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## ***4. Contending Social Forces***

Discussing state-society relations implies understanding the variety of social forces in society in addition to those supporting the ruling elite, which may also be considered a challenge to the regime. As Landis indicates, the strength of the al-Assad's rule is relative. It can only be measured in relation to the opposition.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the contending social forces in Syrian society as well as the social and political issues they strive for. Contending social forces mean those individuals and groups in Syrian society questioning the legitimacy of the regime, i.e. the political opposition. Apart from the Ba'ath Party and the parties cooperating under its leadership in the NPF, all other parties were considered illegal by the regime during the period 2006-2010. Art. 8 of the 1973 Constitution states that "[t]he leading party in the society and the state is the Socialist Arab Ba'ath party. It leads a patriotic and progressive front seeking to unify the resources of the people's masses and place them in the service of the Arab nation's goals."<sup>2</sup> The political opposition questions, by its very existence, the constitution-based leadership of the Ba'ath Party.

In the Syrian context, contending social forces can be divided into three categories, which in practice are interlinked in some cases:

- Faith-based opposition: Islamist parties and groups fall under this category. The most important Islamist parties and groups in Syria are the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Liberation Party and Salafist groups. The latter two strive for an Islamic state;
- Ethnicity-based opposition: Kurdish parties form the main category. However, also Assyrians have founded their own political parties along ethnic lines, such as the case of the Assyrian Democratic Organisation;
- The secular opposition: except for some small leftist parties, like the Communist Action Party, the other parties and groups can be considered to be a part of the liberal democratic opposition. Most of the latter have become party to the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change.

Within the political opposition, the political parties seem to be the weakest. As Landis and Pace note, "[t]he combination of security pressures and lack of internal democracy have rendered the

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<sup>1</sup> Landis, 2012: 2 of 10.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution Syrian Arab Republic, 1973: 2 of 15.

parties brittle and prone to splintering. State agents easily infiltrate parties, foment internal discord and form breakaway parties with disaffected members [...] With the exception of the Kurdish parties, whose members are resoundingly nationalist; none have planted roots in society.”<sup>3</sup> The active membership of these parties is small. While the political parties aim at gaining power - or at least control the power of the rulers - CSOs aim at fostering the interests of their participants. The tie between the opposition and civil society is the people organising themselves around social, economic and cultural issues. Depending on the issues, such development might be considered as a potential threat by the regime, especially if on the side, extra allegiances are established with opposition parties and movements. Intentionally or not, the activities of these groups and activists might support a political project threatening the position of the regime. Such people and organisations might be considered by the government as a potential threat, especially if they ally themselves formally or informally to political opposition movements and parties, providing the opposition with a broad social network. The government may perceive these groups as a threat to its position and/or security, if these groups get support from abroad or have outside contacts. In subchapters 4.2 until 4.4, these contending forces will be further discussed. Subchapter 4.5 looks into foreign pressures on the Syrian regime.

Any political reform in Syria would have to deal with is the question of the social, cultural and ethnic configuration of the society. That discussion, dealt with in the next subchapter, centres on the perceived national identity of the Syrian state and society. Two issues play a central role: Arabism and Islam.

## **4.1 Multiple and Competing Identities**

Syrian society is complex, consisting of different ethnic and religious groups that settled historically not only within the boundaries of present-day Syria, but also in neighbouring countries. Syria has an estimated 19.4 million inhabitants in 2007<sup>4</sup> compared to about 12 million in 1990. Syria’s population has doubled in 25 years and the growth rate has averaged 2,7% a year over the last five years. This places continuous pressure on the country’s infrastructure and resources. Some 75% of the population is under the age of 35, with more than 40% under the

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<sup>3</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 50.

<sup>4</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008. The press statement indicated that the counting did include neither the Syrians living abroad nor the Iraqi’s in Syria.

age of 15.<sup>5</sup> Syria is rapidly urbanising – around 55% of the population<sup>6</sup> lives in cities.<sup>7</sup> Besides the capital Damascus, major urban centres include the cities of Aleppo, Lattakia and Homs. Cities like Damascus and Aleppo each host several million inhabitants. Smaller cities such as Deir e Zor, Hassakeh, Quamishli, Raqqa, Idlib, Daraa, Sweida, Tartus and Hama are also confronted with rapid population growth.<sup>8</sup>

Reliable statistics about the religious and ethnic composition of Syria's population do not exist.<sup>9</sup> The population, including more than 400,000 Palestinian refugees, is estimated to be over 90% Arabs. Arabic is the official and most widely spoken language in Syria. The Kurds, linguistically an Indo-European people, constitute the largest ethnic minority, making up some 9% of the population. Most Kurds live in the Northeast of Syria and many of them still speak the Kurdish language. Sizeable Kurdish communities have settled in most large Syrian cities, often in search of jobs and income and are in many cases, much like the until 2011 stateless Kurds, working in the informal sector.<sup>10</sup> Syria also has a sizeable Armenian community, which fled the atrocities of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Turkey. Unlike the Kurdish community in Syria, the Armenians have full rights to teach, speak, write and publish in their language. Since 2003, a large number of Iraqi refugees have fled to Syria and settled in the main cities, especially Damascus. In 2007, according to Syrian authorities, there are an estimated 1,5 million Iraqis staying in Syria. Among the 180,000 refugees registered by UNHCR in Syria in late 2007, about

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<sup>5</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008: 8.

<sup>6</sup> EC Delegation Damascus, 2009: 7.

<sup>7</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008: 9.

<sup>8</sup> EC Delegation Damascus, 2009: 34. There are some important demographic factors underlying this process of rapid urban development, which deserve special mention:

- Population growth: growing at an annual rate of over 2.3%;
- Rural-to-urban migration within the borders of the provinces and increasingly towards Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and other main cities;
- Internal population displacement resulting from the Israeli occupation of Syrian lands;
- International migration and influx of refugees, mostly Palestinian, Lebanese and Iraqi.

<sup>9</sup> George, 2003: 3. The last census was in 1962; the results have been questioned especially with respect to the government's decision not to recognize the Syrian nationality of a large number of Kurdish citizens. This group is today between an estimated 200,000 – 300,000 persons and does not enjoy the same civil rights as other Syrians. A few of the stateless Kurds are registered in the alien administration of the governorate of Hassakeh as alien (*ajanib*) and have a special identity card. Others, the *maktoumeen*, are non-registered. Although President Bashar has promised to look into the issue of stateless Kurds in Syria on several occasions, no decision has been taken. Only in 2011 after the upheaval against his regime started, the President gave instructions to give the Syrian nationality to those Kurds registered at the Aliens Office in Hassakeh.

<sup>10</sup> Refugees International, 2006: 5. In April 2011, President Bashar al-Assad granted Syrian nationality to persons registered as 'foreigners' in Hassakeh, the Northeast region where most of the Kurds in Syria live. This decision, which positively affects the position of a part of the stateless Kurds in Syria, is widely seen as an attempt to stop the growing unrest and protest among this ethnic minority in Syria. The President has promised to deal with this issue over the years.

half indicate they are Sunni, one third Christian and the others are mainly Shia. At the end of 2011 the estimated number of Iraqi refugees in Syria is 1 million, of which 107,000 receive assistance from UNHCR.<sup>11</sup>

Syria's population is approximately 90% Muslim and 10% Christian. Three quarters of the Muslims are Sunni; the rest are divided among other Muslim groups, mainly Alawi (about 10% of the population), Druze, Ismaeli and Shia. The Christians belong to various orthodox and catholic churches. Each of Syria's sects and religions was – and, as Robert Kaplan describes in an article on Syria's identity crises, remain – concentrated in specific geographic areas. "In the centre was Damascus, which together with the cities of Homs and Hama, constituted the heartland of the Sunni Arab majority. In the South was Jabal Druze (Druze Mountain) where a remote community of heterodox Muslims lived who are resistant to Damascene rule and had close ties across the border with Transjordan. In the north was Aleppo, a cosmopolitan bazaar and trading centre containing large numbers of Kurds, Arab Christians, Armenians, Circassians<sup>12</sup> and Jews, all of whom felt allegiance more to Mosul and Baghdad (both now in Iraq) than to Damascus. And in the west, contiguous to Lebanon, was the mountain stronghold of the coastal region of Lattakia, dominated by the Alawis."<sup>13</sup> While the Sunnis are the largest religious group, this fact should not be given too much weight because it is a very heterogeneous group both in ethnic as well as in socio-political respect: "Arabs, Kurds, tribes, sedentary farmers and often small owners, the urban bourgeoisie, middle class and urban poor."<sup>14</sup>

Since 1961, the Syrian state is called the Syrian Arab Republic. According to Art 1 of the 1973 constitution, it is a democratic, popular, socialist and sovereign state. The people living in Syria are considered to form part of the Arab nation. Although the state is considered secular, Article 3 of the Constitution refers to Islam, in relation to the President: the religion of the President should be Islam; and Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of legislation.<sup>15</sup> The authorities introduce Syrian identity as Arab and Islamic. Secondary level education books in Syria only focus on Arab history and the Islamic character of the Arab identity. However, Syrian society in ethnic terms consists of Arabs and a number of non-Arab minorities such as Kurds, Assyrians,

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<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, 2012: 1 of 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ababsa, Roussel and Al-Dbiyat, 2007: 71. The Circassians, originally from the Caucasus, arrived in Syria between 1907 and 1911 as part of the Ottoman Army and became refugees after the empire fell apart.

