Freedom of Expression in Syria from the 1970s to 2011

Part of a series of research papers entitled
"Syria and its people"

Produced by Sharq
in partnership with
the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

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Translated and edited by Jenine Abboushi

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A series of research papers about life in Syria prior to 2011
Produced by Sharq in partnership with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation

We at Sharq have in recent years interviewed Syrians from diverse socio-economic, religious, ethnic and geographic backgrounds about their lives in Syria prior to 2011. Each interview focuses on a specific topic in which the narrator has experience, and all provide detailed personal accounts of life as a Syrian in a particular community and town living under particular pressures and privileges.

Listening to the individual stories, it becomes apparent that certain problems impacted Syrians across the country, regardless of ethnicity, religion, class or location and that these stories, collectively, add insight into the difficulties Syrians faced in the decades leading up to the 2011 revolution.

It would serve the future leaders of Syria, and agencies and organisations concerned with the development of the country post-conflict, to consider the lessons presented through these collective stories and experiences to ensure the development of a peaceful and prosperous society.

This is the motivation behind this book, this collection of studies on six interrelated spheres, each of which was written following a review of over 120 personal stories and a study of existing research. Despite the massive destruction, the country is not going to be built on a blank canvas. Its people and diverse communities carry with them fond memories, valuable experiences and crucial knowledge that if heard, nurtured and shared can provide the foundation needed for rebuilding a strong and inclusive Syria.

The ongoing conflict has resulted in the destruction of much of the country and many aspects of its society, but warm memories and relationships abound. When looking to rebuild, be it physical structures, institutions, programmes or communities, looking to Syria’s past should inform design for the future. It is not enough to only understand the experience of Syrians during the conflict, but also to know about their lives, loves and concerns prior to it.

Peaceful coexistence and post-conflict development require above all else empathy and understanding of the other. Effective and constructive development in our understanding of the causes and impact of different actions, events and environments on individuals and communities pre-conflict is key to our ability to develop approaches that can both help end conflict and build sustainably peaceful communities.

For decades, Syrians were denied the opportunity to honestly and constructively share their experiences, their dreams and their concerns. As such, we must focus on building trust based on a unifying desire to build a harmonious and inclusive society. Such trust can be built through storytelling. The telling of and listening to individual people’s stories of struggle and success, woes and wonders, nurtures connections and helps build stronger communities based on empathy, acceptance and respect.

Reem Maghribi
Managing Director, Sharq.Org

You can read and listen to the interviews referenced in this paper at www.SyrianHistories.org

Freedom of Expression in Syria: 1970 - 2011

Produced by Sharq.Org, 2018

Summary

There is no need to examine at length the reality of freedom of expression in Syria or even in the entire Arab world and countries of the third world. This assertion may be an unwelcome introduction for research on this subject. The purpose of this study, then, is not to prove or deny the existence of freedom of expression in Syria. Its purpose is to investigate freedom of expression in the most influential sectors in Syrian society, and to question its relationship to political and social power. We aim to clearly identify the causes behind the limitations of freedom of speech imposed on each sector, and the disparities between them. Specifically, we seek to understand how this freedom is accessed, and how to strengthen its practice and extend it to most sectors. We focus on the period before 2011, and before the political and sectarian alignments that have emerged since the so-called "Syrian crisis." The purpose is to clarify and affirm the importance of freedom of expression among peoples, the potential upheavals that such freedoms can instigate, and the failures and regressions that afflict societies quite visibly with restrictions on freedom of expression.

The right to freedom of expression is measured not only by the relationship with the ruling power. It is also a human right that must be acquired within the first social circle, the family, through local communities, all the way to the departments of state.

In Syria, the situation deteriorated dramatically about eight years after the start of the "crisis," which turned into a fierce war. At its epicentre, what was called the "spark of the revolution," was a vast power disparity between the state and the people concerning freedom of expression in terms of handling, according, understanding, and concretely applying this freedom in a balanced way. Understanding the context and historical background of freedom of expression in pre-war Syria is essential to designing programs that could expand dialogue and exchange within and between communities, and to building a peaceful environment to prevent future conflict.

This study focuses on four themes:

1. Freedom of expression in the press and media
2. Freedom of expression in culture
3. Freedom of expression in political and civil spheres
4. Freedom of expression in society

Research for this study uses information and statistics from respected sources, including books, research, and international organization reports; Syrian state documents and papers, such as official laws and reports; and quotations from Syrians interviewed by Sharq organization from its *Syrian Stories* project. This project includes interviews with more than 125 Syrian men and women conducted between 2016 and 2017, with more than 150 audio hours recorded on different subjects from Syrian contexts and communities.

Sharq organization completed *Syrian Stories* with the belief that individual testimonies and experiences of Syrians should be documented to better understand, develop and consolidate the principles of freedom of expression and pluralism. The importance of these testimonies increases when they are used in relevant studies and research, and on subjects addressed by individuals with first-hand experiences.

Introduction

"I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This statement attributed to the French writer and philosopher Voltaire, sums up the importance of freedom of expression and explains why it is worth fighting for and defending. This principle is the foundation of democracy and a fundamental human right.

Opposing the right to freedom of opinion and expression, or attempting to rob or limit it, entails opposing a latent human drive. If it is prevented from growing normally, it can lead to distortions within the psyche of the individual and cause negative social consequences, leading to inertia and ineffectiveness over time.[1] As such, the right to freedom of expression was clearly recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 as the common standard to which all peoples and nations must aspire. "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," and "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."[2]

The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right includes the right to seek, receive, and impart information or ideas of any kind, regardless of limits, either orally, or in writing or print, whether in the form of art or any other means chosen."[3]

The Syrian State has ratified international agreements and conventions regarding this right, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 38 of the Syrian Constitution of 1973 states: "Every citizen has the right to express his opinion freely and publicly by speech, writing, and all means of expression. Citizens contribute to national guardianship and constructive criticism in a manner that ensures the integrity of the nation, and that supports the national socialist system." [4]The state guarantees freedom of the press, printing and publishing in accordance with the law. Articles 33 and 42 of the 2012 Constitution stipulate that "Freedom is a sacred right and the State guarantees citizens their individual freedoms and safeguards their dignity and security," and that "every citizen has the right to express his opinion freely and publicly through speech, writing, or any other means of expression."[5]

But the real question is whether these laws apply in practice or are merely ink on paper.

We will try to answer this question by analyzing the reality of freedom of expression in Syria and discussing it through the four outlined themes.

Freedom of Expression in the Press and Media

Freedom, arguably, is most significant in journalism and the media. In contemporary society, the press is one of the most important means of expressing opinion and it occupies an essential place in the democratic system.

In Syria, the vitality of the press reached its peak after independence from France in 1946. A new Press Law No. 35 of 1949 was issued and many restrictions were lifted on the freedom to

own and publish independent and partisan newspapers. During the 1950s in Syria, there were 52 different publications. This proliferation did not last long. In 1958, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser stipulated a harsh set of conditions to finalizing the unity between Egypt and Syria to coordinate Syrian and Egyptian contexts. This sacrificed political parties, the parliament and the press. The state justified this severe blow to freedom of opinion, expression and the press on the grounds that unity was more important than democracy.[6]

The Syrian press regained some of its vitality and returned to the forefront in the period following the secession from Egypt between 1961 and 1963 but permits for newspapers opposed to secession were not allowed.

