

Syrian Diaspora: Cultivating a New Public Space Consciousness

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Policy Brief • No. 35 • August 2011



Middle East Institute

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Abstract

The Syrian government under both Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad has long pursued a strategy of intimidation and violence against political dissidents, while imposing legal and security structures that inhibit the growth of civil society. The resulting profound vacuum of civil society has made organizing for political change, both inside and outside of Syria, extremely difficult. Furthermore, this overall strategy of intimidation has led to “brain drain” as large numbers of highly educated Syrians flee to other countries. A recent report on disappearances in Syria, compiled by the Transitional Justice in the Arab World Project, specifically omitted the names of interviewees and altered personal backgrounds to avoid identification of sources. This Policy Brief builds on these themes, and presents a summary of interviews conducted by the author in which interviewees provided their real names as a conscious act of defiance of intimidation.

Syrian Diaspora: Cultivating a New Public Space and Consciousness

For almost 40 years, the Syrian Ba'thist regime/al-Asad family restricted Syrians' public space to develop civil society. This restriction has not been limited to Syrian territory, but in fact has in some ways spread to Syrians immigrating to the US. If one asked a Syrian American — one who was born here to Syrian immigrants — to discuss how to better engage politically and civically in Syria, they would often provide vague answers or be unwilling to disclose their names, fearing possible reprisal. However, the "Syrian Spring" is cultivating a new consciousness of public space: Syrian Americans are choosing to link their names to their stories and opinions as an act of defiance. In interviews I conducted with 26 Syrian Americans, the actions of 20 of the interviewees who specifically chose to share their names along with their stories of mistreatment or intimidation (listed below) represent their goal of signaling that their identity, name, and experiences factor into civil society and operate separately from the regime. For these interviewees, their experiences with imprisonment, disappearances, and torture will inform how they reengage with Syria's civil society as they engage online and participate publicly as expatriates.

The literature that documents the regime's human rights abuses against its own people is scant. Radwan Ziadeh, the Director for the Damascus Human Rights Centre, undertook the effort to catalogue abuses for the report of the Transitional Justice in Arab World Project (TJAWP): *Years of Fear: The Enforced Disappeared in Syria*. Although *Years of Fear* exemplifies the most comprehensive report, the authors "withheld the names of those interviewed and have changed some facts to disguise their identities," and concealed the names of the researchers and interviewers to protect them for security reasons.¹ As Robert Fisk warns, "This does not disqualify his report ... This does not, to put it mildly, bestow total confidence on the report. [But] the Syrian authorities will no doubt seize upon this to debunk its contents."² In the vein of *Years of Fear*, this piece catalogues a sample of the human rights violations by the al-Asad regime, and attributes testimony to identity. The difference is exemplified by Asma Akhras, a second generation Syrian American. Asma used to struggle with her identity and name since she shares her name with Bashar al-Asad's wife. Asma states, "I own me — my identity. I own my name; they [the al-Asads] don't own it. They don't own Syria."

In a similar vein as the TJAW report mentioned above, the Syrians and Syrian Americans I interviewed represent a growing trend within the Syrian community to collectively narrate how they engage with their communities and make human rights violations public. Of the 26 participants, 20 specifically chose to share their whole name to rebuff intimidation tactics facilitated by the Syrian government. This piece attempts to outline the counter-response by Syrian Americans in helping to revitalize Syrian civil society. Perhaps Syrian Americans' grassroots organizational and online efforts in the US also signal the next phase of a developing civil society — where Syrian American public space extends back into Syria and raises public consciousness. The next phase of Syrian society's needs, especially the rebuilding of political parties and humanitarian assistance, might resonate more among the diaspora communities than with more established, non-Syrian NGOs. Since the al-Asad regime has largely restricted access to reporting from inside the country, non-Syrian NGOs have not benefited from on-the-ground access to news and information.

1. Robert Fisk, "Ghosts from the Past: Syria's 30 Years of Fear," *The Independent*, June 24, 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-ghosts-from-the-past-syrias-30-years-of-fear-2008757.html>.

