Sara Badoura, Amman, University of Jordan. sbadoura@gmail.com Topic: Radicalism and

Extremist Movements.

The Breakdown of the Syrian Opposition Movement

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Abstract

This paper aims to deconstruct the Syrian opposition movement which cannot be categorized under one "intellectual and political rubric" (Abu Rumman 2013, p.10). By relying on secondary sources of literature addressing Islamic groups in Syria, this paper seeks to investigate the makeup of the Syrian opposition movement, the major extremist groups in Syria, and the degree in which the revolution may have been hijacked by such groups or could be in the future. This paper offers a contextualization of the representation of political Islam in Syria and demonstrates the key players and their ideological and political agendas. It argues that Syria is a highly specific case in the Arab Spring governed by different historical, political and social dynamics, all of which ultimately impact the formation and mobilization of different Islamists and extremists in Syria. It aims to demonstrate a cause-consequential relationship between the revolution and Islamic groups in Syria and vice-versa which is necessary for understanding the course of the Syrian revolution and its future. Finally this paper concludes that unless international intervention occurs soon, a hijacking of the opposition movement by extremists may eventually take place and overshadow the true social cause of the revolution.

Introduction

It's been three years since a wave of popular movements spread rapidly across North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) regions shattering long-standing autocratic regimes. The world marveled at what was viewed as an Arab spring or awakening and perhaps finally, a new age of change and democracy in the region (Phillips 2012). Three years later, such optimism falls short especially with regards to its course in Syria and massive cost. What was once a peaceful uprising transformed into an armed revolution after being received violently by security forces. Today, the brutal civil war with sectarian dimensions has left more than 146,000 people dead, according to the Syrian Observatory

for Human Rights (Reuters 2014). Al Assad's refusal of standing down makes it difficult to speak of a future post-dictatorship regime compared to other MENA regions. This article emphasizes the uniqueness of the Syrian case due to Assad's regime response, a history of clashes and bans on Islamic groups and its ethno-sectarian diversity which all contribute to the internal conflict (Abu Rumman 2013). It has become clear that different Islamic trends and movements contributing to the opposition and revolution are causing great confusion and misguidance about where it is heading (Ibid.). Thus, this paper stresses the importance of distinguishing between these trends which have converged in the context of a violent civil war (O'Bagy 2012). In addition, such a distinction is crucial for facilitating international support which has thus far failed the Syrian people (Ibid.). This article relies heavily on Elizabeth O'Bagy's framework for understanding Islamists in Syria and their willingness to support a modern-state system. However, it demonstrates and emphasizes the cause-consequence dynamics of both the impact of the revolution on Islamists in Syria and Islamic groups' impact on the revolution and its social dimension. Viewing Islamists and the Syrian revolution as having such a cause-consequential relationship is necessary for understanding the course of the Syrian revolution and its future. The following sections discuss the impact of a history of repression on Islamists, the impact of the revolution on Islamists and vice versa. The makeup of the opposition is also discussed along with the implications of their presence on the future of Syria.

Section 1- A History of Repression and Conflict

Islamists in Syria have previously come into conflict with the Syrian regime, most notably in 1963, and during the Islamic protests which took place between1976-82 in an

attempt to overthrow former Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad. The Syrian Muslim

Brotherhood (SMB), one of the oldest Islamic political groups in Syria had initially

begun its quest of introducing Islamic values into the social and political realm

peacefully, through education and reform in 1963. However, they were received with

force by the Syrian government under Hafez Al-Assad and were outlawed in 1964. This

led to the radicalization of some of its members and helped incite uprisings and strikes

which led to the 1976 Islamic insurgency (Abu Rumman 2014, p. 8-23). The SMB

divided itself into 2 camps due to differences in policy and strategies for regime

interaction: a more moderate Damascus wing stood against a more radical Aleppo wing.

The legacy of such a tension between moderate and more radical Islamist approaches can

be seen today among the Syrian population where the northern and northwestern

provinces are essentially more conservative with Sunnis compared to Damascus (Ibid.).

In addition, Bashar and the regime officials belong to the Alawite minority sect which

further complicates the Syrian conflict (Ibid.). After a failed attempt at reconciling both

wings of the SMB, Marwan Hadeed founded a new group called the Fighting Vanguard

(FV). He was joined by many members of the Aleppo wing and the FV would soon be

wrongly considered as the armed wing of the SMB (Ibid.). In 1979, the FV declared war

on the Syrian regime and carried out a series of attacks on government buildings and

institutions. It is worth noting that some of the tactics it employed against the Syrian

government such as car bombings can be seen today in the current revolution and are

perhaps, wrongly associated with Al Qaeda (AQ) which actually utilized such patterns of

attacks well after the FV (O'Bagy 2012, p. 11-12). In 1982, the FV along with some of

the armed SMB members mostly from the Aleppo wing clashed with the regime in Hama

