

30 November 2009 , by Wael Sawah

With the beginning of Damascus Spring, 2000-2001, a new expression entered the Syrian political and cultural dictionary: the civil society. No sooner had this expression been introduced than a debate started about the nature of this expression, its limits and interactions. A question started to disturb a good number of Syrian politicians and intellectuals: to what extent may the political interact with the civil, influence it, and be influenced with it? Is civil society a social-cultural concept, or it is just wrong to separate it from politics, which will abbreviate it to the limits of charities?

We cannot give a simple answer to such a complicated question. This paper tries to raise the question, and to review the complex relationship between the civil activity and the political activity in the performance of the civil society as well as the political opposition in Syria. It will shed light on both views regarding this question, and regarding the Syrian government's attitude towards these interactions and the radical, violent solutions which it has used towards both the opposition and the civil society in Syria.

In addition, the paper will shed light on a new generation of civil society activists in Syria, who focus on social, development and advocacy issues. It will also try to illuminate the remarkable role played by this generation in important issues such as the cancellation of the controversial Personal Status draft, cancellation of the article of the Penal Code that concerns "honor crime," the campaign to give the Syrian woman the right to give her children the Syrian citizenship, in addition to a vast number of civil campaigns, which were initiated by groups of the new generation of the civil society, using new tools such as the new media, blogs, the facebook and others.

Contrary to the popular impression, the notion of civil society in Syria does not belong to the third millennium, and it did not begin with the assumption of President Bashar al Assad of his post as President.

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Friday, 08 January 2010 14:39 - Last Updated Sunday, 12 June 2011 11:57

The notion and its applications date back to the Ottoman era, when primary forms of civil society existed, such as the "Tawaef System" that regulated the role of handcrafts and professions in the empire. The Ottoman Empire also witnessed the core of the Arab liberation movement, which in the beginning took the shape of societies and other civil organizations.

However, many civil society theorists believe that 45 years of a unilateral political and ideological rule, and in the absence of all kinds of voluntarism and civil endeavor, together with banning any independent political activity could not lead but to deprive Syria from any civil performance. The result was that the public (and even private) life was totally linked to, and dependent, of the government, which was dominated by one party. This has paved the way to the return of the sectarian, tribal and family feelings, after the pioneers of the civil society had managed to marginalize them.

Consequently, the Syrian civil society entered a freezer. It was replaced by ideological, non-civic organization which combined the political and civil performance together and mixed the ideology and the civil endeavor together, which made the broader society disappear in a narrow caste, and the open-minded pluralism dissolve in the ideological oneness. On the other hand, the only way to oppose the government before 2000 was to work underground, in small secret political circles. However, the secret work created various problems which led to the retreat of the political life in the country, especially for the political activists who paid their lives, or a big portion of it, as a price for their political activity. Due the enormous security pressures, the political parties were unable to hold conferences to choose their leaders, which made the leadership, stay there for decades. As a result, activists have been unable to meet and discuss party policy, which has remained in the hands of small circles of leaders, and have been without the means to engage in healthy political life inside the party or in society, which will affect the performance of the civil society itself, as we will see later.

The 1980s was the toughest and darkest era in modern Syrian history. People recall this era for the bloody conflict between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood, but forget that it also witnessed the first embryonic civil movement, led by the Bar and professional syndicates of doctors, professors, engineers, and others. The government ended this innovation savagely, as it did with the Muslim Brotherhood. Later it terminated the leftist groups only to append to that more crack down on all political, social and economic aspects of life.

Not until the 1990s did some relief appear: the Soviet Bloc was dismantled, but perhaps a more important event was Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait and the Second Gulf War that followed, in which Syria joined the international alliance, which liberated Kuwait in 1991. Another landmark event was the Madrid Peace Conference, in 1991. For the first time Syrian

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and Israeli representatives sat together at the same table for peace talks. These two incidents put an end to the isolation that Syria had imposed upon itself throughout the 1980s, and brought about minor changes inside the country. In 1991, Syrian authorities started to release dozens of political dissidents.