2. Fisk, "Ghosts from the Past."

Table 1: Testimony Catalogue of Syrian Government's Human Rights Violations

Syrian American without Fear	Incident
Mohyeddin Kassar, Economist and Activist	Brother and sister were interrogated at office and home in Damascus. Two friends imprisoned during the 1980s, and likely died; no death certificates provided to families.
Talal Sunbulli, Physician and President of Syrian American Council	In 1980–1981, his brother-in-law, a newly engaged engineer, was kidnapped/disappeared, tortured, and died in prison. In 1981, a physician colleague from Damascus was disappeared.
Mohamed Chafik, Syrian American Council	15–20 acquaintances detained due to wrongful accusations or affiliation with Muslim Brotherhood.
Mouhanad Abdulhamid, Student and Activist	His father, also an activist, was imprisoned, interrogated, tortured, and died in prison. His uncle, an activist, was arrested and detained for one year; he was subsequently exiled. His mother and stepfather, Ammar Abdulhamid (author & former Fellow at Brookings Institution), founders of the Syrian Human Rights organization Tharwa Foundation were detained, monitored, and exiled.
Salwa Sunbulli, Community Organizer and 2 nd generation Syrian American	Father blacklisted and thus from re-entering Syria; Detained by authorities in 2009.
Murhaf Jouejati, Professor of Middle East Studies at National Defense University, adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute, and Syrian Specialist	A relative was detained and tortured. A friend was detained and tortured.
Bara Sarraj, Postdoctoral Fellow and former political prisoner	Was detained, imprisoned for over 12 years, and tortured.
Yasser Tabarra, Attorney, Civil Rights Activist, and 1 st generation Syrian American	A family friend was interrogated and imprisoned for 16 years.
Imad Salaam, Computer Engineer and 1 st generation Syrian American	A neighbor was detained for 2 weeks. A classmate in Engineering was kidnapped/disappeared.
Rafif, Activist and 1 st generation Syrian American	At least a dozen friends in the activist community were detained, interrogated, and imprisoned.
Omar Shishakly, Activist and 1 st generation Syrian American	Acquaintance's father tortured and killed.
Nour Douchi, Activist and Founder of Syrian Hawk, blog/watchdog site	Blacklisted by Syrian Security Forces (SSF). A female friend was detained, intimidated, and interrogated.
Mohammad Khawam, Physician and Member of Syrian American Emergency Task Force	45 of his classmates at Aleppo University in 1983 were killed or fled Syria after the Hama Massacre.
Mohamed T. Khairullah, Mayor in New Jersey and Member of Syrian Emergency Task Force	Grandfather, an imam: intimidated and interrogated. Father, an imam: intimidated and interrogated.
Dema Alzein, 2 nd Generation Syrian American and Community Organizer	Relative and his best friend detained in 2011; relative managed to find asylum in Egypt — friend disappeared. The same year, their neighbor's son was shot during demonstration in Homs; corpse left in front of house.

Zaher Sahloul, Physician and Active member of Syrian American Medical Society	Classmate at University of Damascus: Disappeared.
Mehyar Al-Zayat, IT professional and Activist	Father intimidated/threatened.
Ala Basatnah, Syrian American Society	Met a former political prisoner through activist work.
Nibrah Maleh	Father was detained for political organizing activities, relocated to US.
Walid Al-Bouami	Detained as political prisoner.
Nour Quadri	Father was detained, jailed twice, and tortured.
Hushyar, living in Qameshly, Syria and communicating via Skype	Arrested and imprisoned.
Wael	Uncle was imprisoned and tortured for 15 years. Father's cousin was imprisoned and tortured for 15 years.
Ghazwan	Jailed and tortured before fleeing to Michigan, USA.
Nadia	Her neighbor, the local Imam's son, was tortured and shot since the "Day of Rage" protests began.
Sameera	Family described a mass grave in South Dara'a, which has been surrounded since April.
Randa	Her family, living in Syria, was approached by "hired thugs" and told they knew that she [Randa] was living in the US and to keep quiet.

Source: Interviews conducted by the author at a May 24, 2011 protest outside of the Syrian Embassy in Washington, DC, at regular Saturday protests outside of the White House in March–April 2011, and in person and over the phone with expatriates in Chicago and Virginia in May 2011.

