

6 The Brotherhood Re-Enters the Political Fray

The spread of the Arab uprisings to Syria in 2011 caught many observers off guard.¹ Syria was stable, President Bashar al-Assad seemed reasonably well liked and the country lacked the overt structural problems that dogged Tunisia and Egypt.² Bashar al-Assad himself remarked to the *Wall Street Journal* in January that year that ‘Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people.’³ However, al-Assad’s assessment was drawn into question weeks later when Syria experienced large-scale protests following a government crackdown in Deraa.⁴ By June and July, protests were taking place across the country, while some members of the opposition began turning to violence. By the time the conflict had reached its fifth anniversary in 2016, the UN Special Envoy to Syria estimated that 400,000 people had been killed.⁵ The UN had stopped formally counting the dead two years prior because the brutality of the war meant that it could no longer confidently verify the data.

The March 2011 protests provided the Brotherhood with the catalyst it had long hoped would lead to the popular overthrow of the al-Assad regime. The Brotherhood, as one of Syria’s oldest, best-known and best-resourced political parties, should have been well placed to benefit from any redrawing of the political system in Syria. It had been preparing for its return to Syria politically, institutionally and financially for three decades. However, the Brotherhood’s recent political track record was

¹ Gregory F. Gause, ‘Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability’, *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011), 81–90.

² David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), chapter 3.

³ Jay Soloman and Bill Spindle, ‘Syria Strongman: Time for “Reform”’, *Wall Street Journal* (31 January 2011), <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704832704576114340735033236>.

⁴ ‘Deaths in Syria as Protests Continue’, *Al Jazeera* (2 April 2011), www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/04/201141132440493496.html.

⁵ John Hudson, ‘U.N. Envoy Revises Syria Death Toll to 400,000’, *Foreign Policy* (22 April 2016), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/22/u-n-envoy-revises-syria-death-toll-to-400000/>.

mixed, ensuring that while the group would be an enthusiastic participant in the uprising, its history prevented it from achieving the influence it had expected among the opposition political landscape. Indeed, a chasm quickly emerged between the expectations of the Brotherhood's triumphant return to Syria, and its very limited success after 2011. It turned out that a strong institutional structure and superior resources did not easily translate into rebuilding its popular base.

The Syrian uprising spread across the country in mid-March 2011 after the Ba'ath regime arrested teenagers who had spray-painted anti-regime graffiti on a wall in the southern city of Deraa. The Arab uprisings began in Tunisia four months earlier after a frustrated fruit-seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, self-immolated in protest at poor economic conditions and local government corruption.⁶ Within months, protests had spread across the Middle East, toppling the long-reigning presidents of Tunisia and Egypt. Until March 2011, Syria had seemed impervious to the regional unrest, with the self-immolation of Hassan Ali Akleh in Hasakah, a 1,500-strong protest in Damascus's al-Hareeqa neighbourhood and a small protest outside the Libyan embassy in Damascus all failing to inspire further activity.⁷ However, within days of the arrests in Deraa, protests spread across the country, buoyed by the calls of nascent Facebook groups to mobilise for a 'Day of Rage'. Protests continued to build for the next fortnight, with al-Assad addressing the country for the first time on 30 March to declare that 'conspirators' were pushing an 'Israeli agenda'.⁸ It was clear from early on that al-Assad did not take the protesters' demands seriously, and although he made a nod to reform through initiatives such as Decree number 161, which ended the half-century old Emergency Law, and Decree number 61, which granted amnesty to 'all members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other detainees belonging to political movements', al-Assad simultaneously sent Syrian security services onto the streets.⁹ This proved a gross misjudgement by the regime – tokenistic reform and brute force would not easily quell the burgeoning movement. Nine months later in December,

⁶ Peter Beaumont, 'Mohammed Bouazizi: The Dutiful Son whose Death Changed Tunisia's Fate', *The Guardian* (21 January 2011), www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/20/tunisian-fruit-seller-mohammed-bouazizi.

⁷ Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), pp. 35–7.

⁸ Katherine Marsh and Martin Chulov, 'Assad Blames Conspirators for Syrian Protests', *The Guardian* (30 March 2011), www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/30/syrian-protests-assad-blames-conspirators.

⁹ Rania Abouzeid, 'The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian Roots of Iraq's Newest Civil War', *Politico* (23 June 2014), www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214.

demonstrations in the central city of Homs were still mobilising 70,000 protesters at a time.¹⁰

Within days of the first protests, the by-then Brotherhood Shura Council chief Ali al-Bayanouni told *Asharq al-Awsat*:

The people are demanding the fall of the regime, the abolition of the emergency law that has been in place in Syria since March 1963, the granting of general freedoms, and an end to people being arrested for their political views or affiliations, as well as the abolition of laws and special courts, and the confrontation of corruption in a serious and effective manner.¹¹

He added that ‘all Syrian governorates will revolt, and there is an almost unanimous view that this regime is not viable, as the people do not want it’. However, the Brotherhood went to significant lengths to distance itself from the early protest movement, even though some of its members were integrally involved. Senior Brotherhood figure Molham Aldrobi claimed that the Brotherhood was ‘one of the components of the Syrian street; it is not the entire Syrian street’.¹² While such distance may seem unusual for a group desperate to re-enter Syria, past experiences of repression often shape future political decisions, encouraging caution in groups that have previously overstepped.¹³ Former National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (the SOC – Syrian Opposition Coalition) Vice President and Brotherhood ally Hisham Marwah agreed with this assessment, arguing that the group’s caution stemmed from safety concerns:

¹⁰ Julian Borger, ‘Arab Monitors Visit Restive Syrian City: Protest in Homs Over Fears of “Whitewash Inspection” Claims of Tanks Hidden after Army Withdrawal’, *The Guardian* (28 December 2011); Melissa Block, ‘In Syria, Homs Emerges as Center of Protest’, *NPR* (30 August 2011) www.npr.org/2011/08/30/140070135/in-syria-homs-emerges-as-center-of-protest-movement; Roula Hajjar and Borzou Daragahi, ‘At Least 18 Killed in Syrian Crackdown; An Assault is Launched in the City of Homs, Activists Say, to End Demonstrations and Detain Protest Leaders’, *Los Angeles Times* (12 May 2011), <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/11/world/la-fg-syria-protests-20110512>; Ian Black, ‘Homs: The story Behind Mani’s Extraordinary Images from the Frontline’, *The Guardian* (25 November 2011), www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/25/homs-mani-images-frontline; Patrick J. McDonnell, ‘Syria Says Troops Have Overrun Rebel Enclave in Homs’, *Los Angeles Times* (2 March 2012), <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/02/world/la-fg-syria-opposition-20120302>.

¹¹ ‘Syrian MB: Uprising Will not Stop until Demands Are Met’, *Asharq al-Awsat* (23 March 2011), <https://english.aawsat.com/theaawsat/news-middle-east/syrian-mb-uprising-will-not-stop-until-demands-are-met>.

¹² Joshua Landis, ‘Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook Page Administrator, Fidaaldin Al-Sayed Issa, Interviewed by Adam Almkvist’, *Syria Comment* (11 May 2011), www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-revolution-2011-facebook-page-administrator-fidaaldin-al-sayed-issa-interviewed-by-adam-almkvist/.

¹³ Nancy Bermeo, ‘Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship’, *Comparative Politics* 24, no. 3 (1992), pp. 273–4.

Even though they (the Brotherhood) had a lot of members involved in the revolution's activities in the beginning, they tried not to say that it is ours to protect the people from being dealt with as Muslim Brotherhood [members] according to that law (No. 49).¹⁴

It proved a prudent strategy, as the Syrian government would go to considerable lengths to tie the group to the unrest. Less than two weeks into the uprising, Syrian presidential adviser Bouthaina Shaaban told *Agence France Presse*:

These are fundamentalists [behind the violence] who hate to see Syria as an example of peaceful coexistence. We trust our people. They were the ones who defeated the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982. Without the help of the Syrian people, we never could have defeated them ... The Muslim Brothers never forgave, and they want to do it again. But they will fail again.¹⁵

In April, state television began broadcasting the confessions of individuals who claimed to have received funds and weapons from a Muslim Brotherhood official.¹⁶ This eerily echoed the forced television confessions of Brotherhood members during the 1970s and 1980s confrontations.¹⁷ By December, the government's efforts to denigrate and defame the Brotherhood took a turn for the farcical when it built a fake website in the Brotherhood's name that took responsibility for two Damascus suicide bombings.¹⁸

It would be wrong to say, however, that the Brotherhood had no connection to the events surrounding the protests, even though Brotherhood supporters were few and far between on the streets. The Brotherhood played a key role in 'The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad' Facebook page, which had 138,000 followers by April 2011.¹⁹ Although the page does not declare a Brotherhood connection, it was

¹⁴ Interview with Hisham Marwah (31 August 2015) (parenthesis added).

¹⁵ Natacha Yazbeck, 'Syria Accuses Fundamentalists of Stirring Unrest', *Agence France Presse* (28 March 2011).

¹⁶ Mahmud al-Jaza'iri, 'Al Jazeera Interviews Syria's Muslim Brotherhood Official on Recent Protests', *Al Jazeera* (Doha: BBC Monitoring Middle East, 13 April 2011).

¹⁷ See 'FCO 93/2253: Letter from Vincent Fean to Douglas Gordon on Husni Abo'r Televised Confession', *British Embassy Damascus*, 7 September 1979; Vladimir Bilyakov, 'Muslim Brotherhood's "Aggressive Campaign against Syrian Regime"' (London: BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 20 October 1980).

¹⁸ 'Syrian Muslim Brotherhood claims Damascus bombings', *Agence France Presse* (24 December 2011).

¹⁹ Joshua Landis, 'The Man behind "Syria Revolution 2011" Facebook-Page Speaks Out', *Syria Comment* (24 April 2011), www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-man-behind-syria-revolution-2011-facebook-page-speaks-out/. Note that the name of the Facebook page has changed since the beginning of the uprising. Today it can be found online at: Labib Al-Nahas, 'I'm a Syrian and I Fight Isil Every Day. It Will Take More Than Bombs from the West to Defeat this Menace', *The Telegraph* (21 July 2015), www.telegraph.co.uk/

founded by a network of activists that included Fida al-Sayyid Issa, who is a Brotherhood youth member from a prominent Brotherhood family. The Brotherhood's link to the page exemplified the group's long-standing individualist streak, where members often engaged in political activities extraneous to the group. The page called for Syrians to rally for (unsuccessful) February 2011 protests, as well as the 15 March 'Day of Rage'. This Facebook page was declared to be 'the most influential social networking tool in the mobilisation of protestors against the Syrian regime'.²⁰