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, Robert D., 1993: 2 of 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ghazzal, Dupret and Courbage, 2007: 27.

<sup>15</sup> Constitution Syrian Arab Republic, 1973: 2 of 15.

Armenians, Turkmen, Circassians and a small number of Jews. In particular the Kurds, the largest ethnic minority, are confronted with discriminatory measures; they are not allowed to teach in their official language, not even in private schools, nor are they permitted to publish in Kurdish.

While Syrian society in religious terms is predominantly Islamic, it has a substantial Christian minority. Both the Islamic majority as well as the Christian minority consists of many different denominations. While the Muslims in Syria are dominated by the Sunni interpretation of Islam, there are Ismaili, Druze, Alawi and Twelver Shia. In the past, the latter Islamic minorities faced persecution from the Sunnis. The Kurds are mostly Sunnis, although there are also Kurds who belong to the Yezidis.<sup>16</sup> There are a substantial number of Christian churches present in Syria, Orthodox as well as Catholic. Christian communities belong to the oldest inhabitants of the country and the region, long before the conquest of the region by Arabs coming from the Arab peninsula. Christian minorities are allowed to have their religious services in their own language as well as teach these languages in their private schools.

There is respectively a big gap between the view presented by the regime on Syria's society (Arab and Islamic) and the reality (multi-ethnic and multi-religious). In the words of Yasseen Haj Saleeh, "Arabism is part of Syria and not the other way round and Islam is part of Syria and not the other way round."<sup>17</sup> While the regime's ideology is secular and pan-Arabic, its actual political conduct is different. As discussed in Chapter 3, the authoritarian regime in Syria is community-based, like in many other countries in the Middle East. The identity of its citizens is predominantly linked to their ethnic and religious communities. In the case of Syria, people from the Alawi minority form the core of the regime. The state is not neutral with regard to different interest groups in society. The state is an instrument for the ruling elite to protect their position of power. Through policies of co-optation, the regime created client-patron relations with the leadership of tribal, ethnic or religious communities as well as other groups in society. In this way the regime enlarges its social basis in return for political stability. This reality is however hidden and even denied by the regime, by imposing its pan-Arab ideology as a major pillar of legitimacy. This ideology is carried out through the Ba'ath party and the people's organisations, the education system and the regime-controlled media. Authoritarianism is a necessity for the survival of this kind of regime as well as for those people and groups that have tied their fate to

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<sup>16</sup> Their belief consists of a mixture of Kurdish beliefs and Sunni Islam.

<sup>17</sup> Saleh, 2006: 3 of 9.

the regime through their leaders; in other words: “[...] groups that closely identify with tyrannical regimes will stand to lose a lot if these change, while other groups bear all sorts of grudges.”<sup>18</sup> As a consequence of this contradiction between ideology and practices of the regime, it is understandable Salamé concludes that the nationalist project under the Ba’ath party has failed.<sup>19</sup> What remained is authoritarianism in a secular state. If secularism as a practice and ideology crumbles down, then the chances of a confrontation between communities will increase. With the growing visibility of Islam in the public sphere, this chance seems even more likely. In Syria, Landis and Pace note that there already is an on-going cultural war between Islamists and Liberals. It is a confrontation that goes to a certain extent also along class lines; “[a] culture of greater liberalism is growing among Syria’s upper and middle classes even though it remains in competition with Islamism, which predominates among the lower middle classes.”<sup>20</sup> While Liberalism can be translated as seeking expression of individual civil and political rights and thus a potential for a pro-democracy civil society movement in Syria, it should be clear that it is confronted with powerful obstacles, which to a certain extent profit from each other. On the one hand there is the authoritarian state, controlling society through the Ba’ath party and the security services, but on the other hand there are the influential leaders of a community, or clan (*asabiya*) based society. The battle for human rights and democracy in the Arab world is according to Salamé on two fronts, which fits the Syrian profile: “[o]n the one hand, it is the common struggle against dictatorships and on the other, the necessity of keeping communities from confining individuals within them.”<sup>21</sup> Hence, creating space for a culture of human rights is above all creating an independent judiciary system, as well as having and implementing laws, which protect the rights of individuals against the state, but also against other social forces, such as powerful economic and social groups.

While on the surface Syrian society appeared calm in the period 2006-2010, in reality people did not have many possibilities to express themselves and there was a constant threat of repression. Although the number of political detainees decreased substantially in the first years of Bashar’s presidency, since 2005 it has dramatically increased. By 2011, the number of arbitrarily detained people was estimated between 2,500 and 3,000.<sup>22</sup> Based on the available yet incomplete data on political prisoners provided by the Syrian Human Rights Information

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 5 of 9.

<sup>19</sup> Salamé, 1994: 8.

<sup>20</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 65.

<sup>21</sup> Salamé, 1994: 10.

<sup>22</sup> Shril, 2011: 3.

Link, an initiative of human rights activist and lawyer Razan Zaitouneh, there are three categories of people, who are according to the ruling elite, considered a threat:

- Islamists: The overwhelming number of persons arrested is suspects accused at aiming to change the political and socio-economic nature of the state. Within this category, three groups can be discerned: those accused to be part of the Muslim brotherhood, those accused to be member of the Islamic Liberation Party and those considered to be Salafist. The last category is the majority. All of these persons are Sunnis and suspected of aspiring to create a state based on the Islam;
- Kurds: Although all Kurdish political parties are banned, almost all Kurds are accused of being members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or the Syrian wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). They are also accused of secessionist activities;
- Individuals actively striving for a secular Syrian state on a democratic basis: These people are often accused of spreading false information and of undermining the morale of the nation, thus providing support to hostile (that is, Western) states. Most of these people have signed the Damascus Declaration.

A detailed outline of political prisoners and the presumed reason for detention in the period 2007-2010 can be found in Annex 3.

## **4.2 The Islamist Opposition**

In the Arab World, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jihadists (groups like Al Qa'aida and Hizb al Tahrir) represent the two main Sunni Islamist streams today. Ideologically, there are not many frictions. They share the same orthodox interpretation of Islam. They compete for mass support and state power but follow different strategies. The Muslim Brotherhood groups focus on changing the Arab World; the jihadist focus on the far enemy, that is the West (including the United States) and Israel. The Brotherhood groups, as Rubin indicates, are tactically flexible while the jihadists focus on armed struggle. "The Brotherhood groups view revolution as a long term process, which involves, among other things, providing social services to build mass support; educating and indoctrinating young people through institutions, participating in elections; compromising at times with Arab governments and showing restraint to avoid



repression; allying temporarily with non-Islamist groups.”<sup>23</sup> The latter does not exclude the use of violence in order to achieve goals. According to experts on Islam<sup>24</sup>, the main stream Sunni Islam interpretation in Syria is orthodox, also known as Salafists, but does not seek confrontation with the political authorities as long as the authorities are broadly Islamic and not foreign or non-Muslim. These Muslims reject violent political activism and they reject the practice of *takfir*, declaring other Muslims to be apostates. According to Mohammad Habash, (director of the Centre for Islamic Studies, grandson-in-law of the previous Mufti of Damascus, Ahmed Kuftaro<sup>25</sup> and a non-party related member of the Syrian parliament) most practising Muslims have conservative views on state-society relations and relations with other religious communities. The number of radical Muslims, those willing to establish an Islamic state by force if necessary, is very small. According to Habash, for conservatives, “[...] Islamic law is based on the Koran and the verified sayings and doings (the Sunnah) of the Prophet Mohammad, as they are unanimously viewed by respected scholars. Thus conservatives reject democracy, because it subjects the will of God to popular opinion. For them, the ultimate authority within a society is God’s revelation to the people.”<sup>26</sup> However, moderates or reformists among the Muslims supporting socio-economic modernisation, allow for the individual to make their choices (a position of importance especially for women) and do not see democracy and Islamic teachings as contradictory: “[a]s for attitudes toward non-Muslims (or non-practising Muslims, for that matter), conservatives believe that the coming of Islam abrogated all other religions, while reformists believe that Islam completes other religions, but does not invalidate or disprove them. [...] However, conservatives do not support the violence against non-Muslims. On the contrary, the jurisprudential traditions of Islamic conservatism obligate Muslims to be just in their treatment of non-Muslims. Thus conservatives and reformists agree that the right of others should be observed and preserved.”<sup>27</sup>

The Syrian regime has a complicated relationship with the Islamic religious Sunni majority. The core of the regime consists of people belonging to the Alawi, an Islamic minority considered heretic by many Sunnis. The fact that the President has to be a Muslim is another complication for the Alawi dominated regime. Alawi as a religious minority “must try to conform to the

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<sup>23</sup> Rubin, 2010: 10.