TAKING NAMES LEADS TO BRAIN DRAIN

As Jouejati, Sunbulli, Kassar, Chafik, Douchi, Akras, and Sahloul asserted in their interviews with me, the policies of the al-Asad regime are directly correlated to high rates of “brain drain,” or high rates of emigration (forced and voluntary) of skilled and educated workers. This occurs in two ways: 1) The *Mukhabarat* (Syrian Intelligence Service) and security forces actively and directly “disappear” potential dissenting voices; and 2) this practice of intimidation has an intimidating and chilling effect on other members of Syria’s “proto-civil” society. Thus, this policy of intimidation has both active and passive effects.

Under normal circumstances, young educated men who excel in their studies might be selected for professional development, or leadership training programs. In Syria, however, educated physicians, lawyers, engineers, and other members of the intellectual elite seem to be targeted for harassment rather than promotion. Thousands of Syrian professionals and intellectuals disappear or undergo exile — forced and self-selecting. As Mohamed Chafiq states, “The regime, by design, facilitates ‘brain drain.’”

All interviewees assert that Syrian Security Forces (SSF) and the *Mukhabarat* periodically stopped and questioned young men, ages 18–40, on their way to morning prayers. Syrian American Council (SAC) member Yasser Tabbara explained that a family friend was imprisoned at age 25 for 16 years because he was falsely accused of having ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. His pregnant wife was not allowed to visit him during his prison sentence. Khairullah shared that his grandfather, an imam, was told by SSF that he and his father were not welcome in Aleppo during Hafiz al-Asad’s crackdown on those practicing Muslims perceived as affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Two decades later it is no

surprise that the Syrian regime has prohibited anyone from proclaiming *Allahu Akbar* [God is Greatest] in public.

Syrian American Council President Dr. Sunbulli fled Syria in 1978 and was prohibited from returning for 30 years, and his family's home in Syria was raided. During his separation, he could only visit family members that were able to travel to Jordan to meet him. Even when he visited in 2009, the Syrian authorities demanded that Sunbulli file for permission to visit and undergo questioning.

Sunbulli recounted how the SSF kidnapped Dr. Tawfiq Barak, a colleague, from his own home. Barak represents the over 17,000–25,000 estimated as having been “disappeared” in Syria during the Hafiz al-Asad years.³ The practice of “disappearing” predates the infamous Hama Massacre of 1982, which resulted in the murder of 10,000–30,000 Syrians. The number detained during the rule of Bashar al-Asad is growing, but currently stands at 93 according to the Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2010 Report.⁴ As of August 25, 2011, human rights groups state that over 10,000 people are reportedly missing or been placed in custody since the protests began.⁵

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Interviewee Asma Akhras described how her father, Dr. Abdulbari Akhras, returned to Syria to deliver pediatric care to the children of his city, Homs. The al-Asad regime subsequently imprisoned and tortured her father without documenting the reason or providing evidence. Dr. Akhras' torture involved repeated beatings to his legs with electrical cords. As a young girl, Asma remembers seeing the flesh torn from her dad's legs upon his release. Interviewee Nibras Maleh relocated to Florida from Syria after his father, a justice of the peace, was imprisoned for trying to organize lawyers to stand up for civil liberties.

Syrian intellectuals, including the prolific author Ammar Abdulhamid, were forced into exile after co-founding the Tharwa Foundation with his wife. In 1983, economist Mohyeddin Kassar left Syria seeking a better life without fear, like many Syrian Americans. For a time, he was able to visit Syria periodically. Then, in 2005, Kassar started to write Arabic op-eds examining the regime's politics and policies and was interviewed by *Al-Jazeera*. Consequently, his family in Damascus received a visit from the SSF, and Kassar was blacklisted and prevented from returning to Syria.

OPPOSITION AND INITIATIVES: RUPTURES IN CIVIL SOCIETY

Opposition is tolerated neither within nor outside of Syria. Activists of Syrian descent are frequently targeted within the United States. According to Syrian American activists, the Syrian Embassy in Washington, DC photographs activists who have been participating in grassroots organizing and protesting at demonstrations in the US. Omar Shishakly, another first generation Syrian American, helps organize his community in Texas to condemn the human rights violations, which have escalated since the first protests in Dara'a on March 15, 2011. Omar shares his name with the ophthalmologist and activist Dr. Shishakly, who in 1980 wrote a letter to Bashar al-Asad (who was also an ophthalmologist) pleading for freedom and the release of political prisoners. Dr. Shishakly was murdered that year after having his eyes removed by torture.

