

## **DOES THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION HAVE THE RESOURCES TO MATCH ITS AMBITIONS?**

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### **By way of introduction**

The Syrian opposition is not a new phenomenon. For more than forty years following the military coup d'état of 1963, the Baath regime in Syria faced domestic dissidence, followed by an opposition movement operating outside the country. First of all, opposition came from the Muslim Brotherhood, which had established itself in Syria at the end of the 1930s and led a ferocious struggle against the regime before being reduced to silence in 1982.

Since the accession of Bashar al-Assad to power, the opposition, both within Syria and abroad, formed around a mix of different organisations fighting for human rights, political parties, groups from civil society and individuals. They were very disperse and divided among themselves. In the past few years, there were several attempts made at joining together these various components, but they were all abortive.

One 'new arrival' on the political scene, Ribal al-Assad, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad, has for several years been leading a fight for the defence of human rights in Syria using an unusual approach. Although he is still little known internationally, this young 35-year-old entrepreneur who is mainly occupied directing ANN (Arab News Network) – a satellite television channel based in London – is trying to promote not only democracy in Syria but also a just peace in the Middle East. His emergence is probably the most striking development in the life of the opposition since the turn of the new millennium.

At the moment when Syria is redoubling its efforts to recover a certain legitimacy on the international scene and is reporting some notable successes, let us examine in some detail the real situation of the opposition forces.

### **Bashar al-Assad: a lost opportunity**

At his arrival in power during July 2000, Bashar al-Assad briefly raised hopes by delivering an inaugural address in which seemed at first to mark a break with the past. In fact, his mention of human rights, democracy and transparency prompted many Syrians to believe that their new president had the makings of a man who, without changing the regime, could at least relax the many restrictions on civil liberties.

However, the ‘Damascus Spring’ was short! To be sure, in November 2000, some discussion Forums appeared in which there were intellectuals representing various views. But these gatherings were quickly subjected to an authorisation procedure. Then the participants were instructed not to touch upon political debates, and finally the forums were purely and simply prohibited. Nonetheless, in the wake of the ‘Damascus Spring’ the Syrian political landscape became more diversified, and many political parties, circles and associations flourished, both on the Left and on the Liberal side.

During the summer of 2001, many waves of arrests hit the dissidents. Many influential businessmen who were convinced that the market economy needed freedom to prosper were arrested along with intellectuals. They were tried before the Supreme Court of State Security or by criminal courts and were sentenced to long prison terms for having believed the promises of the regime’s ‘opening up’ to society.

The publication in October 2005 of the ‘Damascus Declaration’ (see below) triggered a new series of arrests, followed by yet another in 2006.

In December 2007, the opposition was subjected to a third wave of repression: *‘In Syria, the margin for maneuver of the militants diminished considerably during the last two years. The recent questionings simply illustrate how the space for liberty has been constrained.’*<sup>1</sup>

In 2008, Damascus was made a cultural capital of the Arab world by UNESCO at the same time that more and more journalists, writers, poets and artists were rotting in Syrian jails without anyone getting very upset about it. On the contrary, we might say, since at the time the Syrian President was busy ‘reconquering’ the West. And, in his speech at the opening of each of the celebrations organised during 2008, he did not hesitate to say that *‘Damascus is the capital of the culture of resistance, because it symbolises Arab culture – the culture of liberty and the defence of this liberty’*<sup>2</sup> !

In a definitive manner, the end result of Bashar al-Assad’s nearly ten years in power has been catastrophic. The several timid initiatives made in the domain of freedoms have been offset and contradicted by the various state intelligence and security services.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, we have to acknowledge that the prison terms meted out to political opponents are less severe than previously, but the Syrian jails today are holding more political prisoners than in the time of Hafez al-Assad !

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by Nadim Houry, researcher for the Middle East and North African division of Human Right Watch during an interview with Arab Press Network on 12 March 2008 in <http://www.arabpressnetwork.org/articlesv2.php?id=1963&lang=fr>

<sup>2</sup> Sana, Syrian Arab News Agency, 19 January 2008 in <http://www.sana.sy/print.html?sid=157103&newlang=fra&req=archive>

