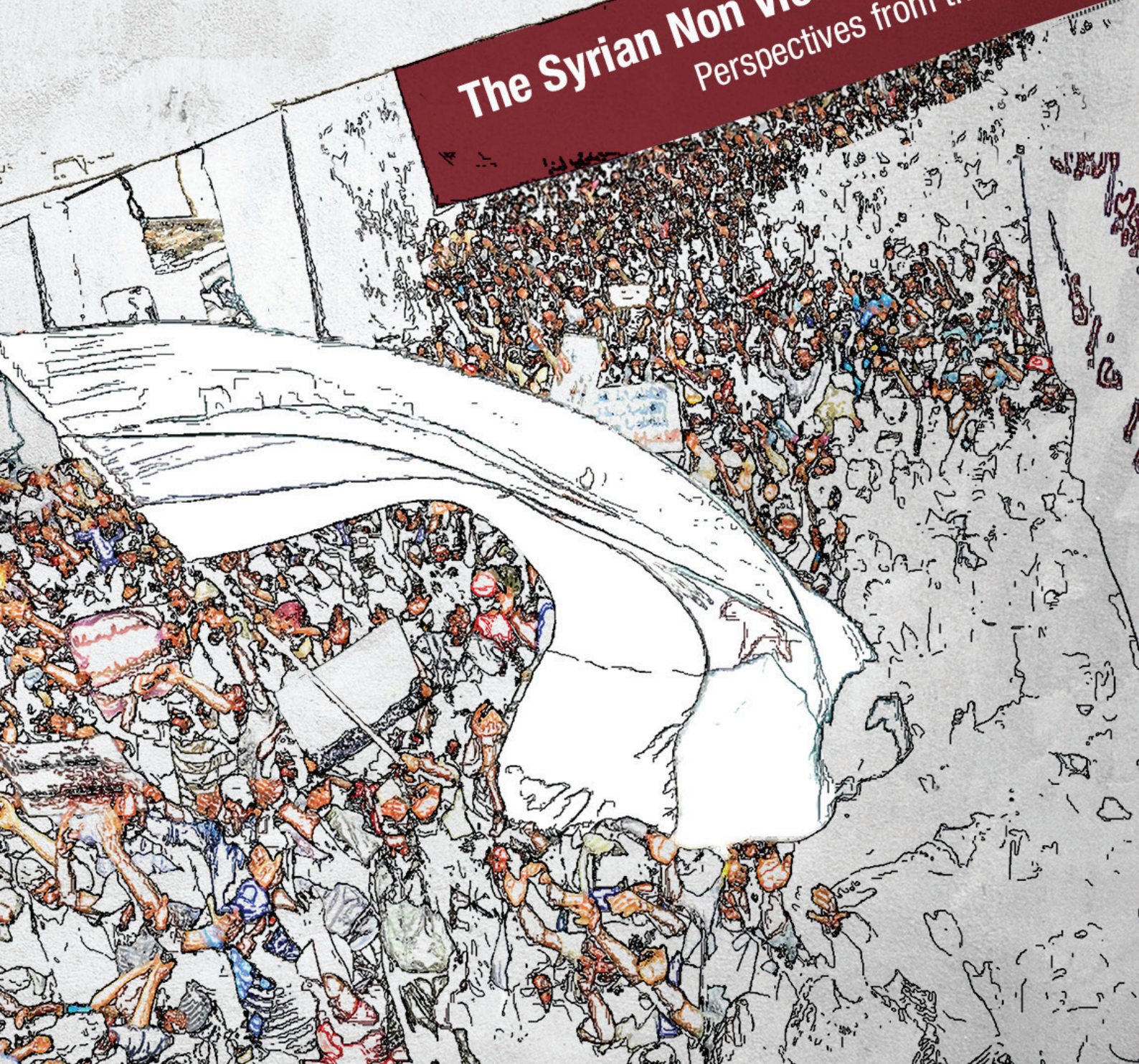


The Syrian Non Violent Movement

Perspectives from the Ground



THE SYRIAN NON VIOLENT MOVEMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Syrian revolution is caught in a complex web of challenges, including a nonviolent movement in decline, volatile militant groups on the rise, and regional and international actors who are more active in the conflict than Syrians themselves. However, hidden within this grim reality, there are still nonviolent activists who work both in the shadows and in broad daylight, within the borders of Syria and abroad. These people strive to keep the flame of nonviolent revolution alive, despite the overwhelming forces working against them. Dawlaty conversed over a period of six months with these activists, encouraging them to search for new tools, question past choices, and analyze the successes and failures of the nonviolent movement in Syria. This report is the fruit of that dialogue.

Dawlaty is a nonprofit organization that focuses on developing and empowering civil society in Syria in order to facilitate democratic transition. This report seeks to document activists' experiences and insights as a resource for the nonviolent movement in Syria. It was made by and for nonviolent activists. The goal is to provide a constructive critique of nonviolent activism in Syria with the hope that the report's findings and recommendations might strengthen the movement and guide nonviolent activism back to the center of the Syrian revolution as a primary catalyst for change.

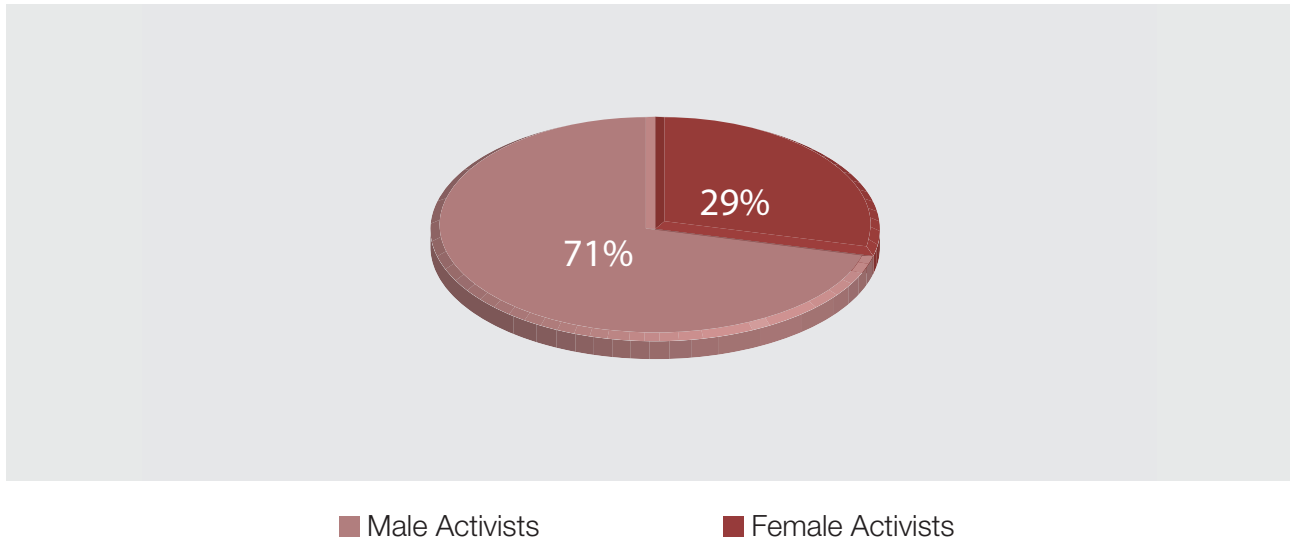
The current state of the movement is fragmented and scattered across a disconnected geography, with stakeholders who share both common ground and divergent agendas. This report seeks to focus the debate by defining the movement's core issues. It seeks to establish an identity for nonviolent activism, the nonviolent movement, and civil society in Syria. It also explores the questions that are at the forefront of activists' minds, such as whether humanitarian aid is to be regarded as part of the nonviolent movement, what the movement's position on military operations should be, and whether or not there is hope for the movement's revival.

METHODOLOGY

Over the first six months of 2014, Dawlaty met with 139 nonviolent, Syrian activists. The activists gathered in Syria and in neighboring countries to discuss three years of nonviolent activism in Syria since the beginning of the revolution. They discussed lessons learned, the movement's strengths and weaknesses, and its role in the future of Syria. Seventy-three male and female activists participated in focus groups in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, and another 66 activists participated through individual interviews and online questionnaires. The Dawlaty team faced difficulties recruiting women to participate in the study, and as a result, more than 70% of participants were men. Women were particularly underrepresented in Northern Syria, where social conventions restrict women's activities, and in Turkey, where participants had to travel in order to attend.

After collecting preliminary results drawn from the surveys, Dawlaty held a workshop in Beirut. Activists from different regions of Syria, in addition to displaced activists living in Turkey and Lebanon, gathered to interpret the results and deepen the analysis. Dawlaty conducted additional interviews after the workshop, then collected and curated all of the data. The present report aims to analyze and interpret that data and identify the topics that warrant further research because they have proven to be critical to the success of the nonviolent movement in Syria.

The methodology used in this study starts with and returns to the activists. It begins very close to reality, then distances itself enough for analysis and perspective, then eventually returns to the activists, bearing new ideas.



FINDINGS

One vital finding is that, with the exception of a few baby steps taken during the transition from Assad the father to Assad the son, nonviolent activism in Syria did not exist prior to the revolution — many decades of authoritarian rule had successfully kept it out of the public sphere. However, despite a lack of history and no experience to guide their initial efforts, activists expressed pride in what they achieved during the early days of the revolution and beyond. They learned by trial and error in a “sink or swim” environment, and benefitted from their contact with international organizations and media outlets. They are proud because they overcame the regime’s monopoly on the public sphere and introduced themselves, for the first time, as active participants, after decades of being marginalized by a totalitarian authority.

The interviews revealed the extent to which the nonviolent movement in Syria established itself and grew against all odds. And yet, as awareness and quiet support of the movement grew, on-the-ground activism declined at the hand of brutal suppression by the regime, militarization of the revolution, and the geographical fracturing of Syria. In other words, while the movement improbably emerged and grew without any civil society to support it, it is now too weak and disorganized to lead the fractured, ad-hoc civil society that it helped to establish over the last few years.

Even if the nonviolent movement does not yet have the capacity to lead the emerging civil society in Syria, after three years in the trenches, activists have a more clear sense of the role they should play, the strategies they should apply, and more importantly, the mistakes that they have made. Although all participants in the study shared a yearning to re-empower nonviolent activism, many, from different Syrian regions, had not communicated with each other in recent times. With the dialogue flowing now for the first time in entirely too long, differences in participants’ experiences and in their various viewpoints quickly came to the surface. In order to understand the differences and similarities between the experiences of activists in various regions, and to discern how they might collaborate and develop a national strategy, local reporting on the nonviolent movement was divided geographically, according to areas controlled by the regime, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamic Front (IF), Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State (ISIS), and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (KDU).

Activists agreed that each area should have its own form of nonviolent activism based on local experience, and implemented with strategy that takes into account the unique constitution and level of violence perpetrated by the local military forces who are in control. They further stressed that while activists in each area should operate in accordance with local circumstances, the nonviolent activist movement was in great need of a unified and unifying national strategy. Activists also shared local lessons learned, such as the importance of coordination and strategizing, the need for nonviolent activism to have its own media, and the necessity of monitoring funding sources and funder agendas.

After an exchange of divergent perspectives, all activists rallied around the idea that in order to invigorate the nonviolent movement in Syria, any new strategy must not only include new on-the-ground tactics based on collective lessons learned, but also a robust political vision for the movement. Broadly supported elements of this political vision include approaching Syria's current civil society as a partner in the nonviolent struggle, the return of displaced activists to Syria, making the goals of the revolution public and debatable, and re-empowering women in positions of leadership after their marginalization by armed violence.

CONCLUSIONS

- The nonviolent movement in Syria is weak, fragmented, and dispersed across a disconnected geography that represents sometimes conflicting social goals and values. But the movement can be re-empowered.
- Re-empowering nonviolent activism is an urgent matter. Activists are aware that the end of their movement means the end of the revolution itself.
- Lack of strategic thinking is a crippling, recurring issue with Syrian activists. Activists understand the urgency to address this, but they lack the tools and training to develop macro-level strategy themselves. One of Dawlaty's recommendations is to stage training workshops on strategy building.
- Militarization of the revolution has marginalized and exhausted nonviolent activism. Activists realize the pressing need to revive their peaceful movement.
- The movement critically needs a unified vision for how to deal with armed forces. Militarization is a reality, whether activists agree with it or not. Waiting for the regime to fall or for militarization to end before taking action means that no action will be taken and the movement will die.
- Militarization of the conflict and a patriarchal culture (including women's own internalization of this culture) in Syria have effectively marginalized women from positions of leadership and influence in the revolution. Activists unanimously agree that women must be empowered. They understand the social challenges they will face, but they are fighting to place women in leadership positions, especially in roles where their unique gifts and insights as women give them an advantage over men.