Fida al-Sayyid Issa explained that his participation in the page was an individual decision, rather than one taken by the Brotherhood leadership:

We worked hard to establish the Syrian Revolution page to be for everyone. Some people focus on the page's affiliations or constituents, but we pursued a policy with everyone. We formed working teams consisting of all Syrian components, visions and ideas. They were independent at the level of media discourse or administration and we succeeded in this, thanks be to God. Regardless of my personal affiliation and the thought that I hold as a Muslim Brotherhood youth member, I was working on a Syrian issue.²¹

This gives credence to Ali al-Bayanouni's claim that the Brotherhood was not officially involved in the page. He explained: 'Some of the members got involved in different activities, but they were not actually [official Brotherhood activities].'²² This trend of individual involvement in the uprising was also seen in the Shaam News Network, an opposition platform established in February 2011 by Abdhassan Abazeed and Bilal Attar, who both grew up in Brotherhood families in Jordan, although they were not Brotherhood members themselves. Attar's brother was involved in the Syrian Revolution Facebook page.²³

Brotherhood members or associates acting in an individual capacity often had a more significant impact on the conflict than the group as a whole. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was never a tightly structured party, even in the days of Mustafa al-Sibai. This pattern had become more pronounced during the group's exile, where the dual forces of repression and financial opportunity meant that the group became a decentralised network dispersed across the world. As one Brotherhood associate noted, 'you have to understand, the Muslim Brotherhood, like

news/worldnews/islamic-state/11752714/Im-a-Syrian-and-I-fight-Isil-every-day.-We-need-more-than-bombs-from-the-West-to-win-this-battle.html.

²⁰ Landis, 'Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook Page Administrator, Fidaalain Al-Sayed Issa, Interviewed by Adam Almkvist'.

²¹ 'Knocking on the Doors of Freedom: The Founders of the Syrian Revolution Facebook Pages Speak to al-Ahd', *Al-Ahd No. 2* (15 March 2013), p. 12.

²² Interview with Ali al-Bayanouni, London.

²³ Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss and Hope in Wartime Syria* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2018).

any Muslim Brotherhood organisation, is a network primarily. Not a political party. It is a network of people.'²⁴ In practice, this means that the Brotherhood umbrella encompasses hundreds of different approaches to the uprising. At times it appeared that there was not one single Brotherhood, but many Brotherhoods in the uprising. Although this is often interpreted as a sinister means of extending power, it is in reality the ordinary behaviour of a group with individualist instincts that was forced to decentralise in order to survive decades of repression.²⁵

The Brotherhood was the most organised opposition group on the eve of the uprising. It was, as Pierret dubbed, 'the grandfather of Islamist politics in Syria', which afforded it name recognition across the country, even though it had lacked a formal presence in Syria for 30 years.²⁶ The Brotherhood participated in all of the major opposition conferences that took place abroad at the beginning of the uprising, many that were organised by individual Brotherhood members. The first president of the Syrian National Council (SNC), Burhan Ghalioun, attributed the group's high level of engagement to its superior resources: members of the Brotherhood were 'in every meeting. No other Syrian party had the same means to attend ... They (the Brotherhood) didn't leave any meeting. They were everywhere.'²⁷ The group gained representation on early opposition bodies, including on the Antalya conference's 31-member Consultative Council, as well as its Executive Council.²⁸ Such ability and eagerness to engage with the broader opposition is not surprising given the group's lifelong willingness to build relationships with parties across the ideological spectrum in order to achieve political outcomes. This early conference participation further evidenced the advantage of the Brotherhood's organisational sophistication, size and international connections. But when it came to the local coordination committees and grassroots organising inside Syria, the Brotherhood was noticeably thin on the ground.

Nonetheless, in the early days of the uprising, the Brotherhood's media office expanded to include up to ten paid staff, many of whom had

²⁴ Anonymous interview.

²⁵ For further discussion of this pattern, see Ellen Lust-Okar, *Structuring Conflict in the Arab World: Incumbents, Opponents and Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Thomas Pierret, 'Syria: Old-Timers and Newcomers', in *The Islamists Are Coming: Who They Really Are*, ed. Robin Wright (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press), p. 71.

²⁷ Interview with Burhan Ghalioun, Paris (3 August 2015) (parenthesis added).

²⁸ The Thawra Foundation, 'The Antalya Conference – A Brief Report', *POMED* (23 June 2011), <http://pomед.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/The-Antalya-Conference.pdf>, pp. 3–4.

qualifications or a background in media and communications.²⁹ At its peak, it would employ 30 people and host a slick, professionally designed website, social media accounts in Arabic and English and publish a newspaper.³⁰ The group also demonstrated a firm understanding of how international politics operates: within a month of the uprising's beginning, Ali al-Bayanouni penned an article in the influential London-based newspaper the *Guardian* aimed at the international community, titled 'No one owns Syria's uprising'.³¹ He declared:

We, along with many others from across the political spectrum, called for the formation of a national coalition to support the youth, but in no way do we claim ownership of these historic events ... It is time that all Syrians – men and women alike, regardless of ethnicity or religion – enjoy equal citizenship.