A handful of brave individuals started to explore a totally new domain - civil society, a notion that had started to acquire a new significance during the civil struggles of the people of ex-socialist Eastern European countries such as Poland and Hungary. The cornerstone for this movement was "The Statement of 99." Shortly after the death of the late President Hafez al Assad, ninety-nine brave Syrian intellectuals paved the way to public work for other intellectuals and politicians. Some of the signatories were writers and scholars, but others were politicians, which gave the statement a political rather than a civil character. Nevertheless, it is this statement that ignited the fire: for the first time in decades a group of the Syrian elite concurred in the following demands: abolition of the state of emergency, amnesty for all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, establishment of a state of law, restoration of public freedoms, acknowledgement of diversity and political pluralism, freedom of assembly, speech, and expression.

The Committees to Revive Civil Society: the interaction between the political and the civil

The idea of reviving civic traditions in Syria started in 2000 _ in the house of Syrian intellectual and filmmaker. A handful of selected intellectuals attended the meeting, which approved the idea of forming a commission to support the principles of civil society. The first of its kind, "The Committees to Revive Civil Society," was announced in a statement that was called "The Statement of 1000," seeing a good omen of "The Statement of 99."

The authority's reaction mounted in segmented steps. Lebanese papers published violent reactions to the calls for Civil Society to secret efforts to form Masonic lodges and Rotary clubs. The then vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam called for a public meeting with intellectuals and university professors where he delivered a ruthless attack against the advocates of civil society, linking them to Western embassies in Damascus. On February 28, 2001, President Bashar al Assad gave an interview to London-based Asharq al Awsat in which he criticized the phenomenon of the statements, but said that he had not read them. In reaction, the Committees to Revive Civil Society started to change its nature and basic goal to those of a new opposition. It acted thus, and thus the government responded.

The National Dialogue Forum

The second step in the interaction between the political and civil was occurred when the then MP Riad Seif the National Dialogue Forum and was considered by many a summing-up of what was later called "Damascus Spring." The Forum was based on the inaugural speech of the then new president Bashar al Assad, in which he called for economic changes, modernization of Syrian laws, removal of bureaucratic obstacles to local and foreign investment, and mobilization of the public and private sectors. When the new president gave his speech, most of the traditional leaders of the Syria opposition were in jail or exile, or they were just recovering from long imprisonment that lasted for years or decades. This made it difficult for them to benefit from the positive atmosphere created by the speech. Intellectuals stepped in instead. Rather than the political opposition, the civil society movement filled the gap. However, the politicians who could not work on the political level availed themselves of the Forum to help turn it into a political forum par excellence. The weekly session turned to be warm political dialogue sessions, in which political views and platforms were reviewed.

The international and regional media seized upon Seif's movement, sometimes exaggerating its influence in Syrian society. Newsweek described the National Dialogue Forum as a "prologue of the no-doubt-coming movement of change in Syria." Other articles made a comparison between Seif and his political movement to Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement in Poland. Seif himself was encouraged to form a political group which he called "the Civil Peace Movement." He made the announcement in one of his salon's sessions, in a symbolic step that was the high point of interaction between the political and the civil. The regime felt that things were accelerating in a direction other than what it had hoped, and rushed to suppress the activities of all of the forums, fearing that they might be the beginning of a peaceful popular resistance movement. The Forum was closed; Seif's parliamentary immunity was lifted and he was arrested, as were other members of the Forum. The Damascus Spring had ended.

Jamal Atassi Forum

The third milestone of interaction between the civil and the political in Syria was the Jamal Atassi Forum, which remained in action four years longer than any of the other forums, all of which were closed in 2001. The Jamal Atassi Forum was originally established to express a different political view, in reaction to the huge success the National Dialogue Forum had achieved with its liberal trends. The pan-Arabist Socialist Arab Union Party played an essential role in establishing the Jamal Atassi Forum. The Forum had the chance to play a role in uniting all opposition trends in Syria. But at the same time a dispute was growing inside the Forum among its founding members. The first trend expressed the traditional views of the Arab Socialist Union Party, and represented the rather elderly age group in the Forum. The second trend represented the young members, who were more enthusiastic and more willing to discuss

hot issues.

The dispute was resolved in favor of the youth trend. The Forum began to discuss hot issues, the latest of which was entitled "Reform Issues in Syria." Fifteen political parties and civil groups took part in the discussions, including the Baath Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. As it was impossible for Ali Sadruddin al Bayanouni, the Superintendent General of the Muslim Brotherhood to read his paper in person, Ali Abdullah, a Jamal Atassi Forum member, volunteered to read out the paper in one of the most crowded sessions. A week later, Ali Abdullah was arrested. A couple of days later, all the members of the board of directors were arrested for a short while, and the Forum was closed. Many intellectuals argue that reading al Bayanouni paper was merely a pretext to close the Forum. Others, however, are positive that the reading of al Bayanouni's paper was the reason; they argue that so long as Law 49 remained in effect, providing for execution of Muslim Brotherhood members, the Forum had crossed a universally recognized red line.