INTRODUCTION AND GOALS

Any strength and weight in the report you now hold is the result of dialogues, debates, workshops, interviews and questionnaires in which Syrian activists shared their experiences with each other. They communicated, argued, and studied. They reviewed the history and the current state of their movement. Some were analytical, while others were nostalgic and emotional. However deep or shallow their differences were, they all strongly believe in the movement itself above and beyond their individual positions.

This report, made by and for activists, aims to foster dialogue and provide an analytic and constructive review of the nonviolent movement from the beginning of the Syrian revolution in March, 2011 through June 2014, when the final roundtable session for this report was held. It also aims to develop new strategies that avoid past mistakes. Dawlaty pioneered a new methodology for this report: for the first time, activists working inside of Syria, outside of Syria, and in areas controlled by all sides of the conflict, all met face to face. The ultimate goal of this process was to turn discussions, reviews and analysis into habitual practice, to forge a nonviolent movement that constantly evolves because the activists themselves are constantly debating, questioning, and evolving.

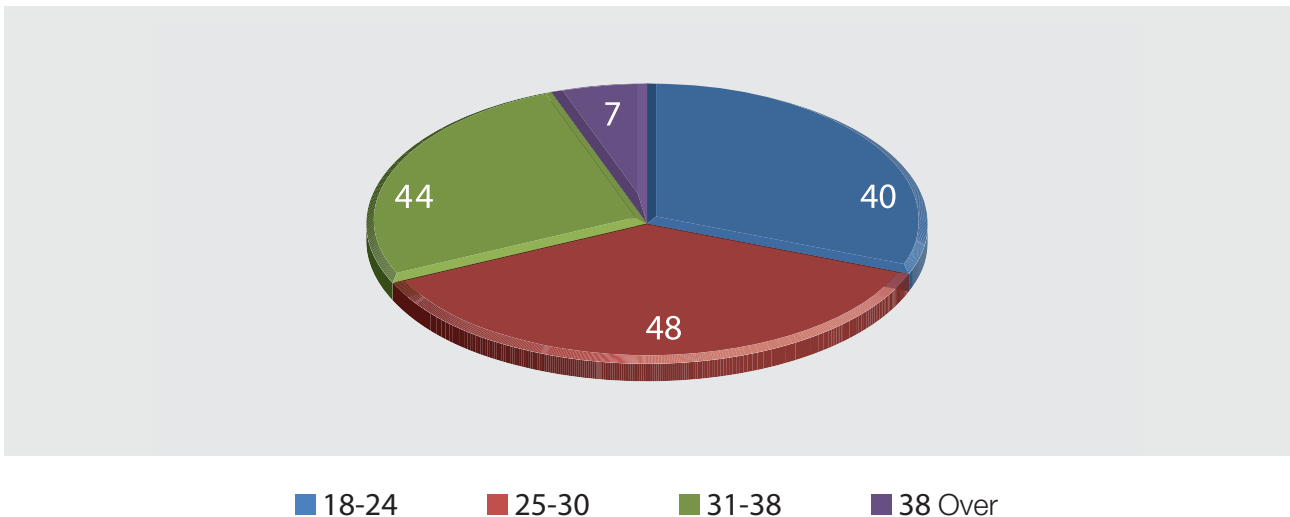
Dawlaty's hope is that anyone who reads this report, whether activist, researcher, or organization, will acquire better knowledge of the strengths, weaknesses and local variants of the nonviolent movement in Syria, and take what they have learned to foster and raise up new tools and strategies to strengthen the movement.

The source of all information collected here is the activists themselves. Their agreements and disagreements, and the myriad of perspectives on every issue formed a deep, broad, and rich discourse. This discourse is the primary material of this report, and it is a unique glimpse into the current state of affairs in Syria. Within the shared knowledge of three years of nonviolent activism in Syria, and in-between the lines of this report, there is a roadmap to a better future for Syria.

METHODOLOGY

FOCUS GROUP

Participants were between the ages of 18 and 38 and held prominent roles in the Syrian nonviolent movement.



SELECTION CRITERIA

In an attempt to cover as much Syrian soil as possible, Dawlaty selected 139 activists from areas where nonviolent movement is still active, including Al-Haskah (Amouda and Al-Dirbasiyyah), Al-Raqqah, Aleppo (Al-Bab, Manbij, Kobani/Ayn al-Arab, and Atarib), Homs, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Damascus (Al-Yarmouk Camp and Rif Dimashq), Al-Suwaida, Hama, Latakia, Idlib (Maarat Al-Numaan, Atmeh Camp, Saraqib and Kafr Nabl), Hamah (Salamiya), Aal-Qamishly (Sere Kaniyeh/Raas Al-Ayn and Tal Abyad) and Tartous.

After assembling the target groups, Dawlaty facilitated interchanges, collecting data and primary source material in group discussion sessions with the following features:

- Seventy-three activists participated in group discussions
- Sessions held in Beirut, Lebanon, and in the rural areas of Aleppo, Syria were all held in small groups comprised of five to eight activists
- A Gaziantep discussion group included 22 activists

- Each session addressed a particular set of issues, detailed below

The group session in Gaziantep was larger because travel from Syria was problematic, and also because Dawlaty's team could not stay in Turkey for an extended period of time

Additionally, 13 activists participated in individual interviews, and 53 participated in an online survey. The individual interviews and an online survey were used as supplemental tools intended to create a larger pool of activists, and to include those who could not participate in person due to challenging social and security conditions.

GENDER BALANCE

Although Dawlaty strove to create gender balance, the number of female participants was lower than hoped for, primarily due to the unique security situation, transportation challenges and social conventions that are heavily biased against women. In an attempt to compensate for this lack of gender balance, a special session was held for female activists in Beirut. Thus, the number of female and male participants was equal in Beirut. However, only two women participated in the session held in Turkey, and there were no female participants in the sessions held in the North of Aleppo. Twenty-five percent of those who participated in individual interviews and online surveys were female.

KEY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the role and the current state of the nonviolent movement in Syria?
- What mistakes did nonviolent activists make? What victories did they achieve? What are the lessons learned?
- Can the Syrian nonviolent movement regain power and lead the revolution? If yes, how and if no, why not?

All answers, discussions and debates were documented and then categorized geographically (in accordance with the areas where activists work), and according to the chronology of political power (which faction controlled a given area at a given time). These distinctions allowed Dawlaty to better understand and document the evolution of nonviolent activism in Syria. The areas covered are:

- Areas controlled by the regime.
- Those under the control of armed factions; Free Syrian Army (FSA), Islamic Front (IF), The Islamic State (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (KDU)

The geo-military power distinctions clarified the differences in activists' views and experiences. It is also significant that most of those who participated in discussions and individual interviews in Lebanon had worked in regime-controlled areas, and were forced to leave the country and continue their activities abroad. Participants in Turkey and North Syria were activists from areas not controlled by the regime, and most of them are still in Syria or at least able to visit. For those who cannot enter the country, it is due to the following:

- Fear of arrest by the regime in places like al-Haskah and al-Qamishli
- Fear of arrest by ISIS in places like al-Raqqah, Manbij and al-Baab
- Fear of arrest by the Kurdish forces in places like Afrin and Sere Kaniyeh/Ain al-Arab
- Unstable security situation in places like Deir Ezzor

Note that the key questions above were used as starting points, and all participants addressed many other issues. All discussions with any potential value were documented and categorized for later use. When the documentation was complete, some of those who attended the discussion sessions were invited to a roundtable session in Beirut, where the primary material was presented, and the activists were consulted on the final form of this report. This roundtable was the first time since the beginning of the revolution that activists from North, Central, and South Syria had the opportunity to meet and exchange opinions and ideas.

Finally, a researcher consulted with both activists and members of Dawlaty foundation, and subsequently curated all data in the form you now read. Therefore, it can be said that this final document is the result of collaboration between three parties: the researcher, Dawlaty, and the activists.

The report focuses on those challenges most frequently addressed by activists:

- How the regime's brutality impacts the movement
- How militarization impacts the movement
- Whether providing humanitarian aid is a revolutionary nonviolent action
- Student movement in colleges
- Activism inside and outside of Syria

CHALLENGES FACED IN INTERVIEWS AND WORKSHOPS

Low Female Participation:

- Due to the conservative social environment locally, female activists could not attend the discussion sessions in North Aleppo. In Turkey, due to transportation challenges and social conventions that discourage women from traveling without male family members, the sessions had only two women out of 22 participants. These challenges inspired Dawlaty to dedicate one section of this report exclusively to female nonviolent activists.

Resistance to Criticism:

- Many participants had never looked back to analyze their own work or the work of others. Some were surprised, confused or not well organized in the articulation of their ideas. Although this was not an insurmountable challenge, it revealed the lack of self-critique in the history of the movement.

Emotionally Charged Content:

- The review that took place during the sessions empowered participants and demonstrated reasons for enthusiasm, but in remembering the past, many activists relived memories of friends who were killed or arrested, thus leading some discussions into primarily emotional territory.

Judgmental Attitudes and Stress:

- The discussion sessions revealed that activists had not been in communication with each other, and that each group was working in an isolated bubble. This was particularly apparent at the roundtable session held in Beirut on June 29, 2014. Deep differences in convictions and ideas came to the surface and some activists judged others prior to understanding their unique conditions. The sessions revealed that groups knew little about the conditions under which other activists had been operating. Activists working from outside the country also judged those inside, especially those working in regime-controlled areas. One clear takeaway from the study was that discussions such as the ones conducted must continue to take place so that different groups



better understand each other's conditions, and better learn from each other's experiences.

Researcher's Absence from the Discussion Sessions:

- The researcher who curated the report was hired after the discussion sessions were completed. Although he had access to all documented data, it would have been more efficient if he had attended at least some of the discussion sessions. Therefore, and in order to compensate for that, he interchanged extensively with some activists and with Dawlaty affiliates who had supervised the discussions.

RESEARCH TEAM

Dawlaty Foundation:



Dawlaty is a nonprofit organization that was founded in 2012. It focuses on developing and empowering civil society in Syria in order to facilitate democratic transition. It seeks to reinforce concepts like nonviolent activism, transitional justice and citizenship. Dawlaty works with young, civil society actors of all ideological, social and economic backgrounds, as long as they are committed to nonviolent activism. Dawlaty partners with organizations, such as the Heinrich Böll Stiftung foundation, that share these values. For security reasons, Dawlaty affiliates and employees contributing to this report are unnamed.

Mohammad Dibo:

Mohammad is a researcher, writer and poet. He is widely published in Arabic language newspapers and periodicals, and is also *Syria Untold's* editor-in-chief. *Syria Untold* specializes in archiving and documenting nonviolent activism in Syria.

NONVIOLENT ACTIVISM ACCORDING TO SYRIAN ACTIVISTS

Many names have been given to nonviolent practices that seek to reclaim rights and challenge authoritarian or colonial authorities. Some of these names are “civil disobedience,” “civil resistance,” and “nonviolent activism.” These frames contain a wide range of activities and protest tools carried out by groups, everyday people, and activists.

From Mahatma Gandhi in India, to Desmond Tutu and Steve Biko in South Africa, and from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. to the color revolutions— Rose in Georgia, Purple in Czechoslovakia and Serbia, and Orange in the Ukraine, history provides rich examples of nonviolent activism. The Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria also belongs to this tradition, despite the fact that some groups deviated towards militarization after the initial, nonviolent activism that inspired the revolutions.

The common thread in these historical events is the use of nonviolent methods in seeking social and political goals. In Syria, the name activists use is “nonviolent civil movement,” which emerges as a term from the particularity of the Syrian movement itself.

DEFINING THE NONVIOLENT CIVIL MOVEMENT

It is a set of nonviolent practices employed by activists as a means to reclaim their rights. The term “civil” refers to the city, civil society and citizenship as opposed to tribe, sect, and primitive communal societies. This means that in order for a nonviolent, civil movement to fulfill its meaning, a nonviolent struggle must be employed to achieve the goal of realizing a state built around a comprehensive definition of citizenship, including freedom, democracy and civil society. Therefore, any nonviolent action that strives for the above-mentioned goal can be part of a nonviolent civil movement, whether it aims for the realization of the ultimate goal of a democratic civil state, or for an intermediate goal that supports it, like worker’ rights, women’s rights, or freedom of expression.

