

America's "Dirty War on Syria": Bashar al Assad and Political Reform

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It should go without saying that the internal political processes of a sovereign country belongs to the people of that country, and no-one else. Nevertheless, as Washington insists on a prerogative to determine who can or cannot lead another country, some background on Bashar al Assad and the political reform process in Syria might be useful.

We find little reasonable discussion of either, in western circles, after the Islamist insurrection of 2011. Instead, the wartime discussion descended into caricatures, conditioned by 'regime-change' fervour and bloody war, of a bloodthirsty 'brutal dictator' mindlessly repressing and slaughtering his own people. None of this helps sensible or principled understandings. Fortunately, there are a range of Syrian and independent sources that allow us to put together a more realistic picture. If we believed most western media reports we would think President Assad had launched repeated and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including the gassing of children.

We might also think he heads an 'Alawi regime', where a 12% minority represses a Sunni Muslim majority, crushing a popular 'revolution' which, only in later years, was 'hijacked' by extremists. A key problem with that story is the President's great popularity at home. The fact that there has been popular dissatisfaction with corruption and cronyism, fear of the secret police, and that an authoritarian state maintains a type of personality cult, does not negate the man's genuine popularity. Even most of his enemies admit that. We have to look a bit deeper.



A mild mannered eye doctor, with part of his training in Britain, Bashar al Assad was effectively conscripted to the Presidency by the Ba'ath Party after the death of his father Hafez, in 2000. He was expected on the one hand to maintain his father's pluralist and nationalist legacy, yet on the other hand develop important elements of political and economic reform. President Hafez al Assad had brought three decades of internal stability to Syria, after the turmoil of the 1960s. This allowed important social advances.

Social divisions were smoothed through strong pressures to identify as Syrian, without regard for religion or community. There were substantial improvements in education and health, including universal vaccination and improved literacy for women. Between 1970 and 2010 infant mortality fell from 132 to 14 (per 1,000), while maternal mortality fell from 482 to 45 (per 100,000). These were particularly good outcomes for a country with very modest levels of GDP per capita (Sen, Al-Faisal and Al-Saleh 2012: 196). Electricity supply to rural areas rose from 2% in 1963 to 95% in 1992 (Hinnebusch 2012: 2). Traditions of social pluralism combined with advances in education drove the human development of the country well ahead of many of the more wealthy states in the region.

Nevertheless, while the system built by Hafez al Assad was socially inclusive it also remained an authoritarian one-party system, conditioned by war with Israel and periodic violent insurrection by the Muslim Brotherhood. US intelligence observed that the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood's insurrections in the early 1980s was welcomed by most Syrians (DIA 1982, vii). Yet, after that, criticism of the government was viewed with great suspicion. Sectarian groups were banned, as was the acceptance of foreign funds for political purposes. In that climate some opposition figures said that Syrians felt helpless, and 'did not know how to ... take initiative or discuss and develop their ideas' (Wikas 2007: 6). The feared secret police (mukhabarat) were ever vigilant for Zionist spies and new Muslim Brotherhood conspiracies, but this meant they also harassed a wider range of government critics (Seale 1988: 335). From the secular opposition side, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party was unhappy with the failed compromise left by Hafez al Assad, by which the constitution required that the President be a Muslim (al Akhbar, 22 Feb 2012). On top of this, there was resentment at the corruption built on cronyism through Ba'ath Party networks. Bashar faced all this when he came to the top job.

This chapter reviews the political reform movement, from the time Bashar al Assad became President until the Islamist insurrection of 2011. It then examines the best evidence on the extent of domestic support for the President.

5.1 The reform movement

At the start of the millennium, Bashar al Assad was the official candidate for reform, but there was also a fairly large if fragmented anti-Ba'ath Party political opposition. Many saw the chance of reform through the youthful new President while others, particularly the banned Muslim Brotherhood, wanted to dismantle the secular state, establishing some sort of theocracy. Yet the simple fact of a change of leadership to a youthful and western educated man gave rise to the idea of a 'Damascus Spring', in the year 2000. Bashar was widely seen as an agent of reform, but his rise was meteoric and quite dependent on the networks of the ruling Ba'ath Party which had recruited him. There were no dramatic political reforms, despite the widespread complaints of corruption (Otrakji 2012). However his socio-economic reforms involved giving new impetus to mass education and citizenship, with a controlled economic liberalisation which opened up new markets, yet without the privatisations that had swept Eastern Europe.

