

Secularists, Secularism and the Syrian uprising - “Secularism cannot exist without democracy and vice versa”

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Syrian secularists, and moreover the concept of secularism, are under attack online and on the ground. Joseph Daher takes a critical look at recent efforts to discredit the contribution of Syrian secularists to the 2011 revolution and offers historic perspective on the meaning of secularism and how the concept has been used and misused in the battle to shape the future of Syria. The first part of this article examines the role of secularists and secularism in the Syrian uprising, how secularism is defined and whether the Assad regime historically helped or hindered secularist forces in Syria.

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Part 1

In the opposition website Zaman al-Wasl [\[1\]](#), the author Hilal Abd al-Aziz al-SFa’ouri launched a new attack on secularists with an article entitled ‘What Syrian secularists want from the Syrian Muslims.’ [\[2\]](#) In it, he describes all secularists as critical of “everything that belongs to Islam”, and claims they hold a “secret hostility towards Muslims” by notably wanting them “to shave their beards and take off their jilbabs [traditional Arabic garb] and throw their turbans... to close their mosques and not pray.” Fa’ouri is the author of numerous articles on opposition website Zaman al-Wasl.

It is probably no coincidence this article comes just a few weeks after one of the leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Molham al-Droubi, posted on his Facebook profile the following request: “I would like to have your comments on: what did the secularists offer the Syrian revolution”, as a clear provocation towards these sectors of the opposition. His comment led many secular activists to answer him either directly or indirectly on social networks. Previously, other

Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups and personalities had attacked secularists as “foreign tools,” rejecting their role in the uprising and the concept of secularism as a heresy or apostasy. These attacks on secularists and secularism raise several questions and issues that need to be tackled.

What secularists offered the Syrian revolution

First, the issue of the participation of secular activists in the 2011 uprising shouldn't even be up for debate. Secular activists have been actively involved in various phases of the struggle against the ruling regime, both before and after the unrest of 2011. Numerous secular activists played an important role within the grassroots committees and in the development of peaceful actions against the regime. These gatherings slowly developed internal structures and several coordination committees played a particularly important role fostering solidarity links on a national level, particularly the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU), Union of Free Syrian Students and the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) and many other youth groups such as the Syrian Revolutionary Youth. The Syrian grassroots civilian opposition was indeed the primary engine of the popular uprising against the Assad regime for the first two years. The repression, militarization, rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist forces, coupled with foreign interventions changed this situation. Syria's uprising transitioned from a popular revolution into an international war.

Secularism is not the opposite of faith or a demand for the eradication of religion from society. One can be a believer and at the same time support secularism as the organizing principle of the state and society.

Second, the recent negative attention directed at secularists on social media and Syrian opposition outlets fits into wider regional and historical patterns. Most of the conservative and Islamic fundamentalist forces in the Middle East have spent decades negatively describing secularism as a form of heresy, apostasy, atheism and an attack on Islam, a product of the west and therefore as a concept to be combatted. The Egyptian Salafist Sheikh Youssef Qaradawi, an influential cleric residing in Qatar and who is linked to the MB stated the following in one of his numerous books attacking the concept of secularism:

“Secularism may be accepted in a Christian society but it can never enjoy a general acceptance in an Islamic society... For Muslim societies, the acceptance of secularism means something totally different. Since Islam is a comprehensive system of Ibadah (worship) and Sharia (legislation), the acceptance of secularism means abandonment of Sharia, a denial of the Divine guidance and a rejection of Allah's injunctions. It is a total falsification to claim that Sharia is not proper to the requirements of the present age... For this reason, the call for secularism among Muslims is atheism and a rejection of Islam. Its acceptance as a basis for rule in place of Sharia is a downright apostasy.” [i]

These remarks were made in his book “How the Imported Solutions Disastrously Affected Our Muslim Nation”. The cleric spreads similar views as a weekly guest on Al-Jazeera where he has his own program.



