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Title: State-civil society relations in Syria : EU good governance assistance in an authoritarian state

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Epilogue: 2011, the Syrian Uprising

Since March 2011, Syria is in turmoil. The Tunisian revolt inspired many Arabs by showing Arab populations could get rid of authoritarian leaders without foreign intervention. Yet, many Syrians perceived the situation in Syria as being different from the one in Tunisia or Egypt. In fact many Syrians saw initially President Bashar as part of the solution and not the problem.¹ The middle class, minorities and secular Muslims thought of the President as a reformer, even though a number of them had been disappointed by the lack of political reform. However, the unbalanced authoritarian upgrading² under President Bashar al-Assad, as Hinnebusch uses the term, undermines the existing social contract between the regime and broad layers of society. This policy was presented as promoting a social market economy: expanding the private sector, reforming the public sector and maintaining social protection. In practice, the privatisation led to an enrichment of a new bourgeoisie, concentrated in the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo, using its connections with the regime to achieve advantages and privileges. At the same time, the fast growing population faced reductions in subsidies of consumer as well as producer goods, rapid decline of quality of services in the public health and education sector and in addition employment halt in the large state-run sector. The opening up of the local market to goods from neighbouring Turkey and other countries put more pressure on the mostly small and medium size local, producers unable to compete with the cheap imports. A severe draught in recent years has complicated life even further for those Syrians dependent on income from the agricultural sector. It has contributed to the ongoing rapid urbanisation of Syrian society. In practice, the socialist aspect of the Ba'athist ideology was abandoned and replaced by neo-liberal ideas and crony capitalism. Instead, the regime tried to maintain a broad social basis by increasing public space for faith-based expressions and institutions, including CSOs. In return, many religious leaders more or less openly have given legitimacy to the regime.

The regime's 'upgrading policies' aimed at economic liberalisation with the guarantee of a social safety net for vulnerable groups, however created economic growth in combination with an unequal development between regions, a neglect of rural areas, an increase of absolute poverty among parts of the population and a growing difference of incomes between a relative small section of the population and the majority. While the regime allowed more activities of civil society associations in relief and development activities, it cut subsidies for large parts of the

¹ Moubayed, 2011: 339.

² Hinnebusch, 2012: 106.

population. The socio-economic policies did not strengthen the socio-political basis of the regime. In fact, it estranged important groups of the population from the regime, especially the rural poor that previously formed part of the regime's social basis. It is evident that the socio-economic policies of the regime were detrimental for the majority of the people depending for their income on the agricultural or the informal sector. As Matar indicates, the economic growth lagged behind employment needs, poverty increased as well as income inequality. The neo-liberal policies were neither pro-poor nor welfare enhancing.³ It remains however to be seen as Matar suggests, if the impoverishment of large segments of the Syrian population helped to bring about the uprising.⁴ There is no evidence of a direct connection; however, it is possible that the lack of prospects to a decent life for people, especially the youth, contributes to the perpetuation of the conflict. Initial protests related to repression by the regime, the lack of freedom the regime's unwillingness to announce and implement meaningful political reforms.

The small-scale protests in March 2011 in the provincial town Dara'a, inspired by the Arab Spring in the Arab region but brutally suppressed by the regime, developed further into general protests covering most of the country. Initially, the protesters asked for reforms of the political system, dignity and they expressed their anger about the conduct of the state. The protests have been mainly peaceful. It is carried, as Abbas mentions, by a spirit of defiance that has crept into many intangible aspects of daily life: songs, music, movies, dance and satirical jokes.⁵ New attitudes seem to have developed expressing at least a partial break from the culture of fear cultivated by the regime. While there is some coordination between the protesters in various villages and towns, especially concerning the nationwide Friday protests, many protests appear spontaneous and motivated by typically local concerns. The slogans shouted out or written down on the banners used on these nationwide coordinated Friday protests, give best indication what the aims of the protest movement are because the internal and external opposition composed these slogans together. During the first weeks, the slogans indicated reasons for protest (dignity, anger), called for a revolutionary attitude, paid honor to specific groups (martyrs, women supporting the revolution, the children of Syria, the inhabitants of Homs under siege) and called on different layers of Syrian society to participate in the protests (the Christians, the Kurds, the military, the tribes and the Alawites). Three months after the first protests in Dara'a, the first political views were expressed asking the departure of Bashar al-

³ Matar, 2012: 2-4.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Abbas, 2012: 7.

