



Middle East  
Centre

# INSIDE SYRIA: 18 MONTHS ON

## Conference Report

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UNIVERSITY OF  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Conference Programme</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Regime</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Opposition</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Economic Implications</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Social Implications</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Opportunities for Further Research</b>	<b>9</b>

# CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

## Panel 1 – Inside The Regime

### **The makeup of the Syrian Leadership, the Military and Shabiha, Business Networks and Alawis**

What went wrong with the Bashar Al-Assad Presidency?

*Dr Christopher Phillips, Queen Mary University*

The Military Balance of Power: The State of the Syrian Army

*(Retired) Brigadier General Akil Hashem*

How Regional and International Factors Impact the Syrian Conflict

*Ghayth Armanazi, Political Analyst and Former Arab League Ambassador*

## Panel 2 – Inside the Opposition

### **The Nature and Dynamics of the Various Opposition Groups and Movements, Focussing on those Inside Syria**

The Syrian Opposition: A Balance Sheet

*Rime Allaf, Chatham House*

The Syrian Opposition: A View from the Inside

*Suheir Atassi, National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change*

Armed Groups in Libya: A Comparative Look

*Brian McQuinn, Oxford University / Centre on Conflict, Development and Peace Building*

## Panel 3 – Identity in Syria

### **The Complex Influences on Identity and Allegiance and how these may affect the Course of the Struggle**

Violence as a Modality of Government in Syria

*Professor Salwa Ismail, SOAS*

Divide, Terrorise and Rule *in the* Syrian 'Black Hole State'

*Dr Abdelwahab El-Affendi, University of Westminster*

The Islamist Elements within the Syrian Uprising

*Dr Thomas Pierret, University of Edinburgh*

## Panel 4 – The War Era: Economic & Sociological Implications

### **The Interplay of the War and the Economy on Syrian Society**

The State of the Economy: How Long Can Syria Survive?

*Jihad Yazigi, The Syria Report*

The War Toll: Life for Ordinary Syrians

*Stephen Starr, Journalist*

## Keynote Address

### **Lessons Learned: Taking Stock of the Opposition Journey**

*Professor Burhan Ghalioun, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle*

## INTRODUCTION

After nearly two years of conflict, Syria has descended into a civil war which has been challenging to interpret. The main goal of 'Inside Syria', a conference held at LSE on 20 September 2012, was to examine the Syrian conflict from the inside out, to learn what was happening on the ground in terms of warring factions, rival ideologies and competing visions of the country. The conference aimed to delineate and understand the social and political features of the regime and the various opposition forces including Islamist, mainstream and liberal groups. Leading international scholars and prominent Syrian actors addressed questions of politics, economics, identity, sectarianism and ideology. This report summarizes the key debates and findings of the conference.

## THE REGIME

There is a debate among Syria analysts about whether Bashar Assad could have reformed Syria before or even shortly after the uprisings began or whether he inherited an intractable autocratic state from his father. Many of the structures and policies which served as both insurance and liability for Hafez Assad's regime, including the security and intelligence establishments, an economy inching towards liberalization, and a subtle, yet powerful modality of government which encouraged sectarianism, were passed to Bashar. Yet not only did Bashar Assad fail to reform the flawed system he inherited, but in some regards, he created more tensions which contributed to the outbreak of protests in 2011.

### Causes of the Uprising

Bashar narrowed the base of support upon which his father's regime had relied to stay in power and also further entrenched the sectarian nature of the regime through the placement of family members and Alawis in powerful positions. In 2005, he stripped power away from 'old guard' Sunnis who had given the regime Sunni legitimacy, including the Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam.

The economy remained only superficially liberalized under Bashar's regime. Further, the regime's economic policies, which it dubbed 'social market economy' to bridge the demands of Ba'athists and cronies alike, continued to be largely reactive and was not fully articulated. Through this quasi-liberalisation, a very visible economic elite emerged which encouraged

resentment among the wider population. This clique was largely drawn from the Alawi community and members of Assad's family, and notably included Bashar's cousin, Rami Makhlof.