With the Ba'ath Socialist Party taking power in 1963, freedom of the press deteriorated again when a state of emergency was announced, and Customary Order No. 4 suspended the licensing of newspapers and publications. The state shut down newspapers and magazines, confiscated printers and printing technology, and seized funds from printing presses and publishing houses. For a short period, the only exceptions were two newspapers, *Barda* and *Al-Arabi*, which soon after joined the long list of banned publications. Syria then entered a stage of public information and thought being controlled by the state. Indeed, the state considered the media to be in the possession of the ruling party and "head of the revolution," and so this media had to contribute exclusively to mobilizing the masses to support the victory and the goals of the party and revolution. The Constitution of the Permanent Syrian Arab Republic, proposed and approved by the People's Assembly in the 1973 referendum, enabled this state monopoly of the media by including Article 8, which pronounced the Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party to be "leader of state and society."[7]

This section addresses three main topics:

1. Print Journalism
2. Radio and television
3. Online publications

Print Journalism

The reality of the Syrian press is a direct result of the Ba'ath Party policy of holding exclusive power to lead state and society. This policy in the field of journalism has led to the creation of dozens of strategic journals aimed at all segments of society. The common denominator of these publications is the hegemony of one homogeneous political discourse. In order to break any possible violation of this hegemony, state authorities practiced censorship of the press. This censorship led directly to the repression of other discourses, perspectives and innovations, and it also indirectly instigated the practice of self-censorship that discouraged the majority of journalists.[8]

At the start of 1967 came the closure what was left of the Syrian private newspapers, such as the satiric *Al-Mudhik al-Mabki* (Tragi-Comic). Journalism was dull with no more than a handful of official and semi-official newspapers that were poor in form and content.[9] Under Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (1971 to 2000), the press was limited to the three official newspapers, which were almost replicas of one another, namely *Ba'ath* (the official mouthpiece of the Ba'ath Party since 1947), *The Revolution* (the state mouthpiece since

1963), and *Tashrin* (a daily published by the Ba'ath Party since 1973). In addition, there were the institutions that published these newspapers in the provinces, and some official and trade union publications affiliated with the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party.

"When you page through these three newspapers, you find them almost identical in terms of the content of the editorials, the news on the front page, and social coverage. The tradition of journalism requires diversity but in Syria we have not seen this range, not even minimally. You find one newspaper is perhaps more audacious than another in the publication of a photograph of an actress with a plunging neckline, whereas another publishes more reserved photographs."[10]

"In *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution) newspaper there were senior journalists, but there was no journalism; there were experts in every sense of the word but none of them was able to use their professional skills. Journalists, like in all media of the regime, were third-rate, kept in the shadows. They did not participate in media decisions, and were not consulted in media campaigns, whether political or economic or in any other domain."[11]

Under Asaad (the father's) reign, oppositional newspapers and publications did not completely disappear from the scene despite being banning in an attempt to prevent political work, and to pursue the oppositional forces in culture and politics. The banned Syrian opposition had its newspapers, its platforms, as well as its secret political and cultural pamphlets, such as *Al-Raya al-Hamra* (The Red Banner), the mouthpiece of the outlawed Communist Workers Party which ceased publishing in 1991, and *Al-Mawqif Al-Demoqrati* (Democratic View), the newspaper of the National Democratic Rally of Syria.[12]

The state did not relinquish its iron grip on the media and its channels, and even prevented the Progressive National Front,[13] allied with the Ba'ath party in power, from publishing and selling their newspapers up until 2001.[14]

With the official press dominating the scene, Syrian journalists were very wary of publishing information or analyses about controversial political or social issues given the many loose standards in the law that pertained to their work. Nothing was precisely defined, such as the criminalization of publications with 'news damaging to national security and social unity,' 'news detrimental to the economy and the authenticity of criticism,' 'news undermining the prestige and dignity of the state and national unity,' and so on."

"Any journalist who writes a word in any newspaper is arrested and imprisoned and may die in jail. But on television, you are allowed to laugh at a minister or a member of the People's Assembly and watch him sing."[15]

"Many writers try to publish in Lebanese newspapers that have been banned in Syria, although the Lebanese newspapers also have censorship of a special kind; each newspaper has its own control, for partisan and other considerations."[16]

The 1970s represented the best period of the Syrian official press due to the presence of a group of journalists who experienced a measure of press freedom and shared professional values. Some of their students, likewise, maintained a level of professionalism and independence in 'certain issues,' specifically in the cultural press, which was at that time the most prominent reportage in the government press, especially in the newspaper *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution).

However, this phase did not last long. As the confrontation between the ruling authority and the Muslim Brotherhood entered the stage of armed conflict in the early 1980s, the government re-enforced its grip on the press as well as trade unions, bringing press organizations and the journalists' syndicate entirely into line with government policies. From the late 1980s until the 1990s, government newspapers became official institutions used to absorb unemployment in Syria, and incorporated hundreds of government officials with no connection with journalism.

"The honest journalists became exiles, defeated. They wrote occasional articles published in the Lebanese press pointing vaguely to some cases of corruption, for example. Those who know the brutality of the Syrian intelligence services also know why Syrian journalists lack audacity in breaking through restrictions set by Syrian intelligence."[17]

From the late 1980s, the government produced dozens of newspapers that operate at a distance from the official state press, broadcasting partisan and ideological propaganda in line with ruling party's direction. And yet even government journalists could not escape censorship policies and the prevention of arbitrary communication to non-media administrations. With the absence of competition, the policy of isolating the country, government control and the demotion of journalists to the status of functionaries, official media could not interest readers or encourage them to buy newspapers to the point that the government press fell out of daily life.

“A typographical error may lead to the expulsion of an editor or a journalist. In *Al-Ba’ath* newspaper, when a typographical error was published in a particular Ba’ath party letter giving the word another meaning, the head of the cultural division of the newspaper was fired.”[18]

On September 22, 2001, nearly forty years after the Ba’ath movement took power ad monopolized all media, President Bashar al-Assad (one year after he took office) issued a new law on publications (Decree No. 50/2001). The law granted the right to establish private media for the first time, and allowed the publication of non-official newspapers. One of those first-ever newspapers was Al-Dumari's publication of the cartoonist Ali Farzat, who followed a satirical line critical of state power that was previously unseen in the Syrian press. Al-Dumari was closed down in 2003 by a decision of the former Minister of Information, Adnan Omran, on charges of violating the Publications Law.

"There was a short period after the death of President Hafez al-Assad in 2000 when freedom of expression was tolerated but that time was fleeting. The following year, new authoritarian media regulations were introduced that allowed newspapers to be banned and journalists detained.”[19]

"Bashar al-Assad’s rise to power was accompanied by many slogans. The Syrians are a charitable people who tended to believe in these slogans, with this reasoning: ‘A young president who studied in London has come to us. Syria will become like London, and he will advance the Syrian people and we will lead a different life.’ Bashar began to allow some freedoms, like allowing Dumari to publish for a short time, as well *A3lan Dimashq* (Damascus Declaration). Bu then the state closed down Dumari as well as the *Damascus Declaration* and arrested its members. In fact, there was no clear change in domestic or foreign policy and all was done for state publicity.”[20]

The Syrian authorities have shown considerable interest since then in supporting and developing the government media sector. The Syrian government has adopted a number of emergency measures, including pumping large sums of money into the budgets of the state media, providing them with additional facilities and credit, and improving the sector's infrastructure. The state has also offered new opportunities for training, both with Arab and international institutions including Reuters, BBC and Al-Ahram, and has sent journalists to workshops outside Syria. The government has also made attempts to change administrative structures, both at the level of employees and regulations, in addition to increasing communication with press departments and holding meetings between government journalists and officials at the highest levels of political, party and economic administration.[21]

The measures taken by the Syrian government have led to the improvement and strengthening of state media, which has reflected positively on the general level in form, professionalism and competitiveness, and increased the number of spectators and sales. However, these improvements are limited to the main government institutions in the capital, Damascus, such as television, radio, *Al-Thawra* and *Tashrin* newspapers, and do not extend to the media in the remaining Syrian governorates, which remain at they were previously. These improvements are also restricted to media supporting the political positions of the government and the shaping of local public opinion. There has been little change in terms of independence or the spread of divergent views, or in terms of freedom of political expression.[22]

"We were allowed to point to the corruption of the ministers, and state that they were mere puppets of Syrian Intelligence. What I wanted to say was that the Syrian media and all the corruption cases it handled were directed by the Intelligence Services."[23]

The authorities continued to repress freedom of speech by restricting the media and journalists and blocking many publications. In addition, the state prevented the distribution of a large number of Arabic publications in the Syrian market.[24] The General Organization for the Distribution of Printed Products[25] of the Ministry of Information continued to inspect all newspapers before distributing them.[26] Two daily newspapers succeeded in continuing, and businessmen who had close alliances with the state owned them. The first was *Al-Watan* (The Nation) launched in November/December 2006, a political daily widely reportedly published by the son of President al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf. The second was *Baladna* (Our Country), a social affairs newspaper published by Majd Suleiman, the son of the head of the security apparatus, Behjat Suleiman.

