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SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY SCENE  
PRIOR TO  
SYRIAN REVOLUTION

## Colophon

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## Editor's Note

The current uprising in Syria took most of the country's civil society actors and organizations by surprise. Few were prepared to lead or give direction to the mass grievances against authoritarian rule, and even fewer appear to have been instrumental to the onset of the uprising in March 2011. However, whatever the outcome of the current Syrian crisis will be –a reform process, a fundamental change of the country's political system, or an ongoing militarized conflict-- chances are that civil society organizations will be variously called upon to aid reforms, support a transition, or help address Syrian citizens' burgeoning needs, or all of these together. As experiences in other contexts of (post-) authoritarianism or (post-)conflict consistently show, efforts to help ordinary citizens through their plight and build a better future will ultimately depend on those courageous and resilient individuals and groups who against all odds helped to build an indigenous civil society. It is against this background that this paper by Wael Sawah, himself a long-standing Syrian civil society activist, should be read. Wael Sawah wrote this paper in 2010 and modified in 2011 after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. Yet despite its delayed publication, its insights remain relevant for those who are keen to know more about the development of Syrian civil society. Mapping and analyzing the achievements and dilemmas facing Syrian civil society activists just prior to the outbreak of the current uprising, Sawah identifies the key players and sketches the backgrounds of their emergence and their changing strategies in response to the regime's hostility and their own divisions.

### Highlights

- Sawah identifies key civil society players, sketches the backgrounds of their emergence and their changing strategies in response to the regime's hostility and their own divisions just prior to the outbreak of the current uprising.
- Hard-learned experience learned activists that although the linkages between civil and political activities appear to be natural and to some extent inevitable, their efforts were better served when one would not mix political and civil engagement on the level of practical action.
- Whether or how the outcome of the current revolution in Syria will prove their point or not remains to be seen. Neither can one say with much certainty whether under current conditions such a strategy is tenable. What is clear, however, is that humanitarian efforts to help Syria's suffering citizens, aid any reform initiative, or manage future changes in Syria's political system will all have to involve and build on those who have been engaged in the pioneering work to give meaning and relevance to the notion of civil society in Syria against all odds.

## Introduction

The nature and role of civil society in Syria has been an ongoing source of disagreement between the Syrian government and its critics. This disagreement is a manifestation of their deep differences of opinion with regards to reform more generally. While the government treats reforms as a gradual and incremental process, its critics argue that reform must be a comprehensive process, of which civil society constitutes one basic component. In his inauguration speech of July 2000, President Bashar Assad called for placing the concept of civil society on the public agenda. Many Syrian intellectuals hurried to respond to the invitation embedded in this speech, and 99 of them signed a manifesto (which came to be known as the “Declaration of the 99.”). This act set the stage for other Syrian intellectuals to step out of the shadows. Among its demands, the manifesto called for putting an end to the state of emergency in the country, and for the recognition of religious and ideological pluralism, freedom of assembly and the press, and freedom of expression. The Declaration of the 99 prompted the establishment of an organization aimed at the revival of the country’s legacy involving civil society. The organization’s mission statement was broader in scope than its underlying manifesto and was signed by one thousand intellectuals, activists, and political figures. For this reason it was called the “Declaration of the One Thousand.” Subsequent to this came the spread of ‘cultural forums’, or loosely organized discussion platforms, which hastened to take specific political missions upon themselves. Most of these forums operated in Damascus, but some emerged in other Syrian cities and towns as well. Additionally, a relatively new phenomenon—human rights organizations—developed in Syria. The expansion of the concept of non-governmental organizations likewise shifted mostly charity-oriented organizations, which were (and remain) a widespread phenomenon in the country, to more sophisticated forms of organization, such as cultural, environmental, and artistic organizations, in addition to organizations aimed at combating untreatable illnesses, and addressing social needs, etc.