The group was also able to mobilise dormant members, particularly those that were successful in business. These people played key roles in fundraising and enabled the Brotherhood to amplify its influence on the ground to position it as something of a kingmaker. Yet, as one member of the SOC noted, the group's organisation and 'discipline does not mean their power and their abilities'.³² Indeed, while it appeared to offer the most promising leadership on the eve of the Syrian uprising, it failed to deliver on this advantage in a substantial way.

Reintegrating into the Syrian Political Sphere

The success of Brotherhood's political rehabilitation was always going to depend on its level of acceptance by other opposition figures and the Syrian public. The Brotherhood had a long track record of interaction with other political groups, dating back to its engagement in the Syrian parliament from 1947 to 1963. Ali al-Bayanouni described the period in his 2011 *Guardian* piece: 'The Muslim Brotherhood won some rounds and lost others, and accepted each outcome.'³³

However, it quickly became clear that the group's more recent track record of political opportunism had soured relations with the Syrian opposition. This dates all the way back to the 1980s – Ismail spoke to opposition activists who argued that the Brotherhood's lack of transparency

²⁹ Anonymous interview.

³⁰ Interview with Omar Mushaweh, Skype (19 September 2017).

³¹ Ali Al-Bayanouni, 'No One Owns Syria's Uprising', *The Guardian* (16 April 2011), www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/apr/16/syria-uprising-assad-blames-extremists.

³² Abdullah Raja 'SOC Member Muhammad al-Dandal Tells Zaman al-Wasl: The Muslim Brothers Will not Rule Syria; the Interim Government is Negative', *Zaman al-Wasl* (Doha: BBC Monitoring Middle East, 14 October 2013).

³³ Al-Bayanouni, 'No One Owns Syria's Uprising'.

over its role in Hama in 1982 should disqualify it from playing a role in the post-2011 political machinations.³⁴ In the course of this research, however, it was the breaches of trust in the previous decade that appeared to weigh most heavily on opposition minds throughout the uprising. This was reflected in comments made by a senior opposition member, who recalled:

The Damascus Declaration [in 2005] rejected continued [government] legal action against Brotherhood [members] ... Although many Damascus Declaration members were prosecuted [for their stances], the Brotherhood quickly left the party on its own. They joined Abdul Halim Khaddam's [National Salvation Front] when he defected in 2005 ... Then, in 2008, before the war on Gaza, they put their opposition to the Syrian regime on hold.³⁵

The group's decision to freeze opposition to the regime during the 2008–9 Gaza war proved particularly damaging. The impact of this decision was also echoed in comments made by one opposition figure, who voiced concern that the Brotherhood might again suspend its opposition to al-Assad in return for a politically favourable deal: 'I don't trust them ... At any minute they could change their mind' about the uprising.³⁶ This lack of trust became a theme throughout the uprising, whereby the flexibility and pragmatism that enabled the Brotherhood's longevity against the odds also catastrophically damaged its relations with others. Many opposition figures were genuinely concerned that if the al-Assad regime made an advantageous offer, the Brotherhood would accept it at the expense of all other opposition members. This question of trust was further compounded by the behaviour of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood following the 2011 revolution, although the Syrian Brothers were critical of their colleagues, with Zuhair Salem explaining:

I am criticizing [the Egyptian President Mohammad] Mursi [*sic*] – and maybe they are upset with me for that ... Where we differ is in our policies. For example, Egypt wants to have a fatwa council, which Al-Azhar approves; we don't want that. We say that what is permissible and what is forbidden is clear. We don't want to enter the realm of theocracy. Syrian society is different from Egyptian society. The political experience in Egypt is different from ours, and I believe personally that the Egyptian Brotherhood made a tactical mistake.³⁷

³⁴ Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 136.

³⁵ Cited in Ayman Sharrouf, 'The Destructive Ascendancy of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood', *Now* (3 December 2014), <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/564483-the-destructive-ascendancy-of-syrias-muslim-brotherhood> (parenthesis added).

³⁶ Anonymous interview.

³⁷ Cited in Tam Hussein, 'The Brotherhood's Man in London', *Majalla* (23 April 2013), <https://web.archive.org/web/20171129085905/http://eng.majalla.com/2013/04/article55240699>.

Nonetheless, the Syrian Brothers would struggle to shake the suspicion that they too were power hungry. As a result, while the group was organisationally in a position of strength at the beginning of the uprising, its behaviour in the 2000s had left it with a much less favourable political reputation. The group had a significant credibility problem.

The first substantive test of the Brotherhood's ability to work alongside opposition groups came through the Syrian National Council, which was established in October 2011. At its peak, the SNC enjoyed the support of much of the international community, with a handful of countries and the European Union declaring it the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.³⁸ The Brotherhood took its involvement in the body seriously, backing the liberal candidate Burhan Ghalioun as the body's first president. Ali al-Bayanouni explained: 'we chose this face, accepted by the West and by the inside. We don't want the regime to take advantage if an Islamist becomes the Syrian National Council's head.'³⁹ Ghalioun claimed to have not been the Brotherhood's first preference,⁴⁰ but its decision to work with him regardless was consistent with the group's pragmatism. The Brotherhood's engagement with the SNC proved successful, with its members gaining almost one quarter of the Council's 310 seats as well as executive positions. Farouq Tayfour became the SNC Vice President and the head of the SNC's Relief and Development Bureau.