"There have been humorous censorship practices, especially in magazines, where you can find a magazine such as *Al-Hayat* (Life) sold on the market with a page missing that was not approved by the controller."[27]

Syria ranked 165 out of 175 in the 2010 *World Press Freedom Report* published by Reporters Without Borders. It was also listed on the organization's "Internet Enemies" list every year, even though Bashar al-Assad was one of 40 world champions of freedom of the press.[28]

In spite of all controls on freedoms, media, culture and literature, there were bright margins in the defence of freedoms. For example, in *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution) newspaper or in its supplement, articles were published that were critical of state restrictions imposed on the freedom of creativity.[29]

The Legal Regulation of the Syrian Press

The intellectual, legal and administrative structure of the Syrian state is still based on strong state foundations that control all social sectors through government agencies. The distinction between the concept of the state and the ruling party, established by Article 8[30] of the 1973 Constitution, remained in force until the constitutional amendment in 2012 when Article 8 was cancelled, further enabling state control. The media, and even private media, is still viewed as the property of the state and the party. Its function is limited to explaining state and party policies and positions, and to mobilizing the masses to support them. Article 3 of the Syrian Ministry of Information stipulates that, "the Ministry of Information's mission shall be to use all media to enlighten public opinion, consolidate Arab national trends, and to strengthen ties with Arab and friendly countries in accordance with the principles of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party and state policy."

Since 17/11/2008, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers has prohibited all public entities and organizations, both civil and legal, from carrying out statistical research or issuing any bulletin containing statistical information or figures without the approval of the Central Bureau of Statistics. In this way, the Central Bureau of Statistics was added to the list of governmental institutions and agencies that oversee Syrian media and the freedom of circulation of information through the following practices:[31]

- State monopoly over the distribution of publications through the General Organization for the Distribution of Publications, established by Legislative Decree No. 42 of 1975.

- State monopoly over advertising through the Arab Foundation for Advertising, formed in 1963.

- State monopoly of news through the Syrian News Agency SANA.[32]

- The exclusive right to issue and cancel media licenses accorded to the Prime Minister at the bidding of the Minister of Information.

- The control of administrative procedures and executive regulations through Decree No. 297 of 2001, issued by the Minister of Information.

- The legal silence on the right to free access to information.[33]

The Publications Law of 2001

Media professionals hoped that the new Publication Law (Decree No. 50 of 2001) would mark a new phase in Syrian media. But the law remained minor, unable to create an independent free press that could exercise professional responsibility given the control of the state and its executive agencies over every aspect of media practice. Indeed, there was no quantitative change that had not been accompanied by a qualitative change.[34] This law did allow the publication of a non-official newspaper, and allowed the parties of the Progressive National Front to issue their own newspapers. Three weeklies were published: The People's Voice of the Syrian Communist Party led by Khalid Bakdash, The Syrian Communist Party

(YSP) led by Yusuf Yusuf, and the Unity of the Socialist Unionist Movement led by Faiz Ismail.[35] However, when the law was issued, many observers and specialists in the field of journalism and media criticized it because it contained articles that prevented the establishment of a free and independent press given the following state restrictions and practices:

- Prison sentences based on ambiguous legal terms
- Penalties for publications calling for constitutional and political reform
- A long list of banned topics
- An integrated system of control
- Imprisonment in the case of publicity of foreign companies or institutions
- Gender-based licensing with the aim of banning political topics
- The absolute right of the Minister of Information to prevent the entry of foreign publications to Syria
- The prevention of political detainees from managing or owning publications
- The absolute right of the Prime Minister to refuse to license any publication
- Administrative conditions and standards for the ownership or management of printed material

The previous law was repealed under Decree No. 108 of 2011 that concerned the new media law.

"This confirms the view of the intelligence services that the media is a mere accessory, one ministry among others that is attached to this ornament called the government presidency. It is not effective, and does not express anything at all. In Syria there are no protocols for the media, so anyone who wishes to could have a go at making some, and that would be the intelligence apparatus."[36]

"When I told my Syrian friends about a project to publish a magazine, they told me, 'you are dreaming', and they alerted me to the difficulties I would face with the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Social Affairs - the latter two are the most difficult ministries, forming a kind of front. But if I could have overcome this, I could have realized my project. I was shocked at how close to impossible it was!"[37]

Radio and TV

The Radio

Damascus Radio was the first radio station in Syria and the second public radio station in the Arab world after *Voice of the Arabs* in Cairo. It was launched in 1947, and was affiliated with the General Authority for Radio and Television. In 1979, the second government radio station, *Voice of the People*, launched an eight-hour broadcast in two parts. Broadcasts were gradually developed until they attained 24-hour radio service in 2013. The state issued a decision to shut them down in early 2017 due to lack of financial resources.[38]

In 2002, *Sawt Al-Shabab*, a government radio station that tried break the traditional mould, began its work with commercial programs and entertainment for young people through technical, sports and other programs. It also covered many artistic, athletic and cultural

festivals. It then shifted to news during the "crisis" years after 2011, covering political events, breaking news and direct reporting.[39]

The licensing of private radio stations commenced one year after radio had operated according to the Publications Law of 2001. Legislative Decree No. 10 was issued in 2002. This added Article 68 to the 1951 law in which private and commercial radio stations were excluded from the decision to limit the right to use airwaves to government and military authorities in accordance with Article 1 of Law 68 of 1951.
Article 2 of Law No. 68 states that "excluded from this limitation shall be commercial and private radio stations, which are limited to music programs, songs and advertisements, provided they comply with the provisions of Article 8 of Law No. 68 of the Ministry of Information." We note that the article stipulated that private radio stations should be artistic, entertainment and advertising stations and not entitled to present political programs or news bulletins.[40]

"In short, I would like to say that the state media was generally in tune with the objectives of the regime and in the service of officials."[41]

The first Syrian private radio station, *Voice of the City*, was launched in 2005 and stations multiplied until Syrian listeners had 18 different radio station options, both state and private.[42]

The new Syrian stations pulled the rug out from under the Lebanese radio stations, which had long monopolized the ears of Syrian listeners and captured the majority of the radio advertising market in the absence of a local competitor at that time. These new Syrian stations cleared the stagnant water of official media with broadcasters who spoke fluidly, very different from the wooden speech of official media. But at the same time, these stations were limited to broadcasting songs, advertisements and entertainment programs, and neglected other normal media objectives to 'educate citizens and increase awareness.'[43]

Television

Syrian state television began broadcasting on Saturday evening, July 23, 1960, from a studio at the top of Mount Qasioun in Damascus. It then moved to a new building in Umayyad Square and opened new studios about a year after its launch. On March 13, 1985, the second channel of Arab Syrian Television began broadcasting up to six hours a day from the Dar al-Mohandeseen building in Damascus. A special broadcasting studio was provided with the necessary equipment and administrative offices. In 1993, a second television channel building with its own studio opened in Umayyad Square and began to broadcast programs from the main building.[44]

State television was been subject to strict censorship and private television stations were blocked for years. With the spread of satellite channels in the 1990s, the satellite dish became a central state problem. No one dared to install them illegally, until the reality of the large numbers of unauthorized satellite dishes rendered it impossible for the authorities to prevent their use.[45]

"Those officials who thought they could control the flow of information now realize that it's impossible ... Anyone, even in a very miserable place in Syria, can now get the truth, or at least different views, through all the international satellite channels."[46]

After Syrian private radio stations received the 2002 legal amendment, the Syrian government used another policy to license private TV channels. The state issued no legislation to authorize television channels but turned a blind eye, allowing them to operate in Syria from the free zone in Damascus through understandings with the owners.[47] Despite some Syrian investors accepting this "unofficial" relationship, it did not last long. Channel "Cham" (the first private Syrian channel) was suspended in 2006 and was still in the pilot phase eight months after its launch.