He released several thousand political prisoners, mainly Islamists and their sympathisers (Landis and Pace 2007: 47). He probably had little room for political reform in the early years as he did not have an organised constituency outside the Ba'ath Party. Perhaps in part to compensate for this he built links with businessmen and initiated several government sponsored NGOs amongst youth, students, other 'civil society' sectors and rural workers. These groups included the Syrian Trust for Development and the Fund for Integrated Rural

Development of Syria (FIRDOS). First Lady Asma al Assad played a prominent role in some of these groups, particularly those to do with youth and children. They attracted some international partners, including the UNDP and UNICEF (Kawakibi 2013). One US analyst says the Damascus Spring of 2000 saw a 'flowering of expression, assembly and political action unknown since the 1950s' (Wikas 2007: 4). Despite the market reforms, Syria maintained its virtually free health and education system. State universities also remain virtually free, to this day, with several hundred thousand enrolled students. That sort of mass education is critical, the foundation of social empowerment.

In this period a number of critical political discussion groups were established, including the Kawakibi forum, the Atassi Forum and the National Dialogue Forum. They began to issue statements of demand on the government, one of which had 1,000 signatories (Landis and Pace 2007: 47). However 'state of emergency' laws still applied and military intelligence saw conspirators in some of these groups, leading to arrests in what some called a 'Damascus Winter'. Some of the prisoners were reported as tortured and killed (Ghadry 2005; Ulutas 2011: 89-90). Despite this, some relatively well informed US analysts say the 'Damascus Spring' left some 'lasting if modest accomplishments'. There was no unified opposition, but for the first time in many years 'individuals could vocalise critical views of the regime in public settings'. Some of the discussion groups survived for some years, including the Committee for the revival of Civil Society and the Attasi Forum for Democratic Dialogue (Landis and Pace 2007: 48-49).

However, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Syria was caught between two powerful occupying armies, Israel and the USA, both hostile to the Syrian state. More than a million Iraqi refugees passed into Syria, to escape the carnage. Syria's generosity with Iraqi refugees was met with US accusations that it was backing the Iraqi resistance, and sanctions were imposed. Yet it was Syria's abrupt withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, after 30 years of occupation, and Lebanon's subsequent 'Cedar Revolution', which helped sparked another period of opposition activity. Even though this Lebanese 'revolution' has been assessed with great scepticism (Narwani 2015), it did help initiate a show of extraordinary unity amongst Syrian opposition groups. The charter declaration from that time remains as quite a good indication of the principles on which all those diverse groups they were able to agree.

The October 2005 gathering which created the 'Damascus Declaration', pressing for democratic reform, is said to have been 'the largest opposition gathering in the history of Ba'ath Party rule', since 1963. It included Islamists, liberals, Marxists as well as Arab and Kurdish nationalists (Rasas 2013). It cited principles of pluralism, non-violence, opposition unity and democratic change (Ulutas 2011: 90).

The statement began with the assertion that Ba'athist rule had disempowered people, claiming that 'the authorities' monopoly of everything for more than 30 years has established an authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish regime that has led to a lack of [interest in] politics in society, with people losing interest in public affairs'. The Declaration called for 'establishment of a democratic national regime ... peaceful, gradual, founded on accord and based on dialogue and recognition of the other.'

It shunned violence and exclusion, gave qualified support for Islam as 'the most prominent cultural component in the life of the nation' and rejected the idea of a one-party state. Emergency law, martial law and special courts had to be abolished, with a 'strengthen[ing] of the national army' while keeping it 'outside the framework of political conflict and the

democratic game'. Popular organisations, trade unions and other bodies had to be liberated 'from the custodianship of the state and from [Ba'athist] party and security hegemony'. It was a mostly secular statement. The new system should 'emphasize Syria's affiliation to the Arab Order' with a view to Arab unity. There was a 'rejection of change that is brought in from abroad' and a call for a 'just democratic solution' for the 'Kurdish issue in Syria'. The document ended calling for a 'national conference' which would lead to the election of a Constituent Assembly' and a new constitution on the basis of a political majority (Damascus Declaration 2005).