But are all nonviolent actions that take a step toward building a civil society really a part of the nonviolent civil movement?

Humanitarian aid workers in Syria, for example, ultimately contribute to building a civil society. But should we categorize their efforts as a part of the nonviolent civil movement? Or should that term be limited to the practices that have an implicit or explicit social change or political goal, like protests, graffiti, or tearing down the regime’s symbols? This was a major question that participating activists disagreed about, especially the question of whether humanitarian aid work is a component of the nonviolent movement.

Activists who do not believe that humanitarian aid work is a part of the movement, view it as a temporary response to a particular situation created by the regime. The movement, on the other hand, is the means to an ultimate goal, which is to overthrow the regime and to build a civil and democratic state in Syria. Further, they believe that the large number of activists who have transitioned to humanitarian aid work have weakened the movement.



Others believe that aid work is a fundamental part of the movement and a core component of the revolution. They reminded the other activists that aid workers are victims of violence at the hand of the regime just as revolutionary activists are. They believe that empowering displaced women and children is a fundamental part of the revolutionary work because it is those same women and children who will return one day and help launch a new democratic, civil Syria.

And yet, expansion of the definition of the nonviolent movement to cover other civil activities can be problematic. Many groups work to build a civil state in Syria, but they have not participated in the daily nonviolent struggle. Some have demands that are significantly lower than those of most activists, for example, advocating for the basic needs of people instead of the downfall of a tyrant. Further complicating the issue is the fact that other civil institutions are actually close to the regime or carry a neutral position in regard to the regime's tyranny. One activist said, "there are many groups inside Syria that work to empower and develop the capacity of women and children, and these groups are supported by the regime. They do good work with utmost neutrality." Another activist argued that "these groups lack goals and planning, which makes dealing with them very hard. The word neutrality was actually invented by the international community and some activists to serve particular agendas. Every human being has opinions. Is it possible to work with a group that is neutral about the killing of innocent human beings?"

The preceding perspectives lead us to two divergent definitions of a nonviolent movement. One is general and expansive in its definition of activism, while the other limits its definition of activism to those acts that contribute to overcoming and overthrowing tyranny. The first focuses on the ultimate goal of building a civil state through activities (protests, writing on walls, aid work, media, education...) carried out by both nonviolent activists and civil society organizations aiming for a democratic state and empowered citizens.

The second nonviolent movement consists of activities on the ground that aim to resist and eventually overthrow tyranny as a fundamental and requisite step on the path to a civil state. This perspective does not view humanitarian aid work, media, psychological support, or education as part of the movement.

They all agree on the ultimate goal and still disagree on the tools employed to achieve it.

For the purposes of this report, the term Nonviolent Civil Movement means:

All activities carried out by both nonviolent activists and civil society organizations that, in order to achieve a democratic civil state, aim to overthrow tyranny.

THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT UNDER ASSAD THE SON (2000-2011)

The initiative of “Committees for the Revival of Civil Society,” established in 2000, was a turning point in modern Syrian history and the beginning of a brief period referred to as “The Damascus Spring,” which brought the ideas of civil society and nonviolent activism back to the public sphere after years of marginalization and repression. The initiative took place right after the death of Assad, the father, when a group of intellectuals, activists, and oppositionists released two statements. The first, known as the ‘Statement of Intellectuals,’ was signed by 99 Syrian intellectuals, and the second was called the ‘Statement of 1000.’ The mere fact that these statements were publicly released was a hugely significant benchmark because almost no group had dared to publicly express dissent since the regime tightened its grip following its bloody victory over the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980’s.

The nonviolent civil movement gained momentum through a number of activities, statements and intellectual forums that took place in Damascus, Tartous, al-Qamishli and Amouda. Many sit-ins were held in front of the Syrian parliament in Arnous Square, the Palace of Justice, and the Supreme State Security Court, demanding a variety of changes and freedoms: the release of political prisoners, a peaceful transfer of power, activating the role of the judiciary, and the abolition of emergency law and the Supreme State Security Court.

These baby steps toward empowerment of a civil society threatened the regime, and soon, many of the movement’s leaders were arrested. All public forums expressing dissent were closed except for one known as al-Attasi’s forum, which somehow managed to stay open until 2005. By then, it was clear that the freedoms people gained during this period, temporarily and transitionally tolerated while the Syrian authorities passed power, were temporary indeed. As power was passed to Assad the son, the well-educated optometrist quickly became a dictator in the mold of his father. The all-too-familiar repression policies were soon in place once again.

This brief experience helped civil society realize that it had power, and it also reminded the Syrian authority that this power had to be contained and prevented from developing independently. One form of containment involved the regime permitting select, domesticated civil institutions to operate. Many institutions and organizations concerned with the environment, children, women, and social conditions were licensed, controlled, or even openly sponsored by the regime, as with the many institutions and organizations that enjoyed the patronage of Syria’s first lady Asmaa al-Assad.

On the other hand, some activists and oppositionists took advantage of this new, narrow space of freedom to continue their work. Many human rights organizations were established and continued to function without any permit— though the authorities did not provide them with permits, they also did not shut them down. Allowing them to work without permits was another containment strategy employed by the regime—activists were constantly under the threat of arrest, and whenever the regime felt it needed to make a point, the authorities made it, as in 2009 when they arrested the lawyer, Muhannad al-Hussaini, from the Sawasiya human rights organization.

Students in Daraiyya and in Aleppo University in 2003 convincingly demonstrated that Syrian society as a whole was striving to express its needs and demands, and that it was in a state of metamorphosis. Students protested university policies and others mobilized to empower student and civil movements, away from the eyes of the Syrian authority. In Daraiyya, in 2003, a group of activists cleaned the streets of the city and distributed educational brochures to raise awareness, and warn people about rampant corruption perpetrated by employees of the state. The regime was not going to allow any hint of a



developing, independent civil society, so it quickly crushed the movement and detained its leaders.

But sit-ins, statements, and demands for freedom continued, and they coincided with the spread of a culture of nonviolent activism and associations that advocated for civil society. The Maaber publishing house, for example, established in 2000, translated and published many books about nonviolent movements, for example, *Nonviolence in Education*, and *The Dictionary of Nonviolence*, both by Jean-Marie Muller.

Between 2000 and 2011 violent protests and sustained nonviolent activism erupted twice. The first was the revolt of al-Suwaida in 2000, which happened a few months after Bashar al-Assad came to power, and the second was the revolt of the Kurds in 2004.

Even today, activists still disagree on what happened in al-Suwaida. They debate whether it was revolt, activism or an isolated outburst, and whether there were actually any protests against the regime, or whether it was in fact a conflict between residents of the city and Bedouins living in the surrounding areas.

Individual interpretations aside, what started as a local issue developed into a conflict between the city's residents and the regime's security forces. Protests targeted the regime's governorate building and police headquarters. According to an activist from the area, 23 people were killed and 400 were injured, mostly at the hands of the regime's security forces. Hundreds of students at Damascus University organized a demonstration and a sit-in, demanding that the violence against people in al-Suwaida stop immediately.

The revolt of the Kurds in 2004 started as a conflict between Arabs and Kurds. The conflict revealed both the social tensions between Arabs and Kurds, and the political tension between the Kurds and the regime. The Syrian army responded with brutal violence, and many Baathists and tribal men were armed and sent to squelch the Kurdish protests.

Though each eruption included strong elements of nonviolent activism, they were also violent in one way or another: In al-Suwaida, people stormed government buildings and the police headquarters (although these actions were supplemented with nonviolent protests in Damascus). During the Kurdish revolt, shops, cars and power stations were destroyed and both Arab (regime) and Kurdish governmental buildings were stormed.

It is important to understand that the regime's actions (and inactions) played a big role in the eruption of social violence because the regime did not provide its citizens with any forum to express frustrations with the government, let alone recourse to have their grievances addressed. These two scenarios represented Syrian society's only recent experience in nonviolent demonstrations, and each of them became violent. Syria's nonviolent movement had little to no history, no precedent, and no experienced leaders.

Thus, when the Syrian revolution started in 2011, it was basically a new phenomenon. Activists invented protesting methods from scratch, based on their own experience. The only reference point was the Damascus Spring, which had advocated for concepts like civil society, the peaceful transfer of power, social change, democracy, and the rights and duties of citizens. But the Damascus Spring was purely conceptual— it provided no hands-on guidance for what to do in the street and on the ground.

At this juncture, it is worth noting some set pieces from recent Syrian history that might partially explain the decline of civil activism and the increase of militarization, especially in the eighties. This historical context might also shed light on why the revolution manifested in 2011, and not in 2000 or 1980.

After a coup lead by Husni al-Zaim in 1949, Syria's ideological and political atmosphere started to change. The glow of the national parties and personalities that had fought to gain the country's independence from France started to dim. Radical and ideological parties sought to gain political power by force. A

liberal trajectory in Syrian life declined, and radical socialist, leftist, Islamic, and pan-Arabist trajectories took over. In this context it made sense for the military to seek political power in the name of “revolution,” and then the military was quick to frame civil activism as an enemy of the revolution and as a bourgeois tool. The armed revolt led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980’s was a natural product of a period in which political power was built through seizing it by force. The revolts of al-Suwaida and the Kurds were very different— the activists never wanted to arm themselves, even in the face of extreme, armed brutality aimed at them from the regime.

The Syrian regime systematically approaches challenges to its authority with brutal violence. And, in fact, the regime prefers an armed, militarized opposition, because they feel it gives them *carte blanche* to unleash any force they want under the pretext of fighting “terrorism.” This happened in the eighties and it is happening in the current revolution, which was pushed toward militarization by the regime’s brutality as well as foreign intervention and participation by armed groups with a variety of interests and goals.

The nonviolent civil movement between 2000 and 2011 was elitist in the sense that it was not rooted in Syrian popular culture. It did, however, succeed in planting some seeds.

NONVIOLENT REVOLUTION CATCHES FIRE

Syrian people were keenly aware of the urgent need for reform in their country: political arrests had to stop, emergency law had to be abolished and article eight of the constitution, which stated that Baath was the ruling party, also had to be eliminated. However, except for some symbolic sit-ins and statements, this awareness never translated into a real protest movement until the Syrian revolution began.

Four forces needed to converge in order for revolution to get a foothold in Syria:

- 1- External: The Arab Spring.
- 2- Civil: Activists and intellectuals looking for any opportunity to advance social change.
- 3- Collective Exasperation: Decades of constant oppression
- 4- A Spark: The brutality of the regime in Daraa, Homs, Duma and Banyas was a breaking point for people, and pushed them onto the streets.

These four forces converged between March 15 and March 18, 2011, and the flames of revolution ignited.

When the spark of the Arab spring broke out in Tunisia, and then moved to Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, Syria’s civil society activists mobilized. In a careful survey of the first three months of the revolution, we see that the first activists belonged to a particular strata: oppositionists, political prisoners, intellectuals, celebrities and university students with a long history of activism. They held demonstrations in support of the Arab revolutions in front of embassies, like the one held in front of the Libyan embassy, where they carried a sign that said “He Who Kills His People is a Traitor” an obvious reference to the Syrian regime. Activists organized the March 15 demonstration in al-Hamidiyya, and a sit-in for prisoners’ families in front of the Ministry of the Interior on March 16. In Daraa, intellectuals, university students and civil society activists led the protests, and in Deir Ezzor, intellectuals also played a paramount role in mobilizing the city. One activist said, “in the beginning, our demonstrations were led by the elite of political intellectuals. At least those first protests were wonderfully well-organized.”



In an effort to expand the protests and root them, these activists searched for ways to communicate with local communities that had been already incited by the regime's violence. Many Facebook pages were created, such as *The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad*, *The Coalition of March 15 for Support of the Syrian Revolution*, and *April 17 Movement for Democratic Change*. Many media networks were established, such as *Sham* and *Ugarit*. On the street, small demonstrations grew bigger, and the more violent the regime's security forces were, the bigger the demonstrations became. Spontaneous protests expanded to Homs, Banyas, Daraa, and the rural areas of Damascus. The first organized attempt to reach al-Abbasiyyin Square in the heart of Damascus was on April, 22, 2011. From that time on, groups dedicated to the revolution began to form. In the beginning, they took the form of local coordination groups, but some of them quickly merged to form larger bodies like the *Local Coordination Committees in Syria*, the *General Commission for the Syrian Revolution*, and the *Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union*.

