

THE REVOLUTION “FROM BELOW” AND ITS MISINTERPRETATIONS “FROM ABOVE”.

THE CASE OF SYRIA’S NEGLECTED CIVIL SOCIETY

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What many initially defined as the Arab Spring had among its numerous effects that of changing people’s perception, particularly in the West, about the Arab world.² Up to that cathartic moment, this part of the world had survived in the Western imaginary as being in the grip of some sort of spell that had slowed down the flow of time and transformed people into docile citizens incapable of reacting to the authoritarian rulers who had been luxuriating in golden palaces for such a long time.³ It wasn’t simply the way the West looked at the Arab world that had changed, but people’s self-perception and understanding of their political lives underwent through a meaningful transformation. Thus, the Arab uprisings represented the beginning of a new chapter for this region’s history, one marked by the “entrance of the masses into the realm of the rulership over their own history”.⁴

The academic world and policymaking circles watched the unfolding of the events of 2011 with genuine surprise. No one had been able to predict the outbreak of the uprisings. After all, the autocratic structure of the state, repression

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and social control over the population, *in tandem* with a lack of practical and conscious preparedness of people to engage politically and culturally in changing the ruling institutions was believed to characterize most of the countries in the Arab world. In this regard, Syria would often be thought of as a “successful” story of an authoritarian government, which had been able to inculcate respect, cult and fear of the ruler and to transform the citizenry into a “disciplined society” of non-thinking subjects.⁵ The myth of authoritarian resilience permeated scholarly works, focused on all those mechanisms that contributed to the stability and longevity of the existing order, while ignoring the everyday forms of opposition that were emerging “from below”.⁶

Academic literature on pre- 2011 Syria was mostly concerned with the structure of the regime, the new political alliances, the security organs and foreign policy. Few scholars have looked at the human agent factor and the grassroots transformations that were occurring at the level of civil society. The analysis favoured a top-down framing; in other words, it privileged elites and formal politics rather than micropolitics and the contentious capacity of everyday life.⁷ The outset of the Syrian uprising was a clear indication that little attention had been paid to people’s (in)tolerance of their government, their organizational capacity and civil resistance and, even more significantly to the enabling effects of information and communication technologies. In a similar manner, the same silence on civic activism that was laid on pre-revolutionary Syria has characterized hitherto the narrative of the Syrian war, where the grassroots initiatives of popular politics and civic resistance remain mostly voiceless.

On these grounds, one needs to modestly admit the presence of scholarly *lacunae* in the analysis of the Syrian case, which need to be filled in order to prevent the reiteration of cultural prejudices and academic presumption and to interpret the

recent developments in Syria and in the rest of the region correctly. Free from the *dictum* of Orientalism and tuned with the specificities of the context, there is a need to bring back in the dynamics of political contestation and mobilization of ordinary people, who with their quiet practices are capable of silent but significant social changes. In Asef Bayat's words, the MENA region requires the development of a "scholarship of silence", that is to say a study of the voiceless, of those individuals who operate outside formal institutions and though lacking institutional capacities to exert pressure, represent a crucial challenge to those who exert power.⁸

In light of what has just been said, this paper aims at presenting a more inclusive and multifaceted account of the Syrian uprising by offering a new reading of its narrative. This narrative emphasizes the long-term growth of civic resilience and mobilization in the years that preceded the spark of the revolt in 2011 and its formational role in the midst of what has turned into a civil war. Conversely to what the tendency of area specialists has been this far, that is to say to delineate what made Arab rulers so exceptionally *successful*, this paper tells the *successful* story of civil society activism, which has been able to grow within the restrictions imposed by an autocratic regime, namely the Syrian one.⁹

Western journalistic reports and, not rarely, academic literature, though framing the Syrian insurrection as a revolt "from below", of ordinary men and women fighting for dignity and freedom, have been unable to represent them fairly. The narrative of the Syrian revolt, like that of neighbouring countries, has been captured from an "above perspective", still strongly ingrained in Orientalist legacy and Eurocentric omniscient presumption. Such an approach tends to analyse Middle East politics against the normative background of the democratic "free

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world", therefore using comparative parameters which belong to the Western world and that can hardly fit other contexts, like the Arab region.¹⁰

Before attempting to give voice to the Syrian people and their making of the uprising, this paper will critically examine the mainstream narrative of the Syrian revolt by looking at how it has been portrayed by most Western media and scholars, pointing out what has instead been misinterpreted, minimized or neglected. In doing so, it challenges the Eurocentric mediatic narrative of the uprising on a linguistic, thematic and methodological level. The second section of the paper will instead present examples of civil society activism and popular expedience both before and during the uprising. The Syrian uprising is thus told by lowering the perspective of the narrative and casting light on what lies "below" the surface of both formal politics and official Western eyes. Hence, the Syrian revolt is not perceived as the outcome of a "moment of madness" or of echoing the regional mantra which chanted "the people want the fall of the regime", but as the last step of a long-term process, which found the perfect timing to burst in March of 2011.¹¹

Where it all started: the emergence of Arab exceptionalism

Before 2011 a relevant majority of Arabs used to blame themselves for the stalemate and passive acceptance of the historical and political circumstances in which they lived.¹² Others would pin the blame on the United States, which is regularly said to have backed authoritarian rulers in order to defend geopolitical interests and, more specifically, to protect Israel, to ensure a secure supply of oil and to curtail any Islamist threat.¹³ The West, on the other hand, would justify the "Arab exception" by simply suggesting that these societies were not "ready" for democracy, because of their patriarchal systems which predisposed them to un-

democratic rule and because Islam was seen as inherently incompatible with democracy.¹⁴