In Syria, democratic, secular and liberal thinkers and groups have endured verbal and physical attacks from Islamic-leaning movements because of their ideology since the start of the uprising in 2011. The most recent display of anti-secularist sentiment came with the military invasion of Afrin and its subsequent occupation by the Turkish army and Syria armed groups affiliated to Ankara, mostly conservative and Islamic fundamentalists. Some of the Syrian fighters participating in the offensive and the subsequent occupation of Afrin attacked the Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) not solely because of their ethnic origins or on the basis of "accusations of siding with the regime", but also because their political party promotes a particular brand of secularism. Its historic roots are close to Marxism and Third worldism^{[ii][ii]} but the group's ideology has evolved beyond that, reflecting the influence of American social theorist Murray Bookchin, a thinker advocating "libertarian municipalism". The main incentive for the Turkish led military operation of Afrin was to prevent the YPG from controlling contiguous territory along its border, as it considered its political branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), as a terrorist group linked to its own Kurdish insurgency, spearheaded by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The offensive in Afrin fits into a much larger war pitting Ankara against the PKK. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has reiterated on numerous occasions that its armed forces would press their offensive against Kurdish YPG fighters along the length of Turkey's border with Syria and if necessary into northern Iraq.

Defining secularism

In Syria, democratic, secular and liberal thinkers and groups have endured verbal and physical attacks from Islamic-leaning movements because of their ideology since the start of the uprising in 2011.

It is essential to define what we understand by secularism and a secular state. At a minimum, the concept encompasses the separation of the state and religion; and the neutrality of the state towards believers and non-believers, including in the distribution of a resource or opportunity. Religion and religious institutions do not rule or impose its laws on society, while no religious creed is privileged over another. At the same time, freedom of conscience guarantees the right of believers to practice their religions and of non-believers to not believe or practice any religious dogma.

The concept of secularism has taken different paths according to the history of each society. ^[iii] In the Middle East, the first modern contemporary debates around the concept of secularism began in the mid 19th century led by intellectuals of the region, during the period called the "Nahda" (Renaissance), accompanied by other related discussions in regards to the challenges of the time, most notably on how to challenge western domination and colonialism. In the 20th century, and the rise of Arab nationalist and communist movements in the region, the idea became more widespread. Conservative and Islamic religious forces, aided by Saudi Arabia and Western powers at the time, increasingly responded to these rising forces by categorizing them as foreign ideologies attacking Islam and as equivalent of atheism seeking to erase religion of society. Secularism is still presented today by many Islamic fundamentalist movements in this way. This is of course not limited to the Middle East.^[iv] The rise of religious fundamentalism is indeed an international phenomenon, not something unique to the Middle East or other societies with predominantly Muslim populations. We have seen the development of similar political currents like Christian fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism, and Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, that all have their own peculiar brand of right-wing politics. But none of them, despite their call to return to an earlier golden age, should be seen as fossilized elements from the past. They may employ symbols and narratives from earlier periods, but all these fundamentalisms are the product of modern societies.^[v]

Syria under Assad, secular?

Syria may be religiously and ethnically diverse but the state is not secular in character. The regime of Bashar al-Assad has been no exception. The 2012 constitution stipulates that the president must be a Muslim man or that “the main source of law is the Sharia”. Syria also has eight different personal status laws, each of which is applied according to the religious sect of an individual[vi]. These laws also include major discriminations against women. In 2010, several Islamic clerics such as Sheikh Osama Rifai, who is now in exile for his opposition to the regime and has established the Syrian Islamic Council, and Sheikh Ratib al-Nabulsi, who has not opposed the regime, portrayed the The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) “as a grave threat to the lives, morals, and religious values of Syrians”, while supporting the several reservations made by the regime affecting key provisions of the covenant against the opposition of feminist movements. For example, reservations were made against Article 2 of the CEDAW, which mandates notably the States parties enshrine the principle of equality between men and women in their national constitutions and other appropriate legislation, and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, including sanctions where appropriate, to prohibit all discriminations against women.[vii]



Banner raised in one of the demonstrations in the city of Aleppo. Image taken from social media and published here under fair use.

Historically, the Assad regime since the period of Hafez al-Assad has developed a religiously conservative discourse and encouraged a conservative Islamic establishment to channel Islamic currents and legitimize the regime. They also started to sponsor and institutionalize alternative Islamic groups that were willing to play along with its political game such as the Naqshbandi Kuftariya Sufi order under Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro and groups affiliated with Sheikh Sa'id al-Buti's or the Qubaysiyyat female Islamic movement.[viii] These policies and rapprochement with religious conservative layers of society coincided with censorship of literary and artistic works, while promoting religious literature that filled the shelves of libraries and Islamizing the field of higher education.[ix] Feminist activists and groups were publicly accused by religious conservative movements close to the regime of heresy and of seeking to destroy society's morality, of propagating Western values, such as the notion of civil marriage, the rights of homosexuals and lesbians, and total sexual freedom.[x] This is without forgetting the long history of relations of the Assad regime with Islamic fundamentalists groups in Syria and outside, as well as its instrumentalization of jihadists groups at different times, including during the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq.

