Cultural Dynamics in the Syrian Uprising

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Change and Continuity in the Middle East

Rethinking West Asia, North Africa and the Gulf after 2011

Graduate Section of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

Annual Conference
11 June 2012

The London School of Economics and Political Science
London, United Kingdom

Panel: **Explaining Social Change through the Lenses of Culture, Memory and Symbols**

Introduction:

Studies of Syrian politics have traditionally focused on the sectarian, military, and economic foundations of the current regime or its opponents. Few studies, however, have paid attention to the cultural basis of this regime and to cultural forms of resistance against it. Politics, after all, is not only about the coercive enforcement of obedience or the management of material resources. Any regime, no matter how oppressive or rich, seeks to assert its authority over the cultural field and display its power symbolically; because representations of power and obedience themselves are instruments of power (Wedeen 1999). Al-Assad's regime in Syria, whether that of the father or the son, is no exception: it tried to utilize cultural resources and means to maintain its domination over Syrian citizens. Although the regime was successful in managing transgression within the cultural field up to the eruption of the current uprising in Syria, it is obvious that this management has collapsed swiftly giving up to a novel culture of protest that is spreading throughout Syrian society. This article will first examine the cult of Hafiz al-Assad–the regime's instrument of cultural domination–and its transformation during the reign of Bashar al-Assad. Then it will turn to its effects on Syrian people and their reaction to the cult. Finally it will examine its limitations and its vulnerability to external shocks, which became evident during the current protests. The bedrock of my analysis is Lisa Wedeen's examination of the cult of Hafiz al-Assad in her book *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria* (1999), which pioneered the study of political culture in Syria. Her suggested "tipping model" for collective rebellion will be analyzed, extended, and employed to shed some light on the course of events that led to the current uprising.

The "Arab Spring": A Cultural Revolution?

There is little doubt that the series of uprisings that erupted in the Arab World in 2011, which is often referred to collectively as the "Arab Spring,"[1] constitutes a landmark in the modern history of the Arab world. Like any other major event in history, there are political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions that need to be considered when analyzing it. Political repression, economic difficulties, and the "youth bulge"–just to name a few–are all important factors to be taken into consideration. However, I argue in this paper that the cultural dimension was particularly significant in the Arab Spring, especially in the case of Syria, due to a number of reasons that I shall explain below.

First, the political, economic, and social pre-conditions for popular uprisings in the Arab world have already been in place for many years. Indeed, it was very common before the Arab Spring to refer to Arab nations as "meek", "submissive", "sleepy", or even "dead" to describe their unwillingness to protest against their regimes.[2] Hence, the question to be asked in the first place is not why these uprisings have occurred, but why now? Cultural factors may help answer this question.

The fact that the Arab Spring was primarily an "Arab phenomenon" is telling. Although it had repercussions outside the Arab world (such as the Occupy movement in some Western countries and the anti-Putin protests in Russia), and although not all Arab countries have experienced large-scale protests that threatened the stability of existing regimes (for a variety of reasons, the discussion of which falls outside the scope of this paper); the most significant uprisings and protests that followed the Tunisian revolution of January 2011 occurred within this cultural zone that we may call the "Arab world."[3] It was clear that the protests were to a great extent inspired by each other and that slogans, symbols, and images traveled easily from one country to the other. The fact that youth throughout the Arab world were able to understand, communicate, and repeat what the protestors in Tunisia and Egypt were chanting directly and without the medium of a translator should not be underestimated. We saw that evidently with slogans such as "al-shaʿb yurīd isqāt al-niẓām" (people want to overthrow the regime) and "'irḥal" (leave!), which became emblematic of the Arab Spring. Furthermore, videos of Tunisians and Egyptians expressing very emotionally their joy when their rulers stepped down went viral on social networking websites reaching out to a vast audience in the Arab world. Some pan-Arab TV networks, particularly al-Jazeera, have taken up this revolutionary wave in the Arab world and actively promoted it.[4] Thus it is possible to maintain that because the Arab world enjoyed a common culture and a common sector of mass media, cultural motifs from the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings had their greatest impact within the Arab world more than any other region in the world. One may even speak of a wave of pan-Arab solidarity that spread all over the Arab world as a result of the Tunisian, Egyptian, and then Libyan, Yemenite, and Bahraini uprisings. These feelings of solidarity are not nationalist in the Nasserist or Baʿthist sense, i.e. they did not call for Arab political unity, but they firmly asserted a concrete state of commonality between Arab countries.