Internally, the al-Asad regime has actively worked to suppress civil society formation both individually and collectively. According to the HRW 2010 report *A Wasted Decade*, the Syrian government has imprisoned at least 30 known political opposition leaders and human rights activists to stifle Syrian's civil society.⁶ For example, the regime imprisoned a former

3. Radwan Ziadeh, ed., “Years of Fear: The Enforced Disappeared in Syria,” (Washington, DC: Transitional Justice in the Arab World Project, 2010), p. 28.

4. *A Wasted Decade*, Human Rights Watch, 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2010/07/16/wasted-decade-0>.

5. “Syria — Protests (2011),” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2011, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/syria/index.html>.

6. *A Wasted Decade*.

member of parliament, Riad al-Seif, and Dr. Kamal Labwani, a physician and founder of the *Syrian Democratic Liberal Gathering*. According to HRW, both al-Saif and Labwani are serving prison terms for publicly criticizing the authorities. Human rights activist Muhannad Al-Hasani was sentenced to three years imprisonment for delivering a human rights report before the State Security Court.⁷ Al-Hasani is the President of the Syrian Organization for Human Rights (*Swasiya*).

Swasiya, along with organizations like the Tharwa Foundation (which works to document abuses of civil and human rights), are key components of civil society development, but continue to be refused permission to officially register as non-profit organizations. Thus, they may not operate freely in Syria and must seek outside funding. The Jamal Atassi Forum (JAF), formed in during the “Damascus Spring” of 2000 by Suhair Atassi, Riad al-Saif, and other intellectuals, was banned in 2001 because of its reformist pro-democracy goals. Currently, the JAF operates via its Facebook page and other networking tools to engage its supporters on common goals such as ending emergency laws in Syria.

INDOCTRINATING FEAR AND COMPLICITY

The Syrian government’s legal documents and regulations, in contrast with its accepted practice and “security measures” present a cognitive dissonance: the regime’s legal language criminalizes torture and detention while in reality these actions are routine, as delineated in *Years of Fear*’s legal analysis of human rights violations. The culture of intimidation remains consistent from Hafiz al-Asad to his son. For 40 years, torture and “disappearances” have functioned as the Syrian regime’s tools to suppress dissidence. Although the Syrian Constitution prohibits torture under Article 28, both presidents sidestepped this law by arguing that political prisoners present a security threat and thereby hold vital information that must be obtained for state security. This practice is exemplified in the testimony of Bara Sarraj, who was imprisoned for 12 years without evidence presented against him. Security guards repeatedly beat him with whips and iron bars after transferring him from detention into the infamous political prison of Tadmor in Palmyra. He witnessed his prison mates’ executions. He was only freed after the intervention of Amnesty International in 1995.

The al-Asad regime facilitated the elementary school program “Pioneers” for boys and girls. Pioneers indoctrinated pre-teen students by instructing them on how to be “good Ba’thists, and conferring certain privileges,” reflected Dr. Jouejati, Professor of Middle East Studies at the US National Defense University. Interviewee Nour Douchi explained that the indoctrination process formalizes as young men enter mandatory two year military service, which initiates in high school.

Kassar retold a popular dark joke: “A general asks for the best high school math teacher in Syria. He dispatches his men to apprehend the teacher. They detain him for a week, where the teacher is beaten and asked about who else he knows before being tortured to death. The general asks his men about the teacher, to which the officers proudly respond that ‘he’s been taken care of and has been in our custody for a week!’ Unfortunately, the general wanted the man alive to tutor his son in math.” The nature of detention and torture is so procedural and bureaucratic, that the robotic tendencies of the *Mukhabarat* only seem to worsen the security dilemma in Syria.

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The challenge in conducting these interviews reflects the troubles afflicting diaspora communities that have fled repressive regimes. For example, three unidentified callers threatened Dr. Kassar to cease all his activities involving Syria. Like other activists, he has received emails threatening his life. As a result, he reported these intimidation tactics to the Chicago Police Department. Some interviewees insisted on sharing only their first names, since many of their immediate families still reside in Syria.