Sit-ins

The period 2004 - 2006 was characterized by a new phenomenon in Syria: sit-ins. This phenomenon was a joint political-civil venture. Calls for sit-ins would come from political parties and civil organizations at the same time. The first main sit-in, held in Damascus, was organized by the Committees for Defending Democracy and human rights. It occurred on March 8 to mark the 41st anniversary of the announcement of the state of emergency in the country, which was announced on March 8 1963 and remains in effect today. Despite the peacefulness of the sit-in, security forces did not tolerate the idea and dispersed participants with force.

However, The cruelty of the police in dealing with these sit-ins increased when the government started using hundreds of armed members of the government-sponsored Students Federation and Youth Federation to attack participants (March 10, 2005.)

Damascus Declaration

The closing of the Jamal Atassi Forum and the suppression of sit-ins once again put the term civil society in the freezer. The term had become political; the meanings of "opposition" and "civil society" had been confused, and the mere mention of "civil society" in the local press

became taboo. Another term was used instead: the communal society. In the meantime, a new political movement started to develop quietly through discussions among political parties and figures, leading eventually to a wide political alliance that was announced on October 16, 2005, under the name Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change in Syria, known as the Damascus Declaration (DD.)

The declaration was signed by the Democratic-National Rally (an alliance of five socialist and nationalist parties that was formed in 1980,) The Kurdish Democratic Front, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, the Committees to Revive Civil Society, and The Future Party.

It was also signed by significant individual politicians such as the renowned dissident Riad Seif, who was in prison when he signed it, Sheikh Jawdat Said, Abdul Razak Eid, Samir Nashar, Fidaa Horani, and others. Within an hour of the announcement of DD, a number of other political groups rushed to announce their support, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communist Action Party, and the Assyrian Democratic Front. But DD had to pass through the same travails as the Jamal Atassi Forum. Two trends had to struggle within the alliance: one liberal, the other nationalist. On December 1, 2007, 163 members of the National Council held a marathon conference to draw up the political platform of DD. At the end of the day, they elected a president of the National Council and a new DD Secretariat. The renowned activist and respected medical doctor Fidaa Horani was elected President. Five members were elected as the executive leadership of DD, headed by Riad Seif.

A final communiqué was issued at the closing of the conference, which, despite maintaining some nationalist rhetoric, had a clearly different approach to political issues in Syria. While both government and opposition adopted a nationalist-socialist discourse, DD adopted a liberal-democratic one.

DD has formed a milestone in the Syrian political map. This was more than the government could stand.

Twelve members of the DD National Council were arrested, sent to court, and sentenced to 30 months. No matter what the premises and objectives may have been, the results showed conclusively that the DD experience has ended before it had ripen, signaling, thus, the second end of Damascus Spring.

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Might Damascus Spring have avoided this fate? Could it have survived in the difficult Syrian environment? Theoretically, yes. Some Syrian intellectuals believe that the civil society movement which began in 2000 made a mistake when it mixed civil society activities with political endeavors that should have been left to the politicians and political parties of the country. They say that the civil society movement should have taken greater care of its role as a societal tool, whose mission was to focus on issues of culture, education, development, training, capacity building, and human rights advocacy. This view believes that civil society's chances to sustain itself and grow would have been stronger had it not shouldered the missions of political parties, and had it not raised political issues in confronting the regime.

These critics believe that the big mistake came from the politicians who were involved in establishing the civil society movement since its beginnings in the late 1990s. They say that politicians used civil society as a Trojan horse to struggle against the Syrian regime. While the politicians have every right to struggle against the regime, they say, they should have done it their way.

The problem could be that civil society did not establish a societal and civic culture. The movement remained restricted to a couple of hundred of intellectuals who were present in all forums, salons, sit-ins, petitions, trials, and cultural events. These are the very people who are the backbone of the opposition political movement in Syria. Therefore, it was next to impossible to separate the two components.

Other critics, however, do not share this view. They believe that the mistake was to confine the idea of civil society to a tiny image of NGOs that were formed recently in the process of globalization, and which operate in accordance with a western vision of NGOs. By contrast, for these critics civil society must be conceived as the organized cultural, social, and development movement of the society that lies in the area between the state and the family. In this sense, civil society operates apart from the state but not against the state.