Furthermore, the role of new media in the Arab Spring in general and the Syrian uprising in particular can hardly be overestimated (Trombetta 2012). The first calls for organized protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria surfaced in the internet just after the beginning of the 25th of January revolution in Egypt. Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and other communication tools on the internet have been instrumental in organizing protest activities and reporting them to the world. Moreover, most foreign TV stations, news agencies, and other media outlets were banned by the Syrian government from covering the uprising, which forced them to rely extensively on local activists to obtain various types of information (news, statistics, images, videos, etc.) about the ongoing events. The Syria regime itself realized the importance of new media–albeit much later than protestors–so it attempted to utilize it for its own propaganda. As a result, the boundaries between traditional and new media in the Syrian uprising almost collapsed (Trombetta 2012).

The significance of new media in the Syrian uprising is not limited to the organization of protest activities and communicating them to the world. The social and cultural implications for the utilization of new media in the Syrian uprising are

no less important. Castells has pointed out that the "technology of mass self-communication" is not simply a tool; it is a social construction that emphasizes individual autonomy vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions (2007 cited in Trombetta 2012, pp. 11). This is very evident in the context of the Syrian uprising, where the bulk of cultural production is created and communicated by ordinary citizens. In the past, much of cultural production and its mass-communication generally required special equipment, training, and funding to the extent that it was difficult to undertake without the support of some institution, such as the state, political organizations, or private companies.[5] However, with the advent of personal computers, the internet, and social-networking services, it became possible for an ordinary citizen with little equipment, training, and funding to produce high-quality cultural items and disseminate them widely.

A good example of such cultural production is the "promotional videos" (also known as "promos") that have been made by anti-regime activists to encourage Syrians to join the protests.[6] These short videos, which resemble Hollywood movie trailers in their sense of grandiosity, are very simple to produce, yet very effective in communicating an emotional message to potential protestors. Moreover, protest songs and demonstration placards spread very quickly among Syrians in a manner that was impossible few years ago. This is why some obscure artists and singers became national heroes and symbols. Kfar Nabl, a small town in the governorate of Idlib that few Syrians had heard of before the uprising, became nationally renowned for its innovative and witty placards that contained bitter criticism; not only of the regime, but also of the international community and of the Syrian opposition (Keller 2012).[7] Therefore, when examining the course of events that led to the eruption of the Syrian uprising and its spread throughout Syria, the observer cannot but pay careful attention to the rapid cultural transformations that have occurred there.

The Cult of Hafiz al-Assad:

Lisa Wedeen points out that the regime in Syria established a cult of personality around the figure of Hafiz al-Assad (1999). Unlike other personality cults–such as those of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Joseph Stalin, and some fascist dictators–al-Assad's did not operate to produce legitimacy (in any of its three Weberian forms: legal-rational, charismatic, or traditional) or ideological hegemony to generate power. Rather it generated power by compelling people to act "as if" they subscribed to this cult and believed in its absurd and phony rhetoric, although actually most of them, including supporters, did not. It is the "unbelievability" of this cult that made it powerful, according to Wedeen. By being compelled to participate hypocritically in the cult, the Syrian citizen felt powerless and submissive to the regime. Public dissimulation or disguise served to de-constitute or destroy the citizen's sense of their political self. In most other totalitarian regimes, the self is re-constituted in line with the ideology of the regime, but this is not the case in Syria. The self is left shattered and incoherent.

Although the occasional use of coercive power by the regime was necessary to maintain participation in the cult, the cult itself did not rest on physical or legal enforcement alone. People, merely by participating in its spectacles and performances, enforced each other's participation. The majority of Syrians, indeed, internalized the power of the cult to control to the degree compliance became "natural," whereas non-compliance was considered to be "deviant." Syrian citizens, as result, were alienated and isolated from each other, which rendered any collective political action virtually impossible. The cult thus served to "kill" political life in Syria and de-politicize its population by removing politics as far as possible from the public sphere. Finally, Wedeen concludes her examination of al-Assad's cult by maintaining that it functioned as a disciplinary device to "*substantiate* rather than legitimate power" (1999, pp. 21; emphasis in the original).