The most important of the political and cultural forums that appeared at this time was the Forum for National Dialogue, which was founded by former Member of Parliament Riad Seif who hosted the forum at his own home. One U.S. journalist described this forum as sowing “the first seeds of a movement of change that is coming to Syria.” Regrettably, Seif took what was seen by many observers as a too hasty step, namely, declaring the establishment of a new party, the Movement for Social Peace. This declaration helped provoke the government to halt the little progress achieved since 2000 and to silence all forums. Moreover, Seif’s parliamentary immunity was revoked and he was sentenced, along with several other members of his movement, to five years in prison on corruption charges. The Forum for National Dialogue closed its doors as did, subsequently, all other forums throughout Syria. One forum, the Jamal Atassi Forum, remained active as, for reasons unknown to this day, the authorities allowed it to continue. Unsurprisingly, Jamal Atassi’s Forum began to attract hundreds of participants on a regular basis. Indeed, it virtually became the only place where people could express their opinions, and to function as a refuge for all currents of the political opposition in Syria. Although the government refused to formally grant it a license, the forum continued to act relatively freely. Many of the country’s intellectuals, thinkers, and political figures gave lectures there, which resonated widely in intellectual and political circles. The two most famous lectures given at the Forum were that of the eminent dissident, Riyad al-Turk (for which he paid with another two and a half years in prison, in addition to the two decades he served earlier), and a position paper sent from exile by Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni, the general counsellor of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, which was read by ‘Ali ‘Abdallah, a member of the board of the forum, who was consequently arrested. The forum



was shut down indefinitely in 2005, marking the end of Damascus's brief spring. Was this the inevitable fate of the Damascus spring? Some Syrian intellectuals are of the opinion that the civil society movement erred when it overstepped its mission as a civil movement and prematurely went into the realm of politics, which should have been left to the politicians and the parties. They further claim that this movement should have better heeded its role as a social means to an end whose primary mission was to advance cultural, philosophical, and educational issues, and to disseminate the ideas of democracy and human rights. Indeed, one of the founders of civil society in Syria claimed that its chances of surviving and flourishing would have been greater had it not taken on the missions of the political parties and had it not put forward political platforms that challenged the government.

### **The Damascus Declaration**

It is impossible to understand this period without discussing two events that caused great tumult in the region and that had a great influence on the civil society movement in Syria. The first of these pertained to the fall of former Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein and the Iraq War in 2003. The second was UN Security Council resolution 1559 (September 2004) and the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, in February 2005, and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The two events combined sparked a commotion among Syria's intellectuals, which took the form primarily of political declarations and strikes, and culminated in the establishment of a broad coalition of the political opposition, the first of its kind in Syria. This coalition included parties and high-ranking independent voices, and it was launched on October 16, 2005 under the banner of 'The Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change'. The declaration stated that "The establishment of a democratic national regime [in Syria] is a decisive element of the efforts [steered at] political change and reform. It is essential that these efforts be gradual, non-violent, and built on common understandings, and on dialogue and recognition of the other." The declaration also called for adopting "democracy as a new regime with universal values and foundations and to elect a founding assembly that will put a new constitution into law with the goal of ensuring a system of checks and balances, the independence of the judiciary, and the realization of national integration through the establishment of the principle of citizenship." The signatories to the declaration included the National Democratic Alliance (a left-wing alliance of five national and left-wing parties), the committees for the revival of civil society, the Democratic Kurdish Coalition, the Kurdish Democratic Front, and a number of independent figures such as former MP Riad Seif. Several hours after the publication of the declaration, many organizations, forces, and individuals abroad hurried to support, and even to join it. The Muslim Brotherhood's surprising support for the declaration sparked much discussion and arguments. Effectively, the Damascus Declaration was a catalyst for developments in Syria's opposition circles. Many supported it while others vehemently opposed it. Yet soon the declaration itself ran into real difficulties, which stemmed in part from government pressures, and in part from the great gaps between the positions of the various signatories of the declaration. These included national, Islamic, left-wing, and liberal currents. Some of the more liberal circles tried to present a platform that was not based on the centrality of the Palestinian question and the Arab-Israeli conflict, socialism, or antagonism toward the United States and the West, but focused primarily on the government-opposition dichotomy. The liberal current tried to strengthen its position by widening the decision-making circle and establish a national council, which became the legislative body of the Declaration. The National Council of the Damascus Declaration assembled for the first time in December 2007 with the participation of 163 members, who all participated in drafting the liberal

political worldview of the coalition. Fidaa Hourani was chosen to head the Council. Likewise a general secretariat was chosen, and headed by Riad Seif. Its members included Riyad Turk, Sheikh Amin 'Abadi, and 'Ali 'Abdallah. The results of these elections strengthened the new liberal trends. Yet the failure of the leader of the Socialist Union Party, and of the Communist Labour Party to gain seats in the general secretariat prompted these two parties to halt their membership in the Declaration. This occurred a number of days, and perhaps even a number of hours, before the Syrian authorities launched an operation to arrest members of the national council, ending with the arrest of twelve of its prominent leaders. The Damascus Declaration represented an anomaly in the Syrian political landscape, which the government could not tolerate. Ultimately, this experiment was still-born. In a way, therefore, this was the second end to the Damascus Spring.

