'Adra Jail, near al-Zarzur, who was arrested on April 1st. It is ugly; it is inhuman. And it has to end.

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