The pioneering revolutionaries, who learned and developed their tools under the tutelage of the revolution itself, innovated effective and beautiful forms of protests, from small 'hit and run' demonstrations to loud protests that brought thousands of people together. Their graffiti and signs confronted the regime's attempts to label the revolution as Islamist and extremist, for example, one sign read, "if you respect my rights, you're my brother, whether you believe in God or in a stone statue." They colored public fountains red, installed loudspeakers in streets and governmental offices, and played revolutionary songs, sometimes offering water and roses to soldiers. The rapid increase of the revolution's attractiveness and popularity threatened the Syrian regime, which then escalated its violence. This violence was driven by two motivations: either suppress the uprising or push it towards militarization. The latter would justify the regime's violence in the eyes of the international community. Many Syrians, and especially the first generation of activists, were aware of the regime's strategy. Resisting by all means, many paid a very high price. Some, like Ghiyath Matar, were killed. Others, like Yahya al-Sherbaji and Hussain Gherer, were arrested; still others, like Marwa al-Ghamyan and Rima Fleihan, fled the country.

The nonviolent period of the Syrian revolution was not completely free of violence, as some claim. While many activists early on denied the presence of violence, they now consider that denial one of the most crucial mistakes that needs to be assessed.

The regime lost credibility quickly when, in order to buy time and suppress the revolution, it lied, giving false and misleading promises. Many who wanted to give the regime a chance saw that it was lying, and realized that Assad was either unable or unwilling to implement any reform.

The extensive killing, imprisonment, and displacement of the revolution's leaders created a void that was often filled by new leaders who were less elitist and closer to people. While this had advantages, these new leaders were less familiar with the principles of nonviolent struggle. The phenomenon of inexperienced leaders coming in continued until the revolution became vulnerable, and began listening to voices calling for militarization in response to the regime's brutality. In other words, at the beginning of the revolution, there were some great nonviolent activists leading the movement, but there was no civil society in place capable of producing new leaders after the first generation was killed, imprisoned, and displaced. This void opened the door for militarization, which ultimately eroded the powerful base of support for the nonviolent movement. It is noteworthy that despite the militarization of the revolution, many still practice nonviolent activism and are on the ground every day.

There were, however, several factors that led to the creation of gaps within the nonviolent movement, which opened the door for militarization and increased suspicion of the movement by some parts of Syrian society. These include:

1. The regime's strategy: escalate violence and facilitate access to arms:

From the first moment, the regime's excessive violence aimed either to suppress the revolution or push it towards militarization. The regime facilitated people's access to arms; it turned a blind

eye to weapons smuggled into the country and sometimes left weapons in open areas where demonstrations took place. Caught in the center of a brutal cycle of violence, some activists eventually armed themselves, not realizing that they were helping the regime realize its goals.

2. Activists' lack of training in nonviolent civil activism:

They learned how to plan, organize, and implement during the revolution itself. Although inspired by the experiences in Egypt and Tunisia, most of their methods and tools emerged spontaneously from their own daily struggles. Despite all their creativity, they lacked the experience that would have provided them with requisite measures to effectively and safely face off against a vicious and determined regime. During the first three months of the revolution, most of the nonviolent activists were arrested, became hunted fugitives, or left the country. In discussion sessions with Dawlaty, many activists expressed their belief that this inexperience combined with a dearth of leadership was the revolution's Achilles' heel.

3. The Arab spring in Tunisia & Egypt: inspiration & misguidance for Syrians

Activists suffered from the impression that the Syrian regime would fall quickly, just like Mubarak's in Egypt, and Bin Ali's in Tunisia. They did not consider the revolution's long term strategies, and when months passed and the Syrian regime was intact, many activists were in despair. Additionally, activists frequently followed the steps of other revolutions without an awareness of the unique geopolitical and regional particularities that conditioned each revolution. Expecting similar results to Egypt and Tunisia, minus experienced leadership, Syrian activists did not realize that change would be a long, complex process, and that losing some battles did not mean losing the war. They focused all efforts on the notion that the Syrian regime would fall no matter what, and did not develop an alternative strategy. When the regime showed that it was not going anywhere anytime soon, the problems of flight, withdrawal, and resorting to militarization emerged. The Libyan revolution, with its international intervention, became an attractive model for some. It is worth noting that nonviolence as a revolutionary path in Syria did not emerge as a product of deep awareness or investigation, but rather what they garnered from Egyptian Tunisian revolutions.

4. Syrian activists: a low threshold for criticism

The revolution was imbued with an atmosphere of being above reproach. Many activists refused to acknowledge any presence of weapons, religious or sectarian slogans, defensive shootings on security and army officers, or vandalism (as when the gate to the Palace of Justice was burned, or the glass of the national hospital in Daraa was broken). The activists' rejection of criticism and their attempts to cover up mistakes, widened the gulf between the opposition and the regime's supporters and created tension within the movement itself.

5. Lack of civil society and its institutions

Ultimately, the lack of community resources and civil society infrastructure to support the nonviolent movement made it vulnerable.



STRENGTHS OF THE NONVIOLENT CIVIL MOVEMENT

The nonviolent movement in general, and the nonviolent period of the Syrian revolution in particular, occupy a very high position in the hearts and minds of Syrian activists. They nostalgically recall that period during discussion sessions and individual interviews. These recollections are of the revolution's beginning, and the first steps toward a long-dreamed-of freedom. It was the period in which they finally overcame their fear, experienced new horizons and made their voices heard. They see the nonviolent movement they are now struggling to keep alive as their ambassador to the world.

Below are some of the strengths of this movement from the perspective of its activists:

THE RISE OF SYRIAN NATIONALISM OVER COMMUNAL, SECTARIAN, AND CLASS LOYALTIES

Syrians felt for the first time that they were all in the same boat, fighting against one tyrant. Casteism, sectarianism, regionalism and unilateralism all declined and a culture of diversity, nationalism and collective affiliation rose instead. As one activist stated, "The greatest thing about the non-violent movement was that it made each one of us feel that she became Syrian again. We felt at home in each city where we held demonstrations. We never felt like strangers anymore. Our loyalties were unified, and we all belonged to one family — the Syrian revolution."

Another said, "we realized how much we love each other. Contrary to rumors and more powerful than the regime's attempts to agitate sectarian strife, we were actually unified around one thing. Our demonstrations brought together people from different cities, religions, sects and ethnicities. Every week, Syrians would vote on the title of the Friday demonstration (some titles included *The Friday of Dignity*, *The Friday of Free Women*, *Hama Forgive Us*, and *In Memory of the Kurdish Uprising*) The nonviolent movement breathed new spirit into Syrians." Yet another: "We, from all Syrian cities, felt the same pain. The youth learned a lot and carried great responsibilities. Differences disappeared. There was no difference between a doctor and a construction worker. We were all revolutionists."

SYRIANS LEARNING ABOUT THEIR DIFFERENCES, AND CELEBRATING THEIR DIVERSITY

Syrians approached their diversity with open-mindedness and acceptance. A new Syrian nationalism brought together and contained differences. "We were all spontaneous. We were comfortable in our own skin for the first time. The one who used to be embarrassed because of his accent, became comfortable, and proud of it instead. Syrians finally embraced all Syrians. We had known nothing about each other. We had had no idea where Dael or al-Khaldiyya was. We rediscovered our own country. What we lived change our lives. Despite the high price we've paid, despite the friends we've lost and will lose, we will never regret it," a proud activist said.

A RECLAIMED CONFIDENCE, AND A RECLAIMED PUBLIC SPACE

For many decades, the Syrian regime reinforced a culture of submission and insulation from public space. During the revolution, Syrians rediscovered themselves after they had lost belief in their creativity. The youth realized that they were capable of taking creative social, civil, and political actions and that they could cooperate under one umbrella. “When we rallied in demonstrations, we were not a collection of individuals. We were one.” Another declared, “the movement proved that we were capable of planning and organizing. It gave us confidence. We came up with creative ideas, some of which are still happening, like the revolutionary periodicals. We moved from fear of even thinking to doing—to action.”

COMMUNICATION WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD & THE ATTENTION OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIA:

Authoritarian regimes like the one ruling Syria tend to isolate their people in an effort to preemptively stop change by preventing people from seeing other ways of existing. This isolation created a deficiency of global awareness in Syrian society, and kept people’s issues and demands absent from the public sphere. The revolution provided Syrians, for the first time in decades, with an opportunity to communicate with the outside world. “One benefit of the nonviolent movement was directing world’s attention to Syria and introducing the world to real Syrians for the first time. Only the nonviolent movement could do that, asserted one activist.” Another said: “The nonviolent movement created a supportive global public opinion of Syrian people.” The movement also attracted the interest of new international organizations and NGOs, which opened the door for activists to “develop new skills in media, technology, organizing projects, and establishing local groups.” “It helped us learn about funding opportunities and donor agencies,” observed another.

Ever since the regime seized power in Syria, it has worked diligently to domesticate media. Not only did the regime tailor Syrian media to its ideology, it also limited the freedom of foreign press correspondents, prohibiting the circulation of foreign newspapers and any contact with world press agencies. Finally, when the revolution broke through, it opened the floodgates for free communication between Syrian activists and world media. One activist said, “even today, foreign correspondents are still trying to give the world access to reality in Syria and cover nonviolent practices in order to combat the one-dimensional story that has spread out since the militarization of the revolution. They are trying to show the world that what is happening in Syria is more than a war between militant extremists and the Syrian regime.”

SYRIANS’ CREATIVITY & THE CIVIL FACE OF THEIR REVOLUTION:

A female activist: “We proved to ourselves and to others that we were able to create and invent. We had had no idea that we were capable of that.” Activists took advantage of all possible methods to express their demands for freedom and dignity. In addition to aforementioned actions like coloring fountains and blasting music into public spaces, activists constantly invented new methods to counter the regime’s increasingly repressive practices. For example, they used carrier-pigeons to distribute leaflets and balls on which freedom phrases were inscribed. On one occasion, “they projected a laser light on the president’s castle as a message that they would reach him no matter where he was.” And when the militant factions took over and began implementing their own oppressive social campaigns, they were not spared the nonviolent movement’s creative protest either: “On one New Year’s Eve, we shot off fireworks in al-Raqqa and blocked streets with trees. Since for ISIS, celebrating New Year’s Eve is a sign of apostasy, we wanted to send them a message that we reject them and their interpretations of religion,” a female activist from al-Raqqa noted.



DEMOCRACY NOT ONLY AS A SLOGAN BUT ALSO AS A PRACTICE

Democracy transformed from a goal and a slogan to a daily practice. The activists' methodology in distributing tasks and managing their disagreements reflected an embodiment of democracy. They believed that practicing democracy themselves was the only way to wipe out the culture of authoritarianism the regime had created. One activist said: "We thought of Syria as a whole every time we wrote or designed a sign; would people like it? Did it represent all Syrians? We planned together and consulted each other on every detail."

ACTIVISTS' SELF-CONTROL AND REFUSAL TO USE VIOLENCE AS A RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

Some activists realized early on that the regime was trying to force them to respond to its violence with violence, or to fall into sectarianism. Therefore, they worked hard to develop self-control and to maintain national interest above personal feelings. In many cases, nonviolent activists tolerated violence from those who worked for or supported the regime. "We were frequently beaten and threatened, and in many cases we were able to beat the regime's thugs back, but we did not. It actually made us feel stronger. We laughed at the humiliation that we went through, just like prophets did." Some activists used creative methods to respond to that violence. "At the revolution's beginning, we painted the doors of the regime's thugs with white paint. It was a message that they were known to all people. We didn't go any further. That was enough to scare them and they stopped threatening people in public. But of course, the regime brought thugs from the countryside and paid them to scare and threaten us," recounted an activist from al-Raqqa. At the beginning of the revolution, those who defected from the army came to the nonviolent activists. "They came to us for help. They asked us for advice on what to do, and we always told them that weapons were prohibited and they listened to us," remembered one activist.

SYRIANS OVERCOMING THEIR FEAR

Activists say that the greatest thing about the revolution and the movement was that they helped Syrians overcome the fear the regime had instilled in them. "We moved from being too scared to even think to a phase of action," said one activist. The awareness of the regime's corruption, crimes, and violations that the activists worked hard to raise finally started to bear fruit and Syrian society began to gradually engage in the protests. "The nonviolent movement succeeded in empowering people," as one activist said. He highlighted this from Zabadany: "The protests in Zabadany were big and the security forces were extremely violent, which led one sheik to prohibit women from joining us, because, as he said, he was worried about them. The next day, the women of Zabadany gathered across the street from the protestors and started chanting in support of the regime. Their message was clear: "We have the power to choose, decide and participate. We are a part of this change and no one can stop us. If you don't include us, you risk turning us against the revolution." Of course, their action did not actually support the regime. It was a message to patriarchal society more than anything else. This is just one of countless stories highlighting how Syrians not only overcame fear of the authoritarian regime, but also overcame fear of social and traditional authorities as well.