For Arabs, only the past seemed to be a source of pride, albeit mixed with an aftertaste of *saudade* for the bygone. In fact, in the popular narratives, the glory days seem to be connected to two precise historical periods: the one that saw the flourishing of Islamic culture (beginning of the VII century) with the revelation of the prophet Muhammad and the *nahḍa* (rebirth), which coincided with European penetration into the region (XIX century) bringing social, political and literary renaissance.¹⁵ Yet a long period of decadence (*inhiṭāt*) characterized not just the time between these two historical moments, but also what came after the failure of the colonial experience and the advent to power of strong autocrats in the region. The durability of the autocratic regimes and their apparent patronizing societies conveyed the idea of an Arab world unprepared for change. The MENA region had become the icon of some form of implicit or explicit exceptionalism, which lasted at least until September 11, 2001. It was no coincidence that for many political scientists, the democratic wave that swept from Latin America to Europe and East Asia in the last few decades, had completely skipped the Arab shores.¹⁶

Deep incredulity was felt by the political, academic and media circles when the popular uprising broke out in Tunisia and unexpectedly developed into a regional phenomenon. Where did the uprisings arise from? Did Arabs “awake” from this long sleep and decide to pour into the streets in a moment of madness, or had the West been unaware of the transformations taking place in the MENA when it erupted in 2011? Who was it that was actually sleeping? Did this mean that Arabs were no longer an exception? Indeed, have they ever really been one?

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Several scholars recited a *mea culpa* for having missed the Arab revolts. Gregory Gause modestly admitted that political scientists like him had been inebriated by the myth of authoritarian stability, failing to capture the “forces for change that were bubbling from below, and at time above, the surface of Arab politics”.¹⁷ Indeed, the myth of change *of* regimes, often passes through change *in* regimes.

Syria, in this sense, fits the pattern perfectly: a country ruled for over forty years by an authoritarian regime, which suddenly erupts in unexpected popular contestations. Having said this, was the Syrian uprising so surprising? It is not anymore if the story of political change is told through a narrative attentive of civic engagement and socio-political activism, which led to the 15th of March 2011 and the start of the Syrian chapter of the Arab uprisings.

Mediating of the Syrian uprising: mangling the narrative?

After three years of turmoil in the Arab world, the fate of the uprisings no longer seems predictable. If at the beginning many hastened to foresee the outcome of these revolts, now it is clear how the unpredictability of their outburst persists in the inability to forecast their outcome. The euphoria of the first months evaporated into disillusion; the colourful and symbolic definitions that had been coined to define the 2011 upheavals like “Arab revolutions”, the “Arab Spring”, the “Arab Awakening” and “Arab tsunami” made room for new definitions, containing the sense of scepticism and disappointment felt, like that of “Arab Winter”, the “Islamist Winter”, the “Winter of Discontent”.¹⁸ Once again the idea of the impossibility to change the Arab world seemed to have returned. The failure in understanding the events on the ground and those that predated them reverberates in the narrative adopted by most of the media (international and local), politicians and often academics, who seem to keep readopting the idea of “Arab exceptionalism”.¹⁹ Indeed all the expressions that have been used to define the 2011 up-

heavals, whether in their initial promising phase or in the subsequent disillusioned one, contain a sense of passivity, of fatal consequence of a period that comes and goes, which minimizes the intensity and courage of all of those who participated and believed in the revolutionary change. Indeed, the same idea of an “Arab Awakening” or “Arab Spring”, is a linguistic *escamotage* to reiterate the idea of sleepy backwardness and (dis)ability to progress among the Arabs. The idea of “spring” itself suggests the teleological succession of cycle, whereby the authoritarian winter is followed by a liberal spring, in which the people participate only as surfers of the tide of history. In particular, when referred to the Syrian uprising this terminology seems to recall those initial promising months of the newly “elected” president Bashar al-Asad in 2000, which had already gone down in history as the “Damascus Spring” and which were followed by the so-called “Damascus Winter”, a clampdown on activists, civil society actors and organizations and a slowdown of the promised reforms.²⁰ The reutilization of the same terminology to denominate the Syrian upheavals of 2011 looms a dark shadow, as if expecting a similar fate. On top of that, it demonstrates how the last decade has not really been understood by most analysts. Syria was rigidly categorized as an authoritarian regime, which had reduced citizens to a “disciplined society” of non-thinking subjects, passive perpetuators of the regime’s stability.²¹ This type of erroneous analysis has removed the notion of human agency for Syrian citizens and has not perceived that the “Damascus Spring” of 2000 did not vanish with the government crackdown, but it just scaled down and lurked below the surface, finding new ways of survival.