<sup>24</sup> See: website Syria Comment. In three articles the character of Sunni Islam is described: A) David Commins “The difference between Wahhabis and Muslim Brothers” 8 May 2007; B) Itzhak Weisman “Sufism and Salafism in Syria” 11 May 2007; C) Anonymous “Ashári Islam predominates in Syria” 20 May 2007. Downloaded 21 November 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Wieland, 2006: 111.

<sup>26</sup> Habash, 2005: 1 of 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

common outlines of Muslim orthodoxy to rule. Hafez al-Assad tried to eliminate this article in the 1973 constitution, but there were big demonstrations and violence; he relented leaving it in. Realising that he could not convert Syrians to liberalism, he spent considerable energy trying to convert Alawis into mainstream Muslims.<sup>28</sup> He received in this respect support from the Shia High Council led by Iranian Musa Sadr after the 1970 coup, which brought al-Assad to power, confirming that Alawis are Muslims.<sup>29</sup> Moderate Sunni Imams allied to the regime, such as Habash, declared that Alawis should be considered Muslims.

The improved relations between the regime and the Sunni religious establishment also created stronger relations between the predominantly Sunni business elite and the religious elite. Pierret and Selvik, referring to the potency of the *ulama*-merchant nexus, noted that all main lists of independent candidates in Damascus were composed of a majority of businessmen accompanied by a religious figure; “Muhammad Hamshu, a nouveau riche Sunni and crony of the Assad family, and Abd al-Salam Rajih, dean of the Kuftaro Academy’s shari’a faculty, came on to with about 80,000 votes each. Their list received significant public support from the local religious elite, its businessmen having built several large mosques in recent years and provided generous financing of religious associations.”<sup>30</sup> The fact that the regime invests in its relationship with the Sunni religious elite, as Pierret and Selvik<sup>31</sup> explain in their study on private welfare, Islamic charities and the rise of the Zayd movement, has not made religious leaders automatically pro-regime supporters. In 1994, the leader of the Zayd movement returned from asylum in Saudi Arabia and re-established the Zayd movement in Syria, which became a dominant player in the private charity sector in Damascus and beyond. The popularity of its religious leaders among Damascene merchants is very helpful in attracting funding from the private sector. According to Pierret and Selvik, the social base of the Jana’ad Zayd is much broader than that of the regime friendly networks, such as the one of Kuftaro. The case of the Zayd movement might be considered an indication of the limits of an authoritarian upgrading. In any case, attempts by the regime for authoritarian upgrading through an extended role of civil society in the case of Islamic associations are less safe than through state-sponsored NGOs. While there are no indications that these associations played a role in political mobilisation and socialisation in recent years until 2011, the success of these charities and their ability to attract people and financial resources make them a political factor. A similar observation might be

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<sup>28</sup> Landis, 2006: Without a page number.

<sup>29</sup> Wieland, 2006: 147.

<sup>30</sup> Pierret and Selvik, 2009: 600 and 601.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 595-614.

made about the success of the Sunni religious women network of the Qubaysi.<sup>32</sup> Thus, as noted by Pierret and Selvik, the political space opened by the regime for more civil society activities seemed to have as unintended consequence; some of the Islamic organisations through their social capital (*ulama*, i.e. religious leaders) were able to generate followers and funding, enabling them to keep some political distance from the regime and not to engage with it in a patron-client relation. For “[t]he most popular *ulama* can count on myriad highly devoted small and middle businessmen whose aggregate capital resources are impressive and whose constant support guarantees stable incomes and popular autonomy. [...] The most efficient private welfare providers, in other words, are those over whom the government has the least political control.”<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the latter development may indicate that policies of the Syrian regime to ensure political stability, may have had unintended consequences. Practices to accommodate possible contending Islamic forces, may have led to a strengthened position of the latter as can be seen in the case of certain conservative Sunni imams, like al-Bouti.<sup>34</sup> The regime’s apparent tolerance towards activities of certain radical Islamists calling for a Jihad against the US-led invasion of Iraq may also have had unintended consequences, such as local Jihadi’s with combat experience returning to Syria willing to fight the Assad regime.

## **Muslim Brotherhood**

Historically, the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has been the main Islamist party in Syria. The Muslim Brotherhood has its roots in social and religious activities (see Chapter 5). After independence, the Muslim Brotherhood participated in parliamentary elections as a political party. The social base of the party is the small and middle-scale merchants. In 1950, the Syrian parliament accepted Islam as the religion of the head of the state and a provision was included in the constitution that Islamic law is the main source (*al masdar al ra’isi*) for legislation.<sup>35</sup> The coming to power of a secular and Alawi dominated Ba’ath Party in 1963 led in 1964 to a first insurgency in Hama. The Muslim Brotherhood was banned but it managed to continue its activities. Its resistance against the regime culminated in 1976 in a new insurgency,

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<sup>32</sup> The Syrian Islamic Women’s Network was established by Shaykha Munira Qubaysi. It has developed into a large network of Sunni Islamic women groups giving social guidance to women based on Islam. The network is also very active in education and has established private schools.

<sup>33</sup> Pierret and Selvik, 2009: 605 and 610.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Bouti was killed in March 2013 in a bomb attack at the al-Iman mosque in Damascus.

<sup>35</sup> Rabil, 2010: 75.

which developed into a civil war (especially in Hama and Aleppo) against the regime. Only by using extreme brutal force and repression the regime managed to crush the rebellion. The fact that Hafez al Assad had apparently co-opted the Sunni Damascene bourgeoisie is also regarded as a factor of importance, explaining why the upheaval did not spread to Damascus.<sup>36</sup> Another element that might explain why the upheaval did not succeed overthrowing the regime, is that the group which led the uprisings belonged to the radical camp of the Islamists<sup>37</sup>, a minority among the Islamists.

In the years following the outburst, the regime tried to fragment the support to the Muslim Brotherhood by arresting and/or eliminating suspected radicals and co-opting moderates. Moreover, membership of the Muslim Brotherhood could be punished with the death sentence (Presidential Decree 49 of 1981); in practice, the mere accusation of membership leads to 12 years detention. As a result, many Muslim Brothers fled the country. The regime also closed down some Islamic associations, which were considered as places of political mobilisation. In the 1980s, severe restrictions were imposed on most Islamic activities, except on state-sponsored networks, like the Kuftaro Foundation. On the other hand, the regime invested in improving relations with the Sunni Islamic establishment and making the government more acceptable for pious Muslims. Even more so, Hafez al-Assad as well his son Bashar present themselves as guardians of moderate Islam. Through presidential amnesties during the 1990s, around 6,000 Muslim Brothers were released; also under the presidency of his son Bashar, several hundreds of former Muslim Brotherhood members have been released but the regime has not changed its position towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Amnesties were given to returnees of the Muslim Brotherhood, if they promised not to be politically active and if the Brotherhood condemns its past policies. While an unknown number of former Muslim Brothers returned under the amnesty, according to human rights organisations several returnees have nonetheless been arrested upon arrival in Syria, as well as family members of some Muslim Brothers visiting Syria. In other ways, the Syrian regime has made it difficult for the Muslim Brothers to regain ground in Syria. In addition to repression, it co-opted moderate leaders and allowed radicals to preach as long as it is instrumental to advancing the regime's interests. At the same time, the regime has to consider the tide of religious Islamic conservatism in society,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 73. According to Rabil, a factor that also played a role was the fact that Hafez al-Assad had reached some kind of understanding with the Damascene merchant bourgeoisie, apparently by somehow softening his socialist policies. Pierret and Selvik (2009: 600) make a similar observation arguing that the Islamic uprising revealed deep differences between the regime and different cities.

<sup>37</sup> Weisman, 2007: Without page number.

in order to keep Sunni religious leaders at their side. Religion has become part of the strategy of the ruling Ba'ath Party in Syria in order to ensure its survival in power. The regime makes a distinction between political Islam and the conservative Muslims.<sup>38</sup> The regime has relaxed its grip on religious life, after a period of repression in the 1980s in which it forbade any expression of religious identity outside the mosques. The visibility of Islam in society has grown. Muslims want to show off their Islamic identity, even more so than a couple of decennia ago. Given the fact that 90% of Syrians are Muslim and three quarters of the Muslims are Sunni, the Sunni identity is felt more among the people. The official Islamic institutions in Syria, but also in other "[...] Arab countries, have been content to leave the political sphere to the governments, extending their influence on the social sphere instead."<sup>39</sup> Potentially, the Islamists represent the most powerful alternative to the regime. Even though they are not allowed to organise themselves in political parties, they are influential. Moderate Islamists are already present as independent candidates in the Ba'ath party controlled parliament. Moreover, as Ottaway and Hamzawy mention, they do not need to participate in legal politics to survive for "[t]hey can concentrate on da'wa (proselytizing) and fostering society to live according to the rules of Islam."<sup>40</sup> Finally, the regime (also for its own internal security) has to take a strong stance regarding the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights, as well as of the Palestinian territory and the United States-led occupation of Iraq. Its strong stance towards these issues was helpful in gaining support among the Syrian population, including among those Islamists who function publicly in Syria. The regime maintains its position that Arabs have the right to resist foreign occupation, a point of view which gives the regime some legitimacy and which the regime uses in turn to justify its support to Islamist and other Palestinian groups and to Hizballah, as well as for its rejection of the United States-led invasion in Iraq.