<sup>3</sup> ‘Absolute control is further aggravated by the existence of a truly loose conglomeration of law and order forces with hazy contours. At least five intelligence/security agencies share responsibility for watching over the Syrian population: Al-Amn ad-dakhiliyya (Domestic Security), Al-Amn al siyassi (Political Security), Jama’at al-Murtada (Mourtada Group), Quwwat Khassa (Special Forces), Saraya as-sira (Brigades of Struggle). Most of the assignments entrusted to these organisations are redundant. In fact, all are more or less engaged in gathering intelligence and ‘weak signals’ which might cause one to think that some independent political forces are emerging or are organising themselves in the country. This competition, which may give an impression of disorder, only appears so: it allows the regime not to depend for its information – and thus for its survival – on a single source of intelligence or a single agency. We should add that two organisations of military intelligence, the Shu’bat al-Mukhabarat al-Askariyya (Military Intelligence, properly speaking) and the Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya (Air Force Intelligence) are also powerful levers for actions taken against any and all opposition: the first, has, inter alia, the task of surveillance and hunting down the opposition abroad, while the second – virtually the most powerful intelligence service in the country due to the fact that the late President Hafez al-Assad himself came from the Air Force –has the specialty of fighting against the Islamists.’ in <http://www.atlantis.org/publications/articles/l'opposition-democratique-syrienne-s'organise/> ‘Syria’s democratic opposition organises,’ Claude Moniquet, 17 November 2003, Atlantis Institute.

## The Syrian opposition in the years since the 1980s

The Syrian opposition may be described in schematic fashion as belonging to three groups:

- The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist opposition.
- The Kurdish opposition, which is especially active in Europe.
- The "rest" of the opposition: a variety of organisations whose leaders are either former members of the Baath party, like former Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam at the head of the NSF (*National Salvation Front*), or Farid Ghadry, an American-Syrian – a close colleague of Lebanese ex-General Michel Aoun – who directs the *Reform Party of Syria* (created in 2001) and in 2003 founded the *Syrian Democratic Coalition*.

### a. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists

The Muslim Brotherhood was for a long time the sole opposition force violently acting against the regime of Hafez al-Assad. At the end of the 1970s, they claimed responsibility for numerous attacks which caused many hundreds of deaths. Following an assassination attempt against Hafez al-Assad, in June 1980, a thousand Islamist prisoners were eliminated. And in February 1982, when an insurrection broke out in the city of Hama under the direction of the Brotherhood, its suppression made many tens of thousands of victims. This episode put an end to the Islamist activity and to terrorist violence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

Today the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood arouses both distrust and rejection by a good number of other opposition movements though they participated in the NSF adventure and adhered to the 'Damascus Declaration' as we shall see further on. Since it was crushed, belonging to the Brotherhood in Syria is theoretically still punishable by the death penalty.

Based abroad, it nonetheless enjoys natural support within the Sunni Arab community, but its influence is weak because it is now far removed from the concerns of the population. Moreover, it has suffered a lot from internal divisions and from the permanent repression which weakened it considerably. The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood is organising and produces various publications from its base in London where its leader, Ali Sadreddin Bayanuni, took refuge after the Brotherhood was banned in Syria.

Generally speaking, the concept of a state based on the Sharia does not receive a warm welcome in Syria, a lay state similar to Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Various Islamist groups (a dozen or so at present) – which have broken with the Brotherhood – like that of al-Attar or of Jaoud al-Said, both signers of the 'Declaration of Damascus,' - try to take their place in an opposition which is now divided. They are promoting not the establishment of an Islamist state but a democratic model and parliamentary elections. The only exception is the *Hezb al-Tahrir* (the Party of the Liberation), a radical organisation which calls for the introduction of an Islamist state but refuses to consider any kind of violent action.

Aside from its great weakness on the ground, the main handicap of the Islamist opposition is probably that it is deemed unsuitable for association by the international community which knows what the promises of the Islamists are worth and remains skeptical about any 'democratic change' among the heirs to the Muslim Brotherhood.

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<sup>4</sup>The Hama affair had another consequence: through the refugees from this city who fanned out across the world, the Muslim Brotherhood put down roots in Europe, starting with a propaganda point set up in Aachen and Cologne.

Finally, one cannot ignore that a large number of sympathisers of the Muslim Brotherhood were purely and simply ‘recycled’ by the regime itself, either in the radical Palestinian organisations like Fatah al-Islam, or in the networks supporting Jihad in Iraq.

### **b. The Kurdish opposition**

This branch of the opposition is particularly divided and splintered. In fact it numbers more than a dozen parties, most of which are active either in the Kurdish region of Syria or abroad (Germany, Netherlands, etc.). Among the main components, we can cite especially:

- The Kurdish Democratic Front (*al-jabha*), led by Abdul Hamid Darwish, which brings together three Kurdish parties;
- The Democratic Kurdish Alliance in Syria (*attakhafuf*) which unites four parties but has no leader;
- A small alliance of three independent parties -*Yekiti* (united), *Azadi* (liberty) and the Movement of the Future;
- A fourth component which has distanced itself from the PKK (Workers Party of Kurdistan) and which brings together the *Democratic Union Party* and the *Democratic Kurdistan Party*.