The orientalist legacy emerges not just through the use of epithets to name the upheavals but through a skilful linguistic and thematic choice of the terms and tones used, particularly in the media but also in political talks and academic production. The most common and effective way has been that of emphasizing the

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diversity between "they" (Arabs and Muslims) and "us" (Western); and the adoption of tones at times pathetic, more appropriate to the description of exotic topics than everyday civil resistance.²² Yet what is most extraordinary is the adoption of such a narrative not just by the West but also by local news outposts and elites. After all, Edward Said did say that Orientalism is not just an attitude of the West towards the Middle East, but it is also absurdly appropriated and interpreted by local elites and experts.²³ The late Fouad Ajami who recognizes Arab exceptionalism as an actual phenomenon and attributes the causes to its intrinsic culture, is a powerful representative of this attitude, as emerges in his most recent book *The Syrian rebellion*.²⁴ Along the same lines, the Syrian-British journalist and academic Halla Diyab provoked a wide debate after her program was aired on BBC One, where she openly objected to the entrance of Syrian refugees to Britain, where they would face cultural barriers such as not being able to speak English and would be a burden on British tax payers.²⁵ It seems that after the disappointment of not being understood and not being fairly represented by the West, the Syrian people are also being mocked by their own experts and representatives, who with their westernized attitude are presenting the cause of their own people wrongly.

In addition to the employment of specific terminology and modalities of phrasing the narrative, the emphasis on some themes, at the expenses of others, perpetuates Eurocentric stereotypes. The emphasis on the new generations and the use of new media technology is one paradigmatic case. Hence, the Arab uprisings have gone down in history as the "Facebook, Twitter or YouTube revolutions" given the prominent role that these tools had in the outbreak of these revolts, promoting dissent, breaking the barrier of fear and coordinating the logistics of the upheavals. The Syrian revolution has been defined as "the most well documented revolution in human history"²⁶ given the high reliance on social media and on

YouTube to coordinate action and ensure that certain atrocities would not go unnoticed as had been the case in the past.²⁷ However, the emphasis that the media and partly academic literature placed on the binomial digital media and new generations conveys the impression that the Syrian uprising and the neighbouring ones were caused more by Western technology rather than by the people. In this regard, Harvard Professor Tarak Barkawi asserted: “To listen to the hype about social networking websites and the Egyptian revolution, one would think it was Silicon Valley and not the Egyptian people who overthrew Mubarak”.²⁸ Unlike traditional ways of fighting, these tools transform the fight into a peaceful one (read: non-violent, no bullets) and make the younger generations similar to “us”, redeeming that image that the West had created of the Arab world, underdeveloped, dangerous, chaotic, violent, passive and in need of help (from the West). In short, they discharged these new modern generations of the Arab world of the epithet of being “terrorists”. This type of reading asserts that the new Arab generations are “modern” in that they are IT-savvy, “peaceful” as capable of using their intelligence rather than their force to counter injustice, at odds with other fundamentalists, dangerous and instigators of terror. Many interpreted the ideology of the Arab youth as inspired by the ideas of non-violence theorist Gene Sharp, of whom they had never probably heard.²⁹

One needs to mention that up to 2011 the Arab world and Syria in particular, was classified as underdeveloped in terms of Internet connectivity and use of digital tools when compared to the Western world. Syria was the last country in the region to allow Internet access to the public (2000) and among the one with the lowest rates of Internet penetration and ICT literacy.³⁰ How can these data explain the high reliance on new technology after 2011? Did Syrians become IT-savvy overnight? Statistics may not be able to assess technology’s democratic potential. As Deborah Wheeler observes, counting the number of Internet users

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within a society tells us little about how such technology is leveraged by people in their everyday life.³¹ In a context like Syria, statistics have failed to convey the exact numbers of Internet surfers, given the predominant access of people at Internet cafés, (due to the expensive cost of computers in relation to average income) and the number of family members who often access the Internet on the same account.³² Not only, but the number of those accessing the Internet does not communicate the index of social interaction that a convivial environment like an Internet café creates to those who continue on-line conversations or news discoveries with the offline community of friends and peers. Furthermore, to transform the Internet and digital media into empowerment tools, it is not necessary for all of the citizens to be connected and equally IT-savvy. What is necessary is a group of particularly IT gifted activists who play the role of “bridge leaders”, as explained by the “two-step flow theory”.³³ The bridge or opinion leaders are citizens who with a more literate understanding of the media context, connect the news to the larger group of the population which does not have access to the Internet or to any other form of alternative media. A whole new generation of IT-savvy and techies grew up in the years that predated the Syrian uprising, like Rami Nakhle, Razan Ghazzawi, Bassel Khartabil, becoming extremely useful in keeping the population conscious of the state’s wrong-doings and transforming years of repression into acts of public resentment in 2011. This class of digital activists had played a fundamental role in raising civic awareness and stimulating political and social participation before 2011 and afterwards as essential social connectors and coordinators. With the outbreak of the upheavals, they have been the focus of the West’s attention, embodying the positive results of IT media literacy and the adoption of Western values. Nonetheless, they were more suited to the political paradigms of a Western taste, than necessarily representing the Syrian people. As Adel Iskander points out, others have been quite active online, although they might belong to the working class, might be mature in age and func-

tionally-illiterate, but who are still willing to have a say.³⁴ Yet, they don't fit into the paradigm of the "Facebook generation"; they don't seem to have much in common with Wael Ghonim and the likes, and have therefore been omitted by the story-tellers.