The Muslim Brotherhood in exile has changed its approach towards political change. In the 1970s and 1980s, its discourse centred on the argument that the Syrian state had been taken over by a heretical Alawi minority.<sup>41</sup> The Brotherhood changed its policy in 2001, at the time of the Damascus Spring; under the new leadership of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian regime seemed to be willing to work towards political liberalisation. The political leadership of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in exile reformulated its political strategy and issued a statement. The main objective became a modern pluralist state in which the rule of law is supreme. The conflict

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<sup>38</sup> Ziadeh, 2007: Without a page number.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway, 2006: 6.

<sup>40</sup> Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2009: 3.

<sup>41</sup> George, 2003: 92.

between secular Arab nationalism and Islamism was considered to be no more of relevance. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has shown both in the past as well as at present political pragmatism, even to the extent that it was willing to embrace socialism.<sup>42</sup> “Nowadays, the Muslim Brotherhood, not only in Syria but in almost all authoritarian states, has discovered popular issues, most of which are commonly associated with Western-style democracy. They converge with the secularist opposition movements on four key issues: the call for human rights, emphasis on encompassing humanist elements in Islam, respect for an ideological and political pluralism and the guarantee of freedom of speech.”<sup>43</sup> In 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood also embraced the views of a broad coalition of the pro-democracy opposition in Syria calling upon the government for a peaceful process of change based on dialogue and on the principles of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change. The leadership did not call anymore for the establishment of an Islamic state, but adhered instead to principles of parliamentary democracy. The Syrian regime considered this policy change a ruse: trying to make use of the political developments in Syria.<sup>44</sup> The external political context at that moment was one in which the pressure on the Syrian regime mounted and the regime was isolated internationally due to accusations of being implicated in the murder of the Lebanese prime minister Hariri. The pressure became even tenser when the Syrian Vice President Khaddam defected and accused the regime of having murdered Hariri. The pragmatism of the Muslim Brotherhood made them acceptable to the opposition in Syria, however with some doubts given the Brotherhoods past position. The decision of the Muslim Brotherhood to cooperate with Khaddam divided the opposition. The opposition realised that the regime might try to exploit the fear of radical Islamists even to the extent that it “[h]as sometimes actively supported the Islamists because they wanted them as a visible danger to the secular opposition: ‘Just look, this is the danger. Either you have us or you get them’.”<sup>45</sup> Among religious minorities, but also among secular Muslims there is a genuine feeling that the intolerance and violence of religiously motivated extremists can only be controlled by state repression. Dictatorship under these circumstances is preferred above religious intolerance, violence and instability, which could be a plausible outcome if Jihad groups gain strength. Moreover, religious minorities are afraid that with a parliamentary democracy conservative Sunnis would acquire power and start to introduce measures. With respect to the Alawi minority, Landis argues that: “[...] no Alawi will allow the

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<sup>42</sup> Rabil, 2010: 74. The party renamed itself Islamic Socialist Front when it was temporarily forbidden at the end of the 1940s.

<sup>43</sup> Wieland, 2006: 108.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 125; Rabil, 2010: 81.

<sup>45</sup> Wieland, 2006: 127. Quote of Tayyeb Tizini interviewed by Wieland in 2004.

Muslim Brothers to take power so long as they can avoid it for fear of returning to the nightmare days of discrimination, when they were second class-citizens. This fear may be exaggerated. Syria and Muslims have changed a great deal since Ottoman days, when the Alawi were officially considered a 'lost nation' or 'Millet-i dalla' and were forbidden from giving testimony in court. At the same time, the extent of Anti-Ba'athist revenge and sectarian fighting that has taken place in Iraq, can only be disquieting, and serves to diminish the Alawi's willingness to take risks in this direction."<sup>46</sup> The Syrian regime can easily play the sectarian card by referring to the existence of intolerant and discriminating views and practices among radical Sunni's regarding religious minorities and secular people. The fact that moderate Sunni Muslims have not been willing or able to distance themselves from these radical elements in the ongoing increasingly violent conflict nurtures the fear among religious minorities and secular Syrians and is instrumental for the regime in its fight against the armed opposition.

### **Radical Islamists**

Regarding the radical elements among the Islamists, a distinction can be made between those who target the Syrian regime by means of violence and those who support and/or participate in armed struggle in the neighbouring countries. Based on information of human rights organisations (see Annex 3) about the accusations against Islamists tried by the State Security Court under President Bashar al-Assad's rule only a few people have been accused of being active in armed struggle. A few people were arrested and accused of being members of Hizb al Tahrir (the Liberation Party) and some were accused of being Muslim Brothers, often having left Syria in the 1980s. The majority of the arrested Islamists have only participated in religious study groups. Hizb al Tahrir aims at establishing an Islamic state (a Caliphate). It is a party active in a number of Arab and non-Arab countries; the party is illegal everywhere. A few hundred people seem to be members of the party. After 1999, the Syrian regime apparently stepped up repression of this party when the party issued a communiqué in which it accused the regime of making a deal with Israel. There have been, as mentioned by Landis and Pace, a few incidents between security forces and those whom the government claim are Islamic militants, such as the Jund-al-Sham; "[t]here is a plausible theory, however that the Syrian regime has staged at least some of these attacks to evoke sympathy from the West and justify its assaults on peaceful Islamists. The timing of these clashes, sceptics argue, has been too convenient for the regime. Since the start of the occupation of Iraq, the Syrian regime has come under

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<sup>46</sup> Landis, 2006: Without a page number.

tremendous pressure to crackdown on foreign insurgents who have been using Syria as a point of embarkation into Iraq.”<sup>47</sup>

The overwhelming majority of the arrested Islamists, mostly young men, are just accused of possessing books and CDs that allegedly promote Salafi takfir<sup>48</sup> ideas. Only few of them are accused by the Syrian authorities of giving support to or participating in the armed activities in Iraq, or being involved in violent activities in Syria. All the Islamist detainees are kept during lengthy periods in incommunicado detention, often more than a year and most probably subject of torture, before being sentenced by the State Security Court in most cases to at least five years detention; a court which does not provide any legal guarantee for a fair trial. Sentenced Islamists are sent to the Seydnaya prison run by the military security service. While there is no indication in the period 2006-2010 that the Islamists are becoming a major political force in Syria, the arbitrariness of the repression might have sown the seeds for further resistance. The arbitrary and ruthless way the Syrian state acts against these Islamists might produce a backlash, as lawyer and human rights activist Razan Zaitouneh prophetically notes “[t]hese people cling to a doctrine which preaches that the world is nothing. All that matters is that I reach heaven. So I don’t have a problem with being arrested or martyring myself. The heightened oppression and its arbitrariness are reinforcing that doctrine and increasing their malevolence. Perhaps, if they were not thinking about violence, after they see the arrests, the torture, the violations, some day they turn to violence.”<sup>49</sup>

According to Carsten Wielard, “[m]ost radical Muslim Brothers have no longer their social base in the Sunni business class and are looking for support in the lower urban classes and the urbanized country population – exactly where the Ba’ath Party had always anchored their social base!”<sup>50</sup> The latter is confirmed by the limited information available about the social background of the Islamists accused of being *Jihadists* by the State Security Court and who come from urbanised areas around Damascus, such as al-Tall and Quatana (see Table 7 in Annex 3: ‘Repression in Figures 2007-2010’).

Most important to the regime remains the internal security and the stability of the regime; Islamists should not undertake any activity that is considered a threat to this. This red line,

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<sup>47</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 51.

<sup>48</sup> The practice of *takfir* is declaring other Muslims to be apostates.

<sup>49</sup> Pace, 2005: Without a page number. Interview with Razan Zaitouneh.