The first two groups signed the ‘Damascus Declaration.’ We also note that many Kurdish parties and organisations decided to join the *Syrian Democratic Coalition* of Farid Ghadry.

The Kurdish parties claim to be peaceful militants and obviously are hoping for greater civil liberties but, above all and in a most utopian fashion, they hope to gain autonomy for the Kurdish region. The eternal divisions which undermine the Kurdish opposition are principally due to rivalries among its leaders; they hinder the emergence of a unified platform and of clear, but above all shared demands.

Apart from its divisions – pushed to such a degree that one may speak of ‘atomisation’ – the Kurdish opposition suffers from its embodying an irredentist ambition which the international community fears will lead to violence and destabilise the region. Thus, it will not obtain much support abroad.

### **c. The National Democratic Rally**

Founded shortly before the disappearance of the Muslim Brotherhood (1979), the National Democratic Rally (NDR) has long constituted the sole ‘organised’ framework of the Syrian opposition. The NDR unites six opposition parties of the Left which are not recognised by the authorities and are, thus, illegal. It has its own website, which disseminates tracts, documents and a journal in Arabic. Many managers of the various parties in this coalition played a role during the ‘Damascus Spring,’ including, in particular, Riad Al Turk, a Syrian opposition figure and veritable kingpin of the ‘Damascus Declaration.’

With a presence inside of Syria, the NDR could no doubt play a role in a transition to democracy, but it cannot be the spearhead due to its weakness and its base in the Left, which does not guarantee a break with the kind of ‘state socialism’ which has ruined the Syrian economy.

### **d. ‘The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change’**

In October 2005, some twenty parties, organisations, formations and Arab and Kurdish personalities following different political lines joined forces around a platform entitled the ‘Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change.’ The objective was clear: to achieve regime change for the purpose of introducing a ‘rule of law.’ Joined by the Muslim

Brotherhood, the signatories intend to establish 'a democratic regime peacefully, progressively, by means of dialogue, understanding and recognition of others (...)' .<sup>5</sup>

The 'Damascus Declaration' is certainly the most important opposition movement because it succeeded in uniting Arabs, Kurds and even the Muslim Brotherhood! The initiative led to the creation of a National Council in February 2006. Since then, apart from several meetings and some declarations and communiqués, the 'Damascus Declaration' has not succeeded in reorienting the regime and many of its leaders have been imprisoned.

This coalition is probably too heterogeneous to be able to drive real change and, above all, to manage such change. The inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood in the process is rather disturbing for those who remember that before the fall of the Shah of Iran, the Islamists claimed to constitute a 'revolutionary front' with the Left and with the students in order to better suppress all opposition once they came to power.

#### **e. Farid Ghadry and the *Reform Party of Syria***

Farid Ghadry announced the creation of the *Syrian Democratic Coalition* (SDC) with great pomp during a ceremony arranged in the National Press Club of Washington on 17 November 2003 in the presence of specialised correspondents from the American press. This movement was born two years after the creation of the *Reform Party of Syria* (RPS) by the same Farid Ghadry, and from the beginning it gathered together various small groups from the pro-Kurdish to pro-Christians and pro-Sunnis, all wishing to see the end of the regime of the al-Assad family.

The *Syrian Democratic National Gathering* (SDNG), an organisation founded in Syria in 1986 and directed by Marwan Hammoud in Austria, finally joined the coalition of Farid Ghadry in July 2006 following disagreements within the NSF of which it formed a part. The *Solidarity Council*, a Kurdish organisation based in Syria, joined the SDC in 2006.

The RPS has a website which is constantly exposing violations of human rights in Syria. Its leader, Farid Ghadry, has worked these past few years to position himself in the United States, in Europe but also in Israel. He in fact published many articles in the Israeli press and even visited the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) in June 2007 at the invitation of the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, deputy Tzachi Hanegbi. This was an 'affront' to the regime in Damascus which cost him his Syrian nationality several weeks later.

Though the RPS is well organised, it must be said that it does not represent many people and that its influence and its ability to upset the Syrian regime are very limited. Furthermore, Farid Ghadry – otherwise totally taken by democracy – looks like an American stooge. The fact that he supported the American move into Iraq obviously strengthens this image which, in the Middle East today, is not a guarantee of success.

Finally, his repeated and uncompromising criticism of the Alaouites in power under Bashar al-Assad, upset this minority.