This does not mean, however, that Hafiz al-Assad did not enjoy some support or consensual approval in certain segments of the Syrian population (a point which Wedeen has not paid enough attention to). This support was mainly based on: policies towards Israel, which were seen or presented as defiant or resistant; ability to maintain "stability" in an unstable region; and finally, the regime's claims of protecting minorities and moderates from the "danger" of political Islam. Nevertheless, it appears that most Syrians, including supporters of al-Assad, did not take his cult seriously.

Al-Assad's Cult during the Reign of Bashar al-Assad:

During the final years of his reign, Hafiz al-Assad groomed his oldest living son Bashar for presidency. Bashar was presented to Syrians as a reformer, advocate of modern technology and new media, fighter of corruption, etc. He was also disassociated from very his father's legacy of violent repression. All these hopes, however, proved to be false. Apart from the short-lived Damascus Spring of 2001–-the aim of which was apparently to ease the transition of power in a republic from father to son and channel out any potential discontent––no real change, whether in the structure of the regime or in political culture, has happened beyond superficial level.

By the end of Hafiz al-Assad's presidency, the revolutionary rhetoric of al-Ba'th Party had already been exhausted. Consequently, the official language of the state was transformed under Bashar in order to become more appealing to the younger generation and the emerging middle-class. For example, the language of revolutionary and ideological sloganeering with which Hafiz al-Assad and Syria were normally exalted was replaced with "vernacular patriotism," i.e. the use of an everyday language that is loaded with sentimental and religious vocabulary to express devotion to the president and the country (Pinto 2011); examples include *minḥibbak*[8] (we love you; i.e. Bashar al-Assad) and *Sūriya Allah Ḥāmiḥā* (God protects Syria). Bashar al-Assad has been depicted in official and popular media like a celebrity as opposed to Hafiz al-Assad, who was usually presented as the leader of

a revolution, war hero, or father of the nation. Bashar al-Assad was also portrayed as a loving family man as we can see from the various photos published for him together with his wife and children playing, riding bicycles, picnicking, etc. His wife, British-born Asma al-Assad, with her flamboyant and fashionable lifestyle constituted an important element in these "marketing" campaigns.[9] Additionally, the image of Bashar al-Assad is habitually conflated with the map or flag of Syria to indicate that they are inseparable from each other, as if "Bashar is Syria" and "Syria is Bashar."

In actual fact, it is possible to assert that the domination of the regime over Syrians has been taken a step further under Bashar. In Syrian TV comedies, for example, we see characters, such as army or security officers, speaking with an Alawite accent while abusing and humiliating other Syrians. This indicates that the dominance of the regime–represented accurately or inaccurately by Alawite officers–over Syrians was normalized to the extent that it became 'OK' to laugh publicly at it. Syrians were, or thought to be, completely habituated to the rule of al-Assad family and its regime. Overall, one may conclude this section by holding that the cult of Hafiz al-Assad did not disappear with his death per se; rather it was passed to his son, albeit with a new image.

Popular Reaction to the Cult: Transgression or Reproduction?

The total absence of open discussions of domestic politics in Syria during the reign of Hafiz al-Assad meant that direct and explicit criticism of the regime, particularly its head, that Syrians may circulate and communicate is limited to jokes, urban legends, rumors, etc. These oral, popular narratives represented the primary discursive tools available to Syrians to make sense of al-Assad's cult (Wedeen 1999, pp. 120-9). With respect to the field of arts and entertainment, especially TV, theater, and literature, there has been an abundance of works critical of the regime, which the latter allowed to be produced and distributed; hence they came to be known as "commissioned" or "licensed" criticism. However, the regime was keen not to allow criticism to go beyond certain limits. Some of these limits were obvious and known to everyone; for example, explicit criticism of the head of the regime, his clique, or al-Ba'th Party was taboo. Yet, the exact boundaries between what is officially tolerated and what is not remained ambiguous and subject to negotiation (Cooke 2006, p. 65-80).