The channel was closed by a verbal order issued by the former Information Minister, Mohsen Bilal, to the owner of the channel, former independent MP Mohammad Akram al-Jundi, and to the director, Mamoun al-Bunni.[48] They were told to transfer the channel to Egypt and broadcast its programs with a license from “media city”. Akram al-Jundi said in a press interview that the channel was closed in a telephone call from state officials, without justification. However, Jundi said he knew very well that the reason was state fear of the success and popularity of the channel. He did not resort to the judiciary because he had received many promises to re-broadcast the channel. However, this did not happen.[49]

"I had the opportunity to join the Syrian television channel, Cham, the first private Syrian television channel. Of course, the intelligence services discovered that this station would address cases of subjugation in Syrian society. Consequently, the Minister of Information ordered the station director to withdraw the broadcast in return for an approval to start a second news channel supported by the Syrian intelligence services and owned by a man of the Assad regime. This channel is operating so far according to the standards of Syrian television, or in other words, in ignorance of techniques used in professional stations.[50]

State harassment of the media continued with the closure of *Al-Mashreq* channel on July 29, 2009. Security personnel informed the channel's staff at its office in Damascus about the closure of the office and asked them to leave immediately. The next day, an investigation commenced with the channel team, led by one of the security services, and they were forced, without justification, to sign pledges to permanently stop working for the channel. *Mashreq* started broadcasting from Dubai on February 2, 2009 and was able to attract a large segment of viewers in Syria in record time.[51] As such, only one private channel remained operative - *Al-Dina* satellite TV, owned Mohammed Hamsho, a businessman close to the state. However, Arab satellites providers Arabsat and Nilesat cut off the channel in July 2012 after accusations that it was adopting the government's incitement speech condoning the use of force to end the revolution. Further, the Arab satellite providers called on the Council of the League of Arab States at the ministerial level to stop the Syrian channel from broadcasting. About a month after it was banned, it was replaced on the same frequency by the *Sama* channel. It began to broadcast a programming cycle that was quite similar in form and content.

"Creative people in Syria are absent, and just gaining employment with a salary in the media is a great victory. Meanwhile, senior positions, such as the Minister of Culture, have nothing to do with culture. A man who does not deal with media in his life, who does not know the difference between a newspaper and a magazine, between radio and television, who does not know anything, is suddenly appointed Minister by sovereign decision."[52]

Television Drama Recruits

After the invasion of Kuwait and the Second Gulf War in the early 1990s, the flow of Gulf funds and investment offered the artistic, technical and production conditions for the launching and expansion of Syrian television drama. The Theatre and Critical Studies programs of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts produced a large number of students, who became acting, directing and writing stars of Syrian drama. A number of students trained in socialist countries in cinema, theatre, television, visual arts and media, and also provided the human resources needed to launch this new form.[53]

Since the number of television studio sets did not match the momentum of production at the Higher Institute of Theatre, a large number of directors, actors and writers worked at local theatres less able to absorb them. These were some of the possible outlets for the flourishing television series industry where the graduates of the Institute could work. But the field of television drama was problematic because it was subject to censorship, both by the government and by the money-producing companies that were often controlled by Gulf producers. Thus, the director monitored text, acting and movement not based on knowledge from the Institute but according to rules determined by the sponsor.[54]

With the boom in the soap opera industry, the government decided to invest, politically and financially, in actors and television stars. After gaining local and regional fame, actors were to generate propaganda for the ruling regime. They had to appear in national or patriotic events and media to praise the leader and the greatness and importance of his regime, and appear in celebrations, as well as in popular, theatrical and television productions.[55]

"In order to become a star in Syria, one must be supported by an intelligence apparatus, the Republican Palace, or the Republican Guard. In this way, one can ensure 70% of stardom and be able to work frequently on television, get offered star roles and ensure that one's image becomes engraved in the minds of the people. Hiring is ordered by the Intelligence Division or the Republican Palace, who contact producers and request that an actor be given the lead in this or that production."[56]

After President Hafez al-Assad's death in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad took power and created mysterious conditions for the creation of investments companies, television stations, radio stations and "independent" newspapers, as well as drama production companies, dubbing houses, publishing houses and cinemas. All were financed by black capital. Observers did not know who controlled all this, whether retired traders, senior officers or the sons of influential officials from Cham International company, Syria International, Saqr, Al-Sharq, Al-Ghazal, Al-Fardous, Arab, Sama etc. They entered the boards of directors in the public sector of the Ministry of Culture including the Theatre Board, the Cinema Institute and the Syrian Arab Television Production Department in the Ministry of Information, which began to fade and diminish in the face of these emerging companies that were flourishing. Thus, the Syrian art scene was flooded with stars that were not made by chance, nor by exceptional circumstances; rather, they were deliberately and intentionally created by power, by design, and by personal connections and capital that controlled these stars.[57]

"The regime understood the value of Syrian television drama, and knew that it had a weapon in its hands. It regarded it as a trade union or a professional union to furnish support for the regime. We did not fully understand these foundations until the onset of protests in Syria,

when the artistic and literary ranks stood with the regime, with a few exceptions who supported the opposition."

"The marketing of a writer, director or artist is forbidden outside of regime politics. We saw with our own eyes how the stars left in the evening with the intelligence services after filming to join the nightlife of Bloudan and Zabadani, to the Sofer and Aley villas of Lebanon, to mountainous areas not known to the Syrian people. These stars were often caught in compromising circumstances in terms of morality and public conduct."[58]

"The television series *Spotlight* was daring but what did they do at the beginning of the crisis? They all stood against the Syrian revolution and said that the country was doing very well, thrown by their lies and hypocrisy when the people stood against corruption for the first time."[59]

The Internet

In Syria, the Ministry of Communication's main provider connects all Internet Service Providers to the network. The providers pay monthly subscriptions according to the data packets that customers use, and no private company, provider or individual is allowed to operate the Internet supply lines regardless of their nature (marine-space, for example).[60]

Internet service started in Syria at the beginning of the last decade. Since then, the government has been trying to control the Internet through methods and techniques based on cutting, monitoring or controlling the speed of the network.

Some of the practices imposed on Internet service by the Syrian authorities are as follows:

• Blocking and monitoring websites and ports for open source applications such as FTP

• Monitoring social networking sites and programs

• Manipulating speed or cutting service at times

• Increasing the supervision of Internet cafés, licensing procedures for opening them, requiring the approval of the Political Security Division of the Ministry of the Interior, and obliging Internet café owners (especially those adjacent to universities and university residences) to register the personal data of their Internet users. In addition, owners must maintain a daily register that includes the user's triple name (first name, father's name, family name), the mother's name, personal identification number or passport, the number of the device used, and the hours of arrival and departure at the Internet café. Shop owners are obliged to submit these records to security agents when they present themselves.[61]

"Internet cafes have spread throughout Damascus, and although access to sensitive sites is almost certain to be monitored by the security services everywhere, there are in fact no effective restrictions."[62]

Authorities in Syria have tried journalists, bloggers and citizens who dared criticize the authorities or the president. The vast majority of journalists and bloggers were tried before the Supreme State Security Court, a special court in which almost no procedural safeguards exist.

In 2009, the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) ranked Syria third on a list of the top 10 worst countries for bloggers because of arrests, harassment and restrictions faced on the Internet in Syria.[63]

The number of websites blocked reached about 263 at the beginning of 2011. At the forefront were Kurdish sites, political opposition sites, electronic communities and "proxy" sites. [64]
In spite of the above, opportunities for publishing and writing on the Internet has been more open (in terms of circumventing censorship) than traditional methods such as books, newspapers and magazines.

"The Internet has opened up a wider area of freedom of expression. Ironically, a text that has been rejected by censorship can be circulated on the Internet without problem, even if it is written as a personal account of the author."[65]

On February 8, 2011, the government lifted the censorship that had blocked the most popular social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter for years. This was read by some as a good will gesture by the Syrian authorities, while others felt that opening access to these sites enabled security services to monitor all users and follow their pages and activities more easily than if users continued to enter by breaking the "proxy" block on these sites, particularly during that volatile period after the start of the Arab spring revolutions.