and ultimately led to the Hama Massacre. The SMB while not responsible for the attacks leading up to the Hama massacre received the blame and are until this very day, questioned by the Syrian population (Ibid., p. 12). The 1980s marked a period of great repression on any Islamic movements or brands of Political Islam which were not in line with the internal and external policies of the Syrian regime. These included the SMB which received an explicit ban and the Salafists as well (Abu Rumman 2013, p. 14). The Islamic group members who were not jailed had left the country, worked in secrecy or simply waited for the opportunity to come to the fore. When the opportunity presented itself with the Syrian uprisings, there was no clear ideological framework by which to identify these Islamic groups due to the ban on Islamic political trends or institutions prior to the current revolution. The majority of the groups who presented themselves had to reconstruct their deconstructed frameworks due to regime policies described earlier or build new ones (Ibid., p.15). This led to misapprehensions regarding their ideology and goals.

Since the start of the revolution in Syria, al-Assad and his regime officials insisted that the wave of revolutions which spread to his country were the cause of foreign-supported terrorists and extreme jihadists and not an Arab Spring. In an interview with Addounia TV on August 29 in 2012, he even denied the existence of a civil protest with claims of a conspiracy to justify his violence towards the revolution (O'bagy 2012, p. 9). In the past, the FV's violent regime confrontations did in fact give the state no choice but to respond in violence as well. However, it is clear that the roles played by Islamists in the past differ greatly from now and the uprising was led by peaceful locals against autocracy and not by Islamists or the FV (Ibid., p. 10). Nonetheless, as the violence continues, there

appears to be an emergence of a Salafi-Jihadist opposition which is deterring prospects

for international intervention and helping justify Bashar's violence (O'bagy 2013). A last

point which needs to be stated is that Bashar's words ring true to a certain extent. The

majority of the jihadist components present on the Syrian ground today are the result of

the Syrian regime's legacy of sponsoring foreign groups labeled as terrorists for its use as

a tool for foreign policy to threaten Israel and Arab neighbors. The Syrian intelligence is

known to have kept relations with some groups providing them operational and logistical

support. As of 2011, these groups turned against the regime who was once an ally and are

providing support to the few local jihadists (Ibid., p13). Taking all this into consideration,

the historical repression of Islamists along with the violent reception of the revolution has

made it difficult to distinguish between political Islamists of moderate nature looking for

peaceful reform and Salafi-jihadists who are proponents of armed struggle and envision a

global Islamist agenda (Ibid., p.10). The next section identifies the different Islamists and

their respective agendas in order to better understand the opposition groups.

Section 2- The Opposition Movement: A Closer Look

   Throughout the course of the Syrian revolution, there has been a gradual increase in

the role of mosques and preachers along with the use of Islamic phrases and slogans in

demonstrations. Symbols and names of armed groups of the opposition have been used

and are the source of great confusion for observers of the revolution (Abu Rumman 2013,

p.9). The Syrian revolution has shown both Islam's spiritual and symbolic role which

many local revolutionaries use as a refuge, and Islam's political and ideological role

which is adopted by some groups of the opposition (Ibid.). Expressions used by known

Islamists come from an entirely different ideology and objective compared to those used

by local revolutionaries. While they share the same public space, they have different

political agendas and are in need of identification to separate fact from myth in the Syrian

revolution. Furthermore, many individuals who joined the ranks of the armed groups after

the eminence of violence lacked political, cultural and intellectual frameworks. While the

armed groups offer indoctrinating knowledge, they focus on military training. The

relationship between the groups and the members is of a temporary nature, a bond created

under the context of civil war and forced self-defense (Ibid., p.9,15). From a different

perspective, the revolution allowed such groups to appear in the first place. In addition,

Islamic groups' historical repression and punishment along with the sectarian dimensions

of the society and the conditions of violence pushed them to take the stance of armed

revolt since peaceful reform is not an option (Ibid., p.15). Consequently, the conditions

under which these groups presented themselves have caused misunderstandings about the

nature of the Syrian revolution, have justified Bashar's narrative and prevented

international intervention. This paper stresses on this cause-consequential relationship

between the revolution and the formation of Islamic groups and the Islamic groups and

the course of the revolution itself wherein, each is altered by the other and will continue

to be unless international intervention occurs soon. In addition, not all Islamists can be

labeled as extremists and unwilling to cooperate within a modern state-system because of

the use of certain slogans or due to their resort to violence.

Islamism is the term used to describe an array of political beliefs stemming from

Islam. It is characterized by a belief that Islamic principles must provide the foundation

for politics, the state and society for correct implementation. However, many Islamists

such as the SMB believe that Islam is compatible with democracy and pluralism. The

SMB's political agenda supports democratic elections and political freedoms in a state

which also observes Sunni principles in its legislation. Some factions of the SMB differ

in their beliefs and this points to the diversity of Islamic political beliefs and values

(O'Bagy 2012, p.17). Salafists and Islamists cannot be used interchangeably. Salafists

believe that the Holy Quran, the Hadith and the consensus of approved Islamic

scholarship are enough to build a social framework. They follow a very literal reading of

the Quran and seek to establish an Islamic Caliphate and reject modern political systems

and values such as equal rights for women and minorities. They consider any opposition

to their beliefs as heresy and display enmity towards other "heretical" sects (Ibid.).