Western news coverage has also tended to determine and influence people's viewpoint of what is right and wrong through the skilful coverage of the uprising as a black and white picture of heroes and anti-heroes. This applies to all the countries affected by the upheavals, but it is more evident in the case of Syria. When the uprising turned into a civil war and difficulties for reporters arose, the media coverage proved to be misleading and no longer reliable. The Syrian conflict has been reduced to a polarized struggle, of black and white pawns, antagonist/protagonist, peaceful/violent, where the forces of good and evil tackle each other, respectively identified as the people and the regime, with no middle ground. Thereby the struggle has been described as a peaceful flock of protestors demanding full citizenship rights and constitutional guarantees, facing an authoritarian regime that suppresses protests with brutal violence. If one considers the initial phase of the upheavals, we see how people poured into the streets, asking for reforms, rather than radical changes, and acting peacefully. When protests started to grow in size, raising the stakes with more explicit requests, the regime responded by brutally crushing them and the protestors themselves did not, for all obvious reasons, stay peaceful. This did not receive much coverage by most news agencies, which preferred to keep the image of protestors as peaceful, victims rather than agents capable of resistance.

This technique was not peculiar to Syria only.³⁵ However, in Syria, more than in any other country, this bipolar narrative was incorrect from the very beginning and became more fragmented with time. In Syria, the population did not all unite to oppose the regime. Many stayed loyal to the regime, whether out of fear or

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genuine support. However, Western media did not favour such nuances, which would have disoriented people's understanding of the Syrian conflict and blurred the line separating good from evil (and out of foreign policy imperatives).

Only alternative sources on the Internet are presenting a 360 ° view, even disclosing grimmer pictures, like the increasingly violent rebel fighters carrying out crimes, comparable to the ones committed by the regime. Many would probably remember the video of the Syrian rebel commander, now known as "Abu- Sakkar the cannibal", who cut out the heart of a fallen enemy soldier and ate it while looking into the camera.³⁶ Many and more of these quivering images are available on the web, contrasting with what the media is trying to say and largely succeeding in saying. As a consequence, Western media are now struggling to adopt their initial coverage of the Syrian uprising to the most recent shifts in popularity of the regime and the rebels, making the narrative confusing and, at times, contradictory.

Taking into account what has just been said, how reliable has the coverage of the uprising been? How can Western prejudices ever dissipate if they are ingrained in the media and academic narrative as we have just mentioned? Moreover, the traceability and ethics of news are often at the mercy of market forces. Western media have been particularly careful in selecting newsworthy stories, meaning news that would guarantee profit, the making of the tale, which in terms of sales means showing the tragedy, the number of deaths that occur daily, picturing bare-foot children waiting in a queue in the snow for some bread or the tears of a mother mourning her son's death. Syria has been the case *par excellence*, given the extreme conditions in which news would be sold to the market. The "spectacular" is what is most desirable and compensated by media outlets: bombing, gunfire, victims. Not civil disobedience. As clarified by an activist running a media

centre near Homs , “Western channels only want to know about the numbers of the dead, not their names, not who is left alive and is struggling to stay alive. Do we count more when we are dead than when we are alive?”.³⁷ The insensibility to the tragedy has been expressed in many ways by the media, as in the case of a BBC reportage on the Houla massacre (May 25, 2012) which reused photos from the war in Iraq, as if every death was tantamount to another.³⁸ This type of information is not just non-instructive; it is also harmful, given the high risk of trivializing the cause. Those same images and news lose their power once they become a daily scene, making people accustomed, insensible and requiring media outlets to find other more moving ones.

In Syria citizens have turned into journalists, as a result of decades of partisan news and the lack of professional journalists covering protests and their repression and the extreme difficulty for foreign media to operate.³⁹ Armed with cell phones, cameras and laptops, they film the everyday civil resistance and pass it on to international media outlets to keep the world aware of their cause. The voice of citizen journalists, though representing a precious element of an “insider” and in many cases the only voice in non-accessible circumstances, may be lacking in trustworthiness and professional ethics. Many citizen journalists and grassroots activists in Syria believe that their role is to “protect” the revolution through the media. This is what emerged from a conversation with a number of citizen activists in August 2013, at the end of a media training funded by European organizations in Gaziantep (on the Turkish border with Syria). One of them firmly stated: “My aim is to use the media to help my people to topple Bashar. Why shouldn’t I serve the interests of my people and of myself? I have been silenced for my whole life by the regime, now I need to have my say.”⁴⁰ Many citizen activists are now being trained by international organizations in neighbouring countries or liberated areas on subjects of media ethics, codes of

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conduct and are provided with the necessary tools to make their reports. Some return to the war zones to report and are often named "revolutionaries of the trenches" (*thowar al-khanadeq*), others leave for safer locations abroad and coordinate the work of those inside the country, conversely earning the reputation of "hotel revolutionaries" (*thowar al-fanadiq*), more aware of Western sensibilities in terms of news.

The uprisings have been reported not only by citizen journalists but by an increasing number of freelancers operating inside the country. Freelancers go to battle sites for one or two days, just for a quick hit and give people the idea of what is going on, while putting their life at stake.⁴¹ Freelancers have become the new precarious workers of the information labour market, with their short-term contracts, at the mercy of economic and political constraints, which inevitably translates into a loss of liberty.⁴² One example that speaks for itself is the one of the Syrian activist Danny Dayem, working for CNN, who was caught staging a false reportage on Syria using extras as actors and asking them to let the gunfire sound in order to create a more credible war-like setting.⁴³ Beside freelancers, news organizations also rely on commissioned journalists, competent in terms of professionalism and ethics.⁴⁴ Paradoxically however, most of these journalists tend to lack a deep knowledge of the region and its local culture. They often don't speak the language and reside in safety zones, five-star hotels and walk around with security men and a translator.⁴⁵ In these circumstances, is professionalism relevant and, above all, do cultural differences effect knowledge? How reliable is news of events seen unfolding from the balcony of a TV station? Real life lies in the streets, in the murals that people write on walls, in the chat that a shopkeeper would like to have with you and would try to have if only you spoke his language, in the words that people shout when protesting, in living the lives of those involved.