### **Community Associations**

Charity organizations generally enjoy a good reputation in Syria. This may well be the oldest form of civil society in this country. Because of the historical conflict between consecutive Syrian governments and its citizens, particularly the more wealthy among them, the Syrians often resorted to charity organizations as a way of expressing social solidarity while also constituting a channel for the realization of *zakat*, a pillar of Islam that calls on every Muslim to donate for the sake of the poor and the needy. Currently, some 600 charity organizations are registered at the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, making them the largest player in the non-governmental sector. Funding for the charity organizations comes primarily from individual donations by Syrians acting out of religious or humanitarian motives. Some of these organizations invest their money in industrial and commercial projects, and in workshops that employ some of the people that the organizations seek to help. Other organizations hold social fundraising events, such as Iftar meals on Ramadan or charity dinners. In addition to this, different kinds of charity markets are opening. Here one should note that limitations are placed on funding from abroad. The organizations in Syria enjoy full property rights and rights to express the volition of the organization, as well as litigation rights.

### **The GONGOs**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a relatively new form of organization that became common during the late 1980s, in particular following the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the birth of the new democracies in Eastern Europe. These NGOs played a central role in the transition from socialist systems there to a more open democratic system. Yet more recently governments worldwide, including in Syria, have begun to understand the importance of non-governmental organizations for forging relations with the developed world. These governments established NGOs that in practice were controlled by the government—GONGOs, whose goal was to give a 'civil' or legitimate character to the growing influence of government within society, and also to solicit financial support for the civil society sector.' Syria displays a refined form of these GONGOs, represented by a number of registered organizations in the fields of social action, development, environment, and children. The most important of these organizations come under the umbrella of the Syria Trust for Development, under the patronage of the First Lady, Asma Assad. These organizations receive the lion's share of foreign aid to Syria's civil society actors. The Syria Trust for Development includes three relatively autonomous divisions: the Syrian Foundation for the Development of the Countryside (FIRDOS), the Youth and Early Childhood Division, and the Culture and Heritage Division. The FIRDOS project works in the fields of economic empowerment, education, training, and socio-cultural

development of groups. It focuses on women's participation, societal organization, and collective action toward supplying the needs of citizens in the Syrian rural sector. According to the Syria Trust, funding for the FIRDOS project comes from international and local grants and the large part of these are from "international organizations, UN agencies, or the European Union." In addition to this, the private sector contributes a significant amount to the funding of its projects, although the share given by individuals is "greater than that given by the companies." The 'Educational Division' of the Syria Trust for Development includes a number of projects, the central ones being: 'Shabab,' 'Massar,' and 'World Links.' Via these agencies the Trust focused in particular on encouraging modern skills, working from the assumption that "Syrian society has a rich and deeply rooted cultural history, which allows for the renewal and acquisition of knowledge". Furthermore, it argues that since Syria has a profoundly young society, it is therefore only natural that there should be a passion for knowledge and expertise. In addition to the Syrian Trust for Development, another group of organizations emerged under the auspices of the First Lady, a fact that afforded them protection and social prestige. Accordingly, this patronage strengthened these organizations and encouraged people to donate to and volunteer for them. Among these active organizations one should mention "Basma," which focuses on the treatment of children with cancer, and the Organization of Young Entrepreneurs, which was founded by young educated business people working to increase economic growth through the encouragement of small- and medium-sized businesses. Also worth mentioning is the Rainbow Organization, which works in the field of early childhood, protection of children from violence, neglect, and exploitation in all its forms.

### **Cultural Forums and Organizations**

Some have generally argued that civil society often takes up all the space that the political parties and the state concede. This holds true in other regions, and it certainly is also the case in Syria. From this perspective, the importance of civil society lies in the fact that its role does not contradict or clash with the missions of government or of the dominant political parties. Historically, beginning in the 1880s, many cultural and urban organizations were founded in Syria. Yet the weakening of civil society and its near disappearance following the Ba'th Turnover of March 8, 1963, brought about the retreat of most of these cultural organizations. Among the pre-1963 organizations that continue to struggle against the ravages of time are the "Sukayna" Forum, founded in the 1950s by Thuraya Hafez, the Arab Salon, and the Social Forum, which recently resumed its civil activities with much vigour. Among the younger organizations are the "Sada" Music Cultural Association, the Star of Non-Violence Forum, as well as other young cultural organizations in the capital and in other cities.