Syria was full of tensions and divisions before 2011, but the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were also influential because they showed the power of what was possible and offered tactics and slogans to revolutionaries in Syria.

In the years leading up to 2011, the rise of an increasingly conservative Sunni Islam across the region empowered poor, unemployed Sunni Syrians who became more conservative in their religious orientation and increasingly bought into a regional narrative of Sunni assent promoted by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Following Bashar's decision in 2005 to cut back on Ba'ath Party leadership and reach in rural areas, these empowered sheikhs and other religious leaders stepped in to run their communities.

### Missed Opportunities and the Security Services

When the uprising began, there was still a window of opportunity for Bashar to implement the necessary reforms; an opportunity which had not existed in Egypt or Tunisia. Bashar had sufficient backing from enough Syrians as well as other Arab countries, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who encouraged him to reform rather than turn to violence. Instead, Assad denied the existence of legitimate discontent in Syria and used predictable propaganda tactics.

*'When [the] Syrian uprisings started, the regime's first line of defence was PR, claiming that this was all the work of outside forces, a conspiracy. But ironically, in the first weeks of the uprising, these 'outside forces' were actually giving Bashar the green light to continue, which was different from how Mubarak and Ben Ali were treated . . . [Assad] calculated that to implement real change would sound the death knell of the regime.'*

- Ghayth Armanazi

Under Hafez Assad, a form of Syrian national identity was promoted which was deliberately ambiguous, including Arab, Syrian state and Islamic elements. Alongside a vague national identity, there were no concerted efforts to de-sectarianise Syria or to allow Syrian identity to outstrip other sub-state ties.



From left to right: Professor Fawaz Gerges, Dr Christopher Phillips, (Retired) Brigadier General Akil Hashem and Ghayth Armanazi

This identity ambiguity was a strength for Hafez Assad who could rhetorically shape Syrian identity to ebb and flow according to his foreign policy agenda, but it also left a legacy of clear sectarian winners (notably Alawis) and losers (notably Kurds) and a tinder box of sectarian tension for Bashar Assad.

Hafez Assad ensured there would not be a coup against his regime by strengthening the Syrian military and intelligence services. In the first ten years of his rule, he tripled the size of the military through support from the Gulf and the Soviet Union. He also created an elite unit, the *Saray ad-Difa*, which would provide the staff for the army's infamous Fourth Division as well as the Presidential Guard. Unlike others, this unit was staffed with handpicked career officers, an estimated 80 per cent of whom were Alawi.

The *shabiha* forces, a shadowy state-sponsored gang now operating in Syria, also originate from this time. This was created as a mafia organization to protect members of Hafez Assad's family who were involved in smuggling. The group included criminals from Syria's jails. Assad maintained the loyalty of both the officers and the *shabiha* through a system of corruption and bribery.

*'He depended on the officers' corps and he managed, throughout the years, to make the big percentage of the officers in the military belong to the same sect, the Alawis. I witnessed that year after year. I used to monitor every year the list where the new officers get graduated from the military colleges and I used to see, very obvious, how 80 or 70 per cent of the graduates belonged to the same sect.'*

- (Retired) Brigadier General Akil Hashem

## The Centrality and Effects of Violence

In the 1980s, both the Fourth Division, during an extended standoff between Hafez Assad and his brother, Rifaat, and the *shabiha* had to be reined in when their power became more of a threat to Assad than a protection. Just as his father was forced to carefully balance both the elite and thuggish forces he had created, Bashar Assad is relying for survival on both elements of the pro-regime forces. History suggests this could be risky. General Akil Hashim described how the 'magic may be turned against the magician.'

Equally, in the way that Hafez Assad's regime relied on violence and the threat of violence to protect itself from coups and violence, violence has now become its only weapon. The regime has no choice now but to kill and keep killing its citizens, said General Hashim. Professor Salwa Ismail described this use of violence as a modality of governance and a 'deep cut' which has established an 'us and them' culture in the Syrian state, which has been under a permanent state of war against its citizens under both Assad leaders.