Secularism, extremism and the survival of the Assad regime

Similarly, there was a clear strategy by the Assad regime since the beginning of the uprising to favor and allow the creation of Islamic fundamentalist and Salafists jihadists' organizations to discredit the popular movement and its initial inclusive message. This was evident in the decision to release numerous jihadist and salafists from its jails after the start of the protest movement, while repressing democratic and progressive components of the civilian opposition as well as the Free

Syrian Army. In tandem to these developments, protesters established alternative institutions such as the local coordination committees and councils, which challenged and replaced the state by providing services to the local population in areas where state was no longer dominant. By developing these institutions, the protest movement provided a political alternative that could appeal to large sections of the population, especially in its first six months of demonstrations and before the large-scale militarization of the uprising.

The challenge became greater for democratic and progressive components of the protest movement as a result of the evolution and dynamics of the uprising. The inclusive and democratic message of the initial protest movement, as well as its vitality, was weakened considerably firstly by the regime's repression and war against democratic components of the protest movement, while the subsequent rise of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements weakened these sectors even further.

This created a double advantage for the regime. Firstly, it presented itself as a bulwark against "extremism" internationally and therefore trying to include its murderous war on the Syrian population in the so called "war on terror" led by Western states and authoritarian regimes in the region and throughout the globe. Secondly, it allowed it to play on the fear among sections of the population who rightly viewed these forces as an existential threat. Jihadist and salafist actors, which were subsequently supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, promoted a vision of society that was of course an exclusionary project and was not appealing to various groups within Syrian society such as religious minorities, women, or those who had a different understanding of Islam. The regime promoted itself on its side as "the protector of minorities" and of "modernity", although this as mentioned earlier was very far from the truth. In this context, each defeat of the democratic strands within the protest movement, both civilian and armed, strengthened and benefited Islamic fundamentalist forces. Progressively, these elements dominated the military scene.



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Secularisms and undemocratic secularism

Does this mean that secular political systems are necessarily good? No not at all, for example on an international level, the French state is very far from being a model to follow and rather should be condemned for its instrumentalization of secularism to implement discriminatory and racist laws against Muslim people, especially women by forbidding for instance the wearing of the veil in public schools. The issue of whether or not to wear the veil concerns only women, and they must make that decision independently and by themselves. Imposing or withdrawing the wearing of the veil by force is a reactionary and anti-democratic act, which goes against any support for women's self-determination.

More generally the rise of Islamophobia,[xi] particularly in Western countries must be denounced, as any other forms of racisms.

Secularism is not the opposite of faith or a demand for the eradication of religion from society. One

can be a believer and at the same time support secularism as the organizing principle of the state and society. Already Abdel Rahman al-Kawakibi, a Syrian Islamic reformist thinker and important figure of the Nahda, at the end of the 19th century, for instance stated in the chapter on despotism and religion in *Tabd'i al-istibdad*, that a "distinction must be made between religion and state, because this distinction is now a major requirement of the time and place in which we live".[xii]

Similarly Ali Abdel Razeq, in his 1925 book 'Islam and the Foundations of Governance' (*Al-Islam Wa Usul Al-Hukm*) argued mainly that Islam did not advocate a specific form of government" and against a role for religion in politics or the political prescriptive value of religious texts.

More so, secularism gives the believers the possibility of liberating themselves from the instrumentalization of religion by state and political parties and enables them to practice their religion freely without state oppression.

What about secularists, do they form one single group? No. Quite the opposite. In Syria we find secularists among supporters of the regime and in the opposition. Differences also exist within these groups. In the opposition for example, secularists have not constituted a single pole and this is quite normal as different political tendencies exist from leftists and feminists to liberals, nationalists and conservative groups. While they may have some common points on the concept of secularism, despite deep differences, they do not share the same political program regarding many various issues such as what kind of economy, women's rights, the Kurdish issue, imperialism, etc... This tendency to politically homogenize secularists in one single group undermines the concept of secularism more generally.[xiii]

Part II

The second part of this article looks at the strategies of survivals deployed by secular actors in the Syrian opposition as Islamic fundamentalist forces gained momentum in the military and political arena. It also analyses the merits and dangers of embracing a "civilian state" in the bid to find a compromise between these conflicting ideologies.