<sup>50</sup> Wielard, 2006: 128.



which these groups and activists should not cross and which would make them no longer beneficial to the regime interests and instead become a danger for its survival, is difficult to draw and depends on external developments as well. As Moubayed indicates, Abu al-Qaqa, the popular speaker of the Iman Mosque and director of an Islamic high school in Aleppo is a good example illustrating this duality for “[a]s long as he did not instigate violence against the government, the Syrians were fine with Abu al-Qaqa. Citizens at a grass root level were becoming increasingly religious, and authorities knew that. If they become organized by several of the underground movements operating in the Arab world, then these Syrians would become dangerous. Allowing political parties with an Islamic agenda to operate was off-limits and made clear at the Ba’ath Party conference in June 2005. But allowing seemingly harmless yet powerful clerics like these to operate, and recruit members into their orbit (offering them guidance and support), would certainly defuse rising tension in the Islamic street. Additionally, arresting Abu Al-Qaqa or exiling him would transform him into a hero in the eyes of millions.”<sup>51</sup> While many Arab recruits of the resistance in Iraq felt inspired by Al-Qaqa (the United States Central Intelligence Agency considered him a sponsor of jihadis) he apparently renounced the methods of these radical groups that make victims out of innocent Muslims. He objected to Al-Qaeda’s violence against the Shia in Iraq. He also distanced himself from the radical Jund-al-Sham group in Syria that emerged after 2003, which was mentioned in relation to a few violent incidents between Syrian security services and this group.<sup>52</sup> In October 2007 Al-Qaqa was murdered by apparently Sunni extremists. It is however clear that Al-Qaqa could have become a nuisance for the Syrian regime. Initially after the invasion of the United States led coalition of Iraq, the Syrian authorities seemed not to act against those Syrians and other Arabs who went from Syria to Iraq to join the resistance. Probably due to United States pressure, the Syrian authorities changed their attitude towards them and started to arrest some Islamists, accusing them of being jihadists. The authorities legitimise these actions because according to the authorities, Syria is fighting terrorism. From the end of 2004 onwards, the Syrian authorities allowed Western diplomats to attend sessions of the State Security Court where many of the detainees were accused of being jihadist, but this could just be a coincidence.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Moubayed, 2007: 2 of 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2009: 50. In 2009 after the riots in the military prison of Seydnaya the authorities refused once again entrance to diplomats.

### 4.3 Kurdish Opposition

As indicated, Syria has a substantial Kurdish minority of 1,7 million Kurds (an estimated 9% of the Syrian population). Given the political implications, there are no exact figures on ethnic and religious groups in Syria. Syrians are not registered by ethnicity. Refugees International in a study on the situation of the stateless Kurds in Syria indicates that it is generally believed that between 8 and 15% of the Syrian population is Kurdish. According to the same study, half of the Kurds live in the Northeast section of the country (Hassakeh and Jazeera), in Afrin and in northern Aleppo. The other half is dispersed throughout the urban centres of Damascus and Aleppo. In addition, large numbers of Syrian Kurds live in Lebanon and throughout Europe.<sup>54</sup> The Kurds form the largest non-Arab community in Syria.<sup>55</sup> The Kurdish issue goes right at the heart of the question of Syria's identity. Most Kurds identify with Sunni Islam. Although most Kurds speak Arabic, just like other non-Arab groups in Syria such as the Assyrians, Armenians and Circassians, they do not consider themselves Arabs; they have their own language and cultural traditions. However, discriminatory regulations ban the use of the Kurdish language, including in conversation, publications, names of children and locations. The government also forbids Kurdish cultural activities and the creation of civil and political groups. Particularly since 1963 when the Ba'ath Party came to power, the rise of nationalism led to increased official discrimination. The Ba'athist government's Kurdish policy was intended, as Ziadeh mentions, "[t]o eradicate the Kurdish presence from Syrian public life. Kurds experienced a lack of political representation, poor economic development and reduced social services. Important elements of Kurdish cultural identity, such as language, music and publications, were banned. Political parties were forbidden and their members incarcerated. The Syrian government began to replace the names of Kurdish villages and sites with Arabic ones."<sup>56</sup>

The Syrian authorities seem to consider the Kurds as a potential threat to the national security. Apart from the aforementioned policies of denying the existence of a Kurdish identity, after a census was conducted in 1962, the government decided to strip a substantial number of Kurds living in Syria of their Syrian nationality in the governorate of Hassakeh. An estimated 120,000 people or about 20 percent of Syrian Kurds lost their citizenship. This number has since more than doubled to approximately 300,000 at present. Many persons who lost their nationality also lost rights to their property, which was seized by the government and used for resettlement of

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<sup>54</sup> Refugees International, 2006: Introduction.

<sup>55</sup> Ziadeh, 2009: 2. Ziadeh estimates the size of the Kurdish minority of Syria at nearly 1.5 million persons.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid..

displaced Arabs. The Kurds whose land was seized were not compensated for their losses. Moving Arabs onto this land ensured that a strong barrier of Arabs existed along the border of Turkey between the Kurds living in Turkey and in Syria.<sup>57</sup> Kurds who lost their Syrian nationality, had to prove residency in Syria dating from 1945 or earlier if they wanted to retain their citizenship. Implementation of this order went awry, Refugees International reported. During recent years, President Bashar al-Assad has mentioned on several occasions that the government is looking into the issue. He recognised that there is a humanitarian problem as far as the fact that the Syrian nationality was given to members of a family and not to other members of the same family, although they are entitled to it. He indicated that the problems related to the 1962 consensus should not be mixed up with the issue of the unregistered persons; “[t]here were also persons of different nationalities, mostly Kurds, who came to Syria from Turkey or Iraq for economic, political, security or other causes. We have nothing to do with this issue.”<sup>58</sup> In March 2011, the regime took concrete steps to normalise the status of Kurds as a result of the growing protests throughout Syria against the regime. Moreover, the regime acknowledged and celebrated the Kurdish New Year, an event that at this time was extensively covered by state news media. Apparently, it was the outcome of a deal between the regime and Kurdish leaders.<sup>59</sup> The situation of the Kurds in Syria is influenced by developments in the region. In the Near East, most of the Kurds live in parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. When the Ottoman Empire disintegrated the Kurds became separated over four states. Until recently none of the four states recognised the political and cultural rights of the Kurds. This situation changed after an autonomous zone, called Iraqi Kurdistan, was established as part of a federal republic of Iraq: a development, which the Syrian authorities consider a possible threat to Syria’s national unity. The Turkish government, while presently recognising the cultural rights of Kurds, continue to have and seek military confrontations with the banned PKK-party striving for autonomy. While Arab activists were ambivalent about the United States-led invasion of Iraq, the Kurds in Syria greeted it with enthusiasm. The fall of Saddam, symbol of Kurdish repression, also led to renewed Kurdish nationalism in Syria. Kurdish opposition groups began demanding for Kurdish rights, “[i]ncluding the return of confiscated lands in the northeast, the right to teach and study the Kurdish language, the redressing of systematic discrimination against the Kurds

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<sup>57</sup> Refugees International, 2006: 1.

A representative of a Kurdish committee dealing with the issue of stateless Kurds estimates the number of stateless Kurds, registered as *ajanib* (foreigner), at 300,000 and the number of *maktoomeen*, the unregistered, at 150,000 persons. Interview 01: Kurdish political activist. 17 June 2008.

<sup>58</sup> SANA, 2007: 9 of 15.

<sup>59</sup> ICG, 2011: 22.

in the official bureaucracy, and the nationalization of Kurds who had been stripped of Syrian citizenship in 1962. A smaller number of parties began demanding greater political autonomy and a federated government.”<sup>60</sup> The neglect of the Kurdish issue by the Syrian regime led to an outburst in March 2004 when Arab and Kurdish football supporters violently clashed in the predominantly Kurdish North-Eastern town Quamishli. The unrest rapidly spread through the town in reaction to the violence used by security forces killing some twenty people. In the next day’s Kurdish violent protests took place elsewhere in the country. The protests were repressed by massive arrests of Kurds. Hundreds of people were sent for several months to prison.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, at a time in 2005 when international pressure on the regime was mounting, the Syrian government managed to arrange a kind of gentlemen’s agreement with Kurdish leaders in the name of “national unity”. A pro-government rally took place in Quamishli. In return, the government released more than 300 Kurds and promised to found an association aiming at the promotion of Kurdish culture and interests.<sup>62</sup>

Prior to the Baath party coming to power, Kurds were modest but noticeable presence in many state institutions. Kurds maintained a strong presence in political parties, especially in the communist ones. In June 1957 the first Kurdish political organisation was founded as the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria under the leadership of Nour al-Din Zaza and other activists who had previously been active in the Syrian Communist Party. Already by 1965, “[t]he Kurdish parties had fragmented into numerous organisations divided over issues such as whether to work for Kurdish autonomy or work within the Communist Party and reject any Kurdish affiliation. Today, twelve Kurdish parties operate illegally and clandestinely in Syria. In addition, the Kurdish movement has remained not only divided, but also isolated from wider pro-democracy circles. The Syrian state’s repression and its attempts to de-legitimise Kurdish mobilisation by linking any Kurdish activity inside Syria to Kurdish movements outside the country has been very effective.”<sup>63</sup> The authorities seemed to tolerate low profile activities of the Kurdish political leadership in the period of high Western political pressure, as long as these parties did not call for the establishment of a Kurdish state. Also the linkages between some of the Kurdish parties and the Arab pro-democracy movement clearly got the negative attention of the Syrian regime such as in the framework of the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change of October 2005. The Damascus declaration was signed by a broad

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<sup>60</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 53.