The SNC was soon accused of being dominated by the Brotherhood, and was replaced by the National Council for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Force (SOC) following a withdrawal of support from the USA, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in late 2012.⁴¹ The Brotherhood was purportedly unenthusiastic about the establishment of the SOC because the wider membership and different structure would curb its influence.⁴² Nonetheless, the group's pragmatism and survival instinct saw it embrace the new arrangements and set about achieving its goals through the new body. As Hassan acknowledged: 'The Brotherhood knew it could not insist on the survival of the SNC, so they started to build a

³⁸ 'EU Recognises Syria Opposition Bloc', *Al Jazeera* (20 November 2012), www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2012/11/20121119195737909518.html.

³⁹ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, 'Syria's Muslim Brotherhood Rise from the Ashes', *Reuters* (6 May 2012), www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-brotherhood-idUSBRE84504R20120506.

⁴⁰ Interview with Burhan Ghalioun, Paris (3 August 2015).

⁴¹ Scott Stearns, 'Clinton: SNC No Longer Leads Syrian Opposition', *VOA* (31 October 2012), www.voanews.com/a/brahimi-seeks-chinese-support-for-syria-solution/1536429.html.

⁴² Rania El-Gamal and Andrew Hammond, 'Mistrust of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood Lingers', *Reuters* (12 November 2012), www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-brotherhood-idUSBRE8AB1CQ20121112.

place for themselves in the coalition – and succeeded.’⁴³ The group’s pragmatism, programmed into its DNA during the Mustafa al-Sibai era again proved an asset. The Brotherhood enjoyed significant influence on the SOC, over the years holding several executive posts. As of early 2019, the Brotherhood-linked Nazir Hakim was Secretary General (and previously Vice President), while the political office included the Brotherhood-linked Haitham Rahma and Ahmad Ramadan. The Brotherhood’s Farouq Tayfour and Salem Mislal had previously been vice presidents, while former Brotherhood Political Office chief Hassan al-Hachimi remained a member of the SOC political office.⁴⁴ Formally, the Brotherhood had only five members on the Coalition.

The group’s political success on paper did not, however, reflect a successful reconciliation with other opposition parties, and the Brotherhood stood repeatedly accused of attempting to maximise power, often in an underhanded way. The first significant accusations levelled at the Brotherhood surrounded the issue of power monopolisation in the early days of the SNC. Although the Brotherhood bloc had more than 70 official members in 2012,⁴⁵ at least nine other senior Brotherhood members or former members sat on the SNC as ‘independents’ or members of other blocs. As of February 2012, this included former leadership and Shura Council member Abdulatif al-Hachimi (listed as an independent), his brother and the group’s former political chief Hassan al-Hachimi (National Bloc), the group’s 2011 uprising-era media chief Omar Mushaweh (independent), the group’s spokesman and former ideologue Zuhair Salem (National Figures), Walid Saffour (independent) and Mohammed Sarmini (National Bloc) who was a member at the time.⁴⁶ Others included former Brotherhood members Ahmad Ramadan, Haitham Rahmeh and Obeida Nahas (all National Bloc).⁴⁷ This practice extended the group’s formal membership in the SNC by at least 10 percent, with Becker adding that ‘repeated restructurings and an ever-changing composition meant that even insiders find it impossible to assess the Brotherhood’s real weight within the SNC’.⁴⁸ This behaviour was probably shaped by the group’s deep-seated fear of irrelevance

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ ‘Political Committee’, *National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces* (2017), <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-components/general-body/political-committee.html>.

⁴⁵ For a full list of the SNC’s membership as of February 2012, see an archived version of the SNC website: ‘Members’, *Syrian National Council* (11 February 2012), <http://web.archive.org/web/20120207234952/www.syriancouncil.org/en/members.html>.

⁴⁶ Ibid. ⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Petra Becker, ‘Syrian Muslim Brotherhood: Still a Crucial Actor’, *SWP Comments 34* (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2013), p. 2.

following its long exile and many failed political efforts, although it did little for its credibility. Ghalioun acknowledged the frustrations among the group's ranks, noting that historically

they were a very big political party and had a lot of influence. Now, they feel frustrated and want to be visible. They want to be visible more than they are in reality ... [and] they want to redress this frustration by being recognised as a big party.⁴⁹

Samir Nashar was harsher, declaring: 'The Brotherhood insisted on taking political leadership of the Syrian opposition and [clung] to the fantasy that it was the biggest and most influential faction.'⁵⁰

Despite the criticism, one Brotherhood member explained that the Brotherhood had been central to the success of the opposition political institutions:

When the Syrian National Council was established, it ... was only successful when the Muslim Brotherhood helped them to be successful ... [but] one or two people are jealous of an institution (the Brotherhood) [that] is 70 or 80 years old.⁵¹

Such self-assured language has done little to endear the Brotherhood to its opposition compatriots. One liberal Syrian activist went so far as to describe 'arrogance' as a hallmark of the Brotherhood's behaviour towards other opposition members.⁵² This has at times manifested in a 'born to rule' mentality, with senior member Samir abu Laban suggesting that the Brotherhood's dominance of Syrian opposition bodies stemmed from the reality that other opposition members were

not politically trained, so whenever there is a problem ... at the Syrian National Council at the beginning everyone would jump and say something quickly, until they realised that the views expressed by the Muslim Brotherhood carried more political weight and sounded also wiser than the others.⁵³

Indeed, it seemed the events of 2011 were not the watershed moment the Brotherhood needed to unshackle itself from the ineffective political practices and attitudes that had characterised its previous political engagement from exile.