Assad, rejecting a dialogue with the President, criticizing the silence of the international community and the lack of response of the Arab League, as well the content of the agreement between the Arab League and the Syrian regime. The protestors also called for action from the international community.⁶ A central role at the local level has been played by the Local Coordination Committees. In these committees civil society activists, such as human rights or pro-democracy activists, play an important role in sharing information, coordinating protests and in formulating demands. Social media is a strong instrument in sharing information and mobilizing people. Since the month of Ramadan in August 2011, the repression became more and more violent as the regime tried to crush the rebellion in Hama, Jisr al Shugur and Deir e Zor, even though the regime tried to calm the protestors down with promises of reform and replacing officials. Defecting army soldiers (mostly Sunni conscripts) but also citizens started to organise themselves in militia groups, mainly to protect their neighbourhoods and the demonstrators against the violence of the security services, army and armed pro-al-Assad thugs called the *Shabiha*.⁷ While peaceful protests continue, the conflict between regime and opposition has become more and more violent deeply affecting social life in large parts of Syria and is accompanied, although still limited, by sectarian violence, political murders as well as revenge acts including by armed opposition groups.⁸

As indicated, prior to the uprising, Syria had a modest but growing number of CSO's mainly of a relief and community based nature. As part of its socio-economic reform agenda, the regime assigned civil society a range of tasks; from increasing the participation of citizens in the socio-economic development, to provision of goods and services to vulnerable groups, poverty alleviation as well as enhancing the accountability of state institutions. In practice, the regime permitted activities by relief and development oriented organizations, but forbade most of the advocacy type of activities, especially relating to human rights. Yet, the regime continued to strictly control civil society using its network of security organisations. Privatizing social services to vulnerable groups, gave room to more community based activities - often religious – of civil society organizations. These organisations provided services and goods the regime was not able or willing to provide for. The regime allowed for more of these Islamic community based

⁶ Leverrier, 2012: 2 and 3 of 6.

⁷ Saleh, 2012: 8. The term *Shabiha*, originally referring to Alawite gangs, expanded to irregular militias which the regime sets on protestors in all regions of the country. "What the original *shabiha* and these more recent formations have in common is powerful ties of personal loyalty and large, tribally connected families."⁷ In return for their loyalty these people get certain privileges, immunity and income.

⁸ Damascus Bureau, 2013: Without a page number.

organisations, but this does not mean they were led by pro-regime figures. As indicated, the regime had to accommodate the religious (mainly Sunni) elite by giving a wide berth to their religious and social activities as long as the latter did not question the ruling of the regime. The attempt by the regime to co-opt the religious and other elites especially the Sunni one, only partly succeeded. The ongoing protests and fighting against the authoritarian regime has divided the traditional civil society. Some Imams openly support the protestors in Dara'a. After the violent repression of protests in Hama, a group of influential Imams in Aleppo and Damascus called on the regime in August 2011 to immediately stop military actions against civilians, to start with political reforms and release protestors. But other traditional civil society leaders continued to openly support the regime, such as some Christian Church leaders as well as the Grand Mufti Ahmed Hassoun or the influential Islamic scholar, al- Bouti⁹, who died in March 2013 due to a bomb explosion in the mosque where he was preaching.

As noted by Kawakibi and Kodmani, the current uprising has not only witnessed the proliferation of violence, it also "[g]enerated an impressive level of mutual solidarity, new grassroots initiatives and unprecedented forms of collective action to cope under excruciatingly difficult circumstances and to help those seriously affected by the conflict."¹⁰ The regime for its part tried from the start of the upheaval to silence the youth who took the lead in the manifestations as well as seasoned political activists. However, many of these pro-democracy activists organized themselves country wide for instance using social media and continued with peaceful demonstrations calling for the end of the Bashar al-Assad's regime and demanding its replacement by a non-religion based democratic state. Furthermore, they collected information on human rights violations, providing support to families of these victims and assisting medical aid to wounded people wanted by the regime.¹¹ In the second half of 2012 this social movement changed its shape and focus: local councils were created in areas under control of armed resistance, therefore the youth concentrated on the need to have some form of local governance and to assist the most vulnerable groups in liberated areas. In some areas these local counsels were established by vote; in other areas the administration of the area was confined to persons of high moral standing or was taken up by volunteers. On the website of the Damascus Bureau there are examples of activities run by local relief committees and councils aimed at providing services and goods to local people, such as running previously government