### **Human Rights Organizations**

Syria cannot boast a clean record in the field of human rights. The concept of human rights is a relatively new one in the Syrian arena. The accelerated pace of political developments in Syria in the 1960s brought to the fore worldviews such as socialism, imperialism, nationalism, unity, and democracy. The stronger the concept of national liberation became, the more the concept of individual and human rights retreated. With the arrival of the Ba'th Party to power in 1963, a state of emergency was declared in the country, and notwithstanding the introduction of a constitution in 1973, the State of Emergency Law was not amended, and the state of emergency remained firmly in place during four decades until it was formally abrogated in April 2011 in response to the current uprising. The concept of human rights permeated the cultural and

political arenas much later than in most other countries in the world. The first Syrian human rights organization—the Committees for the Defence of Basic Freedoms and Human Rights— was founded only in the late 1980s. Due to the lack of experience in the field, and because of the political past of the founders of the committees, they introduced both their judicial and political-party experience into the discourse and organizational structure of the committees. Oftentimes, it was henceforth difficult to differentiate between statements by the human rights committees and those of the opposition (especially the left-wing opposition). This could at least partly explain the government's hostile attitude to the committees, witnessing repeated arrests of activists of the Committees for the Defence of Freedoms in the course of its first decade. The concept of human rights regained attention only at the beginning of the 2000s with the instatement of Syrian president Bashar Assad, at which time lawyers, politicians, and activists in the field of human rights began to establish non-governmental organizations for the protection of human rights. Most of these organizations applied for licenses, but all of these applications were rejected outright or are still awaiting an answer. The Committees for the Defence of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights opened its doors once again in 2000, after which time many other NGOs were established in that field. Among these were the Organization of Human Rights in Syria and the Arab Association of Human Rights, which had a pan-Arab and Nasserist orientation, the National Alliance, which was established by a number of people who had left the ranks of the Arab Association, and the Syrian Association for Human Rights, members of which founded the Syrian League for Human Rights. The founders of the League include prominent intellectuals and scholars who are well known by the Syrian public. Besides these organizations one should mention three Kurdish organizations: the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights in Syria; the Organization of Human Rights in Syria (MAF); and the Organization for Human Rights and General Freedoms in Syria (DAD). Likewise research centres were established to reach out to Syrians generally and inform them on issues related to human rights through numerous studies on the subject. Among these important centres are the Damascus Centre for the Studies of Human Rights, the Syrian Centre for Judicial Studies, and the Syrian Centre for Human Rights Training. In addition to these are a number of internationally based human rights organizations, most of which are associated with opposition circles living outside of Syria. The two most important of these are the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC). Even until the start of the uprising in spring 2011, human rights activists in Syria were going through a period of great frustration and turmoil. They had to go about their work with great prudence as their activities were much more restricted than during the period between 2000 and 2005. The result of such prudence and constant fears of being persecuted caused human rights activists to spend most of their time worrying about themselves rather than about the rights of others. Likewise this has led to splits within the organizations and mutual accusations between the activists themselves, as the government sits by and enjoys the divisions its policies cause. Three human rights activists in particular have been serving repeated prison terms because of their activities:: Anwar Al-Bunni, Haytham Maleh, and Mohand Husseini.

### **Women's Organizations and Associations**

A few women's organizations are operating in Syria and focuses on issues of gender, women's rights and children. The largest of these organizations is the General Federation of Syrian Women. Founded in 1967, this semi-governmental organization operates across the country and has a large active membership. Although the Union is formally not part of the government, it enjoys full funding from the state. This organization has carried out a number of projects in the field of early childhood and education. In addition to

this large organization, other non-governmental organizations are at work across the country. The most important of these is the Syrian Women's League, which stands out for its judicial activity. The League treats women's rights as intrinsic to human rights, and has worked to disseminate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopting it, alongside the Syrian Constitution, as a basis for its activities and its goal of amending discriminatory laws. In addition to the League one should also mention the Social Initiative Organization, which was penalized by the government and disbanded because it conducted a general public opinion poll on issues including marital laws and 'honour crimes'.

Another organization is the Syrian Association for Women's Role in Development (AWRD). Working in coordination with the government, this organization has held a number of conferences on the subject of 'honour' crimes and established a centre for young women—the first of its kind—providing shelter to young women who are victims of violence. Another prominent organization is the Syrian Women Observatory, which is considered an important platform for the treatment of women's and children's issues in Syria. Unlike other organizations, its website is headed by a man, Bassem al-Kadi, who has dedicated much of his life to this issue. In addition to all these we should mention the website Al-Thara, which was founded by Itana Publishing House. Over the past six years, this website has attracted many young journalists and served as a forum for the training of more than sixty journalists in the subjects of writing and free media. This website joined forces with other organizations in public campaigns, such as the campaign against 'honour' crimes, and in writing the alternative report to the Beijing +10 summit on women.