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SYRIA'S LIBERAL SECULARISTS AND THEIR STRATEGIES

Some secularist groups and individuals initially defended and justified the presence of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist movements in the Syrian political and military opposition on the ground. This was the case for multiple dissidents from liberal currents, represented in various opposition bodies such as the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (Coalition, *etilaf* [3]), [1] to the detriment of democratic demands such as secularism and women's rights. These liberal secularist figures remained mostly silent on the violations of human rights committed by salafist groups or their sectarian diatribes, and even included controversial groups such as Jaysh al-Islam in opposition political bodies. Muhammad Alloush, the former head of Jaysh al-Islam, was appointed as the chief opposition negotiator during the third round of United Nations-sponsored talks with the regime in Geneva and remained an important personality in the High Negotiation Committee.

It is not a surprising therefore to see Hilal Abd al-Aziz al-Fa'ouri, the author of numerous articles on al-Zaman opposition website, positively cite George Sabra [4], the former president of the Syrian National Council (SNC) and member of the liberal Democratic People's Party (formerly the Communist Party Political Bureau led by Riad al-Turk) in an article characterizing Al-Qaeda affiliate

Jabhat al-Nusra as “part of the revolutionary movement”. Similarly, Michel Kilo initially refuted all accusations that were made against Jabhat al-Nusra and that characterized it as a fundamentalist organization.[2] He also rejected any comparison made between the Islamic State group and Jabhat al-Nusra, arguing that the latter was a movement that was willing to have “an Islamic electoral system” and wanted to form an Islamic state by national consensus, while the former wanted to reach this through despotism.[3] Many other liberal secularists personalities have also mitigated the reactionary nature of Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist organizations.

On the Duality of Secularism and Dictatorship and the Rise of Political Islam

21 June 2017

Both sides had an interest in this collaboration with the perspective of reaching power or at least having a role in the various negotiation processes. First, the liberal secular personalities and groups in the Coalition saw the cooperation with Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups as a military necessity in the war against the regime; even if they were hostile towards democracy and ruled in an authoritarian way in the areas they controlled, including attacking and kidnapping democratic activists. On their side, the Islamic fundamentalist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhoods and salafist movements like Jaysh al-Islam, collaborated with the exiled opposition body to demonstrate their “moderation” and reassure regional and western states. Islamic fundamentalist movements, however, were the main beneficiaries of this collaboration. The partnership was unequal as Islamic fundamentalist movements had an organized political and military presence within Syria and received massive funding and / or support from sympathetic states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey) and / or private networks from the Gulf monarchies. Democratic and secular groups, which were already initially weak in terms of organized actors, were severely repressed at the beginning of the uprising by regime’s forces and unable to organize later on.

The personalities and groups within the SNC and the Coalition believed the end justified the means, but the end is determined by the means used. These circumstances resulted in the absence of an organized democratic or progressive pole on a national level within or outside the country during these years, while letting Islamic fundamentalist and jihadist groups occupy the political and military space. This led to the situation that the rhetorical commitments of the opposition bodies in exile to a civil and inclusive democracy were not credible enough to persuade large sections of the population to abandon the Assad regime and join the uprising. Similarly, they were unable to develop any solid and inclusive alternative institutions to the regime.

As argued by Syria researcher Tareq Aziza, “This shameful atmosphere (within the opposition of the Syrian Coalition characterized by corruption and submission to foreign states and interests) that has prevailed for years among opposition institutions (if indeed they are institutions) has made it easier for the West to believe and for regime supporters to advance lies such as “the absence of alternative;” or even “fear of the alternative”; and “Assad is bad but there is no mature alternative!”, etc.[4]

Conservative and religious fundamentalists, as well as sectarian groups and figures dominated the SNC and Coalition. These two bodies tried to sell a message to the media that they were inclusive by appointing secular and democratic personalities in visible positions to reassure Western backers who feared the rise of extremist forces that could challenge their interests in the region. The Coalition has not condemned any human rights violations or sectarian discourses by Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham, and very rarely of Jabhat al-Nusra in recent years.[5]

What about a civil-state? A viable solution or a misused concept?