On the one hand, criticism of the regime in Syria, whether explicit, as in jokes and urban legends, or indirect, as in arts and entertainment, has offered Syrians a window to transgress and mock the official and empty rhetoric of al-Assad's cult and counteract the atomization fostered by participation in its spectacles (Wedeen 1999, p. 129-132). Many critics and writers, on the other hand, have accused this criticism of being complicit in the cult's mechanism of control. They maintained that it functioned as a "safety valve" (*tanfis*) to divert dissidence away from channels of political action (Cooke, pp. 65-80). It is true that it made Syrians aware of the

absurdity of the cult and exposed its reality; yet this is precisely what sustains the politics of "as if," which uphold the cult (Wedeen 1999, pp. 129-132). In addition, this criticism re-affirmed and re-articulated the regime's image as "omnipotent," "immortal," "ruthless," "sectarian," etc. Nevertheless, as Wedeen has pointed out, any dichotomous characterization of this criticism as "resistant" or "complicit" is false and obscures its ambiguity, which, in one way or the other, reflects the ambiguity of the regime's rhetoric (1999, pp. 89). Indeed, Salamandra (2012) has correctly showed that some of this criticism, which was previously labelled as cathartic, has equipped Syrians with a "language of critique" with the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, as we can see in the figure of the "Spray Man".

The Effects of the Cult:

The general effect of the cult was that any collectivity or consensus in the public sphere–even when it was non-political or in line with the regime's official ideology– was prevented or dismantled unless it was under the direct control of the regime[10] (Cooke 2006, p. 26). Syrian society was thus broken down into atomized individuals who do not trust each other and who are unable to form bonds outside the framework of the state institutions or the framework of the sect, the tribe, the neighborhood, etc., which were in turn ultimately tied up to the regime through relations of clientalism. Any form of civil bonding on a political, social, or cultural basis–especially one that cuts across vertical divisions of society (i.e. sectarian, regional, or ethnic divisions)–was thwarted immediately, whether by coercive or non-coercive mechanisms. The regime recognized communal bonds alone and refused to deal with any other form of civil or political collectivity, even when they existed. We saw that clearly in the beginning of the uprising; when unrest erupted in one area, the president held meetings with the local notables instead of activists; because this is how it conceives Syrian society: a collection of separate communal, sectarian, or ethnic entities which are ultimately dependent on the regime. In the words of Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Syrian well-known writer and opposition member, "the regime is based essentially on denying the political existence of Syrians as independent citizens who are able to organize, oppose, and contend" (2011). Remarkably, this perception of Syrian society conforms to that of the French mandate of Syria and of many Orientalist scholars (e.g. Bernard Lewis).

The Limits of Domination:

We have seen thus far how a combination of coercive and cultural mechanisms of control was successful, up to March 2011, in maintaining the regime's domination over Syria. Lisa Wedeen, however, explains that the hyperbole and the pretentiousness of the cult of Hafiz al-Assad invite transgression, which makes it limited and unstable; even risky (1999, pp. 84). In the eyes of most Syrians, it had no legitimacy; hence, *when conditions are suitable*, people could be "tipped" from

compliance to rebellion through little acts of transgression. Therefore Wedeen, borrowing from rational choice theories, suggests a "tipping model" to explain the possibility of a large-scale rebellion in Syria. According to this model, as long as one believes that very few Syrians are going to join them if they disobey, then they are likely to abstain from rebelling. Conversely, if one believes that many others are going to join them if they disobey, then they might dare to take a subversive action. Hence just as people reinforced each other's obedience to the cult, they might incite each other to disobey. However, Wedeen, writing in 1999, asserts that the transgressive practices of Syrians did not go beyond "demonstrating the shared conditions of unbelief", which was not only insufficient to "tip" people from obedience to protest (pp. 151-2), but also consistent with the cult's mechanism of control (the politics of unbelief).

Furthermore, the de-politicization of Syrians is arguably superficial and very prone to be reversed. Major political upheavals in the Arab region have in the past acted as catalysts for re-politicization. Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (and also during the second Palestinian Intifada, though to a lesser extent), some Syrians went to the streets to protest the war in demonstrations other than those organized by the government. The regime was relatively tolerant of these demonstrations in order to absorb the anger that many Syrians, especially young people and university students, felt over the invasion. However, after the abrupt fall of Baghdad with hardly any resistance, a number of disillusioned youth groups were formed out of the activist milieu of the anti-war demonstrations. The common philosophy behind these groups was that people in the Arab world became so alienated from their own countries that they would not even defend it against foreign invaders. Therefore, there was a need to re-build society from below by fighting corruption, raising awareness, and encouraging people to take initiatives without relying on the government. They did not hold any explicit anti-regime ideas, but they wanted to work independently.