### **The Legal Framework of Civil Society Organizations**

Syria's Law on Non-Governmental Organizations was passed in 1958 during the period of Egyptian-Syrian unity. This law replaced the older Associations Law, under which any Syrian who wished to establish an organization could do so, with the only requirement being that he or she notifies the authorities. The current law places limitations on the establishment of organizations and gives the Ministry of Social Affairs the exclusive authority to decide about the granting of licenses to organizations. It also gives the Ministry the right to interfere in the internal management of the organizations. The law allows the government to close any organization without going through judicial channels. The organizations' status does not grant them litigation rights insofar as they do not receive a license from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Any organizational or institutional activity done without first obtaining a license is punishable by up to three months imprisonment in addition to a monetary fine. A number of organizations have led civil and legal campaigns with the goal of amending the Law of Non-Governmental Organizations, or replacing it with a new, more liberal, open, and progressive law. Such efforts thus far have been without success.

### **A New Generation of Civil Society Activists**

Since 2006 the Syrian political movement and the civil society movement have met with many difficulties and complications. Activists were sent to prison because of their stances/beliefs and non-violent activity. Arguably, in this context the mixture of the political with the civil resulted in the weakening of both of them. The period following the arrests of 2006 and 2007 was necessarily characterized by the separation between the forces of political opposition and the forces of civil society. The establishment of the Damascus Alliance within Syria, and the National Rescue Front Alliance abroad, led to the separation of political activity from civil activity. In this period a new generation of civil society activists began to appear. These were people

who did not necessarily have a past of political activity, whether with the opposition or the government. These activists carried out a series of community activities of an exclusively social and economic character, and this way hoped to be more successful than their predecessors. They waged several civil campaigns, such as a national campaign for ending 'honour' crimes, a national campaign to annul an amendment of the marital law which, had it been accepted, would likely have sent the situation of women in Syria hundreds of years backwards, a campaign for a woman's right to confer her citizenship on her children, a campaign to lower cellular phone rates, and many other campaigns for the protection of young women who were victims of rape, and specifically on behalf of a girl who was raped by four men in the city of Aleppo. The campaign forced the Syrian government to interfere and to send the girl for treatment in England. In these campaigns, the civil rights activists used new media: blogs, e-mails, and text messages. They also made intelligent use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which were banned in Syria.

## **Conclusions**

Within the difficult Syrian context, and prior to the uprising, civil society activists had largely come to the conclusion that it is preferable to choose either the political over the civil, or vice versa. Hard-learned experience told them that although the linkages between the two fields of action appear to be natural and to some extent inevitable, their efforts were better served when one would not mix political and civil engagement on the level of practical action. Likewise, they reasoned that although the mission of civil society ultimately amounts to the protection of issues that are essentially political—such as democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights—Syria's context dictated that this protection must be primarily achieved with civil, and not political, tools. Whether or how the outcome of the current revolution in Syria will prove their point or not remains to be seen. Neither can one say with much certainty whether under current conditions such a strategy is tenable. What is clear, however, is that humanitarian efforts to help Syria's suffering citizens, aid any reform initiative, or manage future changes in Syria's political system will all have to involve and build on those who have been engaged in the pioneering work to give meaning and relevance to the notion of civil society in Syria against all odds.

## About the Author

Wael Sawah is a Syrian researcher on issues of civil society in Syria, author of a number of research papers in Arabic and English, and co-author of a number of books in Arabic. He is the co-author of "Le Printemps arabe: un premier bilan," Centre Tricontinental, Belgique, 2012. He is a member of the *Annual Middle East Legal Studies Seminar* (MELSS, Yale University); founding member of the *Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression*, Damascus; a founding member of the *Arab Rationalists League*, Paris; editor of Al Awan Website for Laic Studies ([www.alawan.org](http://www.alawan.org)); co-author of "Issues of secularism in the Levant" and "A tale entitled Syria" in Arabic; and a regular columnist at *al Hayat Newspaper* in London. Sawah is a researcher and advisor at The Syrian League for Citizenship. He has written research papers both in English and Arabic for international and regional institutions. In addition, Sawah has worked as a political analyst at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus.

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Hivos and University of Amsterdam, Department of Political Science, initiated the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia in 2008. This academic activist initiative generated insights on the role of local civil society actors and Western donors in democratisation processes in Syria and Iran. Hivos currently co-produces policy papers, policy briefs, working papers, research papers, books and newsletters with think tanks and experts mainly in MENA, but also in the US and EU. These in-depth insights deal with dignity revolutions and transition challenges and how Western donors can accompany transitions through insider knowledge.

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