*'Syrians knew that were they to oppose the Assad rule, there would be mass killings and large scale atrocities. The regime has a willingness to sacrifice . . . [when the uprisings started], there would be references to inside knowledge that some high ranking general said, "Well, we'll continue until the first hundred thousand [are killed] and that should do it or, you know, half a million or whatever." Whether this is true or exaggerated, it talks about the socio-political imagery that Syrians have thought about, their relationship with the regime and should they oppose it, what will happen to them.'*

- Professor Salwa Ismail

Professor Ismail identified two tools of violence as emblematic of the form of government and rule in Syria over the last four decades – detention camps and massacres. The regime used violence as both a tool and a statement. In addition to the Syrians who disappeared and were killed in prison camps and massacres, the camps were also tools of humiliation while the massacres were spectacular gestures of the sovereign's power over life and death. Both instruments have dominated the Syrian imagination about the consequences if they resist the Assad regimes.



The very mechanisms of violence, real and imagined, which both Assads have used to keep control have shown what the consequences are of challenging the regime. This legacy of memory and imagined outcomes arguably raised the stakes and fed the outbreak of the current violence. The fear of severe retribution forced Syrians into a zero sum position.

Further in Syria, as has been demonstrated in the genocides in Rwanda and Yugoslavia as well as the systematic torture of alleged terrorists at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, there is a causal link between the rhetorical use of the threat of genocide and terror and actual acts of genocide and terror. As with the massacre at Hama in 1982, during the recent violence the Syrian regime has used the threat of mass slaughter as a justification to commit mass slaughter. In turn, those affected and who witnessed the violence feel emboldened to take retribution because all limits have been transgressed and, therefore, limits are no longer respected. 'The problem with these narratives is that they become self-fulfilling,' said Dr Abdelwahab el-Affendi. 'If the trajectory goes as it is, the prophecy of the Alawis will be fulfilled. They will be politically, if not physically, liquidated.'

## THE OPPOSITION

While the Syrian opposition and various groups within it, like the Local Coordinating Committees and the Revolutionary Councils – are now discussed as though they always existed, it is important to note that these forces have evolved organically with the conflict and are continuing to evolve.



From left to right: Professor Madawi Al- Rasheed, Rime Allaf, Brian McQuinn, Suheir Atassi, Abdulwahab Sayed Omar

The success or failure of the opposition cannot be evaluated in isolation, but must be seen in a wider scope that considers national, regional and international forces. 'You cannot take them out of the big context and they cannot be evaluated or even monitored in a vacuum,' said Rime Allaf. 'They didn't act alone. You have to always consider when you talk about the opposition that there is a ruthless regime which has proved in the last 18 months that it would cross every single line that we could have imagined. And you also have a world which has been living in total apathy, save for a few declarations of support to the opposition.'

*'We were let down by the international community in all of our requests. Their primary excuse was the lack of unity within the opposition. In which country can you find an opposition that can be completely united?'*

- Suheir Atassi

The distinction made between the 'inside' opposition and the 'outside' opposition is not helpful in understanding the dynamics of the various Syrian opposition groups. More useful is the distinction between how the individuals or opposition groups orient themselves along ideological/religious vs civil/secular lines.

There is not one monolithic opposition, but many groups that forms oppositions. They include the 'old style', underground opposition which existed in Syria prior to the uprisings; a 'new style' opposition made of young people; independent individuals without affiliation or party; and groups of artists, writers and social commentators.

### The Syrian National Council (SNC)

The SNC did not fail, but rather has not been able to play the role it was supposed to as the voice of the revolution. Though the SNC is criticised as an 'outside' force without connection to the opposition inside Syria, it is actually in regular communication with opposition leaders on the ground in Syria.

The SNC is also criticised for clashes between its personalities and the fact that it does not have a clear leader, but these characteristics can be interpreted both as positive and negative. Equally, other Syrian opposition groups have faced similar difficulties and criticisms.

In turn, the SNC has also been critical of the international community for its failure to provide political or military solutions for the opposition. The current stalemate, Ghalioun said, can be broken either through a change of the balance of weaponry on the ground or through a more cohesive opposition that legitimately represents of the Syrian people and is capable of replacing the collapsing regime.