"The flow of information to Syria cannot be stopped, even from sites that have critical views of the Syrian regime and which it has tried to prevent. This information finds its way into the public domain without much difficulty."[66]

Freedom of Expression in Culture

Culture in Syria did not take an important place in government development plans, and remained a marginal sector given state attention to expanding infrastructure, health, education and funding policies. The function of public cultural institutions continued to follow executive branch inclinations, which were far from a participatory or effective program. This limited the general nature of these institutions. It defined the mechanisms of their work, their mutual relations, and their relations with beneficiary groups and cultural actors. It also determined how cultural resources were distributed and the quality of these resources.

Official cultural institutions (like all Syrian institutions), ever under strict control, precluded the use of Syrian society's rich cultural capacities, diminishing the social character of culture. Official culture became dominant, chasing out free thought, public debate and creative communication.[67]

This topic addresses four main themes:

1. Literature
2. Cinema
3. Theatre
4. Cultural plans and events

Literature

We cannot separate literary production, in intellectual and critical terms, into distinct time periods. Cultural production is a continuous process influenced by political, economic and other forces. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about time periods, unless these periods were established as a result of total upheaval, as was the case in Syria after 2011. However, in the previous decade, a series of novels appeared in Syria written by new authors, who possessed a high degree of freedom of expression and dealt with crucial political issues within Syria. Since 1970, Syrian literature avoided commentary on the political situation. There were literary works about the Palestinian situation or Syrian resistance to the French mandate, such as the writings of Nadia Khost and Hanna Mina. There were also books with social themes, distant from the political situation in Syria. [68]

"The early 1970s saw a real cultural revival that lasted for years but was later extinguished with the arrival of Assad, who quickly derailed it, not only by use of the security services but by making the cultural means of production available only to select groups, by giving place to this or that specific person." [69]

"In the 1970s and before, writers were well-known and read, such as Walid Ikhlasi, Nirouz Malik, the poet Sa'id Rajo, Muhammad al-Maghout, Ali al-Jalah, Mamdouh Adwan, and Saadallah Wannous. These writers led the literary movement and were very critical of power, especially Saadallah Wannous and Mamdouh Adwan. Even if protected in one form or another they still suffered harassment." [70]

Writers who wished to publish works critical of the regime had to do so outside Syria. For example, Syrian writer Manhal Al-Sarraj published her novel *As the River Must* in Sharjah as it narrated the events of Hama in the 1980s. This novel was banned in Syria, but she then published two more novels inside Syria, one of which also spoke about the events of Hama but from an acceptable perspective, that of the regime. [71]

"We had a safety valve that is Lebanon. Anyone who wrote a literary book and knew that it would be banned in Syria published in Lebanon."[72]

The Syrian censors played an invisible role in thwarting creativity. Writers had to think a hundred times about potential dire consequences before writing anything, the first and simplest of which was perhaps not to publish.

"If there was less censorship and greater freedom in Syria, we would see much greater production. The evidence is that there exists important Syrian literary production outside Syria - in London with Zakaria Tamer, in Sharjah, Lebanon and elsewhere."[73]

As such, there was a practice among writers not to submit work at all if there was doubt as to whether it would be approved because a restriction on printing and circulation could be issued. It was better to pre-empt censorship by publishing a work in Lebanon and rely on it being smuggled to Syrian markets. If a decision was made to prevent circulation, the book had essentially already been distributed. And there lay the paradox: such a book might be found for sale in Syrian bookstores but if it had been submitted to the censors it would certainly have been banned from sale completely.[74]

"We handled book manuscripts and submitted them to the censors. If a book was literary, we passed it to the Writers' Union. If it was cultural or intellectual, it was passed to readers in the Ministry of Information and if they found in the book something objectionable, it was referred to the district leaders."[75]

"The censor intervenes in the details of a literary work, even in its style and form. The censor of the Union of Arab Writers is an educated person who strives to uncover failings in the text in order to appear brilliant, and is able to read a writer's intention between the lines. More royal than the king, at times he far exceeds his job requirements. The Writers Union transformed from an institution that defends books into one aimed at destroying them. The authority tells you what to say but the intellectual tells you how to say it."[76]

Calculating what can pass without alteration is the censor's prerogative. Sometimes what is forbidden is allowed and vice versa. Perhaps it is possible to pass an insult or offensive words if directed at the brutal enemy Israel, for example. Perhaps the caprices of the censor are influenced by his wife, a strange and ironic state of affairs, but sometimes this happens, such as the wife who influenced a television channel owner concerning the outfit of a guest being interviewed.

The caprices of censor directors also weighed in, as they could prevent the submission of a certain book to the censor responsible for reviewing it. A director would do this just because he did not fancy the title of the book, or because of an objectionable sentence he did not like, or even based on the name of the writer. Some were religious or political fanatics. However, there were some censors who believed in the freedom of thought and considered that their moral function was to help creativity.[77]

"If we were to characterize censorship in Syria with one word, it would be chaos, whereby the writer can publish a book outside Syria, with content opposing the regime, with the writer residing in Syria, of course, despite the possibility of being subjected to security harassment, such as interrogation, travel bans or removal of the book from the market."[78]

Some Syrian writers, despite pressures and restrictions on their freedom of creativity, managed to pass their ideas in their own ways, and succeeded in achieving this in many places without falling prey to the state or its censors.

"Writers cannot be restrained. They are not politicians publishing pamphlets but can say what they want through their particular literary methods. But the state sometimes succeeds in restricting writers."[79]

"We know that we are governed by a repressive state, and this is what led us to practice symbolic writing, using near-transparent symbols. If one of us writes a literary text in which something is too direct, we hide it a little to protect him/her. We are thereby able to communicate to others something about human suffering in Syria."[80]

"Syria, as Riyad al-Turk called it, was the kingdom of silence. Cultural life was very poor. We used to measure any word we wrote, rely on literary devices, and avoid making a beeline straight for the regime. For example, we wrote about tyranny in general without naming the tyrant."[81]

Cinema

Syria has known the art of cinema since 1908 through film showings for Turkish exiles in Aleppo. Then, there were some private Syrian cinematic adventures. During this time the state was not responsible for the film industry. There were four or five major movie dealers importing about 450 films a year to Syria. Hollywood productions alone accounted for nearly two-thirds of them, and the rest were Arab films from Egypt (the only Arab country to produced commercial films at that time), a few films from France and Italy, and even fewer from the Soviet Union and socialist countries.

Syria relied on imported films until the establishment of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria. In 1959, the state established the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, which, in turn, established the Supreme Council for the Arts, Letters and Social Sciences. The Council appointed a special committee on cinema, with the aim of promoting the art of cinema, gathering ideas from specialists, holding meetings and conferences to gather recommendations, and submitting them to the relevant authorities. This Committee recommended the establishment of a public cinema institute sponsored by the state. The idea of founding an institute for cinema was thus born as a result of the work of this committee and the Supreme Council for the Arts, Letters and Social Sciences. However, it was not implemented on time and remained in the planning stage. Five years later, in November 1963, a special decree was issued to create the Public Institute of Cinema.[82]

The private production of Syrian films relied on the Public Institute of Cinema, which monopolized this field. Its function was not limited to filming and production but extended its role to controlling cinemas, film distribution and censorship. The number of cinemas across Syria exceeded 140. In some small cities such as Quneitra, Musayaf, Jarbals, Qamishli and others, there were private cinemas. All these small cinemas eventually shut down because of state monopoly, and in the end only 11 remained open in Damascus. Thus, if a businessman could produce a well-received film that was then blocked from being distributed and shown, why would he produce it in the first place? The Public Institute of Cinema was responsible for distribution and it also reaped the profits.[83]

Syrian cinema can be regarded as the jewel of Syrian cultural production, despite the paucity of cinematic production that existed prior to the 1970s before the establishment of the Public Institute of Cinema, which produced an estimated 11 films a year. After the elimination of the private sector and the emergence of the cinema industry, production gradually decreased until it reached an average of a film and a half per year. The contract between 2003 and 2013 saw the climax of Syrian film production with 22 films, or two and a half films per year.