That level of opposition unity broke down fairly quickly, on perhaps predictable lines. As Landis and Pace (2007: 46) put it 'Leaders of the Marxist left and Islamic right struggled to find common ground', as liberals, exiles, Kurds and Assyrians also participated (Uutas 2011: 90). First the Muslim Brotherhood (along with defected Ba'athist Abdel-Halim Khaddam) created its own Islamist 'Salvation Front', in 2006. Then at the Damascus Declaration's National Council meeting in December 2007 the Socialist Union and Communist Action parties rejected the liberal-Kurd parties' ambition for an 'external factor' to help bring about change. The socialist and communist parties, along with the Kurdish Left Party (and later a second Kurdish party led by Nasreddin Ibrahim), began to look for a 'third way' between the Damascus Declaration and the Ba'athist Government. The Muslim Brotherhood left altogether in early 2009 while in late 2009 the Kurdish groups (minus the PYD) formed the Kurdish Political Council (Rasas 2013). The Government also moved against some of the signatories. The Atassi Forum was closed (Ulutas 2011: 91). In March 2005 the licenses of two US funded channels (Al Hurra and Radio Sawa) were removed (Landis and Pace 2007: 57). This fragmentation destroyed any real possibility of a unified opposition.

The basis for Islamist cooperation with pluralist, secular-nationalist and left parties was always very thin, mainly based on complaints about Baathist corruption and Government repression. But for a while they shared some rhetoric. As Kawakibi (2007: 3) points out, the Brotherhood 'often cites human rights as being the casualty of a repressive system', while being very selective of 'those aspects which help their cause'. Their own record on human rights is appalling. They had sat in the Syrian parliament in the 1950s but, since then a fair amount of Syrian authoritarianism has had to do with suppressing their sectarian insurrections, including assassinations and massacres.

After the Damascus declaration a US report saw the 'secular opposition' as 'all but powerless', while suppression of the sectarian Islamists had 'shaped the current government's tactics and politics'(Wikas 2007: 12, 22). Nevertheless, Arab nationalism and regional solidarity remained strong and the young President remained popular, in the region as well as in Syria. In 2009 a six country poll which cited Israel and the USA as the greatest threats to the region (at 88% and 77% respectively) also put Bashar al Assad as the most popular Arab leader in the Middle East (MESI 2009). That regional view was to change, after the 2011 outbreak of violence, as distinct from opinion within Syria.

With the rallies of February-March 2011 there was a further burst of political activity, mainly in the regional towns, not so much in Damascus and Aleppo (Ulutas 2011: 99-100). This time, however, things were different. Most of the domestic opposition groups, just as they had said in the 2005 declaration, did not support either armed attacks on the state or the involvement of foreign powers. Most remained in Syria and some, such as the Syrian Social National Party, rallied to the government. Others, while not supporting the government, backed the state and the army. Syria had seen sectarian Islamist violence before.

What became known in western circles as 'the opposition' were mostly exiles and the Islamists who had initiated the violence. The exile meetings began in Paris, Turkey and Brussels. A range of groups and individuals attended these initial meetings, but they were poorly coordinated, quickly came under foreign tutelage and the Muslim Brotherhood quickly 'took a leading role' (Ulutas 2011: 91-94). Western reports of the Islamist leadership were often generous, as the Muslim Brotherhood was better organised and therefore the most likely partner in any big power 'regime change' operation.

Hassan Mneimneh, for the Washington-based 'Brussels Forum', noted the real fears in the region of an 'Islamist winter', as the Arab Spring had handed the Islamists 'an unexpected, maybe undeserved, victory'. Nevertheless, he goes on to exaggerate the support held by Muslim Brotherhood and other Salafist groups, claiming the Salafists appealed to 'a sizeable fraction of the electorate', while the Muslim Brotherhood could enjoy 'a plurality or may even be a slim majority' (Mneimneh 2012: 1-4). This is neither consistent with Syria's strong pluralist history nor supported by regional polls. For example a 1984 poll amongst Palestinians showed that, even though almost half the population was very religious (praying five times a day), far more religious in that sense than Syria, the secular nationalist politics of the PLO had 90% support. This reflects badly on the Brotherhood strategy of attacking secular nationalist Palestinians before the occupying power. Israel, on the other hand, saw that 'any success by the Brotherhood would be at the expense of the nationalists', so 'the Brotherhood is treated less harshly [by the Israelis] than the nationalists' (Shadid 1988: 663, 674-675, 679). Support for Islam should not be confused with support for sectarian Islamists. A senior official in Damascus told me, in late 2013, that the Muslim Brotherhood had always been the largest and best organised opposition group in his country but that, at its best and when there was no violence, they might command a maximum of 15% support. That support would fall when the Brotherhood engaged in sectarian violence.