The most famous of these groups was the one that came to be known as *Majmūʿat Shabāb Dārayā (*Daraya Youth Group), which was based in Daraya: a suburb of Damascus. This particular group had existed for some time before the war against Iraq, but its activities expanded during and after the war. They organized a campaign under the title of *ḥatta yughayyiru mā bi ʾanfusihim*[11] (until they change what is within themselves) to boycott American tobacco, fight bribery, and clean the streets.[12] Security agencies responded swiftly and arrested many of its members in May 2003, less than one month after the fall of Baghdad (al-Kurdi 2005). In the eyes of security agencies, such collectivities in the public sphere counteract the atomization fostered by the regime. Al-Haj Saleh (2011) has rightly stated that for the regime "society must remain *disintegrated, formless,* and *politically dead*. 'National unity', in the common vocabulary in Syria, means the total absence of political life." Apparently the regime was correct about its fears of such seemingly harmless civil activities: ex-members of this group (most notably Yahya Sharbaji and Osama Nassar) became the nucleus of the anti-regime protests in Daraya in the beginning of the current Syrian uprising.

These waves of political activism that surfaced in Syria after major political upheavals in the region expose the fragility of al-Assad's cult and the shallowness of its effects on Syrians, which is consistent with Wedeen's analysis, and also with what shall I propose in this article regarding the emergence of the Syrian uprising.

Preludes to the Uprising:

The first signs of dissidence in Syria that preceded the uprising echoed the events of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Starting from the 29th of January 2011, Syrian activists tried to organize a number of sit-ins in front of the Egyptian embassy in Damascus in solidarity with protestors against the regime of Husni Mubarak in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Concurrently with these sit-in attempts, there were calls on Facebook from unknown pages for a "Day on Rage" against the Syrian regime on the 5th of February, in the vein of the calls to protest against Egyptian police on the 25th of January in Egypt, which led to the eruption of the Egyptian revolution. The calls failed to generate any public protests, which prompted some commentators to describe Syria as a "Kingdom of Silence"[13] that would stay away from the uprisings sweeping the Arab world (Aljazeera English 2011). On the 17th of February, hundreds of people gathered in al-Hariqa square in Old Damascus to protest the beating of a shop owner by some policemen.[14] The protestors chanted *al-Shaʿb al-Sūrī ma byinzal* (Syrian people shall not be humiliated), which became one of the characteristic slogans of the Syrian uprising. This particular event was very unusual; Syrians had very rarely objected to police abuses, which were almost habitual, with a demonstration. This indicates that the way Syrians interact with their regime's coercive institutions began to transform profoundly.[15]

The signs of dissidence continued to surface in the following month. A sit-in in support of the Libyan uprising was organized in front of the Libyan embassy in Damascus on the 23rd of February. Moreover, anti-regime graffiti appeared on the walls of some public buildings in Damascus, Homs, and Darʿa, which was, again, something very rare to occur in Syria. The writer of this article lived in Syria for more than 20 years, and not once saw an anti-regime graffiti. Even if such an action had happened before; the committer, in all probability, wouldn't have been so keen to publicize their work, by posting it online for example. The reason behind avoiding deviant behavior is not only fear of the notorious security agencies, but also the cultural and psychological conditioning generated by al-Assad's cult. This is what made these little acts of transgression significant and indicative of a major transformation in political culture that was underway in Syria.

In Darʿa, a group of boys, some under 15 years old, were held by security authorities for scrabbling the enduring slogan of the Arab Spring, *people want to overthrow the regime*, on some walls in the city (Aljazeera.Net 2011). On the 15th of March, tens of people marched in the first organized demonstration calling for democracy and freedom in the heart of Damascus, which was followed in the subsequent day with a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Interior. These modest transgressive acts (modest in

size, but not in significance) culminated on the 18ᵗʰ of March when the first mass demonstration in Syria was staged in Darʿa calling for the release of the boys who had been arrested earlier. Security forces responded with live ammunition killing three protestors (BBC News 2011), the first to be killed in these events, which provoked demonstrations in many parts of Syria leading up to the outbreak of the uprising.