<sup>61</sup> Wieland, 2006: 45.

<sup>62</sup> Wieland, 2006: 48.

<sup>63</sup> Ziadeh, 2009: 5

spectrum of domestic opposition groups, including the two main Kurdish political groupings. While in first instance the Syrian regime focussed on arresting the Arab key figures of the Damascus Declaration, this situation clearly changed in 2009 when leaders of several Kurdish parties<sup>64</sup> were arrested, as well as some human rights and pro-democracy activists.

All Kurdish CSOs are illegal; many of them – such as human rights organisations – have ties to political parties. Kurdish New Year, *Nawroz*, is always a tense event. During this festivity, the Kurds want to show their cultural, political and national identity. It often leads to clashes with security forces and the subsequent harsh reaction of the latter, which responds with shooting at and arresting people. With a semi-independent Iraqi Kurdistan next door and Turkish authorities accepting the cultural identity of the Kurds, the Kurds in Syria feel encouraged to strive for change within the context of the Syrian state, or outside, with the establishment of a Kurdish state. Activities considered to threaten internal security are repressed, including such against the at the time good relations with Turkey.<sup>65</sup> Hundreds of PKK fighters from Syrian origin have been arrested in these years after their return to Syria. A few years earlier, they were useful to the Syrian regime and mistrusted by other Kurdish political organisation, because of their apparently good relations with the Syrian security services during the time that the political relations between Syria and Turkey were strained. Due to the political tensions between Syria and Turkey as a consequence of the violent repression by the Syrian regime of the current uprising, the relations between the Syrian regime and the Syrian branch of the PKK have improved.

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<sup>64</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2010: Without a page number. "Security forces detained at least nine prominent Kurdish political leaders in 2009, including, on 10 January, Mustapha Jum`a, acting general secretary of the Azadi Party. On 14 April, a military court sentenced two Yekiti party leaders, Fuad `Aliko and Hasan Saleh, to 8 and 13 months in prison respectively for membership in an unlicensed political organisation. On 11 May, a criminal court sentenced Mesh`al Tammo, spokesperson for the Kurdish Future Movement in Syria, to three-and-a-half years in prison for weakening national sentiments and broadcasting false information. On 20 October, a criminal court sentenced Ibrahim Berro, a Yekiti party leader, to eight months in prison for membership in an unlicensed political organization." Amnesty International 2012. In June 2011, Tammo was released following a limited amnesty. In October 2011, he was murdered by unknown gunman. Syrian activists accuse the Syrian authorities and say Tammo was targeted because of his leading role in mobilizing the Kurdish minority to join anti-government protests.

<sup>65</sup> The Syria regime gave support to the Turkish Kurdish party, PKK. PKK leader Ocalan stayed several years in Syria, until he was extradited after relations between Syria and Turkey improved.

## 4.4 Secular Opposition

The secular opposition in Syria consists of some illegal left wing parties that since the beginning of the 1980s have been grouped in the National Democratic Gathering<sup>66</sup>, with the exception of the small Party of Communist Action. Since 2000, the Civil Society Movement has been more influential as opposition, which is “[a] kind of amorphous network of intellectuals, journalists, actors, doctors, attorneys, and professors with a colourful range of opinions”<sup>67</sup>, in addition to human rights activists.

Despite the repressions, Syrians have tried to express in a non-violent way their concern about human rights violations and the lack of democracy. Near the end of the 1970s, professional organisations became the platform for political opposition. The lawyers, organised in Bar Association took the lead, demanding for an immediate lifting of the Emergency Law, asking respect for the rule of law, condemning the use of torture and asking for the release of people imprisoned without trial. Demonstrations, protest strikes and, at the end of March 1980, a general strike of several professional associations followed. The regime reacted with brutal force on several occasions, killing demonstrators, arresting leaders of professional organisations as well as leaders and activists of banned opposition parties. The professional organisations were dissolved and replaced by government-controlled bodies.<sup>68</sup>

At the end of Hafez al-Assad’s presidency (when his son Bashar was increasingly put in the limelight as his successor), in an effort to counter public cynicism, the regime allowed wider debate, albeit clearly circumscribed. Especially in the first year after he was installed as president, hopes for change increased after Bashar al-Assad indicated modernising the economic and political system of Syria. The President however, also made it clear from the start that as far as the political system was concerned; his focus would be on the reactivation of existing political structures in a way that these could better cope with the demands of modernising the society.<sup>69</sup> Civil society activists, mainly a handful of intellectuals encouraged by the emerging democracy in Eastern Europe as well as the speech of the new President and the release of hundreds of political prisoners<sup>70</sup>, started rebuilding civil society. Civil society groups and discussion groups proliferated throughout the country expressing the existence of a social

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<sup>66</sup> George, 2003: 94.

<sup>67</sup> Wieland, 2006. 115.

<sup>68</sup> George, 2003: 103-105.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>70</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 47.

base for a reform movement. “A number of prominent establishment figures – parliamentarians, businessmen, academics, and former opposition leaders – also began to step into the reformist limelight.”<sup>71</sup> In his book *Syria. Neither Bread Nor Freedom* George describes this process. These middle class activists created a movement aimed at the revival of the civil society. The broader aim was to create a cultural and political climate, in which the ideas of democracy and freedom of society could flourish. The intellectual father of the project was Michel Kilo. Kilo and other activists, such as the parliamentarian and businessman Riyad Seif, envisaged the creation of “[c]ommittees on all levels, professional and other, which would link the particular problems of each sector with the general political problem. The lawyers, for example, would integrate the problems they face – the interference of the security apparatus in the courts, the injustice of certain laws – into a comprehensive, democratic programme.”<sup>72</sup>

The focus of the ideas of the movement was on re-establishing rule of law and an independent judiciary, the abolishment of special courts, the emergency law and related decrees, as well on “[t]he revival of institutions of civil society to achieve a balance between their role and that of the state in the context of a real partnership between them in the higher national interest.”<sup>73</sup> The relaxed grip of the security apparatus on society after the first months of Bashar al-Assad taking office, the release of hundreds of political prisoners by the regime and the spread of the message of the Syrian civil society activists through widely watched and read Arab media, led to the rapid growth of civil society forums throughout Syria as well as to the re-emergence and/or creation of human rights organisations, such as “the Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights” (CDF) and the “Human Rights Association of Syria” (HRAS). In the fall of 2000, regime critics, many of whom were intellectuals, became increasingly vocal through the publishing of signed statements in which they called for freedom of expression, a public pardon for all political prisoners and exiles and democratisation of the political system. While in the first statement of 99 signers, the authors did not explicitly question the role of the Ba’ath party as the leading party in society, the second statement from January 2001 asked to reconsider the Ba’ath party’s role, supported by 1000 signatures. The latter statement asked for a multi-party political system and argued that the economic reform programme of the regime would fail without fundamental political change. In the view of the movement, “[c]ivil society constitutes the very substance of the modern state, while the state is civil society’s political

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> George, 2003: 34. The quote is from Michel Kilo.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 35. The quote is from a statement late August 2000 from Michel Kilo and his associates.

expression. Together they constitute the system of government.”<sup>74</sup> Following, “[p]arliamentarian and vocal regime critic Riad Seif announced the formation of the Movement for Social Peace Political Party.”<sup>75</sup> The fact that the growing pro-democracy civil society movement explicitly questioned the pillars of the regime, led to a reaction of the regime in which it first discredited the dissidents and in a next phase embarked on arresting key figures and closure of the forums. Dissidents were blamed for being agents of Western countries, supported financially and in other ways by foreign embassies. The government actions were legitimised by blaming the activists for undermining national unity and stability in the face of Israeli threat and in a subsequent phase, Western threat in general, especially from the United States. President Bashar al-Assad, as highest political authority, on the one hand portrayed the activists as an insignificant minority representing no one but themselves in a number of speeches, but on the other hand accused them for being a danger to the national security. The underlying message was and has always been until the recent announced reforms due to the current upheaval, that the core of the existing political structure will not be changed.<sup>76</sup> The human rights movement in Syria as well as the broader pro-democracy civil society movement is in essence a secular, urban, middle class movement consisting mainly out of lawyers, writers, academics and representatives of other free professions. However, as the Damascus Spring has shown, the movement might quickly flourish and broaden, if the authorities relax their grip on society, given that the former express feelings felt broadly in Syrian society but not openly ventilated because of fear. At the same time, as Landis and Pace concluded, the Damascus Spring has “[f]ailed to produce anything resembling a unified opposition. Almost all the opposition groupings agreed on a basic set of demands, but even these shared commitments proved tenuous. Trifling ideological disagreements, personality conflicts and interference from state security forces compounded substantive disputes over everything from the question of Kurdish rights to the role of foreign assistance. These troubles produced a fragmented, ineffectual opposition consisting of human rights associations, political parties, civil society forums and committees, independent activists and intellectuals, and underground Islamist groups.”<sup>77</sup> Although repression has continued during the subsequent years until today, the civil society movement, while severely hampered in its activities, has not been silenced. A major initiative was the Damascus Declaration of 2005, in which civil society activists, including a large number of representatives

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<sup>74</sup> George, 2003: 43-45. The quote is from the statement of the 1000.