The Brotherhood's behaviour caused furore within the broader opposition in 2012, prompting some members to resign their posts. One such member, Walid al-Bunni, complained that 'the Brotherhood took the

⁴⁹ Interview with Burhan Ghalioun, Paris (3 August 2015).

⁵⁰ Sharrouf, 'The Destructive Ascendancy'.

⁵¹ Anonymous interview (parenthesis added). ⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Interview with Samir Abu Laban, Istanbul.

whole council ... we became like extras'.⁵⁴ Another Syrian dissident, Amr al-Azm, said: 'they are trying to make sure they have a finger in every pie and a hand on every lever of power that they can'.⁵⁵ The group's behaviour was also purportedly a source of discomfort within Brotherhood circles. An open letter published on the Facebook account of opposition figure Riad Durrar, claiming to be written by the 'sons of the Muslim Brotherhood', noted:

The group was involved in emerging Syrian national institutions after the revolution, and displayed much political realism, which is a necessary aspect of political work. But the group overreached in this plan until it became an example of a group inconsistent in its positions and uncommitted to principles. Such self-interest is abhorrent and is not befitting of the representatives of the largest political group in Syria ... Do not let history show that your representatives were working to divide up positions and small spoils while the Syrian people are being slaughtered by the thousands and rivers are flowing with the blood of their sons.⁵⁶

The Brotherhood denied the message's authenticity, with Molham Aldrobi dryly responding: 'When they voice concerns, Muslim Brothers are usually brave enough to mention their names.'⁵⁷ He later complained that the Brotherhood's critics 'do not differentiate between good Muslims and Muslim Brotherhood. There are many good Muslims on those bodies, practicing Muslims, but they are not Muslim Brotherhood' members.⁵⁸

Many hoped that the formation of the SOC would dilute the Brotherhood's influence, but in reality the new coalition's structure replicated the group's existing patterns of political engagement. The SNC is the largest bloc on the SOC, with 22 representatives. SOC members have no influence over how these 22 members are appointed, so the Brotherhood's power in the SNC was de facto carried across to the SOC (even though officially the Brotherhood only has five seats).⁵⁹ Other

⁵⁴ Anne Barnard, 'Syria Opposition Group Is Routed and Divided', *The New York Times* (14 March 2012), www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/syria-torture-report-military-maintains-assaults.html.

⁵⁵ Liz Sly, 'Syria's Muslim Brotherhood Is Gaining Influence over Anti-Assad Revolt,' *Washington Post* (22 May 2012), www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrias-muslim-brotherhood-is-gaining-influence-over-anti-assad-revolt/2012/05/12/gIQAtoJLU_story.html.

⁵⁶ Riad Durrar, 'Letter from a Group of the Sons of the Muslim Brotherhood', Facebook (12 January 2014), www.facebook.com/riaddrar/posts/337902093014536.

⁵⁷ Cited in Raphaël Lefèvre, 'A Revolution in Syria's Muslim Brotherhood?', *Carnegie Middle East Center* (23 January 2014), <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54287?lang=en>.

⁵⁸ Interview with Molham Aldrobi.

⁵⁹ Yusra Ahmed, 'Syria's Muslim Brotherhood Leader Highlights Reforms, Future Plans – Interview', *Zaman Al Wasl* (20 March 2015), <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/9402.html>.

Brotherhood members or former members are represented in non-aligned groups on the SOC. As one senior SOC figure described, ‘some people are members, some are probably members, and then they have allies ... They do this because they don’t want it to be said that they are dominating.’⁶⁰ A Brotherhood associate estimated that this could mean that the Brotherhood has influence over 40 percent of SOC members, although this was denied by senior Brotherhood figures.⁶¹

The Brotherhood’s reputation was further compromised by its links to so-called front groups that are perceived to further extend its influence. According to Hassan, these include the National Union of Free Syrian Students, the Levant Ulema League, the Independent Islamic Democratic Current, the Syrian Ulema League, the Civil Society Organizations’ Union, the Revolution Council for Aleppo and its Countryside, the Commission for the Protection of Civilians, the National Work Front, the Kurdish Work Front, the Hama Revolution Gathering, the National Coalition for Civilian Protection, and the Syrian Society for Humanitarian Relief.⁶² Others include the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC). Such groups have obtained political representation or represented themselves as independent NGOs, without declaring their ties to the Brotherhood. For example, Walid Saffour, a Brotherhood member who represents the SHRC on the SNC was appointed the SOC’s ambassador to London, giving the Brotherhood an important formal diplomatic link to the UK through an undeclared member.⁶³ A Brotherhood associate was highly critical of the decision, arguing that Saffour was unqualified for such an important diplomatic role and that the Brotherhood’s push to have one of their own represented amounted to ‘gross incompetence’ on the group’s part.⁶⁴

It is important, however, to not overstate the impact of these patterns of engagement. While it is difficult to observe longitudinal SOC voting patterns because voting is secret,⁶⁵ opposition figures with knowledge of voting dynamics say that the Brotherhood bloc does not always vote in unison.⁶⁶ In fact, senior Brotherhood members have been known to vote in contravention of Brotherhood policy on the SOC. This was seen when senior figures broke with party position by voting in favour of the Geneva 2 conference, as well as when Farouq Tayfour argued in favour of Ahmed Jarba’s presidency of the SOC in 2013, even though Mustafa Sabbagh

⁶⁰ Anonymous interview. ⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Hassan Hassan, ‘How the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Hijacked Syria’s Revolution’, *Foreign Policy* (13 March 2013), www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/13/how_the_muslim_brotherhood_hijacked_syria_s_revolution.