The connection between the events that paved the way to the uprising in Syria and the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt is unmistakable. This is confirmed by the accounts of the activists who were involved in the organization of these events; such as Suhair al-Atassi and Marwa al-Ghamyan, who asserted that immediately after the overthrow of Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia, they started thinking of a revolution coming soon to Syria that is inspired by the Tunisian model.

A "Tipping" Model of Rebellion:

Lisa Wedeen does not dedicate more half a page in her book to her "tipping model" of collective rebellion (1999, pp. 152-3). The model seems too simplistic to offer any satisfactory explanation of the eruption of the current uprising. Therefore, there is a need to expand it and improve it in order to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics that produced this uprising.

As mentioned above, the "tipping" model rests on the assumption that due to the general state of unbelief in al-Assad's cult, little transgressive practices might "tip" people from compliance to protest, provided that these acts convince them that others are willing to protest actively. The question to ask, however, is how, when, and on what basis would one who has lived for many years under the severely oppressive, hostile, and anti-political environment of "al-Assad's Syria"[16] be convinced, or at least positively hopeful, that many others may join them in a very risky action against the regime?

The answer to this question, I propose, lies in external factors, particularly from other Arab countries. We saw above that Syrians, although de-politicized, they (at least some of them) are prone to become politicized and mobilized in response to major crises and transformations within the Arab world. Al-Assad's regime, paradoxically, might be partly responsible for this tendency among Syrians. Thanks to its Baʿthist Arab nationalist propaganda and to its relentless efforts to suppress political opposition on the pretext that Syria is a "confrontation state" (*dawlat muwājaha*) with Israel; Syrians, it seems, remained sensitive to major political changes in the region, albeit passively most of the time. However, when the changes are so immense in their scope, such as the invasion of one country by USA or the overthrow of a dictator by a popular uprising; Syrians might escape their role as "extras" in the political theater of al-Assad's cult and become actively engaged in political action. Even though this political action was not initially targeting the regime itself, as with the case of the American invasion of Iraq, it carries a

subversive potential that could very easily turn against the regime "tipping" political life from obedience to rebellion. Had the American invasion of Iraq happened in 2010, for example, when Syrians had much better access to new media and technology, it might have very well, in my opinion, provoked more serious political unrest.

We argued above that the Syrian uprising erupted because the political shockwave caused by the fall of Ben Ali's and Mubarak's regimes has brought about fundamental changes in political culture in Syria. Now if we reverse the previous argument, would it remain possible? In other words, could have Syria triggered the Arab Spring? According to the model suggested earlier, this is highly improbable. The question proposed in the beginning of this section: "when, and on what basis would one who has lived for many years under the severely oppressive, hostile, and anti-political environment of "al-Assad's Syria" be convinced, or at least meaningfully hopeful, that others may join them in a very risky action against the regime?" appears to be unanswerable according to this "tipping" model. This does not imply, nonetheless, that such a scenario is impossible; it only implies that it is inconceivable within the scope of the suggested "tipping model".

Conclusion:

As it has been explained above, the Syrian regime has employed cultural mechanisms of control in addition to its coercive power. The most important of these mechanisms was a cult of personality that revolved around the figure of Hafiz al-Assad and his son Bashar after him. The purpose of the cult, as it has been explained above, was to atomize and de-politicize Syrians and neutralize any potential discontent. It functioned not by engendering ideological hegemony or legitimizing authority, but by forcing Syrians to act "as if" they believed in the cult. The pretentiousness and superficiality of the cult was both its strength and weakness towards transgression.

Although the cult had been generally successful, it proved to be vulnerable to external shocks coming from the Arab surrounding of Syria. The fall of Ben Ali's and Hosni Mubarak's regimes provoked a number of Syrians to challenge the regime through little subversive acts, which in turn caused a growing change in political culture. Thanks to these acts, many Syrians became aware that others are likely to join them if they engage in transgressive behavior, which enabled them to overcome their submissive, atomized, and de-politicized state and start a "chain reaction" that would lead eventually to "tipping" large sectors of Syrian society from submission to resistance. The Syrian uprising has thus declared the effective collapse of the cult and its hold over the majority of Syrian society. Nevertheless, without the external influence, it would be difficult, according to the "tipping model", to conceive a nationwide rebellion sweeping Syria.