#### **f. A setback for the *National Salvation Front***

In the spring of 2006, after years of speculation about the future of the Syrian opposition – long weakened and divided – the initiative of former Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam to merge his forces with Ali Sadreddin Bayanouni (the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood) elicited interest and hope among a goodly number of dissidents and opponents of the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

It is true that the *National Salvation Front* (NSF) set as its main objective setting up a government of transition in Syria. At the end of two days of working meetings which ended in

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<sup>5</sup> Le Monde, 17 October 2005.

the creation of the NSF in Brussels in March 2006, one delegate said that *'the role of the NSF is to be ready to fill the void if the Assad government falls.'*<sup>6</sup>

This improbable alliance – even against nature – which was constituted in 2005 on the occasion of the signing of the 'Damascus Declaration' – was dissolved three years after the creation of the NSF without eliciting much emotion either in Syria or abroad, where it finally became clear that both the opportunism of Khaddam and his thirst for revenge did not allow the Front to fulfill the difficult mission which was assigned to it.

It is true that the personality around which this union crystallized is, at the very least, problematic. Abdel Halim Khaddam was a supporter of the late Hafez al-Assad for many years and has therefore been perceived in Syria like a corrupt member of the old guard. Named Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1970, he was promoted to Deputy Prime Minister in 1974 and was put in charge of a delicate matter: Lebanon. He became Vice President in 1984, a post which he occupied until just after the death of Hafez al-Assad, when he headed the interim government and helped Bashar take his 'first steps' in the presidency.

Abdel Halim Khaddam was gradually removed from responsibility for Lebanon and he finally announced his resignation from the post of Vice President during the Baath party congress in June 2005. He joined the opposition and quietly left Syria for France. We note that his departure curiously coincides with the start of the investigation into the assassination of Rafic Hariri. In December of the same year, the Syrian parliament passed a motion calling for his 'being brought to justice for high treason' and his assets were frozen. He is considered by many to be an opportunist and, by his former comrades, to be a traitor who never accepted the fact that he was marginalised within the *establishment*. Though he has been supported by Paris, which is making yet another blunder in the region, Abdel Halim Khaddam is totally discredited. Having been associated with all the crimes and abuses of the regime for decades, he has no right to embody the change to which Syrian society aspires.

### **g. Rifaat al-Assad, the ex-successor designate**

Rifaat al-Assad, the younger brother of the late Hafez al-Assad and a former Vice President, was generally expected to succeed him at his death. In the end, this did not happen because, as we know, the constitution was modified in favour of Bashar al-Assad.

Rifaat al-Assad worked for a long time alongside his brother, playing a predominant role, because it was thanks to him that Hafez al-Assad succeeded in taking power in 1970. He then loyally directed an important area of the security services and was, in particular, the founder of the *Saraya al-Difaa*, the 'Companies of Defence,' a sort of guards unit close to the regime. During the 1970s and 80s, he worked especially to strengthen the role and place of women within Syrian society. Thus, he opened for them the door to the Army and led a ceaseless struggle against retrograde currents which aimed at subjugating them. He also succeeded in crushing the Islamist opposition of the Muslim Brotherhood, which displayed unequalled violence in conducting its political fight.

In 1984, recurrent dissension and the authoritarian excesses of his brother forced him to go into exile, first in France and then in Spain. Nonetheless, Rifaat al-Assad has continued to maintain excellent relations with the Arab countries, particularly with Saudi Arabia, where he enjoys a special relationship with King Abdallah, whom he meets regularly and Riyadh supports his cause. In fact, ever since the start of his exile, Rifaat al-Assad n'aura has never stopped working to unify the Syrian opposition in order to offer a democratic alternative. Even today he can count on many supporters in Syria and abroad, where his pragmatism and his thirst for reform have found resonance.

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<sup>6</sup> BBC News, 17 March 2006.

In addition, the many supporters whom he has kept within the officer corps and the Alaouite minority ensure that he would be able to lead a transition without conflicts.

But Rifaat al-Assad has never been able to convince Western leaders, who hesitate, when facing Syria, between two contradictory attitudes which are equally wrong: either to tolerate the regime and its excesses (thus, de facto, to support it) or to ignore it totally and be content with marginalising a country which is a regional power despite everything and whatever one might wish.

#### **h. Ribal al-Assad: another path to promoting human rights in Syria?**

Ribal al-Assad is the president of ANN, Arab News Network, a 24-hour a day satellite information channel created in the same year as al-Jazeera which broadcasts its programmes throughout Europe and the Arab countries. He seems determined to figure among those who are leading the fight in defence of human rights. Born in Syria but having settled in Europe at a very young age and educated mainly in France and in Great Britain, he is the son of Rifaat al-Assad and thus the cousin of the current President. Ribal al-Assad now spends the greater part of his time campaigning for interfaith dialogue between Muslims, Jews and Christians, and promoting freedom in Syria.