In a context like the one in Syria and the difficulties to access information, the media have become strong instruments of power, capable of greatly influencing public opinion and academic production, by choosing the more “appropriate” information and forcing moral judgement, by materializing and shaping certain views that with time become reality. As noted by Herman and Chomsky, the media are able to spread propaganda and to craft realities by simply selecting the news and relying on experts and influential figures.⁴⁶ The risk is that instead of conveying unbiased information, they reproduce the falsehoods and interests of those in power and more sadly, they subjugate academic production to their will. Paradoxically Syria has been subjected to this manipulation twice, by the West and by the regime.

The denial of human agency: a glance at Syrian civil society activism

The narrative of the uprising stressed the idea of a revolution “from below” of ordinary people who with courage and cohesion have become formidable opponents of authoritarian rulers. For once, the narrative did not err, insofar as it then diverted the attention from the actual protagonists. In fact, while the uprisings have been described as the outcome of a “bottom up” movement of ordinary citizens actively organized to depose despotic regimes, reporting their struggle has tended to be that of a “from above” perspective. The ‘revolution’ of ordinary men and women, has failed, not in the streets, but in the voice of those who narrated the story. After all, it is understandable that the real actors of the upheavals are not represented or given voice, having been ignored by most of the media and academic production in the years predating the initial spark in 2011.

As Samer Yazbek, a renowned Syrian writer and journalist argues, the media don’t seem to see the civil society initiatives of the uprising; they don’t talk about

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the extraordinary art of civil resistance and activism that Syrians have been capable of carrying out, despite the violent conflict.⁴⁷ The media seem to be obsessed only with statistics of the death toll, the refugees and of those in need of humanitarian aid. Not a word is spoken about the revolutionary art, drawing, graffiti, cinema, songs, literature, poetry that have emerged since the early days in Dera'a. Particularly interesting is the creative outdoor campaign that Syrians carried out in response to a regime's advertising campaign, which had put up colourful billboards, showing a raised hand and slogans like: "whether progressive or conservative, I'm with the law", "whether girl or boy, I'm with the law".⁴⁸ Citizens responded to this Orwellian atmosphere by hanging like-posters but new slogans like "I lost my shoes", suggesting it had been lost throwing to the dictator, or "An mu hindi!" ("I'm not Indian"), a politically incorrect expression meaning "I'm not stupid".⁴⁹ The regime responded with new posters, which tried to appeal to a middle-way form of nationalism, by simply saying "I'm with Syria. My demands are your demands". Yet, Syrians did not stay quiet and, with a marker, deleted the second part of the slogan and substituted it with "my demands are freedom."⁵⁰

Not much coverage was given to the "revolutionary" organizations that have sprouted up at the micro level in Syria, like the local committees and local councils. These organizations have emerged by the thought of the Syrian anarchist named Omar Aziz, who had died before becoming the target of Western media attention.⁵¹ The local committees embrace all segments of the society, horizontally-structured and dealing with the provision of basic services, coordinating with the local councils and with armed resistance groups and maintaining security. Not a word has been said about the incredible self-management by the masses in the city of Raqqa, involved in cultural activities like the theatrical performances mocking the regime and the Islamists; the organizations of baccalaureate exams entirely based on the initiative of volunteers; the creation of centres, involved in

social issues like youth occupation and the treatment of psychological disorders.⁵² Nothing has been said about the incredible stories of a group of Syrian doctors, of different ethnic and religious affiliations, who work side by side in the area north of Aleppo, moving from town to town, despite the intense shelling, to provide medical assistance to everyone, regardless of political and religious creed.⁵³ This is a ‘revolutionary’ example of creating a ‘we’ that cuts across lines of cleavage based on fear, ignorance, religious or ethnic diversity. This is the example of a “social glue” which Syrians have been able to achieve, Asad’s stranglehold notwithstanding and which no foreign support/intervention would be able to implement. Not even the Union for Free Syrian Students found much coverage in Western media, despite being the most relevant youth group organization developing civil resistance in the country and organizing initiatives in and off-campus, like boycotting to sit at exams in the name of their classmates detained by the regime; staging flash demonstrations in central areas of the capital and raising the independence flag in public places.⁵⁴ Even more interesting is the counter-elections campaign that citizens have carried out to oppose the presidential elections staged by the regime for the 4th of June 2014. While the regime had filled the country with billboards supporting Bashar under the slogan of “Together” (*sawa* in Arabic) and describing him as the “destroyer of crime”, the “protector of minorities”, the “man of safety and security”, citizens decided to promote a counter-awareness campaign by distributing leaflets in the streets and occupying the cyberspace with satirical anti-Bashar posters and slogans saying the “elections of blood”, “lower your voice”, “together we will bury him”, “together we kill”, “together we destroy”.⁵⁵ These are only a few among the wide array of initiatives that citizens have been carrying out since the start of the uprising. Many would probably argue that these activities are not conscious political acts of a structured collective group, but rather the expression of spontaneous and individual practices, driven by the necessity to survive in times of war. However

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these everyday forms of resistance, though strongly influenced by the frame of the war, they nonetheless represent a "movement in itself", characterized by people conscious of their doing, articulating their actions, aims and justifications.⁵⁶ Moreover, despite the clampdown of the regime, these practices engender social changes at the local and raise social awareness on malpractices of both the regime and most recently, of the radical Islamist cells operating in the country.