*'The division of the international community, its hesitation and its incapability of action has actually played a very encouraging role of the continuation of the violence on behalf of the Syrian regime, or rather the escalation of violence you've seen recently because now the regime feels like they're not going to be punished.'*

- Burhan Ghalioun

### The Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The FSA has also evolved organically, beginning first with defections of ground-level military, then moving on to higher grade defections, many of whom went to Turkey. Overall, the FSA is not very organised or coordinated and lacks a notable and charismatic leader. As Rime Allaf said, 'We don't have a clear Pancho Villa-type of leader.' Currently, many battalions fighting in Syria identify themselves as belonging to the FSA, but have ideologies and goals that are very different and observers should be careful about lumping together all groups who say they are part of the FSA.

The FSA has received a lot of criticism from Syrians who might have supported it, particularly because of its role in the battle for Aleppo. The FSA is aware of this criticism and is eager to change its image. As of late September 2012 around 30 battalions had pledged to sign codes of conduct as part of this effort.

More so than the non-armed opposition, the FSA has been challenged to pull itself together as a cohesive unit as a result of pressure from outside powers and benefactors. Relationships with outside forces have created imbalances and complicated allegiances within the FSA.

### Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) and Revolutionary Councils

The first LCC was started in Midan, a neighbourhood in Damascus, and like the other LCCs across the country that would follow, was established in order to provide necessary goods and services, like medical aid, which Syrians could no longer access safely or at all once the uprisings began.

The LCCs are more organised and better placed to carry on if and when the regime falls than they are given credit for. In small communities throughout Syria, the LCCs are already acting, as the regime once did, as managers of their own villages and towns. For example, the LCCs provide garbage collections, run field hospitals, provide education and deliver supplies and food.

*'You have the coordination of efforts and what started initially as one basic council [across Syria] has multiplied into a big network of councils which are not always working perfectly together, but manage on a local level to do what they need to do as much as they can'*

- Rime Allaf

Suheir Atassi noted that the LCCs do not have an overarching leader, but follow a general assembly. 'This was by design; we did not want a single leader because that could have been easily eliminated by the Syrian regime.'

### Armed Opposition: Lessons from Libya

In Libya, there were three stages of armed group development from micro groups ('as many people as you could fit in a car'), then larger groups of about 50 people and finally brigades, often formed during a major event, like defending the frontline.

Though armed groups are often seen as weak because they are uncoordinated and leaderless, these qualities are sometimes purposeful and powerful because it makes their moves less predictable and their acting leaders less likely to be individually assassinated.

Several factors that distinguish groups can help explain how and why they stay together or later fall apart:

1. The events and timing around which groups form is critical to understand why they gel together. For example, in Misrata, many groups were under intense pressure without any safe haven, which led these groups to be extremely cohesive as compared to Benghazi where the conditions were less tense.
2. The community linkages between a group and a particular neighbourhood or geographic area can explain the emergence and cohesion of particular groups as well as the choices they make as a group. Groups with stronger linkages to communities may be held more accountable for issues than less connected groups.
3. Some groups will coordinate with the local authorities and sometimes, particularly during fighting, to distinguish between the group and the authority.

## The Islamists

Islamists – and in the case of Syria, this refers mostly to the Muslim Brotherhood – have been excluded from Syrian politics for decades. The Brotherhood has been a movement of exiles. Following the Hama Massacre in 1982, the only political Islamic groups in operation were so-called independent Islamists ‘which were very weak and a loose network of a few dozen moderate Islamic intellectuals,’ said Dr Thomas Pierret.

There were also a small group of radical groups like *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, but these groups were harshly repressed towards the end of the 1980s.

When the uprisings first began in 2011, the Brotherhood played a minimal role inside Syria. However, the group was very influential outside Syria, particularly within the Syrian National Council where they made up an estimated 35 per cent of the group. There was no strategy to arm or use violence and, in fact, the Brotherhood advocated a strategy of non-violence.