However, Syrian cinema is exemplary for the intelligence of its directors and the aesthetic quality of its films. This was partly a result of directors studying with great international filmmakers in France, Russia, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. They were clever and indirectly communicated what they wanted to say through displacement - that is, talking about a subject through a second story. This process allowed them, by necessity, to be creative, and to turn pressure and oppression into a source of aesthetic inspiration.[84]

Thus, Syrian cinema was able to win acclaim and international awards through the experienced and celebrated names in this field, such as Nabeel Al-Maleh, Nidal Al-Debs, Usama Mohammed, Mohammed Malas, Omar Amirili, and others contributing to the film

industry. Collectively, following the establishment of the Cinema Institute, they won more than 123 cinema awards in local Arab forums as well as in international festivals.

Syrian directors did not enjoy creative freedom. While they were able to show their films abroad, many of them were banned in Syria. Some films were banned in a strange way, especially films produced by the Public Cinema Institute, which cost tens of millions of Syrian pounds. Instead of preventing a film from being produced, the relevant authorities did not issue a permit allowing it to be shown. This was cunning because the matter could not be criticized or prosecuted. They did not officially ban the film from being shown so there was no hold against them.[85]

It can be said that the Public Institute of Cinema played both a positive and a negative role. It was poorly planned. But it also produced powerful films, which is normally only possible when backed by strong financial institutions or governments. The best productions in the history of cinema are national productions; that is, when the state assumes financial responsibility for film production. This is what the Institute did.[86]

The Stage

Theatre teaches democratic dialogue, freedom of speech and courage. As Syrian playwright, Abu Khalil al-Qabbani,[87] says, "It is high wisdom and compelling verses that set off the tongue, encourage the coward and purify the mind."

In Syria, the regime-state became the most important player in the development of culture in general and theatre in particular in the four decades before 2011, taking hold of an entire society through the censorship of cultural production, and making use of it for ideological purposes and propaganda. The theatre lost its essence and spirit based on a spontaneous and creative relationship with the spectator. This exacerbated its predicament, with no new inspiring conditions on the horizon.[88]

The conditions that contributed to the backwardness of Syrian theatre continued, especially the detrimental effects of a long absence of democracy, and the strength of religious frameworks in Syria and the Islamic world in general. These two conditions are expressed by the late Saadallah Wannous: "The problem is deeper and more complex than a relationship between state and society. There is a tripartite structure, and perhaps one should dive deeper into it to explore it. A very backward social structure accompanies a superficially modern social structure with an absence of any coherence or future project. There is no future proposed project that can be carried out by a modern state that does not rely on conflict between state and society. Hence, the state marginalizes its own society and compels it to return, via a negative defence mechanism, to its traditional and moral bases."[89]

Syrian playwright, Farhan Belbel, stated in a press interview that with all the restrictions on literary output in general and on theatre in particular, the margin of freedom of speech in Syria is wider than some think. He added that he staged very bold plays, and only one, *The Hidden Power*, was banned in 1987. He mentioned that it is the role of the writer to realize that freedom is taken and not given, and that s/he should contribute to expanding the margin of freedom. “The Arab writer must realize that he is governed by a limited margin of freedom to speak, and he has to expand this margin and to fight to say what he wants.”[90]

"In all policies of tyranny there is always something that is used as a safety valve for society to vent." In Syria, there were safety valves in the cultural field of theatre, such as in the plays of the Qanou3 brothers, *Masrah al-Showk*, or Durayd Lahham's *Hamam Al-Hout*. These plays do not offer aesthetic stimulation to develop artistic appreciation, nor do they offer anything stimulating to develop character on the level of content."[91]

The National Theatre

Those who have studied the history of Syrian theatre agree that the period from the establishment of the Syrian National Theatre in 1959 until 1989 can be considered its second heyday (the first was led by Syrian playwright, Abu Khalil al-Qabbani).

The establishment of the National Theatre coincided with the unification of Syria and Egypt in the late 1950s, and was preceded by the official theatre of the military, founded in the second half of the 1950s.[92]

The National Theatre played a role similar to that of The Public Institute of Cinema, because theatre production was expensive and without a strong supporter would end up floundering or becoming vaudeville. The National Theatre in this context was very useful and positive in large parts of its work. Much of its work outside of creativity was corrupt (in terms of all the shrouded planning, management and financing) although in itself it was a good national theatre. Syrian theatre witnessed many enlightened moments in its productions that were significant in Syria and in the Arab world as a whole.[93]

The Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts

The Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts was established in Damascus in 1977 following the agreement of a group of Syrian intellectuals and academics (including Saadallah, Wannous, Ghassan Al-Maleh, Fawaz Al-Sajer, Dr. Nabeel Al-Hafar, Dr. Hanan Kassab Hassan and Dr. Mary Elias) to establish a cultural academy aimed at graduating specialists in various fields of theatrical arts.

The institute was initially composed of departments of acting, criticism and literature, and then expanded and diversified its range. Its headquarters was moved from Damar to Umayyad Square in Damascus in 1990 to enjoy a more spacious and artistic architectural style. The late musician, Salhi El-Wadi, who founded the National Symphony Orchestra in 1993, became the dean of this institution. It offered two degrees in the Higher Institute of Music and the Theatre Institute, which later added cinematography and design, as well as theatrical techniques and acting, criticism and ballet.[94]

The opening of the theatre institute was exceptional, and it constituted an important oasis of freedom for its teachers and also in terms its educational curriculum, which was based on the freedom of learning rather than indoctrination. This was an exception to the Syrian academic curricula in universities and institutes. The method of indoctrination adopted in these centres has always been their fundamental weakness.

At the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts, teachers allowed students to use references and booklets during their exams. Students did not depend on these but rather on their own

knowledge and brilliance. In fact, many who later became great and important people graduated from the Institute.[95]

The Institute adopted useful methods reflected in its theatre space. The problem was that it did not have much space in Syria, and was subject to restrictions and controls like other forms of cultural production, and suffered from other difficulties in addition to censorship. The most important were financial pressures. A play was not prepared in a day or two, and often needed four months of training, during which time most of the actors were paid part-time. Theatre tickets were sold at a low price, and a large number of them given as gifts or through connections. Profits in the supply box did not go to the theatre or the Institute but to the Ministry of Finance and then redistributed to various constituencies. There was, therefore, no direct relationship between the play, production and proceeds.[96]

"Persecution against me is practiced on the grounds that my work is not presentable, and the censor committees cancelled it, and this is a repressive act. After so many months of fatigue and hard work by the actors and participants in the work, this committee summarily rejects it on sight.[97]

Cultural Programs and Events

The five-year plans were the main instrument of government policy in Syria from 1960. These plans were usually issued by laws approved by parliament. Indicative planning was adopted in 2001 to reduce the centralization of planning that suited neoliberal policies that were gradually implemented in the economic sphere. The plans were overseen by the Supreme Planning Council, which operated under the national leadership of the Ba'ath Party until the 2012 constitutional amendment. The planning was carried out by the executive branch of the government, with little involvement from civil society or the private sector.[98]

Culture did not have an important place in development plans, and remained a marginal sector, with government focus on expanding infrastructure, health, education and support policies.

"I noticed that the official domain of culture is elitist and does not reach people, not because they do not care but because over the years they have been robbed of any interest due to the difficulty of simply living, studying and eating. And the rest we are not allowed, and it is not for us."[99]

The tenth five-year plan approved by the 2006 law was an exception. The plan included an attempt at social and economic transformation, and devoted a chapter to culture. It tried to partially rehabilitate the role of culture by focusing on the importance of cultural capital, criticizing the performance of cultural policy in previous plans, providing an ambitious vision for transforming social knowledge, a creative climate, respect for the rights of writers, artists and intellectuals in general, and other actions and recommendations that supported their work and the cultural sector as a whole.