Civil society activism in Syria is not the outcome of the uprising: it is deep rooted in the decade that predated the spark of the revolt. Nonetheless, the same disinterest towards civil society activism and everyday resistance that is found in the mainstream narrative of the Syrian uprising replicates the attitude of scholars before 2011. Small steps towards a citizenry reawakening had been perceived by many analysts, but their role was minimized in the light of a regional tendency of autocrats to "upgrade authoritarianism" in the past decade.⁵⁷ In other words, the growth of civil society was interpreted as a way for the regime to relinquish its social commitment to non-state organizations and conversely assume more control of society. If this seemed to work initially, with time the promotion of individual initiative, self-help, NGOs utterly translated into a loss of political space for the regime.⁵⁸ Salam Kawakibi, while vehemently asserting the evil pragmatism and stronghold of the Syrian regime, points out how the plan might have got out of hand, with unexpected consequences.⁵⁹ The survival tactics of "modernizing authoritarianism" as a way to hold on to power, resulted in a risky card to play. Ironically, the country's bid for modernization, which contemplated, *inter alia*, the expansion of non-state organizations and the opening of the country to satellite dishes and the Internet, enhanced the potential of the upheaval. The decade preceding the uprising provided fertile soil, nurturing values of citizenship

and civil engagement, which became admittedly anti-regime in the Spring of 2011.

The literature about Syrian civil society activism seems to recount only those events that were manifest and politically oriented, those born during the Damascus Spring and in its aftermath. This includes the drafting of the ‘Statement of the 99’ (2000), the ‘Damascus declaration’ (2005) and the setting of political forums like the National Dialogue Forum and the Jamal Atassi Forum, where with an increasingly demanding tone, intellectuals, opposition figures and secular political parties asked for profound social and political reforms.⁶⁰ By contrast, the second half of the last decade saw the emergence of a new generation of civil society activists who did not necessarily have a political record, but who were merely engaged in social and economic activities and in connecting citizens. Precisely because of their largely apolitical and low-profile form of mobilisation, they have been belittled or simply ignored as non-destabilizing.

Since 2005, Syrians led a vivid cultural life through discussion forums, sit-ins and organized human rights demonstrations. The growing numbers of civil society organizations (both NGOs and GONGOs), became a means for the government to outsource services which the state could not afford to provide. While at first this strategy seemed to work, allowing the state to keep control of the new civil society actors, over time these organizations widened their activities and audience, beyond the regime’s direct control.⁶¹ Many of these organizations, operating under the administrative umbrella of the Syria Trust for Development, funded by First Lady Asma Al-Assad, addressed the younger generations by promoting learning campaigns, offering scholarships for underprivileged students, developing IT literacy and values of citizenship among the youth.⁶² These programs not only got the blessing of foreign partners but also established new

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ventures with Western and international organizations, including the UN agencies and a number of development agencies, which by *osmosis* contributed to increase professionalism and to expose the younger generations to concepts of critical thinking and civic empowerment.⁶³

Next to these type of more structured civic activism, the Internet produced thought-provoking examples of civic engagement. Indeed the cyberspace became for many a forum of discussion, information, campaign awareness, effecting people's sense of responsibility and their way of thinking, as well as scrutinizing the regime's code of conduct. Even though the role of the Internet and information technology requires a more in-depth analysis, it is nonetheless important to mention some successful campaigns that have been carried out online. Among the most effective campaigns that citizens have carried out online one needs to mention the National Campaign against Honour Crimes, aimed at improving women's rights in Syria and the repeal of article 548 which permitted "honour crimes".⁶⁴ The campaign sustained by a network of NGO's and organizations working on the issue of human rights managed to carry out an on-line information campaign, seminar and workshops and start an online petition which obtained 10,254 signatures of men and women which were sent to the president, the prime minister, the justice minister and the Bar Association.⁶⁵ In 2008, the campaign brought about a change in the law, raising punishment from one year to two years, still a light penalty, but definitely a successful achievement. Equally important has been the Personal Status Law campaign, an on-line campaign aimed at abrogating a draft of a new personal status law, formulated by a conservative Islamic committee, which would have represented a setback for civil rights, especially for women.⁶⁶ As in the previous campaign, activists occupied electronic websites, involving TV and cinema celebrities and signing petitions calling for the withdrawal of the law and presenting them to official of the gov-

ernment. The widespread mobilization managed to get the draft law sent back for further examination.⁶⁷ In addition to these wide-scale campaigns, there have been a number of smaller initiatives taking place since 2006, which were strongly based on the use of the Internet and telecommunication technology like a national campaign to annul an amendment of the martial law; a campaign to allow women to transfer their citizenship to their children; campaigns for the protection of young women who had been victims of rape, a campaign to lower mobile phone rates and to keep the country clean.⁶⁸ The common feature linking these new forms of civic mobilization was the emphasis on social issues rather than political ones; they included different categories of Syrian society; and relied on tools such as the Internet, mobile technology and social media to carry out their initiatives.⁶⁹ The new information and communication technologies contributed to new ways of learning, organizing and coordinating actions that social movements did not have before. The new tools played an important role in campaigns and petitions, as mentioned above, as well as being instruments for social awareness, like a YouTube video showing a policeman receiving a bribe (viewed 366,703 times and received 1,323 comments); or the case of a Facebook video in 2010 showing two Syrian teachers beating students, eventually obliging the Ministry of Education to remove the teachers from their jobs.⁷⁰ This did not produce a change in the centres of power but became a force that the Syrian regime later had to confront.