In the climate of events in Egypt and Tunisia, but two months before the violence broke out in Syria, President Assad said he would push for more reforms. 'If you don't see the need of reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it's too late to do any reform', he said. Specific to his agenda were municipal elections, greater power for NGOs and a new media law. His government had already increased heating oil subsidies (Solomon and Spindle 2011). A general elections bill followed soon after, although exiled critics reacted with scorn (Hatem 2011). Others observed that Syria was quite different from Egypt, in that the government had promoted social and educational improvements, had no external debt, guaranteed minority rights and maintained a foreign policy independent of the US-Israeli agenda. 'When Bashar al- Assad says that he supports political reform, many Syrians believe him ... Syrians in recent years have enjoyed greater religious freedoms, which includes the Sunni majority' (Hetou 2011). Syria was not Egypt.

A variety of civil 'committees' were formed in the social foment of 2011, many with a shifting character and with greater or lesser affiliation to the political parties. These included the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), the Federation of Coordination Committees of the Syrian revolution (FCC) and the National Action Committee. While a number began as neighbourhood groups, many of them became 'more involved in media coordination than leadership of the protest movement' (Asi Abu Najm 2011). The LCCs in mid 2011, while calling for 'overthrowing the regime', rejected the call 'to take up arms or call for military intervention', saying that 'militarising the revolution would minimise popular support and participation' (LCC 2011). By 2013, however, what remained of the LCCs seemed well

embedded with Islamist armed groups, mainly reporting on their casualties (LCC 2013). With the Islamist insurrection, lines between opposition groups began to harden, but attempts to find common ground persisted. A Paris-Damascus paper presented to opposition groups, minus the Muslim Brotherhood, was said to have 'wavered between reform and change but did not call for overthrowing the government'. This was the basis for the creation of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change in Syria (NCC), a 'third way' group created in June 2011. It included the Socialist Union Party, the Marxist Left gathering, four of the Kurdish parties including the PYD and some independents. It was said to represent 'the Arabist, Kurdish and Marxist left' (Rasas 2013).

The following month, in July 2011, there was an attempt to create a Syrian National Council (SNC), linking the NCC with what remained of the Damascus Declaration and the Muslim Brotherhood. However that plan failed because the Brotherhood and the Declaration group objected to the NCC's demand for 'rejection of external military intervention' and for a 'just solution to the Kurdish question'. The result was that the Brotherhood and the rump of the declaration group comprised most of the foreign-backed SNC, created in Istanbul in October 2011 (Rasas 2013).

But foreign sponsorship has its price. In late 2011 the exiled SNC was declared by western governments and the Gulf monarchies as the 'legitimate representative' of the Syrian people; less than a year later it was unceremoniously dumped in favour of a new exile formation, called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces or simply the Syrian National Coalition (AlArabiya 2012). That decision was made in Washington. The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the second largest secular party after the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (Syrian Region), with its own militia and with branches in Lebanon, remained committed to 'the stability of the state'. It had re-entered the Syrian Parliament in 2005 and saw itself as at the centre of the reform movement (Haidar, Ali 2013). Commentators suggested there may have been division over support for the government at the branch levels, but SSNP Vice-President for Syria, Safawan Salman, said: 'We are simultaneously with the stability of the Syrian state and the cohesion of Syrian society, and with profound and extensive reforms. We believe that the stability of Syrian society is necessary for the reforms to succeed' (Francis 2011).

At the time of the constitutional amendments and parliamentary elections in early 2012, the SSNP remained critical of the former (saying a National Assembly was needed to rewrite the Constitution) and complained about the conduct of the latter; but they did not boycott either (al Akhbar 22 Feb 2012; al Akhbar 15 May 2012); nor did the communist group led by Qadri Jamil. After that election several non-Ba'athists were incorporated into the government, with SSNP President Ali Haidar accepting appointment by President Assad as Minister for Reconciliation, maintaining a dialogue with both the civil opposition and the armed groups.

5.2 Bashar, demonised outside but popular inside Syria

The popularity of the Syrian President at home undermines attempts to cast him as a monster, at least in Syria. The petro-monarchy of Qatar is an open enemy of Syria, having put literally billions into the Islamist armed groups (Khalaf and Smith 2013). However their own media channel and polls have acknowledged Bashar's popularity. In January 2011 Qatar's main media outlet Al Jazeera concluded that a revolution in Syria was 'unlikely' due to Assad's popularity. While there was authoritarian rule, 'factors such as a relatively popular president and religious diversity make an uprising in the country unlikely' (Wikstrom

2011). Bashar was popular amongst young people, said US analyst Joshua Landis. 'They may not like the regime, they don't like corruption ... but they tend to blame this on the people around him, the old guard'. People wanted change, because of poverty, corruption and the political police; but Syrians liked Assad's support for pluralism and modernising reforms (Wikstrom 2011).