There were several key issues with this. At the planning level, the cultural sector was not a priority, and this ambitious plan's vision for culture was not implemented. The plan instead focused on strategic features of policies and programs that reflected its essence. Hence, the previous traditional projects continued without qualitative change. In terms of

implementation, the vision was emptied of its content, the substantive aspects of cultural and participatory dialogue were not realized, and an enabling environment for innovation and institutional reform was not created. The failure of this ambitious plan for culture was frustrating for individuals and institutions looking for change.[100]

"I had great ambition that this small opening of the previous decade, this opening up commenced by the President (son), would offer a small space of movement. But it turned out to be a margin of control and not real openness, so we could see exhibitions and cafes and other things but what was the place of the ordinary citizen in all this? He was totally exiled and this was all just marketing without any real change. This kind of top-down policy was catastrophic."[101]

Some initiatives emerged from outside the development plan, such as the celebration of Damascus, the capital of Arab culture, which reflected the absence of institutional thought about cultural life. Such initiatives were exceptions, and they did not advance any method for sustainability.[102]

Damascus as the Capital of Arab Culture

The Board of Directors of the Damascus Municipality was established as the capital of Arab culture by a special decision, Republican Decree No. 1 of 2007, which linked this Board to the Prime Minister. Consequently, the Ministry of Culture had no clear role in the festival. The board of directors was responsible for proposing financiers, disbursement mechanisms, as well as legislative and regulatory cover for ceremonial activities. This meant that it could override legislation in force and govern cultural work.

It was expected that the event and special year would not be a passing one in the history of Syrian culture after the capacities offered, and freedoms and support promised. That is, all of this should have been used to establish a new cultural climate in Syria - but this did not happen. [103]

"The capital of culture was just a festival that had nothing to do with culture and never provided any service to the Syrian community. As an observer, I consider it to be lacking, not living up to ambitions. It presented itself as an independent body with full freedom of action and a huge budget. I asked people and my neighbours about their opinion of the capital of culture, and no nobody knew, and its work remained superficial."[104]

"We planned to build a museum of modern art and a cinema school, and young people were active both as actors and as recipients. It was very beautiful and we were dependent on it but unfortunately the activities in that dark sky of culture were just like a festival, fireworks in the sky of Damascus. We simply did not want it that way; we wanted it to be sustained and free of the regime, namely two people, the former prime minister and the political adviser to the president. These were the two main obstacles to effectiveness and sustainability." [105]

"Of course, there were some good people and good plays, including the *Muhajiran* play. I do not want to criticize good work but what I would like to say is that the margin the regime called a new opening was the same margin as the capital of culture."[106]

The Damascus Film Festival

The first session of the Damascus Film Festival was held in 1979 but Damascus had set a precedent in this field 30 years earlier, when a film festival was held in 1955 as part of the Damascus International Fair. However, it had been much criticised. The first Damascus Youth Film Festival was held in 1972, and did not hold a subsequent session until after 2011.

More than a year after the Damascus Film Festival was launched, former Culture Minister, Najah Al-Attar, formed a committee to draft the festival's program. The aim was to design a program in broad strokes, outlining ambitions and possibilities, leaving space for further development and expansion so that the festival could become comparable to the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia.[107]

The first session of the festival opened in October 1979 and became an annual event from 2007. It continued until its 19th session was suspended after the outbreak of events in 2011.

Cultural researcher Dr. Hassan Abbas believes that the festival played a formal role only in the film industry. She gives as an example of how “a hundred films will be screened at the festival within 10 days, and it is very difficult for spectators to attend more than 14. Films critics have to view a film more than twice to be able to write about it, and this is almost impossible."[108]

"You can criticize the director, but you cannot criticize the film establishment, the Public Institute of Cinema - not even in your dreams. This ruined our relationships; since we cannot criticize those who deserve it, we criticize individuals instead. We put the failures of a festival on individuals, and not on how the festival happened, not mistakes made by the Ministry of Culture or Information, for example, and this effected standards."[109]

Cultural Centres

The cultural centres in Syria are the buildings, palaces and cultural shrines that host formalized activities. A dilemma emerges due to the redundancies of management in these centres and lack of follow-up. When nominating directors for cultural centres, the Ministry of Culture restricts itself to forming a committee, knowing that the consequent names is put forward by the Ba’ath Party's national leadership. The nomination is made by party branch leaders, and then by the conservatives, so that a list of selected candidates is forwarded for interviews. In other words, the choice of directors of cultural centres is limited to lists of pre-nominated names. The work of the Syrian Ministry of Culture is limited to evaluating the work of the directors of the cultural centres. It is possible that the political responsibility of the Minister of Culture is to appoint a director here and there in cases of corruption or when performance is not required.[110]

"The cultural centres were all very shallow. By the way, the number of centres reached 425 in Syria - this could have transformed the entire country but they were completely ineffective and closer to being security centres than cultural centres."[111]

"The Authority has adopted what we call the policy of manipulation. That is, I give the impression that I am doing what you want but, in fact, I do what I want. To illustrate this, there are about 500 cultural centres in Syria that belong to the Ministry of Culture, each one

being a space for cultural activities. All that is presented, said and exchanged within those spaces is watched over and heard by the authorities."

There was a censor whose job was to inspect the paintings before they were exposed, and they had to first obtain permission. A clause stating 'under the auspices of' had to be written on a poster advertising any activity, for example: 'under the auspices of' the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Information, or the Public Institute of Cinema. No printing press in Damascus had the nerve to print a poster that did not contain this phrase. [112]

"All the security branches attend events in the evenings and this sometimes makes us happy because it increases the number of attendees; for example, the number of attendees is 10, security brings it to 15, so the place is filled. They often ask about one of the stories, 'what does the writer mean?' We say to them to go 'wash with water from the river and nature,' and they say 'God keep your health' and then leave."[113]

Freedom of Expression in Political and Civil Spheres

In a free society, a group of people with similar political orientations can form political parties with the aim of gathering the largest possible popular mass that supports the party's views and ideas. These parties attempt to gain power or to participate in political life and implement their ideas and achieve their goals. This is done in civilized countries through fair elections involving all members of society who can support of their party of choice.

This topic addresses two main themes:

1. Political Activism
2. Civil Society

Political Movements

In 1973, a new constitution was adopted for the country. Its eighth article stated that "the Arab socialist party is the leading party of the state and society," thus formally abolishing free political action in the country.[114]

Under Article 8, the Ba'ath Party became an authoritarian party. It was immersed in power and its resources were diffused through the state to control policies, people, structures and public institutions. Gradually, it began to change from a nationalist party that, according to its well-known slogan, aspired to Arab liberation, unity and socialism to a party that controlled state mechanisms, and moulded political, social and cultural life in cooperation with the Progressive National Front. Because of its power and prestige, party membership became a bridge for many to realize special interests. The pathway to jobs and positions and even access to higher education opportunities was party-affiliated, and passed through party membership. Some believe that this Article damaged the party itself as individuals or members could associate themselves only through special interests rather than ideas, policies and political programs.[115]

The Ba'ath Party attempted to show that pluralist politics still existed (albeit only formally) through the formation of a ruling coalition that it led with eight other parties under it that

belong to the Progressive National Front, founded under President Hafez al-Assad in 1972. Its constituent parties were the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, The Arab Democratic Union, the Arab Socialist Union, the Arab Socialist Party, the Communist Party led by Bakdash, the Communist Party led by Youssef Faisal, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Socialist Unionist Party and the Unionist Social Democratic Party. Freedom of partisan action and the formation of political parties were not allowed until the Parties Law was passed in 2011.[116]

To keep the Ba'ath Party the strongest in the political arena, it weakened other parties by courting certain personalities or currents and isolating others. In any case, the Ba'athist parties, unlike the Ba'ath Party itself, were not public parties capable of rallying or announcing their own activities and movements without the coordination of the intelligence services.[117]

The Opposition

There were no recognized opposition parties in the Syrian political arena,[118] but there were political organizations that worked in secret for some time. Some of them were subjected to surveillance and repression, and some of them were abroad. Shortly before the death of President Hafez al-Assad, some of them decided to work publicly although they did not receive official authorization. This was the case with the National Democratic Alliance parties as some of their party leaders emerged from the long shadows and returned to practice their political activities. Among the most prominent Syrian opposition parties were:

The National Democratic Rally (NDA): the NDA was almost the counterpart of the Progressive National Front (FNP). What you found in the government were the partisan forms, you found here in the opposition.