To conclude, this paper may have raised more questions than it has been able to answer. However everyone would be hard pressed not to agree that a growing sense of civil and social emancipation expressed in the numerous initiatives before 2011 rejects a whole literature of neglected civil activism in Syria. Not surprisingly, the events of 2011 were defined as an “Arab Awakening”, only when civil activism opted for radical stances. Perhaps the term “awakening” has not

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been inappropriately used; what is wrong is to whom it is addressed. What is certain is that the field of Middle East studies is in need of a critical self-reflection of the literature produced thus far, of the Western categories and theories too often rigidly applied to a context that not necessarily needs to resemble to the West. In fact, the literature produced in this context about the informal and ordinary people is to say the least fragmented. And yet, in the long term, these same people do exercise some power and bring change through their everyday strategies of resistance. This type of research question would not just fill the gap of our literature on the Middle East and explain factors that have not been taken into consideration in the analysis of the Arab uprisings, but it may represent a determinant element for the development of new social movement theories in many developing countries.

More importantly, one would hope that over time, the Arab uprisings will mark the end of our Western hegemonic attitude to understand others, in this case Arabs, as extensions of ourselves. This does not apply to the recent events but to the past in general, which has been obscured from Western historical memory. As Emmanuel Levinas (1991) argued in *Totality and Infinity*, for once we recognize that others, the people in the Arab Street-Muslims and Christians, men and women, shopkeepers and students, soldiers and women in hijab, are not "lifeless signs into which we are free to read our own meanings. They are not objects waiting to be interpreted and illuminated by our own lights. They shine forth with their own lights."⁷¹

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²Due to the lack of precise and consistent terminology to refer to the MENA region, this paper makes use of the expressions “Arab world”, “Middle East” and “region” interchangeably, with no intention of excluding non Arab populations.

³One of the most prominent exponents of the Orientalist approach is Bernard Lewis. For an overview of his thought, see Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism”, *The New Yorker Review of Books*, June 24, 1982, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1982/jun/24/the-question-of-orientalism/>.

⁴ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 17.

⁵The idea of Syria’s “disciplined society” can be found in Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999); and in Aurora Sottimano, “Ideology and Discourse in the Era of the Ba’thist Reforms: Towards an Analysis of Authoritarian Governability”, in Aurora Sottimano, Kjetil Selvik ed., *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria*, (Fife: University of St Andrews for Syrian Studies, 2009), 3-40.

⁶Ref. Oliver Schlumberger “Arab Authoritarianism” in *Debating Arab Authoritarianism*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁷ Asef Bayat, “Un-civil society: the politics of the ‘informal people’”, *Third World Quarterly* 18, (1997): 53-72.

⁸Asef Bayat, “After the Arab Spring” (paper presented at the annual BRISMES Conference, “The Middle East in Global Perspective: Interactions Across Time and Space”, University of Sussex, 16-18 June 2014.

⁹Ref. to Eva Bellin, “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective”, *Comparative Politics* 36, n. 2, pp. 139-157; Posusney Marsha Pripstein, Michele Penner Angrist (eds), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: regimes and resistance*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

¹⁰O. Schlumberger, “Arab Authoritarianism”.

¹¹ The verifiability and accountability of the information provided emerge as part of my doctoral research, which draws on substantial desk research, extensive field observation, both on-line and on the ground, accompanied by in-depth interviews with civil society actors, key media stakeholders, activists, media practitioners and academics. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey and when not possible, via Skype. Given the extremely insecure situation in Syria, any reference to people, organizations and places will not be disclosed in order to protect the persons involved in this work.

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¹³Lin Noueihed, Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring*, (Padstow: Yale University Press, 2012), 16.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Isabella Camera D’Afflito, *Letteratura Araba Contemporanea*, (Roma: Carrocci, 2002), 17-21.

¹⁶Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the late Twentieth Century*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1991).

¹⁷Gregory Gause III, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67932/f-gregory-gause-iii/why-middle-east-studies-missed-the-arab-spring>.

¹⁸Daniel Byman, “After the Hope of the Arab Spring, the Chill of an Arab Winter”, *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/after-the-hope-of-the-arab-spring-the-chill-of-an-arab-winter/2011/11/28/gIQ-ABGqHIO_story.html, accessed June 26, 2014; Omar Kholeif, The Arab Winter of Discontent, *The Huffington Post*, November 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/omar-kholeif/egypt-winter-of-discontent_b_2168265.html, accessed June 24, 2014.

¹⁹Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 153-171.

²⁰Michael Hudson, “Awakening, Cataclysm, or Just a Series of Events? Reflections on the Current Wave of Protest in the Arab World”, in ed. Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer, Ziad Abu-Rish, *The Dawn of the Arab World*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 18.

²¹Ref. Lisa Weeden, *Ambiguites of Domination*; Aurora Sottimano, “Ideology and Discourse in the Era of Baathist Reforms”.