Given the attacks and undermining of the concept of secularism, coupled with the weakening of secular progressive forces in the region-especially because of repression by authoritarian regimes, the term « civil state » has been increasingly used by both secular (mostly liberals and former leftists) and Islamic fundamentalist groups. The concept has been gaining traction since the early 2000s. Its adoption by the two main Syrian opposition bodies could be traced back to the Damascus declaration of 2005, and later with the beginning of the uprisings in 2011.

Many conservatives, liberals and democratic secularists argue that this concept of civil statehood based on citizenship is less controversial for members of the society, while also incorporating the same principles of a secular state with no discrimination based on sect or gender. They however shy away of detailing their thoughts around the concept regarding the place of Sharia or of personal status laws. On the other side, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has published several documents since 2001 promoting the establishment of a modern civil state and concepts such as citizenship, rule of law, democracy, pluralism, equality, etc... So in theory, there is a complete agreement.

Islamic fundamentalist movements completely reject secularism, contrary to what some scholars have argued

But the notion of civil state for the MB in Syria and elsewhere, and more generally of Islamic fundamentalist groups, should be analyzed deeply rather than taken for granted. Islamic fundamentalist movements completely reject secularism, contrary to what some scholars have argued.[6] One of the former leaders of the MB, and who is still very close to the movement, Zouheir Salim, said in 2011 that separating the state from religion means “depriving the state from its morals”.[7] The ideology of the MB remains deeply rooted in religious fundamentalism, where there is no separation of religion and the state and the laws work within the framework of Sharia. The various iterations of the MB across the region do not have the same understanding of a ‘civil state’, which is considered a first step towards an Islamic state, or a state based on Sharia. They generally talk about a dawla madaniyya bi-marji’iyya Islamiyya, that is, a “civil state with an Islamic frame of reference”.[8][9]

In a document published by the movement in 2004 entitled “The Political Project for the Future Syria”, Islam is actually upheld as “a code of conduct for the devout Muslim,” a “civilizational identity” for all Syrians, the official religion of the country, and the highest source of legal authority.[10] The project actually stipulates that the group would seek to “Islamize the laws in a gradual manner, due to our belief that Sharia revealed by Allah is a source of mercy for all mankind and that it consists of the most humane, wise and prudent measures that are in the best interest of all people”.[11]The text is also ambiguous about religious minorities, considering them equal citizens who would not be discriminated against, while saying that Islam should be the basis of the state and of Syrian identity.

In addition to this, women’s rights also remain a point of ambiguity in the MB’s ideology. The MB

calls for women's freedom of choice and the provision of equal rights, while at the same time stating that "appropriate values must be put in place to ensure that men and women continue to fulfill the mutually complementary roles God has assigned to them." This leaves the reader free to interpret what such "appropriate values" may be.[12] On several occasions, MB officials have argued that the identity of the Syrian nation is based on Islamic values, and therefore any government that comes about must also embody those same values. MB members have also made numerous sectarian comments and statements against the Shi'a and Alawi communities, while at the same time considering Jabhat al-Nusra as a revolutionary force and their "brothers in faith".[13]

By adopting the idea of a 'civil state', democratic and secularists individuals and groups conceded key demands of creating a future secular state and upholding women's rights.

We have seen these ideas expressed by the two main opposition bodies, which reflects the domination of the MB and other conservative forces within them. In July 2012, in the opposition conference held in Cairo under the sponsorship of the Arab League for instance, the National Covenant document on women's rights stated that:

"The Constitution guarantees the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and seeks to create the required legislative and legal environment that enables her political, economic and social empowerment, in accordance with all relevant international conventions, as well as in harmony with the societal culture." [14]

The last sentence, in harmony with the society culture, was added at the express demand of Islamic conservative groups and individuals, which was widely denounced by feminists as a way to curtail their rights. Many feminist activists have criticized the fact that secularists in the SNC and subsequently the Syrian coalition and Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC) would inevitably yield to Islamic fundamentalist forces, sacrificing women's rights in the process through different means. Feminist voices complained of the lack or absence of female representation in these opposition bodies, often limited to symbolic representation without any real responsibilities. Similarly these opposition bodies have not opposed the sectarian and Arab chauvinist diatribes or practices of their members.