In contrast to the Brotherhood, the Syrian *ulama* played a prominent role at the beginning of uprisings. Acting as symbols and spokesmen, rather than actual leaders of protests, many led sermons condemning oppression. Within a few months, the regime lost almost all the support of the Sunni religious elite. The few remaining regime supporters, like the Grand Mufti of Syria, were

considered puppets.

The conflict’s participants, including the Islamists and other forces on the ground, have become militarised. This process began as a grassroots, spontaneous response to the militarisation of the repression itself and was not a premeditated strategy. In addition to reacting to the violent repression, funding from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and private Islamic networks, has further encouraged Islamic groups to militarise. This funding has also, in some instances, encouraged non-Islamic armed rebels to ‘play up’ their Islamic credentials.

Categorising armed-opposition groups as either jihadists or non-jihadists is an unhelpful framework when all of these groups are, in fact, armed and fighting. Rather, an important distinction is the scope of a group’s agenda. In particular, are they globally or locally focused? The symbols which a group chooses to use, for example images on their flag, may be helpful in indicating whether their agenda is local or global, though one must keep in mind that symbols may be more aspirational than actually reflective of resources or abilities of a particular group on the ground.

A distinction must also be made between foreign fighters and globally-focused jihadis, two groups which are often conflated. There are globally-focused jihadi fighters in Syria who are Syrian and foreign fighters, coming particularly from Libya, who are not global jihadis, but rather see the Syrian situation as a local cause similar to their own.

## ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

### The Economic Context

Syria’s economy was vibrant from the 1950s until the mid-1980s, a fact in which Syrians had considerable pride. The country was a founding member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and, as a result of the Ba’ath Party’s socialist policies in the 1960s and 1970s, had heavy investment in its physical infrastructure and health and education services during this period. In 1983, Syria’s GDP was higher than Turkey’s which, at the time, was on a par with South Korea.

The economy started to decline in the early to mid-1980s. In 1986, Syrian currency started to devalue, a pattern which continued for several years.



'That's an important date,' said Jihad Yazigi, 'because it is really the beginning of the implosion of the Syrian middle class. It is the beginning of the end and, to this day, the crisis of that period is being felt amongst Syrian society.'

The consequences of Syria's structural economic problems and necessary reforms were delayed with the discovery of significant crude oil reserves in eastern Syria. However, in an attempt to eventually tackle the structural problems, the Syrian regime attempted to liberalise parts of the economy and to attract foreign investment.

Though some investors were attracted to Syria, the regime's liberalisation efforts were not paired with political or judicial reform. Persistent corruption deterred investment. In 2010, for example, 10 years after liberalising reforms began, foreign direct investment in Syria was less than in Jordan, despite the fact that Syria's population is five times larger and has more natural resources. Syria regularly ranked at the bottom of all major business competitiveness surveys.

The liberalisation reforms, particularly subsidy reductions, were also ill-timed and uncoordinated, leaving various sectors unable to adapt quickly enough to the policy changes. For instance, in 2008, the government tripled the prices of gas and oil. Already feeling the pinch from the third year of heavy drought, farmers were unable to pay for the fuel for their irrigation pumps.

## The Economy and the Uprising

By 2011, when the uprising began, there was a distinct contrast between urban centres where certain sectors were booming as a result of liberalisation (in banking, insurance, real estate) and rural areas where slums had formed as a result of the agricultural crisis. This led to the migration of hundreds of thousands of people from northern and eastern Syria to the suburbs of Damascus, Daraa and Homs.



From left to right: Professor Fawaz Gerges, Stephen Starr, Jihad Yazigi

The uprisings have had three main impacts on Syria's economy over the past 18 months:

1. In May 2011, the first set of sanctions was put in place which dampened consumer and investor confidence. In the first half of 2010, the number of investments licensed by the Syrian Investment Agency decreased by 43 per cent from the same period in 2010.
2. In response to the uprisings, the regime made poor economic policy choices which appeared to be knee-jerk reactions based purely on political considerations and further deteriorated consumer and investor confidence. These policy moves included raising civil servant salaries and *mazut* (a gas and heating oil) subsidies and suspending free trade agreements with Turkey.
3. In November 2011, further sanctions were implemented which had more severe consequences than those which were implemented in May. These sanctions targeted individuals, crude oil exports and the banking system. Forcing the government to dip into its foreign currency reserves to pay for imports, these sanctions will have an effect on any future Syrian government which will be left without reserves.