<sup>75</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 47.

<sup>76</sup> George, 2003: 49. Reference is made to an interview given by President Bashar al-Assad to the pan-Arab daily Ash-Shark al-Awsat on 9 February 2001.

<sup>77</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 48.



of opposition parties, presented a blue print for the establishment of a democratic system that respects citizens' rights, ensures freedom of speech and association and ends discrimination based on religious or political beliefs. A bold step was the reading out of a letter of the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in exile, Sheikh Ali Sadr al-Din al Bayanuni, by the writer Ali Abdullah at the Atassi forum, a Damascene discussion platform.<sup>78</sup> The Syrian authorities closed the forum and for several months detained the board members as well as Ali Abdullah. In May 2006, ten Syrian signatories of the Damascus-Beirut declaration, which called for respect of Lebanese sovereignty, were arrested. In May 2007, Kilo and Mahmoud Issa, two of the signatories, were sentenced to three years detention by the Criminal Court in Damascus; two others were sentenced in absentia to 10 years each.<sup>79</sup> At the same time and by the same court, another civil society activist and opposition leader, Kamal Lawani was sentenced to 12 years detention after a visit to the United States, in which he had had contacts with government officials. But in 2009, while being in prison, a separate court ruling punished him with an additional three years of detention after allegedly having criticised the authorities in jail.<sup>80</sup> Human rights lawyer Anwar Bunni (who became the director of a Civil Society Training Centre funded by the EC and the Belgium-based NGO Institute for International Assistance and Solidarity, IFIAS, within the framework of the EIDHR, and which was inaugurated in February 2006 in the presence of Western diplomats and civil society activists) also signed the Damascus-Beirut Declaration. Immediately after its opening in the presence of EU diplomats, the Civil Society Training Centre was closed by the Syrian authorities, allegedly because the authorities had not given prior consent for its activity. In May 2006, Anwar Bunni was arrested and in April 2007 he was sentenced to five years imprisonment and a fine of Syrian Pounds 100,000 to be paid to the MOSAL for spreading false information on the death of a prisoner who reportedly had torture marks on his body.<sup>81</sup> In November 2007, the Syrian security services arrested more than 40 civil society activists. Afterwards, on the 1 December 2007, the Damascus Declaration was created

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<sup>78</sup> Syria comment.com. 2005. Ali Abdullah interviewed by Hugh McCloud. "A month before I was arrested the forum met and we decided to send a message to the Ba'ath Party conference in June. So we arranged a meeting under the title The Reform Process according to the Syrian opposition, and we gave each party ten minutes to talk about reform. Obied al Nasser, an MP and professor at Damascus University, represented the Ba'ath Party. The condition was that all the parties involved should believe in peaceful change. We consider the Muslim Brotherhood met this condition when they issued a statement accepting peaceful change. We sent an email to Bayanouni [Ali Bayanouni, the exiled leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, who lives in London] to send to the board their stance and opinion about democracy and the reform process. They sent the text and the board asked me to read the statement".

<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2010: Without a page number. Kilo and Issa have been released in respectively May and June 2009.

<sup>80</sup> [www.amnesty.org.uk/actions\\_details.aspx?ActionID=346](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.aspx?ActionID=346). Downloaded 30 October 2010. Kamal Labwani has been released in November 2011.

<sup>81</sup> In May 2011 Anwar al Bunni was released after completing a five year jail sentence.

in a meeting of National Council of Thirteen Activists. Among them was Fida al Hurani, who was elected president of the council. In October 2008 the criminal court in Damascus sentenced all thirteen activists to 30 months of detention on charges of “[w]eakening national sentiment [...] and [...] spreading false or exaggerated news which would affect the morale of the country.”<sup>82</sup> Despite the fact that since 2008 the diplomatic isolation of Syria eroded, the Syrian regime continued to harass and arrest human rights and pro-democracy activists, including journalists and bloggers, as well as other presumed opponents. Among the detainees were well-known human rights lawyers, such as Mohannad al Hassani and Heitham al Maleh, both arrested in 2009 and accused of and sentenced for “[...] weakening national sentiment [...] and [...] spreading false or exaggerated information.”<sup>83</sup>

## 4.5 Foreign Pressures and Political Opposition

Syria’s foreign policy and the political choices of the ruling elite have to be viewed from the angle of desire to ensure the survival of the regime. As the President declared in an interview about Syria’s close relationship with Iran, “[i]t is not about ideology, our close relationship with Iran. It is about interests. Whoever is better for Syria’s interests will be its friend.”<sup>84</sup> The interests referred to can only be interpreted as the interests of the regime, for Syria’s population cannot freely express themselves about its interests. Thus, any foreign development, which threatens the position of the former as the dominant power in Syrian society, is considered a danger to the regime.

Nevertheless, there are two issues which are used by the regime to legitimise both internal and external policies: firstly, the return of the Israeli occupied Golan<sup>85</sup>; and secondly, a fair and a

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<sup>82</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2010: a.33. Fida al Hurani was released in 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Without a page number. In 2011, both have been sentenced to three years of detention but have been released.

<sup>84</sup> Lesch, 2007: Without a page number. David Lesch is a professor at Trinity University in San Antonio, and has been visiting Bashar al-Assad regularly since he wrote a biography of the president in 2004. On 8 June 2008, President Bashar al-Assad made a similar remark in an interview with Siddharth Varadarajan when asked about the apparent paradox in Syria’s policy with respect to internal Islamist opposition, while at the same time most of Syria’s best friends in the region all come from sectarian backgrounds like Hamas, Hizballah and even the Iranians. President Bashar al-Assad said: “Actually in politics, you have to be pragmatic; the first question that you have to ask is who is effective in our region, you do not ask who is like you or who is not. Hamas is effective and important in Palestine. Hizballah is a very important party in Lebanon, and Iran is a very important country in the region. Without those players, you cannot have stability, you cannot have any solution and you cannot reach anything you are looking for [...]” The Hindu online edition. 12 June 2008. India, Asia and the world. The Assad interview transcript.

<sup>85</sup> In 1967, during the Six Day War, Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria. Between 80,000 of the approximately 109,000 inhabitants, mainly Druze fled to other parts of Syria. In 1973, Syria tried to recapture the area

comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, that includes the regaining of Arab occupied land and ensuring the rights of the Palestinian nation. Both issues are linked to its relation with Israel and consequently with the United States as Israel's main supporter. The regime has to pay tribute to these goals because many ordinary citizens take personal interests in these issues. As mentioned before, over 100,000 people fled the Golan Heights in 1967 and became internally displaced. Moreover, the regime has linked its legitimacy to its ability to defend Palestinian and Arab rights against Israel.<sup>86</sup>

In attaining these goals Syria encountered two major problems. First, it did not have the military capacity to regain the occupied Golan through a direct military confrontation with Israel. While initially intending to push back the Israelis, the coordinated Egyptian-Syrian surprise attack on Israel in October 2003 did not lead to regaining the Sinai and the Golan. The second problem for the Syrian regime was that with Western support, Arab countries like Egypt and Jordan and even the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (The Agreement of Oslo in 1993) managed to bring about peace agreements with Israel and recognised the state of Israel. The Syrian regime's position towards the Israeli state has remained ambiguous: there is a significant anti-Israeli propaganda blaming the Israelis for Arab backwardness and the prevention of pan-Arab unity. The regime also has provided support to both Palestinian political military movements as Hamas and Islamic Jihad as well as the Hizballah in Lebanon, both of which do not recognise the state of Israel. On the other hand, on several occasions the Syrian regime has discussed the possibility for a bilateral peace deal in secret, as well as in official negotiations with Israel.

The regime's foreign policy, also mentioned by the Syrian President, is very pragmatic, keeping in mind that its main goal is its survival. The regime needs three forms of support from abroad for its survival: strategic, military and economic support. Strategic support is needed to counterbalance Israeli, Western and neighbouring countries' pressure on the regime and to obtain some leverage in international and regional relations. Its extensive contacts with the Soviet Bloc in the near past, as well as its relations with the regional power Iran, provide some form of strategic protection in addition to military and economic assistance and cooperation. The military support received from its strategic partners, provides the means to modernise its armed

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but after initial military successes ultimately failed. In 1974, both countries signed an armistice agreement and a United Nations observer force was stationed on the Heights. Israel unilaterally annexed the area in 1981, although the Syrian government continues to demand the return of its territory as a goal in itself, but also as part of its stated objective in 1967 to liberate all Israel-occupied Arab territories. Although no major incidents have taken place since 1974 until the 2011 upheaval, Israel and Syria are still in a de jure state of war.