If anyone misinterpreted the call for democracy, which is a must for the civil society movement, and confused this with political activity, it was the government.

Civil society: a new generation

Since 2006, both political and civil movements have suffered great losses and have been under difficult circumstances, in which they lost a remarkable number of distinguished activists who went to jail because of their opinion and peaceful struggles. While the interaction between the political and the civil in Syrian from 2000 to 2006 led to the loss of both movements, the era that came on the heels of the 2006 and 2007 arrests was characterized by compulsory separation between the two streams: the opposition forces and the civil society groups. The foundation of Damascus Declaration inside the country and other coalitions outside the country contributed to the separation.

In the new era, a new generation of civil society activists emerged who did not necessarily have a political history or record. This new generation has led a series of social and economic activities. The series started with the national campaign against honor crime.

The National Campaign against Honor Crime

□ A series of communal campaigns started with the National Campaign to Stop Honor Crime. For decades, Syrian law exempted male murderers from penalty if they “took their wives by surprise committing adultery.” The campaign started on the initiative of a number of individuals and civil society organizations. There were twenty-four participating groups, varying in size and influence. On the front line of these groups were Syria’s Women Observatory, the Syrian Women’s League, al Thara Magazine, the National Association to Develop the Role of Women, al Nour Weekly newspaper, and others. The campaign has achieved a concrete presence among some popular circles and among scholars, professors, clerics, and even MPs. It managed to obtain the signatures of thousands of individuals on a petition that was sent to the President, the Parliament, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Justice, the Bar Association, and the media. Renowned, influential individuals were attracted to the campaign, including the Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun and a famous young cleric who is also a member of parliament, Mohamad Habash.

In July 2009, the President issued a decree to amend Provision 548. According to the new amendment, murderers who kill their wives when they surprise them in adultery cannot be exempted from penalty. They will receive a minimum sentence of two years. Those who kill their wives simply on suspicion will have no special treatment and will be considered ordinary murderers.

The Personal status Law campaign

The second large civil society campaign organized recently was against the new draft Personal Status Law. The Personal Status Law regulates marriage, divorce, and inheritance for Muslims in Syria, whereas other communities have separate laws. Syrian PM formed a “secret” committee to amend the existing Personal Status Law. When leaked, the new draft proved much worse than the current one, in many ways. No sooner was the draft leaked than dozens of small civil society groups, in addition to hundreds of individuals, websites, and blogs, initiated a spontaneous campaign, that became more and more organized, to withdraw the draft, which was regarded as a huge setback for civil rights and the principle of citizenship, as well as for the rights of women in Syria.

Activists argued that the Syrian government was now harvesting the results of its policy to encourage non-political Muslim foundations, which it thought would not pose a political threat. The government had not foreseen the social and cultural damage that such foundations can cause. The campaign was so large that the government could not ignore it.

Other campaigns

In addition to these two major campaigns, a number of smaller campaigns have been taking place since 2006, benefitting from the latest internet and telecommunication technology. These campaigns were tailored to focus on certain cause to achieve specific results. Among these campaigns were a campaign which was launched to support a Syrian child that was raped by four men in the northern city of Aleppo; a campaign that aimed to reduce the prices of the mobile phone calls and services; and a campaign to keep the country clean, entitled “Keep your country as clean as a jasmine,” and has been adopted by a number of celebrities, intellectuals, renowned popular artists, civil groups, websites, and blogs.

All the above cases are characterized with new common features: they were all non-political; they comprised different categories from the Syrian society; and they used new tools such as the internet, the blogs, mobile phones, Facebook and Twitter, have contributed to this wave of activities.

Conclusion

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Political struggle is an inevitable necessity for all peoples on earth. The civil struggle is a no less important necessity. There must be interaction between the two. But this interaction should not be allowed to dissolve the limits between the two fields. Political activities have their domain: the government, the parliament, political parties, and the street. The domain of civil society is cultural, social, developmental, and ethical affairs. Civil society's mission is to defend values that are political in their core, such as democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights, but with non-political tools and methods. This is the result that has been accepted by most political forces and civil society groups in Syria. What is left is for the government to accept the civil society movement and give greater freedoms, without restrictions or threats or harm.

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<http://arab-reform.net/?lang=en>