²²Rabab el-Mahdi, “Orientalising the Egyptian Uprising”, *Jadaliyya*, April 11, 2011, accessed February 26, 2014, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1214/orientalising-the-egyptian-uprising>.

²³See, Bassam Haddad, “Ajamindustry”, in Adel Iskandar, Bassam Haddad, *Mediating the Arab Uprising*, (Washington DC: Tadween Publishing, 2013).

²⁴Fouad Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press Publication, 2012).

²⁵Eman El-Shenawi, “‘My Thoughts Were Misread’ Says Halla Diyab”, *Al-Arabiya English*, February 03, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/television-and-radio/2014/02/03/-My-thoughts-were-misread-says-Halla-Diyab.html>, accessed April 24, 2014.

²⁶Amjad Baiazy, “Syria’s Cyber Wars”, *Media Policy*, January 06, 2012, <http://www.mediapolicy.org/2012/06/syrias-cyber-wars/>, accessed April 20, 2014.

²⁷In 1982, the Syrian city of Homs had been the scene of a massacre ordered by the president Hafez al-Asad to crush a Sunni rebellion where an estimated 20,000 people lost their lives. “1982: Syria’s president Hafez al-Asad crushes rebellion in Hama”, *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2011/aug/01/hama-syria-massacre-1982-archive>, accessed April 23, 2014.

²⁸Mohamed Ben Moussa, “From Arab Street to Social Movement: Re-Theorizing Collective Action and the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring”, in ed. Maha Taki, Lorenzo Coretti, *The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprising—Past and Present*, Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture 9, (April 2013) n. 2.

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³⁰Middle East Internet Usage Statics, Population, Facebook and Telecommunication Reports” *Internet World Stats*, (June 30, 2012), [<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>], accessed March 28, 2013.

³¹Deborah Wheeler, “Empowering publics: Information Technology and Democratization in the Arab World—Lessons from Internet Cafés and Beyond”, *OII Research Report*, (July, 1, 2006), n.11, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1308527], (accessed April 07, 2014), 113.

³²H. Benjamin, “The Syrian media environment”, p.19.

³³Elihu Katz, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: the Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

³⁴Adel Iskander offers the example of a Syrian-Malaysian, who in his forties became quite active online with the name of Tha’er Sukhny. A. Iskandar, “Introduction” in ed. A. Iskandar, B. Haddad, *Mediating the Arab Uprising*, 1-2.

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³⁵In Egypt, the early fall of Mubarak was triggered by protestors burning down numerous police stations, yet this did not receive much media attention. Similarly, the news about the sexual harassment taking place in Tahrir square by citizens towards their own women, did not receive full coverage, for its potential of damaging the image of protestors and the ideals of their "revolution".

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³⁷Syrian media activist, interviewed via Skype, November 18, 2013.

³⁸Hannah Furness, "BBC News Uses 'Iraq Photo to Illustrate Syrian Massacre'", *The Telegraph*, May 27, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/bbc/9293620/BBC-News-uses-Iraq-photo-to-illustrate-Syrian-massacre.html>, accessed April 20, 2014.

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⁴¹"Journalism in Syria, Impossible Job?", *Reporters Without Borders*.

⁴²Francesca Borri, "Women's Work", *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 1, 2013, accessed March 30, 2014, http://www.cjr.org/feature/womans_work.php?page=1.

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⁴⁵See the case of Eliot Higgins, a 34-years old Briton who reports about Syria from his home in Leicester. Karen Leigh, "The Profile: The Man Behind Brown Moses?", *Syria Deeply*, April 19, 2013, accessed March 03, 2014, <http://beta.syriadeeply.org/2013/04/profile-man-brown-moses/#.UxS8foXSB7k>.

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⁴⁷“On Being a Writer in Bashar al-Assad’s Syria”, *IFEX*, October 7, 2013, accessed February 25, 2014, http://www.ifex.org/syria/2013/10/07/writer_under_oppressive_regime/.

⁴⁸Donatella Della Ratta, “Syrian Hands Raised: User Generated Creativity Between Citizenship and Dissent”, *MediaOriente Blog*, November 4, 2012, <http://mediaorient.com/2012/11/04/syrian-hands-raised-user-generated-creativity-between-citizenship-and-dissent/>, accessed April 14, 2014.

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⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Omar Aziz called for autonomous, non-hierarchical organizations, self-governed based of the principle of cooperation, mutual aid and psychological support. For more information see, Budour Hassan, “Omar Aziz: Rest in Power”, *Random Shelling Blog*, February 20, 2013, accessed March 06, 2014, <http://budourhassan.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/omar-aziz/>.

⁵²Joseph Daher, “The Roots and Grassroots of the Syrian revolution”, *Open Democracy*, April 1, 2014, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/joseph-daher/roots-and-grassroots-of-syrian-revolution-part-1-of-4>, accessed April 24, 2014.

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⁵⁷Raymond Hinnebusch, “Syria: from ‘Authoritarian Upgrading’ to Revolution”, *International Affairs* 88, no.1 (2012), 95-113, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x/abstract>.

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⁵⁹Salam, Kawakabi, "The Paradox of Government-Organized Civil Activism in Syria", in ed. Paul Aarts, Francesco Cavatorta, *Civil Society in Syria and Iran. Activism in Authoritarian Contexts*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2013), 169-186.

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