Similarly, the General Principle of the transition plan submitted by the opposition's HNC in September 2016 exclusively listed for example the Arab Islamic culture as source "for intellectual production and social relations amongst all Syrians" (High Negotiation Commission: 2016: 9). This is why I believe that, by adopting the idea of a 'civil state', democratic and secularists individuals and groups conceded key demands of creating a future secular state and upholding women's rights. They failed to challenging sectarianism and yielded to the politics of reactionary groups for opportunistic reasons. This has had dramatic consequences on the Syrian opposition and hurt its capacity to present itself as an inclusive alternative to the regime. Of course, a difference needs to be drawn between political groups that adopted the 'civil state' rhetoric to justify and seek an alliance with reactionary groups such as the Brotherhood, and those popular youth groups that emerged during the uprising, using this notion, while not abandoning their opposition to sectarianism and / or discriminations against women.

Secularism cannot exist without democracy and vice versa.

Conclusion

The "secularism" that progressive and democratic secularists should defend is not separate from the broader collective struggle for democracy, social justice and equality in Syria and beyond. This form

of secularism does not differentiate between different sects and ethnicities, between believers and non-believers, men and women. Indeed, a secular state is key to challenging sectarianism, racism, sexism and homophobia. All people should be equal before the law, and there should be no laws drawn based on religions that discriminate against women in terms of their personal status, or against people on the basis of their sexual orientations, ethnicities and so on. At the same time, as mentioned above, it's a guarantee against state oppression or imposition of one understanding of religion on all believers. In his Critique of the Gotha Program of the German Workers Party (1875), Karl Marx defended people's right to practice their religion by stating "everyone must be able to satisfy their religious and bodily needs, without the police tipping its nose".

Secularism is a first step towards challenging these various discriminations and therefore a major democratic demand. Of course, secularism cannot exist without democracy and vice versa. In this framework, the struggle for secularism, alongside the other component mentioned above, is not only about creating a more tolerant society, but also a struggle against the dominant ideas of the authoritarian regimes and religious fundamentalist movements, and therefore a struggle for the oppressed against the oppressors. The ideological hegemony of these groups must be challenged by progressive alternatives part of much wider struggle to change society, which included issues of social justice and democracy.

Defending an inclusive conception of secularism also challenges the political alliances of some liberal secular members in the Syrian opposition with the MB and Islamic fundamentalist groups that refused to defend basic democratic demands, and with foreign autocratic powers. Similar problems among some liberal and democratic groups allying with fundamentalist forces have been experienced elsewhere in the region.[15] Indeed the motto (or slogan) "the ends justify the means" ignores how the means used will influence the outcome... and we have seen the impact this had on the Syrian opposition, which lost the appeal and inclusiveness of the initial popular movement in Syria.

Syria—and the rest of the region—is not 'exceptional', as some orientalist and orientalist in reverse proclaim. Nothing prevents the country from struggling for the same demands that people in other parts of the world have struggled for, such as democracy, social justice, equality, secularism. The hope in the future resides in the fact that the Syrian revolutionary process that started in 2011 is one of the most documented. This memory will remain and will not only be there to look at the past including its mistakes, but also as an opportunity to seize on this past to build future resistance. The political experiences and insights that have been accumulated since the beginning of the uprising will not disappear.

Joseph Daher

Notes of Part I

[i] <https://ia802305.us.archive.org/2/items/FP0203/0203.pdf>, p. 67

[ii] View: <https://wordpress.com/posts/syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com>

[iii] For example, Karl Marx rejected as idealist the notion that the main task of revolutionaries is to attack religion such as promoted by many intellectuals of the Enlightenment period in Europe. Marx argued that there is a real material basis for religious belief – the terrible conditions in which the mass of oppressed humanity are forced to live. Only with the elimination of those oppressive material conditions will religion fade away. Karl Marx also opposed atheism being inscribed as part of the political program of the revolutionary movement.

[iv] See

https://www.opendemocracy.net/rajeev-bhargava/states-religious-diversity-and-crisis-of-secularism-0#_edn1

[v] See Martin E. Marty, 'Fundamentalism as a Social Phenomenon,' Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 42, no. 2 (1988)

[vi] Christian communities follow their own laws, while Personal Status Law for all Muslims is based on a particular Sunni interpretation of Islamic Sharia, Hanafi jurisprudence and other Islamic sources.