⁹ Pierret, 2011: 2 and 3 of 4.

¹⁰ Kawakibi and Kodmani, 2013: 1.

¹¹ Leverrier, 2013: 2.

owned bakeries, provisions of electricity, repairing sewage systems, collecting garbage, reorganizing tribunals and taking care of the civil administration.¹² Moreover, in areas no longer in the hands of the regime, newspapers as well as radio stations have been founded in addition to professional associations and other mutual assistance groups.¹³

However, this freedom is not only threatened by the Syrian regime but also by radical Islamist groups trying to impose their norms and values in an arbitrary manner and by force. This has led to numerous locals protesting and furthermore to subjection to these armed groups. Activists have been arrested, detained and some even murdered while others felt forced to flee.¹⁴ Moreover, journalists and human rights activists have been specifically targeted by the regime as well as by armed opposition groups because of collecting information on events in these areas and on human rights violations. The sketchy information available about current civil society activities indicates that also in regime controlled areas, community based activities (mainly relief activities including supporting the many internally displaced Syrians¹⁵) continue to take place while persons and organisations involved in activities considered as undermining the regime face harsh repression.

In the current situation in Syria, citizens need to be and feel safe and secure. Besides ending the bloodshed, establishment of rule of law and respect to fundamental human rights are essential steps in a confidence building process leading to reconciliation and reconstruction including the democratization of the political system. As Burnell indicates, “[i]n all cases clearly any sensible strategy must take account of the local political dynamics-that is the attitudes of both the political leadership *and* society- by identifying the stakeholders in democratic political change *and* the forces of resistance.”¹⁶

¹² Damascus Bureau, 2013: Without a page number. For instance, Shumra Ali: “An Alternative to Government Institutions: the General Committee for Civil Defence in Daraa”, 13 August 2013; The Eastern Ghouta: “Where animal feed is allowed but bread is forbidden”, 23 September 2013; Hazzaa al-Adnan: “Relief Organisations Replace Government Bakeries in Kfar Nabel”, 18 November 2013.

¹³ Leverrier, 2013: 3.

¹⁴ Damascus Bureau, 2013: Without a page number. For instance: “Activists in Raqqa under daily threat”, 6 December 2013.

¹⁵ Ibid. For instance: Karam Mansour: “Red Crescent under fire from both sides of the civil war”, 27 December 2013; “Displacement crisis worsens in Jaramana”, 2 January 2014.

¹⁶ Ibid., 102.

List of Interviewed Persons

No	Category	Date
01	Kurdish political activist	17 June 2008
02	Government official (MOSAL)	28 October 2008
03	Official intergovernmental organisation	7 January 2008
04	Official GONGO	15 December 2010
05	Women's rights activist	12 June 2008
06	Human rights activist	6 January 2009
07	Human rights activist.	31 March 2008
08	EC delegation official	4 July 2007
09	Local staff member international organisation	a) 1 December 2008 b) 5 May 2010
10	Women's rights activist.	4 May 2010
11	Official intergovernmental organisation	4 May 2010
12	Human rights activist	13 July 2009
13	Political opposition activist	19 July 2009
14	UNDP Syria official (written answers to a questionnaire)	April 2009
15	EC Damascus delegation official (written answers to a questionnaire)	29 March 2009
16	Philosopher and social scientist Sadiq Al Azm	7 June 2009
17	EC Damascus delegation official	2 Mei 2010
18	Women's right activist	25 March 2009
19	Syrian political analyst	5 May 2010
20	An official of the Aga Khan Development Network	5 May 2010
21	Chairman Islamic association	25 March 2009