POLITICS RETURNED TO PEOPLE

When, in the 1970's, political parties in Syria agreed to keep their activities out of universities, schools and the military, they issued a death sentence to political life in Syria by abandoning the last public space available to them. The Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the 1980's was an attempt to seize control over public life by force, but it just tightened the regime's grip on Syrian people. The newly realized freedom in thinking encouraged Syrian people to reread and to reinterpret their own history. Subsequently, many of

the activists' slogans and songs alluded to a people's history, like the famous song 'Forgive Us, Hama,' which alluded to the regime's massacre in Hama in 1982, a long muted story. "We realized that we had been oblivious to our recent history. We were determined to educate ourselves through readings, discussions and debates. We learned, for example, about what really happened in Hama and about the struggle of the Kurds. This learning was eventually expressed in our songs, slogans and media," said one participant.

BREAKING THE MONOPOLY OF THE REGIME OVER THE PUBLIC SPHERE

For decades, the regime's security service monopolized all aspects of public life in Syrian society. Syrians, for example, needed approval from the security service to travel or even to apply for a job. The nonviolent movement threatened the regime precisely because it broke this authoritarian tool. "The movement flipped the equation. The initiative was now in the hands of people," recalled one. When the Syrian regime claimed that, as a part of its reform, it would provide people with approvals to demonstrate, activists ridiculed these claims and continued to protest without an official approval. Also, many activists returned to protesting after they were coerced into signing written declarations that they would not protest again.



EXTERNAL FACTORS THAT HINDERED THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT

Before highlighting the challenges faced by activists, the list below seeks to document the factors that were out of activists' control, but that negatively impacted the movement.

THE REGIME'S VIOLENCE

The regime's violence and repressive methods have certainly weakened the nonviolent movement. After arrests, murders, and the fleeing of the movement's original leaders, there was less control over the streets. The new leadership that emerged was not well educated in the principles of the nonviolent movement and they were particularly vulnerable to demands for arming the movement. The regime also succeeded in igniting sectarianism and demonizing the movement as an ultra-conservative Salafi phenomenon. It took advantage of and propagandized factors like protests starting off from mosques and voices demanding Sharia schools with segregation between the sexes.

MILITARIZATION AND THE DIVISION IT BROUGHT

The Libyan example of swift, decisive, foreign intervention, the Syrian opposition abroad, and regional and international interests all contributed to deviating the Syrian revolution toward militarization. Initially, many activists welcomed the idea, believing that militarization might speed up the demise of the regime. Then, when the goal of militarization shifted from "protecting the protests," to "liberating the country," it transformed from a defensive tool to an aggressive one.

Ultimately, militarization became the most destructive obstacle in the revolution's progress. The armed individuals had no civil society awareness, and had never believed in the nonviolent movement. The fighting began and eventually battles became a part of Syrian people's daily lives. Squares that had at some point witnessed peaceful demonstrations became battlefields. The regime took advantage of the situation and rained the areas embracing the opposition with bombs and missiles. These developments created fissures between activists and armed groups, between activists and the communities that supported them, and between these communities and the armed groups... The armed entities also were not open to criticism or suggestions coming from civil society activists. All of the above led to the regression of the nonviolent movement, and forced most activists to either escape the country or to shift to humanitarian aid work, and limited nonviolent activism to isolated episodes in unconnected areas. Militarization, combined with the regime severing all means of communication, fractured the nonviolent movement even further until it was divided into weak micro-movements.

The militarization of the Syrian revolution split activists into three discordant camps: those who completely rejected militarization and treated it as a harmful phenomenon that should be stopped, those who disavowed the nonviolent movement and fully embraced militarization, and those who accepted that militarization had become a part of the revolution and sought to continue building the nonviolent movement all the same. Of these, only has the third been able to continue its activities. The first group found itself isolated and unwelcomed by both the regime and armed groups, and the second lost any affiliation with the nonviolent civil movement.

A NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT CAUGHT BETWEEN A BRUTAL REGIME, ARMED SEPARATIST MILITIAS, AND MILITARIZED ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS

As if the emergence of ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other armed extremist groups weren't enough, the regime made its own efforts to Islamize the revolution (for example, by releasing extremist jihadists from its prisons). The Islamist militant factions, along with armed groups like the FSA and the Kurdish People's Committees combined to create powerful forces, all of which worked against nonviolence as a revolutionary tool. "Right after liberating a particular area, a conflict always emerged between the militant groups and the civil society groups. And, obviously, the militant groups, like the FSA, were powerful enough to immediately marginalize us," explains one participant.

The nonviolent movement found itself struggling not only against the Syrian regime, but also against armed groups who aimed for an Islamic instead of a civil state. They had to also struggle against armed groups like the Kurdish People's Committees that aimed for an autonomous region in Kurdish areas. These powerful groups successfully marginalized the nonviolent movement—it has been completely neutralized in areas controlled by ISIS, though it still has some small influence in areas under Jabhat al-Nusra, the FSA and the Kurdish People's Committees.

THE FRACTURING OF THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION:

Documenting the evolution of the movement, it becomes clear that deep fissures began to appear when the Syrian opposition began to form political coalitions. Each coalition tried to speak for the Syrian revolution as a whole in an attempt to gain political legitimacy. Each coalition wanted the world to believe that it was the one that truly represented the revolution and the nonviolent movement.

Complicating the dynamic, the different political coalitions truly had different goals. While the National Coordination Committee called for "changing the regime," the Syrian National Council called for "overthrowing the regime, its figureheads, and its pillars." The lack of unified leadership and vision allowed some coalitions abroad to arm unqualified people under the banner of overthrowing the regime by force. Many activists agreed that "no one held the opposition coalitions accountable for their mistakes, nor monitored their funding sources. In addition, we never directly communicated with them, or understood what they were seeking. We decided not to recognize them. We may have monitored some of those individuals' personal lives on Facebook, but we should have held the coalitions they formed accountable for the professional and political mistakes that impacted Syrian people."

MEDIA

One of the most poignant critiques of media that emerged during the discussion sessions was that after the emergence of ISIS and other armed Islamist groups, the media marginalized Syria's nonviolent movement. Media groups often primarily broadcast stories that revealed the violence perpetrated by armed groups, ignoring the movement's humanitarian, social and economic issues.



INTERNAL FACTORS THAT HINDERED THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT

LACK OF EXPERIENCE AND LACK OF TRAINING IN NONVIOLENT TACTICS

Many participants highlighted their lack of experience in nonviolent activism, its methods, tools and tactics. One male concluded: “Our lack of knowledge of the philosophical underpinnings and history of nonviolent movements left us with weak resources to counter arguments for militarization of the revolution.”

FRAGMENTED EFFORTS AND LACK OF CENTRALIZED LEADERSHIP

The emergence of the coordinating committees was an attempt to organize and frame the activists’ revolutionary efforts. Despite the fact that coordinating committees achieved significant success on a micro-level, as in villages, towns, and sometimes even cities, they remained isolated and the players did not succeed in coordinating efforts across the country. “The lack of unified leadership was the movement’s biggest mistake. Such leadership would have unified our efforts and prevented the movement from fracturing,” said one activist. It is noteworthy that while most of the coordinating committees eventually split, diminishing their power, some, for reasons out of the scope of this report, have progressed and evolved into local councils and have played a significant role in presenting the revolution to the outside world.

LACK OF COMPREHENSIVE AND LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Activists believed that the Syrian regime would fall quickly. They never considered how to peacefully face the regime’s extreme violence, nor did they assemble a long-term strategy that might contain alternate approaches in case overthrowing the regime took longer than expected. According to one, “we believed that the regime would fall in days or weeks. That’s why we didn’t pause while quickly exhausting our financial and human resources.”

Enthusiasm resulted in a neglect of security measures. “When planning a protest, we would set time and place, but we never discussed security measures, such as how to escape in the event of an attack by the regime’s forces,” said one activist. Nonviolent activists also lacked a vision that included a political alternative to the regime. They became anti-political, especially after witnessing disappointing results from the Syrian opposition abroad. One participant recalls, “while Islamist groups and militants were planning for a post-regime period, we never got that far. Our ultimate goal was to overthrow the regime, but we never considered what would happen after.” Lack of planning led to many improvised and temporary solutions, and it also forced many activists to escape the country in fear of their lives.

SILENCE REGARDING MISTAKES AND NO INTERNAL CHECKS AND BALANCES:

Mistakes were regularly covered up by activists, which led to a lack of benefitting from collective lessons learned, and ultimately, to the repetition of those mistakes.

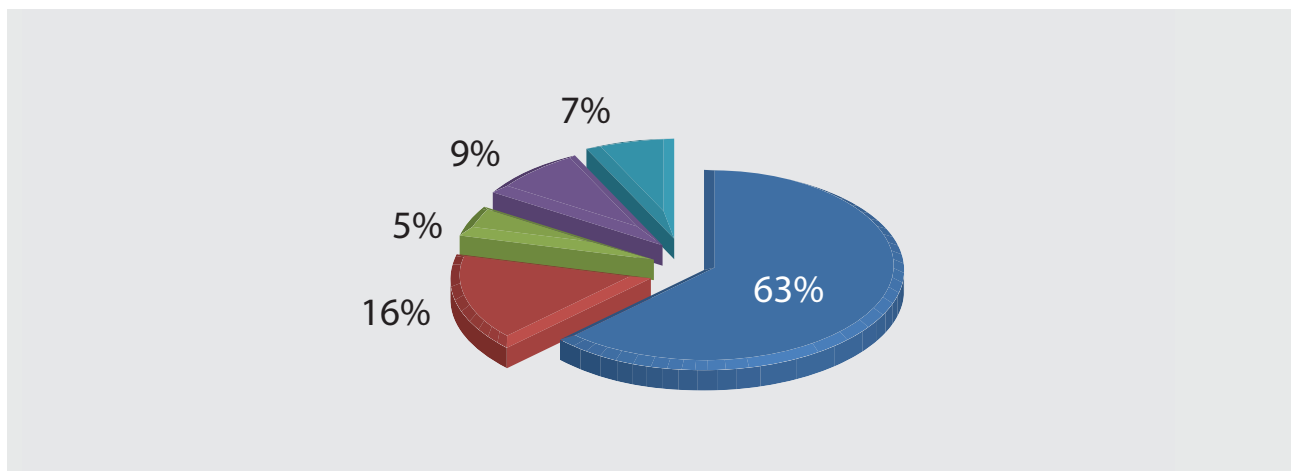
LACK OF A UNIFIED GOAL

While the movement's original goal was to overthrow the regime and achieve a civil state, it shifted with time. Signs calling for an Islamic state and flags other than the revolution's started to appear during demonstrations. Activists disagreed not only about goals but also on how to achieve them. While some of them insisted on nonviolent methods, others called for arming the revolution. "The revolution raised general goals like freedom, dignity, and civil state, but people did not agree on the meaning of these words. While freedom and dignity meant a civil state for some, these words meant an Islamic state for others."

ACTIVISTS FLEEING THE COUNTRY

Forty-three activists that participated in the sessions are outside of Syria and cannot return. They fled for different reasons.

Why Activists Left Syria



■ Security Concerns ■ General Instability ■ Personal or Family Reasons ■ Work-related ■ To Avoid Military Service

Activists who fled drained the movement and left many communities to face the regime without the presence of voices calling for nonviolent practices. The majority who fled did so for security reasons and are either too afraid to go back or not willing to because they do not want to lose the safe environments they finally found in which to live and work. "The nonviolent movement is now significantly more active abroad than it is inside of Syria itself, and this reflects negatively on the movement. Many activists who left out of fear did not return when the situation improved. Nothing of the work done abroad benefits the activists inside. What we have learned through dialogues should be conveyed to the activists working on the ground and applied inside Syria. "Our mistake was that we distanced ourselves from those inside," said one female activist.

LACK OF SELF-CONFIDENCE AND DEPENDENCE ON FOREIGN ENTITIES

Activists increasingly relied on help from foreign countries and international organizations, whether for tactical military support or for humanitarian aid. This dependency limited creativity and frequently impaired the search for a self-directed solution. Due to their lack of experience in politics, participants in the nonviolent movement eventually, unintentionally, succumbed to foreign agendas. "We did not realize the danger of foreign parties' interference. We naively believed that any help to overthrow the regime should be welcomed and embraced," reflected one participant.