<sup>86</sup> George, 2003: 19.

forces and to maintain or create some form of military deterrent. The latter might also create some leverage in case of international or bilateral peace talks. Although Syria is not capable to defend itself effectively against Israeli attacks, it has the military means to severely harm Israel, with the use of for instance its rocket arsenal. It has also its political and military proxies in Lebanon (Hizballah) and the Palestinian territories (Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the PFLP) that are able and willing to fight the Israeli army and cause harm to Israeli society.

The cooperation with Iran dates back to the time when Syria sided with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Syria had bad relations with the Ba'ath-regime of Saddam Hussein, which tried to interfere in its internal policies. The threat of Iraq also played a role in Syria's decision to join the United States-led multi-national military coalition of 1991, chasing out the Iraqi army from Kuwait.<sup>87</sup> This decision however took place at a time when the Syrian regime sought opportunities to breach its isolation within the Arab and Western world by fostering good relations with Iran, as well as at a moment when Syria was confronted with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc.

Since 2001, especially from 2005 until 2009, there is growing political - and other - pressure on the regime by the United States and other Western powers accusing the Syrian regime of obstructing the Middle East peace process by:

- Supporting the insurgency in Iraq after a United States-led invasion in 2003 (The Coalition of the Willing) which resulted in the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party regime;
- Obstructing the political independence of Lebanon by providing support to government opposition forces, for example Hizballah, and pro-Syrian Palestinian groups in Lebanon after Syria retreated its troops from Lebanon in 2005;
- Providing support to Palestinian political and military movements, rejecting the peace talks between the Palestinian authorities and Israel.

The United States-led pressure on the Syrian regime has for the moment strengthened the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran. Opponents of the Iranian regime remaining in Syria have paid the price for the increased security cooperation between the regimes. Ahwazi's, the

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<sup>87</sup> Raphaeli and Gersten, 2008: 1 of 5.

Arab minority in Iran, who came to Syria for political or other reasons, are under serious risk of being expelled to Iran, in case of being suspected of political opposition against the Iranian regime.<sup>88</sup> The growing pressure of the United States and other Western states coincided with a renewed interest by the now Russian Federation in Middle East affairs. Since 2005 Russian-Syrian cooperation intensified. The Syrian regime is the only remaining strategic partner in the Middle East for Russia, both military as well as politically. Moreover, Russia has important economic interests. The Syrian regime is a very important buyer of military equipment and some Russian oil and gas companies have important contracts.<sup>89</sup>

The growing international pressure on the Syrian regime has also increased the regime's attempts to contain any source of internal opposition, as can be concluded from the previous paragraphs. The openly embraced pro-democracy groups within Syrian civil society, by the United States and also the EU, have put the opposition in a delicate situation. This was evident "[...] at the end of 2005 when the White House sought to reach out to the Syrian opposition and publicly take up their cause. On November 11, 2005 US President Bush demanded that Labwani be freed from prison along with other civil society advocates and insisted that Syria started importing democracy. Moreover in February 2006, the Department of State announced its decision to grant \$ 5 million to promote the rule of law, government accountability, free access to information, freedom of speech, and free and fair elections."<sup>90</sup> The EU also tried to give openly direct support to pro-democracy groups active in Syria through its EIDHR instrument. Pressure on the Syrian authorities from Western countries behind the scenes but also publically through statements to release human rights activists and/or peaceful political opponents, has not led to any tangible results during recent years.

These strategic alliances however jeopardise the regime's policies to modernise the Syrian economy, for which it needs foreign investments and expertise. It has led to sanctions and pressures by the United States, which makes it more difficult for the regime to pursue its economic policies. The external policies of the regime as well as the United States' pressure played an important role in the freezing of the partnership agreement with the EU, signed in Brussels in 2005 along with Syria's application in 2001 to join the World Trade Organisation.

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<sup>88</sup> Amnesty International, 2006: Press release.

Syria has expelled in 2006 six Ahwazi's, including a Dutch national of Ahwazi origin, to Iran in spite of interventions by UNHCR, different European states, the EU and the U.S.. Other Ahwazi's have been detained.

<sup>89</sup> Khlebnikov, 2011: 2 and 3.

<sup>90</sup> Landis and Pace, 2006: 63.

Although the regime managed to attract foreign investments from other sources, including from its strategic partner Iran and other mainly Gulf States as well as Turkey, its political isolation hampers its economic development. The economic gains from its strategic relations with Iran are relatively unimportant compared to the investments from the Gulf States as well as Turkey in Syria, taking place while political pressure by the West mounted.<sup>91</sup> The fact that the economic relations with Turkey can be reinforced in the period 2006-2010, might be part of a carrot and stick approach approved by the United States. While keeping pressure on the Syrian regime, the United States allowed its allies to provide incentives to Syria in the economic and political field to become more cooperative in resolving the complex problems in Iraq, Lebanon and between Israel and the Palestinians. As with Turkey, the Syrian regime has shown under Turkish pressure its willingness to stop providing assistance to the Turkish PKK that fights for an independent Kurdistan. Syria expelled the PKK leader Ocalan and arrested Syrian Kurdish allies of the PKK, organised in the PYD. The latter development is probably influenced by the developments in Iraq where the Kurds have established a semi-autonomous area, a concern for both Turkey and Syria given that both have substantial Kurdish minorities. This development shows the pragmatism of the Syrian regime in changing alliances if such decision would be advantageous for their interests, especially if such a choice would not be at the detriment of their capacities to control Syrian society. The pragmatism of the Syrian regime with respect to its support for Palestinian political military organisations is reflected in its relationship with the Islamic Resistance Movement (Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya-HAMAS). In fact, the relation with Hamas is an unnatural alliance given the secular regime's dislike of radical Islamist groups. The support to Hamas has been convenient for the Syrian regime, until the 2011 upheaval developed into an armed conflict in which Palestinians also got involved. It provided leverage to influence developments between Israel and the Palestinian authority. Supporting Hamas might have been instrumental as a sign to the Syrian population that the secular regime is not anti-Islamic and as a sign of its pan-Arab solidarity. However, the relationship with Hamas, which developed from the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, can only be seen as strategic in the context of the continuous repression of Islamist groups in Syria, including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Raphaeli and Gersten, 2008: 1 of 5. "To stress how important Arab investment is for Syria, it should be noted that Kuwait alone has invested U.S.D 3 billion, primarily in Syrian tourism and real estate projects, and Qatar has announced an investment program of U.S.D 4 million, while Iran's total investment is estimated at U.S.D 1 billion, which includes a number of commitments that remain on paper."

<sup>92</sup> Jane's, 2002: 6.

A politically stable Syria under an authoritarian but secular regime in Damascus, which would gradually allow for more political participation of its citizens while containing Islamic extremist or Kurdish secessionist forces, could have been preferred by the neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Israel as well as the West, instead of the unpredictable and possibly violent developments which might be the outcome of a sudden regime change in Syria. However, the violent repression of the on-going uprising since March 2011 led to renewed political isolation of the Syrian regime as well as support to the armed opposition.

In short, during the period 2006-2010, the Syrian regime was confronted with three main groups of contending forces: the Islamists, the Kurds and the secular opposition. Each of these groups has ties to different parts of civil society and is confronted with internal divisions. The Syrian regime tries to exploit these differences of opinion as part of its divide and rule politics. The social groups opposing the regime have different views on the future state-society relations. Radical Islamists seek creating an Islamic state, but the moderate Islamists, including Muslim Brotherhood, accept the principle of a parliamentary democracy. Among the Kurds, in addition to Islamist views, there are also differences between separatists and those Kurds who see a future within Syria. Most of the secular opposition advocates for parliamentary democracy as well as to respect the civil and political rights of citizens. Contending social forces – the pro-democracy movement, Islamists and Kurds – have different political agendas, although some groups have found a common basis in the principles laid down by the Damascus Declaration. The Islamists are potentially, in the Syrian context, the most powerful political alternative for the Ba'ath party-based regime. The Islamists have an available infrastructure of numerous Quranic schools, mosques and associations, which could be used for political purposes. The regime has an ambivalent attitude towards the Islamists. On the one hand, it tries to co-opt the Sunni religious establishment through privileges; on the other hand, it oppresses potential opponents, arguing that they undermine the secular character of the state. Parts of the civil society have links with the different contending social forces. Through their activities, based on different visions on state-society relations, they form part of the social base of the divided and repressed political opposition. Chapter 5 will describe the situation of civil society in Syria in more detail and analyse more in depth the consequences, problems and challenges for specific CSOs, which are active in the Syrian context.