⁶³ Anonymous interview. ⁶⁴ Ibid. ⁶⁵ Interview with Hisham Marwah.

⁶⁶ Anonymous interview.

was the Brotherhood's preferred candidate.⁶⁷ In fact, even SOC members widely seen as Brotherhood stooges, such as Ahmad Ramadan or Obeida Nahas regularly vote against the Brotherhood bloc, and have been known to publicly and substantially criticise the group.⁶⁸

The final area in which the Brotherhood's political behaviour has been controversial is in the way it has managed resources. Farouq Tayfour's role as head of the SNC's Relief and Development Bureau gave the Brotherhood control of much of the SNC's financial resources. The Relief Bureau is responsible for distributing aid and resources inside Syria, to both civilians and armed groups, but the group's critics accuse it of using the resources selectively to rebuild Brotherhood influence and networks in the country. It is also accused of favouring Brotherhood supporters in the distribution of aid. Prominent Damascus Spring activist and SNC member Kamal al-Labwani accused Muslim Brotherhood members of 'trying to monopolize aid and weapons to gain popular influence on the ground'.⁶⁹ Molham Aldrobi later clarified:

When we give support, say humanitarian aid, we do not differentiate between who is Muslim Brotherhood and who is not, because ... Those who are Muslim Brotherhood inside Syria are very minimal. The majority of the Syrian people are not Muslim Brotherhood ... for the humanitarian aid, for the educational aid, for the health and medical support, we do not differentiate between people.⁷⁰

These criticisms also extend to the Brotherhood's apparent tendency to parachute its own members into key positions, with the group purportedly achieving control of the Council of Syrian Tribes through the appointment of Brotherhood member Shaykh Salem Abdul-Aziz al-Mislat as president.⁷¹ Al-Mislat later took on a vice presidency position on the SOC through a seat allocated to the Council of Syrian Tribes. The trend has at times bordered on the absurd: a 60-year old Brotherhood member was appointed as the SNC's 'youth envoy' to Idlib, which has one of the most important opposition areas. The chief of the Revolutionary Council in Idlib, Mazem Arja, complained: 'The guy had not been

⁶⁷ Raphaël Lefèvre, 'Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Brotherhood', *Middle East Institute* (27 September 2013), www.mei.edu/content/saudi-arabia-and-syrian-brotherhood.

⁶⁸ 'The Syrian Opposition Coalition Accuses Sides of Thwarting the Interim Government, and 13 Military Factions Withdraw from it', *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (Beirut: BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2013).

⁶⁹ 'Syrian Opposition Coalition Formed Without the SNC', *Al-Akhbar* (17 March 2012), <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/5319>.

⁷⁰ Interview with Molham Aldrobi.

⁷¹ Haian Dukhan, 'Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising', *Syria Studies* 6, no. 2 (2014), p. 14.

there for 32 years ... If you dropped him at the edge of town, I doubt he could find his old house.⁷²

To some extent, this behaviour relates to the Brotherhood's decades of survival under authoritarianism, which deeply penetrated the group's psyche and created path-dependent behaviour that has proven difficult to shake.⁷³ Groups socialised into such an environment rarely fully surrender themselves to the democratic process because of their distrust of the system and fear that the post-authoritarian political arrangements will fail.⁷⁴ In the same regard, the front groups are a legacy of the harsh repression the Brotherhood faced over decades. Although Ghalioun accused the group of having 'the mentality of a closed club. They don't trust others and others don't trust them', he acknowledged:

When they were persecuted in 1982, they received no support from the other opposition groups. They were totally excluded, which forced them to [turn inward and] live inside with themselves. For three, four decades ... To protect themselves. And they created their own organisations for help, relief, etc.⁷⁵

Groups such as the SHRC were initially founded to track and advocate for those incarcerated in Syria in the 1980s. While this pragmatism was key to its survival for years in exile and proved a major strength in the initial uprising by positioning the Brotherhood to seize many opportunities that came its way, as the uprising progressed, the pragmatism evolved into opportunism and desperation, leading to perceptions that the group stood for nothing but its own political gain. Although such behaviour may have a historical justification and reflect the mark of decades under authoritarianism, in the context of the uprising it was a further source of intra-opposition suspicion.

Failing to Convince even the Exiled Elite

It was clear that history had cast a long shadow over the Brotherhood's ability to reintegrate among Syria's elite exiled political class, dealing it a dual blow that both deprived it of the political nous required to stage a successful comeback and which created a level of distrust among its opposition compatriots that would prove possibly insurmountable. The

⁷² Neil MacFarquhar, 'Syrian Opposition Meets to Seek Unity', *The New York Times* (8 November 2012), www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/world/middleeast/syria-war-developments.html.