The President's popularity was shown in the early days, by the huge pro-government rallies that came out in response to opposition rallies. Robert Fisk, one of the few western journalists with a strong sense of Arab history and an eye for detail, but often cynical as regards the Syrian Government, made these observations:

'Another pro-Assad rally was starting ... it might have reached 200,000 by midday ... there was no Saddam style trucking of the people to Omayad Square [Damascus] ... the only soldiers were standing with their families. How does one report a pro-government demo during the

Arab Awakening? There were veiled women, old men, thousands of children ... were they coerced? I don't think so' (Fisk 2011).

Informed critics have observed that the violent conflict in Syria has always been between a pluralist state and sectarian Islamists, backed by the big powers. Iraqi-British analyst Sami Ramadani, a critic of the government, maintains Syria has been run by 'a ruthless, corrupt regime' with a feared 'security apparatus'. However he also says, because 'reactionary forces' backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar very rapidly took over from the 'democratic resistance', popular support shifted back to the government (Ramadani 2012). He says the idea that Syria is a sectarian Alawite regime was 'highly exaggerated'. The government had 'much wider circles of support', including influential Sunni classes and 'millions of women' who fear the Salafis. Further, many of 'the poor, the unemployed and students' who at first backed the protest movement, were repulsed by groups such as the exile Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, which were 'dominated by the Brotherhood' (Ramadani 2012).

Syrian analyst Camille Otrakji suggests President Assad: 'lost many of his supporters' in the first year of the violence because he was perceived as a 'weak leader who could not enforce his will on his security apparatus. Others felt he [was] not effective at mass communication ... [while] some held him personally responsible for the high death toll' (Otrakji 2012). In any case, most Syrians were clearly even less happy with the violent insurrection. A Turkish poll in late 2011 showed Syrians to be the 'least positive' in the region about the 'Arab Spring' events of that year. Only 22% of Syrians thought those events had had a positive effect on their country and 91% opposed (and 5% supported) violent protest (TESEV 2012). Ramadani reconciles these two trends by suggesting that, after the initial movement away from the Government in 2011, 'popular support shifted back' when Syrians saw the sectarians and the Saudi-Qatari cabal behind the violence (Ramadani 2012).

In a provisional accounting, Otrakji wrote that the President 'deserves low marks for failing to fight corruption and for assigning a low priority to reforming Syria's authoritarian system that he inherited'. There were 'mixed marks' for the economy, with benefits for the cities but regression in rural areas. On the other hand, Bashar could be credited with keeping Syria 'an island of stability' in a region in flames, having the status and participation of women higher than most other countries of the region, a popular independent foreign policy

and a pleasing 'humility and approachable personality'. While he did not live an austere life, like his father, the outside claims about his own gross corruption were just 'outlandish' (Otrakji 2012).

A poll in late 2011, funded by Bashar's enemies in Qatar and so certainly biased, showed that a majority outside Syria wanted the Syrian President to resign because of 'the regime's brutal treatment of protestors'. However, and more importantly, it also showed that 51% of Syrians wanted Assad to stay (Doha Debates 2011). When a poll run by an enemy says this we should take notice. Islamist fighters in Aleppo were more emphatic. Three Free Syrian Army leaders (all of whom collaborated with the al Qaeda groups) said the Syrian President had at least '70 percent' support in that mainly Sunni Muslim city (Bayoumy 2013). The local people, 'all of them, are loyal to the criminal Bashar, they inform on us' (Abouzeid 2012); they are 'all informers ... they hate us. They blame us for the destruction' (Ghaith 2012). Unpopularity is fatal to a revolution; to a religious fanatic it is merely inconvenient. An internal NATO study in 2013 also estimated that 70% of Syrians supported the President, 20% were neutral and 10% supported the 'rebels' (World Tribune 2013; BIN 2013). These estimates were not far from the outcome of the 2014 Presidential elections. Outside Syria the demonisation of Bashar was powerful.