However, the Arab Spring has helped many Salafists to question their rejection of

modern political process and have participated in elections throughout the MENA

regions. This led to the formation of a new Salafi branch: Salafi-Islahi (reform) and the

more conservative one is described as Salafi-Jihadi. Reform Salafis believe in changing

society through preaching and education and understand that in order to achieve their

goal of establishing an Islamic state governed by Sharia law; they must work within a

modern political system abiding by state laws (Ibid.). Salafi-Jihadists (SJ) believe that

they must engage in militant jihad in order to achieve their goal of an Islamic state and an

Islamic Caliphate. This is the ideology of groups like AQ and Syria's homegrown SJ

movement Jabhat-Nusra (Ibid., p.18). The civil war in Syria has made it difficult for

observers to distinguish between proponents of political reform and those of armed jihad

(Ibid.). The majority of the opposition groups in Syria can be said to be made up of

secularist- religious nationalists such as those of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and their

armed groups. Most of the opposition is composed of local revolutionaries of Sunni majority fighting for their rights and their country as well and resort to Islam's spiritual and symbolic purpose. They adopt an all-inclusive secular agenda in hopes to attract minorities as well (Ibid., p.19). Groups such as Suqour Al-Sham fight under the banner of FSA, but are not secular in nature and envision a state governed by a modern interpretation of Sharia without imposing it on society, however. They are not Salafi-Jihadists and do not seek to establish an Islamic Caliphate. Foreign fighters comprised of mainly youths from many regions fight in the name of jihad, in the spirit of brotherhood, but do not believe in a global jihadist ideology (Ibid). The Umma Brigade, a Libyan Islamic group has received harsh criticism but cannot be considered as Salafi-Jihadist either as they believe that it is their duty to fight in the name of Jihad to help their Syrian Muslim brothers. They too do not believe in a global jihadist ideology and along with other foreign fighters, are likely to leave Syria and return to their homelands once the conflict is over (Ibid., p.20). The Syrian rebel groups are generally reluctant to accept foreign fighters but have accepted the Umma Brigade and accept fighters of radical nature in times of desperation and this shows the Syrian rebels' persistence on a people's revolution (Ibid, p.25). According to Syrian Intelligence, there are 200 AQ operatives in Syria including some foreign fighters, Iraqi jihadists and Syrian recruits. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) are supporting the violence in Syria by providing light weapons and explosive experts however, their presence is too small and they are most likely to focus their actions against the Iraqi government. The prospects for AQ expanding its networks in Syria remain open (Ibid., p.30). The jihadist groups comprise a small faction of the opposition approximately 10% (Benotman and

Naseraldin, p1). Jabhat Nusra (JN) is a group which has been gaining popularity and follows AQ's jihadist ideology. It has used AQ iconography and there are suspected JN ties with AQ which is believed to have helped JN with its operational capacity. It is responsible for over 15 attacks in Syria and its strength has drawn local revolutionaries who do not necessarily share its jihadist ideology but are frustrated with the weakness of other groups. It has also recently demonstrated a shift in tactics where it refrained from carrying out certain operations due to the presence of civilians in the vicinity (O'bagy 2013.p.33-37). It is important to note that JN although a minority part of the opposition, represents a greater threat to the future of Syria and the prospects of international support as it represents a domestic platform for AQ ideology compared to a few AQ operatives making use of the instability and working far from the conflict (Ibid., p.38).

Conclusion: Implications of Growing Extremists on the Syrian Revolution

The above account shows that the emergence of Salafi-Jihadist groups such as JN while small is growing and is worrisome to a certain extent especially with regards to its AQ associations. JN and AQ's influence and reach have been exaggerated due to an increased mainstreaming of AQ iconography and slogans in the Syrian revolution by revolutionaries and groups who use them as a sign of rebellion rather than its representation of a political jihadist ideology (O'Bagy 2012, p.21). JN stands as a threat to the long-term stability of Syria if the Assad regime is overthrown in the future and poses the threat of hijacking the revolution. This helps justify Assad's narrative and the Iranian and Russian stance towards the conflict which has been to remain allies of the Assad regime (Bauer and Schiller 2012, p.2). The sectarian dimension of the conflict is

worsened by such an emergence as it galvanizes support for the regime by the Christian, Alawite and upper class Sunnis. It also diminishes the prospects for support from the international community who have been misled by the nature of the revolution and its cause-consequence nature on Islamic groups leaving them to appear as extremists. The complexity of the Syrian struggle and the diverse makeup of the opposition have made it difficult for international support to come into Syria especially from the U.S. However, the U.S, the EU and the international community must revisit their policies towards political Islam and Islamic groups so as not to alienate the entire opposition and must channel support to responsible players to ensure that JN is prevented from further hijacking the opposition movement and to maintain the people's revolution (O'Bagy 2013).

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