Endnotes:

1 There are some commentators who object to the term "Arab Spring" on various grounds. This term, however, is used in this paper for convenience for the lack of a better alternative.

2 In a famous sketch from the 2004 Syrian TV series *Mā fī ʾAmal* (No Hope), which regularly features two characters drinking maté and making witty remarks on a different topic each episode, one character ponders about "the revolution that is yet to come" and "who is going to lead it?" He contemplates that the future leader might be "here among us" or "in an unknown corner." He goes on to say that the leader could still be "a young child in school" or "maybe he hasn't even been born yet." "That's it!" the other character exclaims confidently (Salamandra 2012). The episode can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX40zrZKwCw

3 The use of the term "Arab world" in this article is not intended to imply that inhabitants of this region are homogeneously "Arabs" in the national or ethnic meaning of the word. However, the populations of this region, regardless of how they identify themselves nationally or ethnically, generally share what we may call a common "contemporary Arab culture" (Hammond 2005).

4 Without a doubt, each of these networks was selective about which protests to support or focus on and which not. However, their semi-official attitude is to support Arab nations in their uprisings against their "unjust" rulers. For a succinct demonstration of this attitude, the reader may refer this promotional video (promo) from al-Jazeera channel (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xosQ7Oh5pK8), which presents the Arab Spring as a series of consecutive revolutions with each country, starting from Tunisia, passing the revolution to the next; suggesting that it is going soon to take over the whole Arab World.

5 The Syrian regime, since its inception in 1970, has been keen to dismantle any societal institution (be it a political party, professional union, civil society organization, or private enterprises) or any form of collectivity in the public sphere that is not subject to its direct control or co-optation, even when it did not oppose it. Therefore, with the beginning of the uprising, Syrian activists found themselves without any institutional support inside the country, so they had to make their cultural production individually at a very grassroots level rather than institutionally.

6 For example see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pi3AKPEvH84

7 For an example of placards from Kfar Nabel, see
http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=356226494399829&set=a.356226474399831.81179.3
26832054005940&type=1&theater

8 Syrian protestors often refer to supporters of Bashar al-Assad derogatorily as *minḥibbak-jiyye,* which could be translated roughly as "we-love-you-ists."

9 Vogue magazine published an infamous article titled "Asma al-Assad: a Rose in the Desert" just three weeks before the eruption of the Syrian uprising and the subsequent bloody crackdown by the regime. This article is a prime example of such "marketing" campaigns that aimed at polishing up the image of Bashar al-Assad and his family in the Western world and also in Syria. The article has been withdrawn from Vogue's website, but an archived copy can be retrieved at
http://web.archive.org/web/20110225204927/http://www.vogue.com/vogue-daily/article/asma-
al-assad-a-rose-in-the-desert/

10 Heavy metal subculture in Syria, despite being non-political, was fought and persecuted by the regime; not because the regime wanted to defend public morality against "Satanic" music, but because it was a form of collective bonding in the public sphere that was not subject to its direct control (Magout 2010).

11 This is an excerpt from the Qurʾanic verse 13:11, and also the title of a book by Syrian Islamic thinker Jawdat Saʿid, whose ideas of nonviolent activism influenced the group.

12 For a video showing one of the activities of the group, see
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ByJ9XKoLQ0

[13] The term "Kingdom of Silence" was first used by Syrian veteran political dissident Riyadh al-Turk in an article that he published shortly after the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000.

[14] For a video of this demonstration, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NykGjfKn3TU

[15] There were some reports from al-Hasaka—a governorate in the far north-east of Syria with a Kurdish majority—that a man set himself on fire in January 2011 in protest of poor living conditions (reminiscent of Mohammad Bouʿaizi in Tunisia). There were also some reports of following demonstrations there. However, these events, for some reason, were not widely publicized.

[16] One of the most repeated slogans of al-Assad's cult is *Sūriya al-Assad*, which implies that Syria, the country, belongs to al-Assad.

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