The Syrian President was said to have directed a series of appalling civilian massacres. For example, the massacre of more than 100 mostly pro-government villagers at Houla (just outside Homs) was used to expel Syrian diplomats and impose draconian sanctions on the country. That massacre was most likely a 'false flag' incident (see Chapter Eight). Despite their anti-Syrian bias, some western sources exposed other 'false flag' massacres. For example, the August 2012 massacre of 245 people in Daraya, initially badged as a massacre by 'Assad's army' (Oweis 2012) was exposed by Robert Fisk as a slaughter by the FSA of kidnapped civilian and off-duty soldier hostages, after a failed prisoner swap (Fisk 2012). Similarly, the 10 December 2012 massacre of over 100 villagers in Aqrab was at first blamed on the Syrian Government (Stack and Mourtada 2012). However British journalist Alex Thompson (2012) later reported the FSA had held 500 Alawi villagers for nine days, murdering many of them as the army closed in and the gang fled. The August 2013 chemical weapons incident in East Ghouta was widely blamed on the Assad Government. Yet all independent evidence exposed this as yet another 'false flag'. I document the propaganda surrounding these atrocities in Chapters Eight and Nine.

Quite a number of Syrians have criticised President Assad to me, but not in the manner of the western media. They say they wanted him to be as firm as his father. Many in Syria, at least early in the crisis, regarded him as too soft, leading to the name 'Mr Soft Heart'. In late 2013 soldiers in Damascus told me there was an Army order to make special efforts to capture alive any Syrian combatant. This is controversial, as many regard Syrian terrorists as traitors, no less guilty than foreign terrorists. What happens to the latter is another story. While there is no credible, independent evidence of attacks on civilians by the Syrian Army there is some video evidence and other anecdotal evidence that the Army has executed captured terrorists. This is certainly a war crime, but probably quite popular in Syria, as most Syrians have family members who have fallen victim to terrorist attacks.

Indeed, a central problem of the demonisation of Bashar by the 'attacks on civilians' stories is that these accusations also reflect on the Syrian Arab Army, and that army is extremely popular, including amongst the civil opposition. Syria's strongest secular traditions is embedded in the Army. With about half a million members, both regulars and conscripts, the army is drawn from all the country's communities (Sunni, Alawi, Shiia, Christian, Druze,

Kurd, Armenian, Assyrian, etc), which all identify as 'Syrian'. Remember that the Damascus Declaration of 2005 expressed strong support for the 'national army', wanting to remove Ba'athist monopoly control but also to 'maintain [the army's] professional spirit' so as to protect 'the country's independence, safeguarding the constitutional system and defending the homeland and the people'. That is, the entire anti-Ba'ath reform movement of 2005 declared itself opposed to attacks on the Army.

The first to break with this position was, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood. They reverted to their traditional aim of seeking an overthrow of the secular state (Al-Shaqfa 2011). A key objective of the Brotherhood's insurrection was to split the Army along sectarian lines. Indeed, a number of army officers did defect, including many who had family links to the Brotherhood. Islamist atrocities against Alawis and Christians no doubt raised community tensions. However, towards the end of 2011, the FSA-aligned English spokesperson Rami Abdel Rahman admitted that less than 1,000 soldiers had deserted (Atassi 2011). The Syrian Army, often derided by western media as 'Assad loyalists', remained quite united, as a national institution. By contrast, the Brotherhood and other Salafi groups relied on sectarianism. They and their foreign, Al Qaeda linked allies, are the key source of the western-adopted idea of the Assad government as 'an Alawite regime', murdering Alawi and Shiia civilians, in attempts to incite wider conflict.

The Army is so large that most Syrian communities have strong family links, including with those fallen in the war. During the conflict there have been regular rallies and government backed ceremonies for the families of these martyrs, with thousands proudly displaying photos of their loved ones (IIT 2012; SANA 2015). Further, most of the several million Syrians, displaced by the conflict, have not left the country but rather have moved to other parts under Army protection. This is not really explicable if the Army were indeed engaged in 'indiscriminate' attacks on civilians. A repressive army invokes fear and loathing in a population, yet in Damascus one can see that people do not cower as they pass through the many army road blocks, set up to protect against 'rebel' car bombs. Stories of 'Bashar the monster' have little traction inside Syria, except as slogans for die-hard anti-government people, because those stories reflect on the army and people have their own personal experience with the army, every day. Those stories seem designed for an external audience. Syrians know that their Army represents pluralist Syria and has been fighting sectarian, foreign backed terrorism. This Army did not fracture on sectarian lines, as the sectarian gangs had hoped, and defections have been small, certainly less than 2%. European Union adviser Kamal Alam puts it this way, for the Syrian Arab Army to operate as long as it has, it has relied on its own people ... there can be no substitute to your own people's backing' (Alam 2015).