Syria's GDP contracted last year between 12-15 per cent and is expected to contract this year anywhere between 20-35 per cent. Unemployment is very high. Foreign exchange reserves are down and inflation has increased significantly. There is severe trade disruption as a result of the insecurity of transport and logistics routes. The government is 'really paying only salaries,' noted Yazigi.

While some data is available, it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about Syria's formal economy because few indicators are published officially and publicly. Therefore, anecdotal evidence which differs widely from various parts of the country has become a key source for analysing the economic situation.

## SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There is a huge contrast between Syrians in cities, particularly Aleppo and Damascus, who have benefitted from economic liberalisation and those who have suffered in rural areas as a result of the drought between 2007 and 2010 and this helped spark the revolutions.

There is a wide spectrum of support for the regime, including many in the cities who benefitted from the regime's economic policies and view the revolution as 'a huge inconvenience' with regular electricity outages which also prevents them travelling to their holiday homes on the coast.

Sectarian identity is not a clear-cut indicator of one's opposition or support for the regime. There is a critical mass of urban Alawis, for example, who have been educated abroad, regularly read international news, and do not support the regime. In rural areas, however, many minorities see Bashar Assad as a saviour and are influenced by Syrian state media which runs, for example, a 'stage-managed' show each week in which different sectarian leaders pray together.

The violence has continued, in part because there is a diverse mix of opinion about what is happening and how to deal with it. Early on in the uprising, Syrians frequently discussed politics and the conflict in public, something that had not happened openly in decades. But as the conflict has continued, many of these early conversations have ended with long-time friends and even family members refusing to talk to one another, defriending each other on Facebook and preferring to talk only with those who take their side.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The conference raised the following questions and areas for potential future research:

**The Legacy of Violence:** How has the use of violence as a modality of government affected the Syrian population and what will be its legacy after the war?

**Reconciliation:** Truth and reconciliation committees will be critical following the war to help facilitate communication between Syrians who have become polarised both as a result of the conflict as well as

entrenched inequalities and divisions which regime policies encouraged. Can the aftermaths of the genocides in Rwanda and Yugoslavia offer roadmaps for Syria?

**Armed Opposition:** There is a general lack of understanding of armed groups. As a consequence, peace processes following civil unrest and war are faulty because the demobilisation process does not actually suit the groups that are involved. Investigation and mapping of the origins of various armed groups in Syria and greater understanding of the extent to which they coordinate among each other as well as with local authorities is needed.

If and when the regime falls, rebels who feel they are fighting and dying for Syria may find it difficult to give up power to political opposition or transition leaders, many of whom have been outside Syria. Tensions should be expected. What will happen to the *shabiha* after the war?

**Islamists:** There is a need for further research both on the agendas and funding of the newly formed armed Islamist groups in Syria as well as on the tangible ways in which these factors influence group behaviour. To what degree is a group's Islamist agenda opportunistic in order to receive funding? To what degree is a group's rhetoric and symbology more aspirational than based in reality?

**The Economy:** It is unclear whether Syria's economy will collapse and this depends on how one defines collapse. If one speaks to individual Syrians, the economy may have, in practice, already collapsed in their village or town. But in terms of hard figures it is hard to say: over the first 18 months of the uprisings, inflation rose to 36 per cent and the Syrian currency lost half its value. In Lebanon, it took seven years for the country's currency to collapse; in Egypt, the currency lost 5 per cent of its value after the revolution. The idea of collapse is relative and, without hard data coming out of Damascus, Syria's economy will need to be monitored quantitatively.

The reconstruction of Syria will cost billions of dollars. Any reconstruction programmes must be transparent and involve a wide-range of participants. What lessons can be learned from the experiences of post-war Lebanon and Iraq?

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