7. *World Report 2011: Syria*, Human Rights Watch (2011), <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2011/syria>.

DIASPORA COMMUNITIES: PROTO-CIVIL SOCIETY OUTLETS

Diaspora communities in both the US and UK have mobilized to echo Syria's civilian protests. Beyond mobilizing in the moment, diaspora communities may influence the pace at which proto-civil societies may mobilize into more sustained, collective voices that comprise a role within civil society. According to the World Bank, the term 'civil society' refers to the

wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organizations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) therefore refer to a wide of array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.⁸

Based on the above definition, civil society that lacks indigenous faith-based organizations, community groups, and labor unions also lack the voices to express the interests of those members. In the case of Syria, where there are no organized labor unions and faith-based groups are banned, there are no indigenous civil society outlets for expatriates. As such, diaspora communities address the civil society gap by coalescing around other interests, like philanthropic institutions and humanitarian relief efforts.

Moreover, key Syrian human rights activists have mobilized outside Syria to operate within their new public spaces — both virtually and physically — through reform organizations. For example, the National Initiative for Change (NIC) represents a spectrum of Syrian activist group members and operates as an umbrella group.⁹ An umbrella group marks one virtual step towards civil society engagement. NIC specifically calls for two actions: 1) it requests that the Syrian military should lead a transition period, similar to Egypt's current situation; and 2) it implores the international community to expand the sanctions against 13 political figures as well as security forces involved in violence against protestors. The fact that NIC does not take any religious position may provide a sustainable model, or even an outlet, for local Syrian opposition groups to express their grievances.

Diaspora communities do not limit themselves to political opposition groups. They also civically engage by organizing humanitarian missions and organizations. For example, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) was formulated as a secular, apolitical organization. SAMS was founded by many first-generation Syrian physicians who recognized that many Syrians outside of the public sector could not gain access to basic healthcare needs and that advanced medical training in the US produced an outflow of Syrian medical professionals to Europe and North America (in addition to the security-related "brain drain" mentioned earlier). As a result, SAMS received permission to directly deliver humanitarian and health services and initiated a telemedicine program for Syrian physicians to consult with their US colleagues.

In the wake of Syria's protests, SAMS expanded its mission to deliver healthcare and supplies to the increasing number of Syrians seeking refuge in Turkey. Since SAMS mobilized within weeks to address Turkey's pressing Syrian refugee problem, perhaps SAMS represents one track for civil society initiatives to take root within Syria if local Syrians assume ownership of the efforts by way of participation and engagement.

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8. *Defining Civil Society*, The World Bank, <http://go.worldbank.org/4CE7W046K0>.

9. Katherine Zoepf, "Long Repressed in Syria, an Internal Opposition Takes Shape," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>.

MOVING AHEAD

Currently, the US offers one outlet for strengthening Syria's civil society through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). However, MEPI hones in on only the political facet of civil society by offering grants regarding "Participatory Politics" — civil society development includes many other elements. Post Bashar al-Asad, political reform will still not address the social and economic challenge of brain drain. Humanitarian assistance and economic reform will require diaspora support. The International Red Crescent Society will not be able to address humanitarian needs alone; nor do they have the mission to address the economic and political reforms post-Bashar. Diaspora communities will have to shift from virtual, online participation to on-the-ground support.

Perhaps Syrian Americans' grassroots organizational and online efforts in the US also signal the next phase of a developing civil society — where Syrian American public space extends back into Syria. Documenting names and testimonies, as done here and in *Years of Fear*, illustrates the first step in moving from the individual action to the collective diaspora community in demanding government accountability. The second and third steps, advocacy and legal action, are already underway as the American-based Syrian Emergency Task Force supports a US civil lawsuit to set the precedent of using the US legal system to hold the Syrian government accountable: *Abdul Aziz, et al. v. The Syrian Arab Republic*. Meanwhile, the Syrian diaspora will have to undertake humanitarian and other civil society initiatives that move beyond the al-Asad regime and hold whatever government comes next accountable to the beginnings of a civil society in Syria and beyond.