What then do the polls tell us about the support Bashar al Assad enjoys within Syria? That, of course, is the main issue of substance, when discussing democratic legitimacy. We have several opinion polls, estimates from Syrian and foreign analysts and the Presidential poll of June 2014. Great care needs to be taken with polls, in context of a war where legitimacy has become a major battle ground. As I explained in Chapter Three, conventional ethical notions of avoiding conflicts of interest, searching for independent evidence and disqualifying self-serving claims from belligerent parties have been ignored in much of the international debate over Syria. At the same time, we have to consider a wide range of sources.

Some polls should clearly be excluded, like that of the International Republican Institute, jointly run with Pechter Polls, and funded by the US Congress (IRI 2012). This survey focused on foreign intervention. It concluded that 'members of the Syrian opposition support

international armed intervention in their country, including establishing a “no-fly” zone, humanitarian corridors and training Free Syrian Army fighters, but they do not support an international presence on the ground’ (Dougherty 2012). This poll is forensically worthless, as regards the views of the Syrian opposition because it rejects a random poll in favour of a ‘snowball’ method of polling. At least IRI/Pechter state the biased method fairly clearly.

‘Key individuals (or channels) were used to initiate the referral chain, ultimately reaching a sample of 1,168 opposition members, approximately 315 of whom were inside Syria. Margin of error is not strictly applicable to this survey because of the non-random selection of respondents’ (IRI 2012).

In other words, the political associates of the IRI asked their friends, they asked theirs and 73% of the whole sample did not live in Syria. We have no idea what fraction of the ‘Syrian Opposition’ this might represent. More importantly, it says precisely nothing about broader Syrian public opinion.

Syrian electoral processes during the crisis, and public participation in them, have been important. President Assad was addressing some of the key reform demands when he signed decree law 101 in August 2011, amending the electoral law. Then his government prepared constitutional amendments which would remove the Socialist Ba’ath Party’s state-embedded character and allowing for competitive presidential elections. This passed by a referendum in late February 2012. Civil opposition groups like the SSNP and the communists opposed both the process (they wanted an elected constituent assembly to propose the changes) and some elements of the changes, but did not boycott the vote (al Akhbar 22 Feb 2012; al Akhbar 15 May 2012). The armed Islamist groups boycotted the referendum and the National Assembly elections of early 2012, threatening to attack those who participated.

That electoral reform led to the registration of six new parties, in addition to the previously existing eight parties, while formally removing the privileged status of the Ba’ath Party (As Safir 2012). Voter turnout for Syria’s parliamentary elections of May 2012 was low at 51.26%, down from 56% in 2007 (International IDEA 2015). This was in part due to threats from the armed groups. The Farouq Brigade (FSA), at that time being expelled from the city of Homs by the Syrian Army, was the main group making those threats. Farouq was subsequently named by many witnesses as responsible for the killing of civilians in the village of Houla, 18 days after the elections. Some at Houla had participated in those elections (see Chapter Eight). The other factor for a low turnout is the relatively low importance given to parliamentary elections in presidential systems.

The outcomes of the 2012 National Assembly elections were 150 seats for the Ba’ath Party and 90 for independents in the 250 seat parliament. Prominent among the non-Baathist MPs were Ahmad Kousa of the Syrian Democratic Party, Qadri Jamil and Ali Haidar of the Front for Change and Liberation, and Amro Osi from the Initiative of Syrian Kurds (Landis 2012). The composition of the parliament was additionally important because a new constitutional condition for the Presidential elections was that each candidate had to secure the support of at least 35 MPs, and each MP could only support one presidential candidate. Presidential candidates were also required to have lived in Syria for the previous 10 years, which ruled out exile candidates (As Safir 2012).

The Presidential elections of 2014, for the first time in decades, presented the Ba’ath Party candidate with a competitive election. Elections before then had been plebiscites on the official candidate. Of course, more than four decades of Ba’ath Party rule along with wartime

conditions did mean that Bashar had had a very strong advantage. He was far better known, identified with the state and genuinely popular. In the lead up to the Presidential elections Syrian analyst Dr Taleb Ibrahim coincided with the earlier NATO consultant in an estimate that Bashar's support would be around 70% (Ibrahim 2014).