THE DECLINE OF THE MOVEMENT'S MEDIA

Many activists who set out trying to build a media wing for the movement eventually became “war correspondents” for foreign channels. They largely deviated from their original goal to expose the regime’s crimes and convey the movement’s voice. “The armed parties controlled money, resources, and media. Many of the Web pages that used to follow the nonviolent movement have become platforms for armed factions. This is not necessarily a question of loyalty, but rather because those who work in media, especially in areas controlled by armed factions, are often either marginalized or forced to cover the armed factions’ activities. Nonetheless, this feeds the interpretation that what is going in Syria is civil war not a revolution,” explains one activist observer.

Personal ambitions also played a role in the decline of the movement’s media. According to one participant, “some people are obsessed with being on TV. They have monopolized media in their areas and they cover what they like and ignore what they don’t.” Another said, “after a horrifying massacre, for example, people would rally the streets in protests. If there was one person carrying a carrying a sectarian sign, media would focus on this person, although he represented himself only. Most people trust media and believe whatever they see.”

ISLAMIZATION OF THE REVOLUTION

Activists did not expect that launching their protests from mosques would reflect negatively on their movement. “We did not realize at the beginning that we should not start out from mosques because it would give the revolution an Islamic character. We were not experienced enough. We were very excited when people joined the protests and we sometimes tolerated signs like *The Prophet Muhammad is our Leader Forever*. That was a big mistake,” recalled one. In addition to taking advantage of the activists’ mistakes, the regime took many steps to help Islamize the revolution. As one activist clarifies, “we were not aware that the regime releasing all extremist Islamic prisoners and easing border crossing points was a part of its plan to Islamize the revolution. Foreign fighters from all over the world entered the country and began to form armed extremist Islamist groups. Another mistake we made was that we did not take a stand when these Islamic groups were still weak and forming. We believed that the regime would fall quickly and that such groups wouldn’t have the chance to grow. But we realize today that the regime was much better in planning than we were.” The excessive violence made people call out for help and accept it from whomever offered, which “opened the door for al-Qaeda and ISIS and ultimately marginalized the nonviolent activists from their own revolution,” reflected another activist.

WEAKNESS OF THE MOVEMENT IN UNIVERSITIES

Although some universities witnessed a scattering of protests, activists did not succeed in mobilizing students or turning universities into movement centers of power. This is due in part to the fact that the regime’s security forces were strongly present in universities from the outset. The violence practiced against students who protested was “beyond imagination,” one activist recalled.

NOT GIVING SECTARIAN AND REGIONAL ISSUES THE ATTENTION THEY NEEDED

In the beginning, activists did not acknowledge sectarian, ethnic, or regional issues and tensions. They insisted on one slogan “One, One, One: The Syrian People Are One.” Regardless of whether they believed that such issues existed or not, they thought that ignoring these issues for the time being and focusing only on unity would prevent the regime from taking advantage of the underlying tensions. Activists also used questionable strategies for addressing those who were slow to join the revolution, like people from Aleppo and the Syrian Coast. One activist pointed out, “in a sense, we refused to approach those who did not support us. We categorized people as supporters of the regime or oppositionists, and we only

cared about those who opposed the regime. We preferred to communicate with an oppositionist in a different city than to communicate with our regime-supporting neighbor,” said another.

Other dividing factors emerged as well, for example, many activists opposed the choice of the independence flag to represent the revolution because it carries colonial baggage due to the fact that it was used under the French mandate. “The flag divided people and pushed away many Syrians who sympathized with the revolution,” observed one participant.



LESSONS LEARNED BY ACTIVISTS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT:

This self-critique of Syrian activists seeks to strengthen the movement by learning from an analysis of Syrian activists' past successes and failures. They have examined and reframed their ambitions and ideas, finding a new balance between what they hope for and what they can realistically achieve. Engaging in a critique of their own efforts has led to an evolution in their awareness and strategies. Below are some of the most vital lessons learned by Syrian activists in the nonviolent movement:

GIVE COORDINATION, STRATEGIZING, AND SECURITY THE ATTENTION THEY DESERVE

The majority of activists who participated in this research agree on the importance of both coordination and strategizing with clear goals in mind. Further, there is consensus that strategy should take into consideration even the smallest of details, like security measures, logistics, and the expertise of organizers. One activist states that "one of the mistakes of nonviolent activism was a lack of focus on the qualifications of activists who were filling highly specialized roles." Another says, "nonviolent activism is a major mobilizing force that requires both coordination and unified efforts." A third relates, "I learned the importance of planning and of keeping the goal in mind, even in the face of shifting circumstances on the ground." A fourth activist avows, "coordination is the key. We established ourselves as an active presence through organized, collective work. I learned discipline, organization, patience, and security foundations." All of these lessons led the activists to seek the establishment of a political vision for their work.

PERSEVERE AND UNDERSTAND THAT NONVIOLENT ACTION IS A LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Activists have learned that a failure today does not mean nonviolent action has failed but rather that "the process of peaceful change takes years to bear fruit. Therefore, one should not be impatient," as one activist puts it. Another activist believes that "nonviolent activism should not only aim to bring down a particular regime or change a particular ruler, but rather should seek to establish an ongoing presence of nonviolent activism as a foundational part of a conscientious, healthy society." The ongoing need for nonviolent activism also manifests in the words of another activist when he says, "I think that those who still believe in the peaceful process of change are capable of starting a new revolution. I count on them." Perhaps the most important thing that these activists have learned is that "peaceful and civil activism is the only way to get the revolution back on the right track."

For these reasons, activists today insist that authoritarianism must disappear, but this is not their only goal. Despite all difficulties, defeats and the high prices they've paid, they insist on moving forward and working to realize collectively worked out goals. One activist says, "I learned to be patient, determined and consistent. There is no room for despair because we love this land." The activists now know their important role in bringing change to their country.

PAY MORE ATTENTION TO FUNDING SOURCES AND DONOR AGENDAS

Activists have learned that they should not blindly follow the goals of funding organizations. One notes that they are calling for the "establishment of common standards to help civil society organizations in Syria collectively resist funding organizations' terms and agendas that may not be in the best interest of the Syrian people." On the same topic, another activist calls for "monitoring and publishing the money trail and agendas behind funders that support civil society work in Syria."

NONVIOLENT ACTIVISM NEEDS ITS OWN MEDIA

Activists have realized the importance of strengthening their media expertise, so they can avoid news exaggeration and not bow to the terms of media channels. This, according to one participant, happens through reinforcing a culture of “acknowledging mistakes and crimes, regardless of which group perpetrates them.”

CRITIQUE SOCIETY WITH SENSITIVITY

Activists have realized the importance of raising awareness in local communities, and analyzing and critiquing the discourse of people in the streets before moving forward with a plan for social change. They now know that the opinions, convictions and actions of people are related to their level of awareness, which in turn, is affected by many factors, like money, security, and power hierarchy. Activists, therefore, realize the importance of balancing their work with the needs of people. They should not blindly yield to whatever demands people make, and at the same time, they should understand and empathize with people’s needs. Instead, they should move toward “reinforcing a culture of peace and rehabilitating the collective conscience by addressing mistakes that have been made in the past, and providing alternative paths for moving forward.” Activists from different regions realized that they have to cooperate with each other and avoid generalization in order to understand the particularities of areas and appropriately address local issues. One calls for “active communication and cooperation between national groups from different social, ethnic, religious and regional backgrounds.” This approach would serve to create stronger bonds between regions and help link activists inside Syria with those abroad. “Local residents should be trained to serve as mediators between activists abroad and the local community, instead of the activists going back and forth between the different groups all the time.” Another states that “the key is to learn how to accept the other. Everyone should acknowledge past mistakes and work on fixing them.”

One lesson learned was to maintain an achievable goal and work within the frame of available resources. Each area should produce its own version of nonviolent activism that corresponds to the local culture and demographics. “There is no need for a one-size-fits-all, nonviolent activism. Instead, it should be based on local issues and needs, especially because issues like extremism, repressive practices, weapons, lack of education, sectarianism, gender inequality, and corruption tend to emerge in particular areas.”

BECOME POLITICALLY AWARE AND UNDERSTAND THE INTERESTS OF OTHER STATE PLAYERS IN SYRIA

The political awareness of both activists and Syrian society as a whole has developed significantly over the past few years. After paying a high price, activists now better understand the tricks being played by other nation-state players with an interest in Syria. They realize, according to one, “that many of the empty slogans we heard were no more than lies, and that all countries follow their own interests.”

KEEP A DISTANCE FROM THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Activists have learned not to cast their struggle in the political terms of the opposition. The Syrian opposition has been disappointing and activists now work hard to prevent politicians from using the nonviolent struggle to serve narrow political goals. One activist says, “politicians that are not elected, like those in the Coalition, should not be allowed to speak in the name of the Syrian people. We should look for figures who truly represent our revolution.” Another activist reiterates the necessity of establishing a political vision for the nonviolent movement.



PAY MORE ATTENTION TO THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Activists realized the importance a civil society that is distinct from government and business interests. They emphasized the need to encourage and empower public participation in the political process. “Civil society is the only guarantor for the building of the future Syria,” declared one person.

ISLAMIZATION ENDANGERED THE REVOLUTION

Activists now understand that they share responsibility for the Islamization of the revolution, because some of them embraced anyone who offered to help overthrow the regime. They realize that the Islamization of the revolution has cost them a lot, including international sympathy. In response to this, one states, “the only way to put our revolution back on track is to continue with nonviolent activism.”

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT

Activists disagreed when evaluating the current state of the nonviolent movement. While some believe that it has taken new shapes, others believe that it has declined or even no longer exists. Some consensus was found around the assessment that the movement does not exist in regime-controlled areas. And many agreed that some regions, like the rural areas of Idlib, are still “a fertile environment for the nonviolent movement, with a free space available for civil work.” This available space shrinks in areas controlled by the Islamic armed factions, and completely disappears under ISIS. The situation in Kurdish areas is better, but the movement there is focused on humanitarian aid and civil organizations. According to some activists, “this transformation from nonviolent revolutionary activism to service-oriented activities speaks to the current state of the movement.” Others believe that the movement is evolving and even succeeding: “There are finally civil organizations on the ground. The concept of civil society has spread out and become familiar to many Syrians. There is also a great network of communication between activists through workshops and seminars that take place in several countries, especially in Turkey. The movement has taken more active forms.”

The activists’ differing opinions stem from the fact that each area in Syria is defined by a shifting set of social, political, religious, economic, and military factors. For this reason, we first address the general state of the nonviolent movement in Syria today, and then we will analyze the movement within each geopolitical area individually.

GENERAL STATE OF THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT IN SYRIA

- Activists’ involvement in protests is declining, but their engagement with humanitarian aid work, media, and civil organizations is rising.
 - The movement has goals that differ according to the regional dominant geo-military power: the regime, ISIS, the Islamic Front (IF), Al-Qaeda, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), and other armed factions.
 - Passive attitudes prevail among activists: most are waiting for the regime to fall and militarization to end in order to resume their activities. One activist described his feelings: “I feel that we are scattered, not working together anymore. We are all waiting for something to happen to bring us together again. It feels like there is no place for us anymore. Armed conflict rules this phase, not us.”
 - Absence of proactive work, goals, and strategic planning characterize the current phase: Most of the movement’s current activities are responses to crises.
 - A remarkable decline of women’s presence in the movement is palpable.
 - The center of nonviolent, revolutionary activity is now located outside Syria: The number of nonviolent Syrian activists in neighboring countries is significantly higher than the number inside of Syria. “One reason why the movement is suffering from stagnation is that too many activists have fled, and are too scared to return, even to areas where civil and nonviolent activities are needed or even welcomed, such as in al-Qalamoun,” a female activist said.
 - Following the funding: funding, international organizations, and workshops held abroad were the topics of many debates and disagreements between the activists. “At the beginning of the



revolution, we all volunteered and worked hard because we believed in what we were doing. Once we received funding, people started to complain, and they refused to work for free anymore,” one participant said. “As trainers we face lots of mistrust. For example, people think that we are highly paid and that we should pay volunteers for their participation in the workshops and the seminars we invite them to attend. Although paid workshops have helped people learn many great things, they also encouraged those who do not really believe in civil activism to join, only because it pays. For many, civil activism has become a job opportunity and when they find a better job, they leave,” another explained.