[vii] See Kannout, Lama (2016), 'In the Core or on the Margin: Syrian Women's Political Participation,' UK and Sweden, Syrian Feminist Lobby and Euromed Feminist Initiative EFI-IFE

[viii] At the same time, the Assad regime repressed, particularly in the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, Islamic fundamentalist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhoods, opposing it. See Khatib Line (2011), 'Islamic Revivalism in Syria, The rise and fall of Ba'thist secularism', London and New York, Routledge Studies in Political Islam; Pierret, Thomas (2011), 'Baas et Islam en Syrie', Paris, PUF; Imady, Omar, (2016) 'Organisationally Secular: Damascene Islamist Movements and the Syrian Uprising' Syria Studies, Vol. 8, No. 1, pdf. Pp.66-91; Lefèvre, Raphael (2013a), 'The Ashes of Hama, the Muslim Brotherhoods in Syria', London: Hurst

[ix] Pierret, Thomas (2011), 'Baas et Islam en Syrie', Paris, PUF, p. 115

[x] Aous (al-), Yahya (2013), "Chapter 3: Feminist Websites and Civil Society Experience", in Kawakibi S. (ed.) Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria : Civil Society Against all Odds, HIVOS and Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia. (pdf.). Available at: https://hivos.org/sites/default/files/publications/special20bulletin202-salam20kawakibi20_6-5-13_1.pdf, (accessed 3 March 2014), p. 25

[xi] Islamophobia is understood as by the author a form of religious bigotry mixed with racism directed against the Muslim population.

[xii] As noted by librarian and scholar George N. Atiyeh « Whether al-Kawakibi's secularism was complete or not is a debatable question in more than one way. His introduction of the idea of spiritual caliphate led him necessarily to consider politics as an autonomous discipline, a position which placed him almost alone among the modern reformers of Islam"... such as for example Rashid Rida, the counter-reformist per excellence and , pointed out his disapproval of al-Kawakibi's concept of the separation of state and religion. <http://www.syriawide.com/atiyeh.html>

Rida transformed the reformist tendencies of pan-Islamism, particularly of famous reformist intellectuals such as Mohammad Abduh and Jamal al-Din Afghani, toward a fundamentalist orientation. Rida's evolution brought him closer to the puritan Hanbali doctrine, particularly its Wahhabi followers. He became a determined defender of the Saudi regime and Wahhabism, while collaborating with Saudi King Abdel Aziz. He started opposing and fighting the Sufi brotherhoods and practices of their adherents. He argued for the restoration of the caliphate after its abolition in 1924. He also developed a strong anti-Shia diatribe, accusing Arab Shia of being agents of Iran (a theme often found today among Salafis and other Islamic fundamentalist movements). Rashid Rida particularly had a prominent influence on the intellectual and political framework by the Muslim Brotherhood as he sought to revive Ibn Tammiyya's literalism and call for jihad. This new Salafi tradition was spread individually by intellectuals like Rashid Rida in the 20s and 30s, and socially by groups such as the Brotherhood later in Egypt and elsewhere

[xiii] It is important also to note that similarly that all political movement rooted in religion should be treated homogenously. As the Syrian writer Aziz Al-Azmeh, stated that “the understanding of Islamic political phenomena requires the normal equipment of the social and human sciences, not their denial” Not acting in this ways, will lead us to an essentialisation of “the Other”, in much of the current cases today of the “Muslim”. Each religion does not exist indeed autonomously of people, in the same way that God does not exist outside of the field of intellectual action of man. This is why we must reject Islamophobic claims that the roots of ISIS, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and other fundamentalists can be found in the Koran. Such groups and their actions should be analyzed as the product of international and local social, economic, and political conditions in the present time, not as the product of a text written 1400 years ago. Do we explain the US invasion of Iraq by the religious beliefs of George Bush (who reported that God told him in a dream to invade Iraq)? Of course not. We instead explain Bush’s war, his motives, and their ideological justification as the product of American imperialism.

At the same time, we have seen in the past movements or individuals rooted in religious identity develop progressive policies. The Christian liberation theology had developed a radical critique of capitalism against the dictatorships of South America, while black Muslim intellectual and activist Malcolm X who, while remaining faithful to his religious beliefs, especially at the end of his life was moving to the left. He did not hesitate to criticize Muslim leaders in an interview in 1965, which he accused of having voluntarily kept the people, and women in particular, in the dark. He added that the state of progress of a society is measured by the situation of women, stating that “the more women are educated and involved ... the more the whole people are active, bright and progressive”.