The fact that many western nations declared Syria's elections 'fixed', before they were held, hardly carries much credibility. These were the same governments trying to overthrow the Syrian Government (Herring 2014). The Washington-run Voice of America falsely claimed that Syria 'would not permit international observers' (VOA 2014). In fact, over a hundred election observers came from India, Brazil, Russia, China, South Africa, Iran and Latin America, along with non-official observers from the USA and Canada (KNN 2014; Bartlett 2014).

While seven candidates nominated, only three eventually qualified, apparently because not all could gain the support of 35 MPs. Businessman Hassan al-Nouri (a former Assad government minister) and Aleppo Communist MP Maher Hajjar stood against Bashar (al Saadi 2014; Harbi 2014). They agreed with the incumbent on national unity, support for the Army and the struggle against terrorism, differing mainly on economic policy (Harbi 2014; Baker 2014). The second largest secular party, the SSNP, supported Bashar.

The international media recognised the massive turnout, both in Syria and from the refugees in Lebanon, with some sources grudgingly admitting that 'getting people to turn out in large numbers, especially outside Syria, is a huge victory in and of itself' (Dark 2014). Associated Press reported on crowds of tens of thousands, in a 'carnival like atmosphere' in Damascus and Latakia, with 'long lines' of voters in Homs (FNA 2014a). AP noted thousands of exile voters 'clogging entrances to the Lebanese capital', along with the dominance of Assad voters in Sweden. They concluded that President Assad had 'maintained significant support among large sections of the population' (FNA 2014b). Indeed, the 73.4% participation rate in Syria's 2014 Presidential election was far higher than any presidential election in the USA in recent decades, where participation rates range between 52% and 60% (Idea International 2015a, 2015b).

Bashar al Assad won this election convincingly, with 88.7% of the vote (AP 2014). Hassan al Nouri and Maher Hajjar gained 4.3% and 3.2% respectively (Aji 2014). With a 73.4% turnout (or 11.6 million of the 15.8 million eligible voters), that meant he had 10.3 million votes or 64% of all eligible voters. Even if every single person who was unable to vote was against him, this was a convincing mandate. Washington complained of the wartime conditions, but were happy to endorse the polls in Afghanistan and Ukraine, both plagued by war and corruption. Associated Press reasonably concluded that Assad's support was not just from minorities, but had to do with his legacy of opening up the economy, his support for women, the real benefits in education, health and electricity and, last but not least, the President's capacity to move decisively against the sectarian armed groups (AP 2014).

The June 2014 Presidential elections were the most authoritative indication of support for Bashar al Assad. Even though the great institutional advantage of the incumbent made this more of a hybrid of plebiscite and election, his support in the first competitive Presidential elections in decades was clear and fairly consistent with other estimates. These are shown in the table below. I have included estimates which come from Bashar's enemies in Qatar and NATO.

Table 1: Relevant Polls on Syrian Government, 2011-2014			
Poll question	Date	%	Poll host
Revolution in Syria “unlikely due to Assad's popularity”	Feb 2011	N/A	Wikistrom Feb 2011 in Al Jazeera (Qatar)
91% opposed violent protest against government (5% supported it)	Late 2011	91%	TESEV (2011) poll (Turkey) of Syrians
Parliamentary elections (Ba'ath Party result) on a 51% turnout	May 2012	60%	Syrian Govt
Bashar support in Aleppo?	Mid 2012	70%+	3 FSA leaders in Aleppo
National support for Bashar?	2013	70%	NATO consultant
National support for Bashar?	2014	70%	Syrian Dr Taleb Ibrahim
Presidential elections (Bashar vote) on a 73.4% turnout (of all eligible)	June 2014	88% (64%)	Syrian Govt

We see significant concordance between agencies of the partisan or enemy sources, those linked to the anti-Government armed groups, and Syrian electoral processes. The election results were relatively consistent with informed opinion during the crisis. The Syrian President enjoys more than two-thirds popular support in the country. This reality is not really challenged by Bashar’s institutional advantage. Support for the Syrian Army is probably higher than that for the President, while that for the Ba’ath Party is lower. The combined data confirms the idea that a range of non-Ba’ath parties and social forces rallied to the President during the crisis.

We can see from the earlier reform statements (in particular the 2005 Damascus Declaration) the reasons why most of the domestic opposition did not join in armed attacks on the state. Most of them backed the state, against the foreign-backed sectarian terrorism. The major exception to this was the Muslim Brotherhood and other smaller Salafi groups. They were not concerned about any sort of democracy, looking instead for their own version of a religious state. For that, once again, they needed and sought foreign military assistance.

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