Activists agreed that the above points reflect the general state of the nonviolent movement in Syria. Below, we will look at the movement within each geo-military area. It is important to note that any geopolitical, military area noted below is defined by a shifting set of social, political, religious, economic, and military factors. They are likely to change— an area that is categorized below under one power might fall under the control of different hands tomorrow:

REGIME-CONTROLLED AREAS

While according to one activist, “it has become nearly impossible for the movement to be active in the regime-controlled areas,” and “the movement’s goals and demands have shrunk to almost nothing,” other activists believe that the movement has not disappeared, but rather “has taken new forms.” Despite different words, all activists acknowledged the movement’s decline in areas controlled by the regime, even if the situation slightly differs from one region to another.

Reasons behind the decline of nonviolent activism in regime-controlled areas

- Areas controlled by the regime are in confined geographies, meaning there is a heavy presence of security forces and checkpoints within a small radius. Checkpoints in Damascus, for example, are less than one kilometer apart. “When we surveyed Damascus, we realized that there were four security centers in one street, making it very hard to work,” said one activist.
- The regime is trying to maintain its control over big cities. Such metropolitan areas inevitably contain people of mixed loyalties, which makes it harder for activists to move, hide, and maneuver. “If an activist from a small town like Barzeh is followed by security forces, he knows where to go and which neighborhood will shelter him. This is not the case in big cities like Damascus.”
- The decline of community support: people are tired of war and fed up with living in mortal fear and a lack of the most basic services. They have suffered for three years. “The situation in the regime-controlled areas is exhausting. I was in Damascus recently. I believe if someone came out to the streets and shouted out the word “freedom,” people themselves would stop her before the police could even arrive,” one female activist said, pointing out that many communities are tired of the revolution, and just want it to end.

FSA-CONTROLLED AREAS

Civil activism finds some support in areas controlled by the FSA and similar factions, because these military forces ultimately aim to establish a civil state. Nonviolent activists in many of these areas have gained the support of fighters, regularly coordinate with them and, at the same time, keep their activities separate from military operations. The city of Daraiyya in the rural areas of Damascus is one place that exemplifies this spirit, since activists there have established a local city council to which the fighters actually submit.

It is important to note that the situation differs from one area to another, even when the same group is in control. For example, when blockades and bombing are inflicted on an area, the needs of fighting

groups are greater than the needs of civil nonviolent activism. This situation, according to some activists, affects the movement in two ways: first, it forces the majority of activists to focus on crisis response, and second, it weakens their ability to criticize the armed groups. “Activists in these areas have a larger margin of freedom to practice civil activism, but they must always be careful not to directly criticize the FSA or the Islamic groups,” one activist observed.

While some activists were not happy with the activities of the nonviolent movement in these areas, an activist from the town of Kafr Nabl had a very different opinion; “I disagree with all of you,” he said. “These are the areas where the nonviolent movement lives on. Look at the constant activities carried out in Kafr Nabl, for example: awareness campaigns, women and children rights campaigns, centers for psychosocial support for children and women, groups trying to restore people’s support and constantly reminding them of the revolution’s goals of liberty, national unity, and social justice— the revolution lives in Kafr Nabl,” he beamed. Despite differences, all activists showed remarkable appreciation of the fact that the movement in many areas controlled by the FSA and similar groups managed to maintain the revolution’s original goals of overthrowing the regime and establishing a civil state.

ISIS-CONTROLLED AREAS

“The presence of Isis and al-Qaeda has forced the revolution to deviate from its original path. Extremism, assassinations, and kidnapping have crushed the spirit of the young activists.” These words summarize the situation in areas controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The city of al-Raqqa is a representative example of what has happened in these areas. Right after it was completely liberated from the regime in 2013, al-Raqqa was home to 35 active civil groups. Today, civil activism in the city is nonexistent, except for one token, toothless city council that the Islamists permit to operate.

KURDISH AREAS

The nonviolent movement is active in Kurdish areas, and while it still calls for a civil state, it is also swamped with local issues. For example, while focus on overthrowing the regime has declined, new civil institutions are emerging that have locally-focused goals such as achieving coexistence between the various ethnic groups in a given area.

While the movement has support in Kurdish areas, several key factors prevent it from gaining momentum:

- The dominance of the Democratic Union Party, which forcefully imposes its ideology on the nonviolent activism in areas it controls
- The emergence of extremist Islamic groups like ISIS and al-Nusra in neighboring areas
- The inability of Arab and Kurdish political forces to reach an understanding or a framework for solving the Kurdish issue in Syria

The nonviolent movement in Syria’s Kurdish areas is in danger of being marginalized and weakened due to the ongoing attacks by ISIS in these areas and continual strikes by international coalition forces on neighboring areas controlled by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.

AREAS CONTROLLED BY CONSERVATIVE ISLAMIC FACTIONS

The movement is weakened in areas controlled by other Islamic factions such the Islamic Front in Eastern Ghouta. The disappearance of the revolution’s flag and the emergence of the black Islamic flag instead, as well as the kidnapping of Razan Zaituneh, Samira al-Khalil, Wael Hammadeh, and Nazim Hamadi—all activists who worked in Douma’s Center for Documenting Human Rights Violations—highlight the deteriorating situation of the movement in these areas. “The Islamization of the revolution



was more dangerous than the militarization of the revolution. At least at the beginning, there was some cooperation between nonviolent activists and militant groups. There is never cooperation with the Islamic groups—they oppose any educational work, and activists are allowed to open Islamic centers, but not educational centers. Instead of having courts, people now have to consult Sharia councils for their daily challenges. The problem is that most people support those in power, because the dominant power provides them with services. Because we cannot provide services in these areas, we have no support from the people,” reflected one activist.

CURRENT NEEDS OF THE MOVEMENT

Despite a brutal reality and significant challenges, activists expressed a firm conviction that the movement still has a vital role to play in Syria's current fractured state. "The nonviolent movement is greatly needed, particularly because of the chaos and destruction that the regime and armed groups have left behind," one activist explained. They made it clear that withdrawal is not even in their dictionary, and that they are eager to find areas in Syria where they can sow seeds of hope. They believe that the movement should now do the following:

DEVELOP NEW NATIONAL STRATEGIES

Activists believe that in order for the movement to regain momentum and assert its role as a viable independent power, it must evolve a clear national strategy. "Nonviolent activism cannot exist without building unity, which requires a united leadership that strategizes on a national level. The presence of such leadership would perplex the regime," one activist explained. Strategies should also take local and geographical particularities into consideration. "Syria is a mosaic of various communities. For decades, the regime has marginalized some areas, especially rural communities. The time has come to embrace this diversity and address the needs of all Syrian communities," avowed another activist.

AUTHOR A CLEAR POLITICAL VISION AND AN ALTERNATIVE PLAN

Activists believe that the movement should formulate and crystallize a political vision. Any vision must include the following:

- Transparency regarding all revolutionary activities and processes
- The winning over of Syrian's hearts and minds to the idea that an empowered civil society is the solution, not the seizure of political power by force (militarization)
- A thoroughly thought-through policy regarding militarization of the movement
- A similar thoughtful policy against Islamization of the movement
- A clear and evolved vision for the future of Syria, post-Assad

ARTICULATE A POLICY REGARDING MILITARIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT

With activists themselves divided on whether the movement's goal should be "resolving the conflict and disarmament," or "complementing the armed resistance with nonviolent tools," further interchange and dialogue in the movement's leadership is urgent. The next interchange should have as a goal the full hashing out of all differences and culminate in a public articulation of the movement's policy on militarization and Islamization.

PARTNER WITH LOCAL CIVIL ORGANIZATIONS AND MEET PEOPLE'S DAILY NEEDS

Many activists believe that the movement should work with local organizations serving people in need. This partnership "would help people put their differences aside and realize that they share same goals." This, according to many activists, "would be the first step towards peacefully living together." Because



a partnership like this requires regaining people's trust, activists urged that the movement should focus on meeting people's daily needs. "A successful campaign that calls for reducing prices, for example, would help us regain people's trust," one activist suggested.

ENCOURAGE LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS TO SUPPORT THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT AND WELCOME ACTIVISTS TO RETURN HOME

Most activists believe that in order to be effective, the movement needs to be based on Syrian soil. This requires "that activists return home from abroad." For that to happen, "local environments that support nonviolent activism should be cultivated. Activists should be welcomed to return home because their role is singularly important and much needed."

PREPARE FOR POST-REGIME PERIOD

While more challenging projects like rebuilding infrastructure and democratic governance are being formulated, simple but effective services that impact people's daily lives need urgently to be implemented. "The Temporary Government should invest in establishing institutions like a civil registry instead of leaving those kinds of services to be provided by the Islamist Sharia Committees. These projects should be well established before the regime falls, so that when it does, we have some alternative public services in place already," one activist recommended.

DEFINE MOVEMENT GOALS AND EXPAND SUPPORTER BASE

"The most important thing now is to determine whether our goal is to overthrow the regime or to rebuild society, because the tools differ according to the goal," clarified one activist. One female activist suggested that participants should ask themselves "whether the movement can ever grow if it only addresses those who already support the revolution." At that point, another suggested that the movement must now reach out to those who have been neutral, especially in areas controlled by the regime."

HUMANITARIAN AID, DOCUMENTATION, AND CHILDREN

Despite the disagreement over humanitarian aid work, most activists believe the movement should embrace it because people have deep daily needs that are not being met. Activists also believe that the movement has a responsibility to document human rights violations, call out for freeing prisoners, and most importantly, work with children, because "they are the most harmed in the current situation and because they are the future of the country," emphasized one participant. Some activists argued convincingly that the movement should work with armed fighters and educate them on effectiveness of nonviolent activism. "This calls for developing political awareness as an alternative to violence."

EXPEL EXTREMISM

In addition to working to overthrow the regime, activists feel strongly that the movement should also focus on "fighting ISIS and expelling its fighters from Syria, coupled with rigorous work on building and nurturing civil society."

RE-EMPOWER WOMEN WITH LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE MOVEMENT

Female activists pointed out that after the revolution gave women a new freedom to voice their issues and contribute to the process of change, the current war closed that door and reestablished women's

limited roles with a vengeance. Women called on the movement “to work on restoring women’s vital roles as advocates and educators in the processes of disarmament and conflict resolution.” Activists agreed and called for an immediate move toward that goal, emphasizing the commitment by saying that re-empowering women is a fundamental prerequisite for re-empowering the movement itself. “There is no effective nonviolent activism without the participation of women,” an activist declared.

REMINDE THE WORLD THAT THE REVOLUTION IS ALIVE

Activists agreed that it is urgent to remind Syrians and the world that despite the current war, a revolution against tyranny and oppression is still in place. “Our movement is desperately needed right now. Even little things, like fresh graffiti with positive, powerful messages will remind people that this is a revolution. As one positive example, Kafr Nabl was able to keep ISIS away and influence the FSA only through nonviolent activism. Because the movement is in a position of strength, fighters of the Free Syrian Army are attentive to the movement’s demands and goals,” pointed out one participant.



WOMEN AND THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT

As part of Dawlaty's effort to shed light on women's declining roles in the movement, and as a first step towards finding the right methods and tools to re-empower women, female activists were rallied around a table in Beirut, where they deeply analyzed their involvement in the revolution: their challenges, reasons for involvement, success and failures.

"At the beginning of the revolution, women shattered many barriers and succeeded in becoming real partners. However, the situation today is significantly different, and women are under heavy pressure from the regime, the FSA, Islamic factions and their families to withdraw from the movement," explained a female activist. A second woman argued that the rosy picture of women's participation at the beginning of the revolution was not entirely accurate: "From the very beginning, women's participation in the protests was limited. Women, for example, were always placed in the back lines, and the signs and banners they were allowed to carry were carefully chosen by others. Even in the coordinating committees, the decision makers and administrators were always men. There were places where we shattered taboos, such as when women in Douma, a very conservative area, organized their own protests and participated in humanitarian aid work, but those rare examples should not be generalized," she contended.

Despite the disagreement on the nature of women's participation at the beginning of the revolution, all activists agreed that the revolution opened the door for women to challenge restrictive social conventions, whether those conventions were legal, familial, religious or social. Many female activists bore the responsibility, in the beginning of the revolution, to counter the regime's propaganda that the revolution carried an Islamist ideology and that it would marginalize and oppress women. To achieve this, they organized, participated in, and even led protests in various cities, and some of them like, May Skaf, Razan Zaytouneh, and Fadwa Sulayman, eventually became icons of the Syrian revolution.

Unfortunately, this margin of freedom began to shrink with the introduction of arms and extremism into the revolution. Women's roles were eventually re-cast along conventional lines, and the majority of female activists were relegated to work in humanitarian aid. At some point, "the sphere of women's roles regressed to a smaller area than it was before the revolution," one woman pointed out. Most activists agreed that this regression was due to predictable dynamics, such as the escalation of the regime's violence and of war and militarization, plus the emergence and expansion of ISIS and some other Islamist groups. Activists also noted that women's internalization of patriarchal values, and submitting to familial and social conventions, contributed to the regression, especially after the revolution became militarized: "While some families tolerated their daughters' participation in the movement in the beginning, they became more anxious when the bullets started flying and bombs started dropping," a female activist indicated.