⁷³ Vincent Boudreau, *Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and protest in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷⁴ For a discussion of this more broadly, see Nathan J. Brown, *When Victory Is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 2.

⁷⁵ Interview with Burhan Ghalioun, Paris (3 August 2015).

Brotherhood began the uprising from a position of relative strength, underwritten by its lifelong characteristics of pragmatism, flexibility and individualism. But the group continued to favour opportunistic and short-term decisions, with a serious cost to its credibility. Seven years into the uprising, the group had failed to rebuild the trust of the exiled opposition. In fact, in many ways, the problem had been compounded. As one liberal activist noted:

They (Brotherhood members) are diplomatic (unlike the Salafists). They treat you well to your face, but I have always had the feeling they were not honest with what they say ... They have an agenda that has to be realised, regardless of the price.⁷⁶

As a former Brotherhood member remarked, the group ‘might have repaired this if they dealt with [the opposition and the uprising] it in a good way, but they didn’t’.⁷⁷ History had left a mixed legacy for the group, endowing it with the resources to play the political game, but without the political aptitude required to make sustainable gains.

The Brotherhood for its part saw no issue with the way it had engaged politically. When asked about the accusations of monopolisation, the group’s uprising-era Strategic Planning chief Molham Aldrobi stressed:

This is totally not true. We were always part of the Syrian national bodies. We were always helpful to others. We always tried to be as positive and as productive within these national bodies. Now of course we do have probably more organisational skills than others ... And due to the fact that we are an organisation, individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood have behind them a group supporting them. So compared to individuals who do not have these groups supporting them, our productivity on those national bodies becomes more effective and more efficient. But this is by no means controlling the political power.⁷⁸

Indeed, the Brotherhood’s senior leaders believed that the group was being unfairly maligned. Its influence stemmed from the weakness of other opposition groups rather than a cynical plan on the Brotherhood’s part.

To an extent, it is true that weakness of the broader political opposition enabled the Brotherhood to take on an exaggerated role. Nobody has been able to seriously challenge the group, as Karl Sharro observed:

The Muslim Brotherhood cannot be blamed for being more effective at political lobbying within a system that the entire opposition subscribed to. There’s been

⁷⁶ Anonymous interview (parenthesis added).

⁷⁷ Interview with Ali al-Ahmad, London (parenthesis added).

⁷⁸ Interview with Molham Aldrobi.

no self-critique whatsoever by the opposition for its complicity in creating this environment in the first place.⁷⁹

Others agree that the group's engagement itself was not undemocratic, and that it demonstrated a high regard for the processes built into the political bodies and never tried to undermine a decision that it lost. When asked how the Brotherhood interacted on the Council, Ghalioun acknowledged that '[t]hey respected the president and the posts and the hierarchy because they have a tradition of organisation' within their own group.⁸⁰ He added: 'They are not violent like others [but] ... They are not cooperative with others ... [This being said] they are not anti-democratic.'⁸¹ The Brotherhood may have regularly exploited loopholes, but they also respected the system's boundaries.

But in the end, this all proved immaterial to the Brotherhood's real challenge, which required it to build a popular and legitimate base for itself inside Syria, rather than obtain early numerical strength among the comparatively weak opposition outside the country. While it was trying and failing to win the elite politics game in Istanbul, Doha and Riyadh, those inside Syria languished in war. The exiled opposition existed in something of a 'bubble', with many of its parts far divorced from events on the ground. As Abouzeid described, exiled voices 'did not travel far across the border. Syrians were deaf to those claiming to represent them from the safety of elsewhere. Inside, other voices prevailed.'⁸² Those inside Syria derided the SNC and SOC as the opposition of 'the hotels' or the 'hotel revolutionaries' who lived in luxury while those inside Syria paid the price for the population's defiance in 2011.⁸³ Yassin al-Haj Saleh expanded:

The problem lies specifically in the unnecessary, unjustifiable, and persistent infighting, which is most likely driven by attempts at self-promotion; and the deeply mediocre standing of most opposition spokespersons, manifest in their lack

⁷⁹ Karl Sharro, 'Did the Muslim Brotherhood Hijack Syria's Revolution?', *Karl reMarks* (14 March 2013), www.karlremarks.com/2013/03/did-muslim-brotherhood-hijack-syrias.html.

⁸⁰ Interview with Burhan Ghalioun, Paris (3 August 2015). ⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss and Hope in Wartime Syria* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2018).

⁸³ 'The Syrian National Coalition: The Rebel Hotels Club', Orient-Net (7 July 2013), http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/4300/0/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%82; Rania Abouzeid, 'Syrian Opposition Groups Stop Pretending', *New Yorker* (26 September 2013), www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/syrian-opposition-groups-stop-pretending.

of discipline and a clear, shared vision. Consequently, trust in the broader opposition has collapsed, resulting in a nearly indiscriminate public repudiation. The opposition has been found ineffective and worthless at best, disrespectful and despicable at worst.⁸⁴

Indeed, while the Brotherhood had expended much of its energy and political resources on unsuccessfully building influence and legitimacy within the exiled opposition, the SNC and SOC enjoyed little respect and credibility among those inside Syria. As its reputation soured with every passing year, it became clear that for all the Brotherhood's struggles among the exiled opposition, that challenge would pale in comparison to its struggle to win the support of those on the ground.

⁸⁴ Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (London: Hurst, 2017), pp. 122–3.