On 4 February, Ribal al-Assad was invited to a conference organised in London by the Legatum Institute entitled *The importation of democracy into Syria and the Middle East and the dangers posed by Iran*. In the course of his presentation, Ribal al-Assad not only delivered a catastrophic assessment of the situation of human rights in Syria, but he also explained how the regime acted to control the media, not just in Syria but abroad as well. His own television channel has been blocked by the Syrian authorities, just as they jammed broadcasts of the BBC Persian service in the context of the recent demonstrations in Tehran. He clearly called for establishing a transition process focused on political pluralism and he argued in favour of reforming the constitution in order to guarantee the separation of powers and protection of the minorities. In international affairs, he gave clear and unambiguous support to the 'Green Revolution' in Iran. Lastly, he confirmed that he favours a speedy and total peace with Israel, bringing about the return of the Golan Heights.

We note that the Organisation for Democracy and Freedom in Syria (ODFS<sup>7</sup>) recently created by Ribal al-Assad is not intended to serve as a unifying platform like the NSF or the RPS. Its objective is to denounce the tyranny of the regime in Damascus with a view to combining with international pressures and a domestic mobilisation so as to lead the regime to make ever broader concessions in the domain of human rights and freedom of expression. Ribal al-Assad is in fact convinced that the only a firmly crafted civic link will allow Syria to recover its national unity and that only this unity can protect it from a fate like the one experienced by its neighbour, Iraq

#### **By way of conclusion**

**For a long time, members of the Muslim Brotherhood were the only ones to assume the role of opponents to the regime. They used violence and they disappeared in violence as well. Since the year 2000, various platforms organised both abroad and inside Syria have tried, in vain and despite the relative success of the 'Damascus Declaration,' to unite the opposition by holding out the utopian hope of overturning the regime. The NSF and the RPS have both failed, In the case of the first, it was likely due to the nefarious personality of its leader, Abdel Halim Khaddam, who became a reformer only because he had been marginalised, and also because of his 'unnatural' alliance**

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<sup>7</sup> Organisation for Democracy and Freedom in Syria.

**with the Muslim Brotherhood. The second failed because it does not have any tangible base in Syria and because its opposition is almost exclusively carried on from United States territory.**

**In order to succeed where the others have failed and to offer a credible alternative to the regime of Bashar al-Assad, one must in particular be able to demonstrate a capability to bring together the elites, to succeed in finding international political support and have a solid base of support inside Syria. At the present time, no opposition force meets all of these conditions and, as we have stressed, most of them suffer from crippling handicaps.**

**In this context, Ribal al-Assad is, without doubt, introducing many new and interesting elements.**

**To be sure, he also has a handicap, that of being a ‘member of the family.’ But, paradoxically, what might seem to be an insurmountable obstacle can be transformed into a decisive advantage. As a ‘member of the clan,’ even if he is far away and his choices are not well known, Ribal al-Assad can reassure those in the Alaouite minority presently in power, who would like change but are afraid of losing control of this change. (We must remember that the Middle East is not gentle with minorities who are not capable of defending themselves.) Having left Syria while he was still a child, he has thus not been associated with any crime or abuse but can nonetheless count on the support of those who continue to take pride in his father, particularly in the Armed Forces. A veritable ‘cultural crossbreed,’ he is ‘Eastern’ enough to understand the Syrian soul but ‘European’ enough to know what the international community expects of his country – and also to reassure those who want more democracy.**

**He will not be able to succeed all on his own. He must bring together the energies inside the country and outside, but his democratic project is credible and able to attract others.**

**It is also essential that the United States and Europe understand that, on the one hand, present-day Syria cannot in any case be considered to be an honest and reliable partner despite its diplomatic successes. By giving it new legitimacy, you only support a brutal dictatorship. On the other hand, the great powers must not give in to their old demons. For the past few decades, in this tormented region Washington, Paris and London have moved back and forth among three contradictory choices which are all equally disastrous: support for dictatorships, trust in ‘democratic’ Islamism and the imposition of change by force. It suffices to contemplate today the tragic spectacle that plays out in the Middle East, along the shores of the Mediterranean and within Central Asia to be convinced that the time has finally come when we must dare to try another policy which would wager on a calm transition, on promoting human beings and respect for the local realities in a march towards progress.**