CONTENTIOUS ISSUES IDENTIFIED DURING THE DISCUSSIONS

POLITICIZED FUNDING, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

The bright and promising beginnings of the nonviolent movement encouraged many countries and international organizations to support and fund the movement, each according to its own interest and agenda. This support provided the movement with two pieces that it sorely needed: expertise and financial resources. The new funding and training produced solid ideas, creative projects, alternative media and civil society organizations. But this support also had a negative side in that it opened the door for many activists to leave the country. The funding dollars also bred corruption and produced some activists who became enamored with their new financial stability, and lost their enthusiasm to take risks.

Many activists within Syria came to feel that those now living abroad had turned the revolution into a source of income. Additionally, the direct intervention of some funding countries changed many organizations and activists to “on demand” tools. According to one observer: “Some activists change their loyalties according to who pays more. They adopt the agenda of those who fund them. They produce videos and write speeches that represent the political agenda of the funding party, even if it contradicts their original principles.” The civil nonviolent movement came to be seen as serving foreign agendas, which put it in direct conflict not only with the regime, but also with parties that rejected all kinds of international intervention.

The subject of foreign funding and the support of international organizations through workshops and training sessions generated a lively debate among the activists. While some believed that foreign funding and training provided them with needed tools to develop their skills, others countered that it had a negative impact as well. Below are advantages and disadvantages of foreign funding and support, as seen by the activists:

Advantages

- Workshops backed by foreign organizations allowed activists to contextualize their experiences and place them within a global framework, and a rich, proud history. “Workshops and training sessions were crash courses on the principles and historical lessons of nonviolent activism,” noted a participant.
- Workshops also “helped win the hearts and minds of many young activists who had been drawn toward militarization,” said another.
- Funding, workshops and training sessions helped build, revive and reinforce institutions that operated in the public interest, which in turn helped strengthen civil society in Syria
- Workshops provided activists with opportunities to communicate and collaborate that they otherwise would not have had



Disadvantages

- Training sessions provided participants with formulas that were not rooted in Syrian reality and conditions on the ground. “They provided activists with rigid plans to be implemented “as-is,” instead of working with activists on customizing their own tools,” a woman noted.
- **Money:** Several activists see that money and salaries provided by foreign organizations played a negative role, because “the backing eroded pure volunteerism, monetized something that previously came only from the heart, and changed the movement into a money-making opportunity,” one activist complained.
- **Money:** It contributed to activists’ emigration and abandoning their work inside of Syria. “The tempting financial offers, especially from international organizations in Turkey, encouraged many activists to leave the country, even when they were not working in dangerous areas,” lamented one activist.
- **Money** also contributed to corrupting many activists, who began shifting their loyalties and ideologies in accordance with the ideology of the party paying more. “The corruption of the funders themselves transferred to those who were funded,” noted one activist.
- “Funding is like a disease for activism.” Also, many local organizations disappear a few months after receiving funding “because the organizations were either hasty or had set unrealistic goals and tools,” or simply because they were fraudulent, only wanting foreign funding.

INSIDE *VERSUS* OUTSIDE

The discussions brought to the surface differences in viewpoints between activists working from inside Syria and those working abroad. Tensions and differing opinions also surfaced between those active in regime-controlled areas and those active in “liberated” areas.

Most activists living in Syria expressed their disappointment with activists who had fled, and criticized them for leaving the country. They argued that Syria and the movement are in dire need of more activists on Syrian soil, and they called on their colleagues abroad to move back home and pitch in to help during this critical period. Some of the activists living abroad became defensive, but many others agreed on the urgent need for their return.

REGIME-CONTROLLED *VERSUS* “LIBERATED” AREAS

While activists from everywhere recognize the urgent need for re-empowering the nonviolent movement, they disagree on the goals of the activism needed.

While those working in “liberated” areas insist that the movement should aim for overthrowing both ISIS and Assad, those working in regime-controlled areas believe that the revolution has left people exhausted. They think less focus on the macro, political goals, and more focus on helping people meet their daily life challenges would help the revolution regain popular support. Ultimately, activists agreed that the movement’s goals and strategies should be agile, and adapt to the ground-truths of each area.

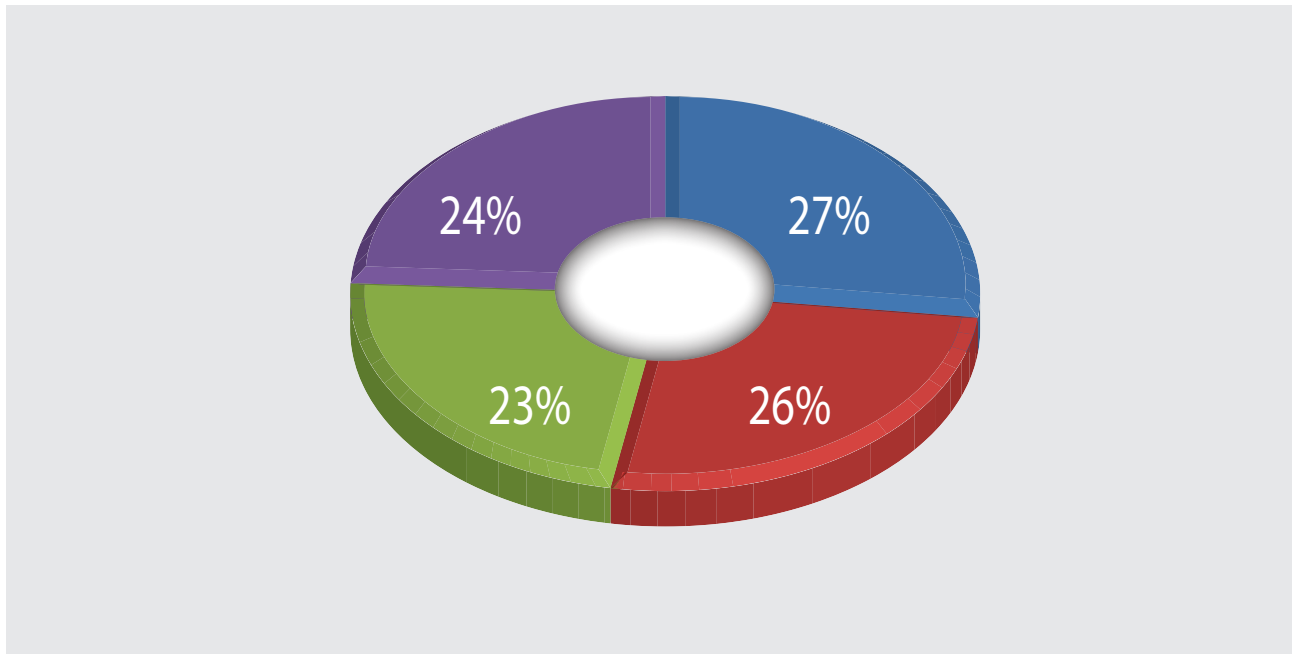
MILITARIZATION

As shown in many places within this report, militarization is a powerful dividing factor for activists. While some blame militarization for the weak state of the movement and suggest that militarization should be eliminated as soon as possible, others believe that a cooperation formula with select armed groups is the only hope for a successful revolution.

CAN THE MOVEMENT REGAIN POWER?

Activists' responses on whether the movement might regain power and momentum correlated to their geographic locations and the ruling authority in their areas.

The question: Can the movement regain power and momentum?



■ Yes ■ Conditional Yes ■ I don not know, It depends ■ No

Breaking down the activists' responses to the question:

Those who stated that the movement could regain power and momentum agreed, "The nonviolent movement will continue as long as people believe in it. The fact that it is weak in some areas and strong in others just proves that it is still alive,"

Those who stated that the movement could not regain power and momentum agreed, "Most of the movement's leaders have been killed, imprisoned, have fled the country, or have joined armed groups. It is very difficult to organize demonstrations now. We used to gather hundreds of demonstrators within an hour, but today we cannot gather ten people, because they simply don't believe that it will matter." Others think that the movement will not regain power "because the proliferation of armed factions, foreign intervention, and extremist agendas will destroy Syria."

Those who stated that the movement could maybe regain power and momentum agreed that it would only happen if the following conditions were met:

- "If channels of communication are established between armed groups and civilian activists, between all sects and ethnicities and even between those who support the regime and those who do not."
- If people's trust can be regained through actions like "establishing courts that would hold criminals from any and all parties equally accountable."
- Only when the movement is ready to coordinate with the moderate armed groups like the FSA. "In order for the movement to regain power, we need to stop dreaming. We need to get rid of the extremist groups and this can happen only with the help of moderate, armed groups like the FSA."



Those who stated they do not know if the movement could regain power and momentum agreed, “It depends on the movement’s strategies and its ability to reestablish its presence on Syrian soil and convince militarized groups to relinquish their arms to help build a civil society that provides job opportunities for those who would otherwise pick up a gun.” They also agreed, “The movement needs political solutions and alternatives, but we don’t know if this movement has the capacity to develop them...”

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVISTS

- Make a clear break and a decisive separation between extremism and the revolution: over the course of the revolution, some activists, for one reason or another, cooperated with extremist factions like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, which caused the movement to lose the trust of many people. Therefore, it is time for the movement to strongly voice its opposition to the extremist agenda, and firmly cooperate with all who call for a civil state.
- Respond to the urgent need for a clear and unified strategy and policy on all armed groups. Armed groups are a part of the Syrian reality, and the movement should establish channels of communication with those groups that have not committed violations against civilians. A long-term strategy should also be developed in which the movement's support for armed groups is granted only if the armed groups submit to civilian authority and not vice versa. This strategy should be flexible enough to include diverse experiences in various geographical areas.
- Create a national media that refuses to follow militant or military dictates.
- Find a mechanism to link activists in Syria with those abroad, so that they complement and serve as resources for one another. Also, provide the activists abroad with the support they need to return to Syria.
- Divide the goals of the nonviolent movement between the strategic and the tactical. The strategic goal is to build a civil democratic state that serves all its citizens. The tactical goal is learning what steps can be implemented on the ground, depending on the circumstances of each region in order to work toward establishing a civil state.
- Develop a strategy to instantly activate the nonviolent movement as soon as ISIS, NF, extremist factions, or the regime leaves an area.
- Before working with an organization, foreign or domestic, educate ourselves on that organization's funding, history, roles and agendas— what do they have to gain or lose by our success or failure?
- Train activists on how to research international organizations to better understand the missions and agendas that drive NGOs and funding organizations that operate or fund projects in Syria.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

- Syrian Civil Society work should take place on Syrian soil. Move operations from abroad to Syria, where the work is needed and appropriately situated.
- Organizations should provide expertise and training, but activists should, in turn, boldly bring their field experience to the table and build custom strategies and tools for Syria. Resist following cookie cutter plans.
- Work only with civil society organizations that are transparent with their finances and backers—if they cannot or will not show where their funding comes from, refuse their support.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS & DONORS

- Funders should verify the experiences and qualifications of applicants with trusted, local Syrian Civil Society Organizations in a mutually beneficial effort to avoid funding “activists” who are really interested only in money.
- Prioritize funding Syrian projects on Syrian soil, where the work is truly needed. This approach will also encourage the return of activists to Syria.
- Support projects that take power and potency away from militarization and armaments.
- Fund development of humanitarian aid workforces so that activists can return to activism.
- Back discussions and workshops that bring disparate activists together.
- Through multiple discussions and workshops with a broad cross-section of Syrian activists, fund the drafting of a manifesto for the Syrian Civil Nonviolent Movement.

CONCLUSION

Activists living inside of Syria and those living abroad dream about the birth of a democratic Syria where all people hold political power and where government exists to serve, protect and empower its citizens. It is time for activists living abroad and activists living in country to come together on Syrian soil to document and proclaim their shared vision for Syria's future. This vision must transcend the current powers in Syria so that it sustains and guides the nonviolent movement with a way forward whether the Assad regime remains in power, or falls, whether the violent conflict escalates, or is disarmed, whether extremists are removed today or tomorrow. The opportunity to create and implement this vision may never come again: The time is now.



دولتي

مساحة لنتصوّر دولتنا

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وتطوير مواد تدريب عن التحول الديمقراطي
والعدالة الانتقالية وسيادة القانون في سوريا