Notes of Part II

[1] A trend that we can find since the 1980s in some Syrian opposition circles and was repeated by similar groups following the Damascus Declaration in 2005 seeking alliance with the MB or at least strong relations.

[2] Syrian4all (2013), “Mîshîl Kîlû: îltiqayt jabhat al-nusra wa âstaqbalet ka-al-âbtâl”, Youtube, (online). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hdkkEFdROQ, (accessed 20 December 2014)

[3] Radio Rozana (2014), “Kîlû: lâ taqâranû “jabhat al-nusra” bi-“dâ’esh””, An-Nahar, (online). Available at: <https://www.annahar.com/article/97968-كلاهما-لا-تتعلقان-بجبهة-النصرة-او-بداش>, (accessed 20 March 2015)

[4] <http://drsc-sy.org/البيان-الاجتماعي-لجبهة-النصرة-في-البيان-الاجتماعي-لجبهة-النصرة>

[5] see <http://www.etalaf.org/press.html>

[6] See for example French academic François Burgat saying the Muslim Brotherhoods have accepted the idea of a secular state.

[7] Diaz, Naomi Ramirez (2018), ‘Unblurring ambiguities’, in Hinnebusch R. and Imady O. (eds.), *The Syrian Uprising, Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*, London and New York, Routledge, p. 10

[8] For example, the former deputy Supreme Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Muhammad Khairat al-Shater declared in March 2011, following the overthrow of then-President Hosni Mubarak:

The Ikhwan [the Brotherhood] are working to restore Islam in its all-encompassing conception to the lives of people, and they believe that this will only come about through the strong society. Thus the

mission is clear: restoring Islam in its all-encompassing conception; subjugating people to God; instituting the religion of God; the Islamization of life, empowering of God's religion; establishing the Nahda [Renaissance] of the 'Ummah[religious community] on the basis of Islam (...) Thus we've learned to start with building the Muslim individual, the Muslim family, the Muslim society, the Islamic government, the global Islamic state.

[9] We can find similar statements among Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist forces, for example the Lebanese Hezbollah declared on numerous occasions its opposition to any kind of possible personal status civil law alongside Islamic Status law, and declared such propositions as being anti-Islamic, and professed until today that an Islamic state is its preferred political system, although not able to implement it in Lebanon because of the religious sectarian diversity of the country.

[10] http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=البيان_الاسلامي_الاسلامي_الاسلامي

[11] http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/index.php?title=البيان_الاسلامي_الاسلامي_الاسلامي

[12] Lefèvre, Raphael (2013a), 'The Ashes of Hama, the Muslim Brotherhoods in Syria', London: Hurst, p. 174

[13] We should not forget as well that while the MB initially supported the Damascus Declaration in 2005, in 2006 they joined forces with fifteen other opposition groups along with the former vice-president of Syria Abdul Halim Khaddam, who had just defected from the regime (see further in the chapter), in the establishment of the National Salvation Front (NSF), which was backed by Saudi Arabia. In April 2009, the MB announced an end to the Brotherhood's participation in the NSF, as they were seeking a form of understanding and reconciliation with the regime. The beginning of the uprising in Syria in March of 2011 ended this process with the MB that called in April to support the uprising.

[14] <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12273&article=684969#.W1ZBjyPpNR0>

[15] In the latest elections in Iraq for example, the Sairun coalition, gathering the movement of Shi'a Islamic cleric Moqtada Sadr and the Iraqi Communist Party, mentioned their willingness to build a "civil state" for all citizens. At the same time however, issues such as women's rights and secularism were not tackled by both parties, because according to Iraqi Communist Party secretary-general Raid Jahid Fahmi they were source of conflicts between his movement and the Sadrist. Sadr is today seeking to form a unity national government with other Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist forces and individuals and other sectarian personalities that he used to criticize previously. For more see: ESSF (article 45801), [Elections in Iraq: Sadr, Sectarianism, and a Popular Alternative](#).

P.S.

- Article first published on the website Syria Untold:
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Footnotes

[1] <https://en.zamanalwsl.net>

[2] <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/26419>

[3] <http://en.etalaf.org>

[4] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20312255>