The National Democratic Rally brought together five left-wing political parties: the Socialist Arab Democratic Union Party led by Hassan Abdel Azim, the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) led by Riyad al-Turk, the Arab Democratic Socialist Ba'ath Party led by Ibrahim Makhos, and the Arab Revolutionary Workers' Party led by Elias Morcos (Marxist - later succeeded by Tariq Abul Hassan) and the Arab Socialist Movement led by Abdul Ghani Ayyash (Socialist).

The Muslim Brotherhood: the Muslim Brotherhood is banned in Syria. It was founded by Professor Mustafa Sibai in 1942, and chaired today by Mohamed Hikmat Walid. In the early 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria suffered a violent confrontation with the ruling regime when, in the beginning of the 1980s, a faction that had split from the Brotherhood but was still considered part of it, organized attacks and the assassination of figures in the regime. In early February 1982, the authorities repressed the movement known as the Hama massacre.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has been absent from political life in Syria because during the intensification of the confrontation the authorities issued Law No. 49 of 1980, which accords the death penalty to anyone proven be a member of the Brotherhood.

Other opposition parties: There are Syrian political opposition groups, including the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (YKTI) and the Party of Modernity and Democracy for Syria, both unauthorized Kurdish opposition parties. Also there is the pro-Iraqi Ba'ath Party, the

Communist Action Party, ‘the Nasserite Popular Organization, and the banned Islamic Liberation Party.

Confrontation

The government exploited the operations carried out by the militant wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria in the early 1980s to run violent operations in Hama, Tadmur, Jisr al-Shughour and other areas. It also executed a campaign aimed at suppressing all currents of opposition, democratic and leftist political movements. This repression focused in particular on the Socialist Democratic Union Party headed by Gamal al-Atassi, and the Syrian Communist Party - the Political Bureau. Its secretary-general, Riyad al-Turk, was arrested and remained in solitary confinement for 17 years. The state also arrested hundreds of cadres of these parties. The detentions included the cadres and leaders of the Communist Labour Party, especially its founders, Aslan Abdul Karim, Fateh Jamous and Abdul Aziz Al-Khair. For the parties of the National Democratic Alliance,[119] this massive security operation resulted in a full paralysis with no remaining ability to influence, and they could do nothing but survive as a symbol of resistance to the regime. With this broad campaign against the parties, there was no longer any hope for the existence and practice of political work of value, and the intelligence services seized the country and its potential.[120]

"We witnessed a very dangerous period in 1979 and 1980. I was a high school student when the country was experiencing a wave of violence with bloody confrontations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the state. In this confrontation it seemed that violence targeted society to change the regime. The conflict transformed into a kind of civil disobedience with trade union participation. We witnessed the reaction of the regime, its willingness to use its power against society, to deploy all units of the army and military brigades within the cities, to increase check-points, and the intelligence services practiced great terror."[121]

"In 1963, the effects appeared in Homs and Hama in particular, followed in 1979 in Damascus and Aleppo. There were countless incidents and attempted assassinations and bombings in the streets of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. The repression spread to include many Syrian cities but the most prominent was in the city of Hama where it began and from which it spread forcefully to Aleppo, Al-Shughur Bridge and other areas. The regime committed massacres and fought battles where organization members were not the ones killed. It was a way of imposing domination and destroying organizations on the ground, ending the Muslim Brotherhood and effacing its experience and political cover. But this repression ricocheted, touching all of Syrian society, and the regime committed massacres of civilians and peaceful people."[122]

With the tightening of the security grip on the political and social capabilities of the community, the state’s desire grew to seize any effort, activity or social product that did not serve or reproduce the state. Political action outside the institutions of the Authority was prohibited, leading to liability and punishment. Citizens’ fear of punishment for political activity turned into fear of possible death or forcible disappearance for years, even decades, after the decisive turn of 1980 resulting from armed confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government.

"The results were catastrophic for Syrian society. The regime gave itself the opportunity to further build up its security apparatus, and allowed it to cancel the rest of civilian life. The

state raised the banner of political unionism rather than trade unionism. This tied the unions to the state and its apparatus, thus effectively cancelling the unions, which had played an important role in the conflict. They had tried to give solutions but the regime took them over, imprisoning lawyers, engineers and trade union leaders. The result of this was very bad because it enabled Hafez al-Assad to seize politics and the entire society with an iron fist of absolute power." [123]

In these security conditions, there were only two options for the Syrian opposition: either to be silent or to act in secret to avoid state repression. Those who were silent and abandoned political action lived in the shadows and demostrate the futility of peaceful political action in the face of bullets, gallows and long-term detention. Those who chose confrontation fought a harsh and unequal struggle with the regime in terms of the balance of power. [124]

The activity of the Muslim Brotherhood declined after the 1980s because of the physical liquidation campaigns carried out against them by the regime, as well as the large number of Islamic detainees in prisons. A number of communist and nationalist parties remained on the ground with very covert activity, which affected their performance both in terms of the nature of its members or in terms of political party achievement. [125]

"The regime later crushed the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood within the major cities and combed all Syrian cities in order. After the 1980s, there was a radical upheaval in the manner in which the state handled its people. There was a density of security and military forces; the institutions of the state were emptied out, becoming little more than formal institutions, and the real rulers of the country were the army and intelligence. Political work became a major crime, and the number active in politics was small. However, there was secret involvement in political organizations to revitalize young people and overthrow the regime."[126]

Hope for Change

After Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as president in July 2000, many people in Syria were hopeful that the state of freedoms and human rights would improve. In his first presidential speech on July 17, Assad spoke of the need for creative thinking, constructive criticism, transparency and democracy.[127]

"I thought it would open a real window for progressive democratic change, which could lead to openness at all levels because this young man, so we thought, had an open mindset and could lead us on another course - one opposing his father's legacy. First, Bashar Assad released political prisoners, allowed freedom of expression within certain limits, and political forums to emerge. There was a kind of spontaneous civil movement of classes and political and cultural elites, and this formed the phenomenon of the Damascus Spring in 2000. "[128]

In the early months of his rule, Bashar al-Assad stressed the principle of openness. Many politicians and human rights activists began to feel an opportunity, raising their voices to demand more freedoms and political reforms in Syria.

A number of informal groups began to meet at home to discuss human rights issues and reform efforts. The authorities allowed such forums to convene, leading to a period of relative openness, often referred to as the Damascus Spring. The state closed down Mezze military

prison in Damascus in November 2000, followed by the release of hundreds of political prisoners shortly thereafter. By 2001, 21 informal activist groups had been formed in Syria.[129]

"In 2001, President Bashar al-Assad issued a decision to vacate the prisons of Tadmur and Mezze and to collect all the detainees transferred from the Tadmur prison on a daily basis in Sednaya prison. I was part of the last group of about 80 detainees that was transferred from Tadmur prison. We left Tadmur prison and headed towards Sednaya, and that was the first time I saw the sky. During the six years I spent in Tadmur prison, we were prevented from raising our heads, and we always had to keep our heads down."[130]

The brief opening up period reached a surprising end. On January 29, 2001, Syrian Information Minister, Adnan Omran, declared that, "civil society is a Western term that is further enriched by groups seeking to become political parties." A month later, Assad repeated warnings to the civil society movement during a press interview. "There are two possible consequences to any action affecting stability at the national level: the possibility that the perpetrator is an agent who sabotages a country, or that the person is foolish and unintentionally sabotages. The result in either case is that a service is rendered to the enemies of the country so the two cases are dealt with in a similar way, regardless of their intentions or motives."[131]

"With the beginning of the rule of Bashar al-Assad, space was given to forums but that did not last long, and all were then closed. Our forum was called the Assembly of Syrian Women and was among those that were closed."[132]

Repression began in August 2001. The security services arrested Maamoun al-Homsi, a member of the People's Assembly known for his criticism of the regime, soon followed by subsequent arrests of prominent political and human rights activists. Within a single month, Syrian authorities arrested ten opposition leaders, including two members of parliament, and cracked down on civil society groups. Convicted members of Parliament, Maamoun al-Homsi and Riad Saif, were accused of "attempting to change the constitution by illegal means" and "inciting ethnic and sectarian strife." The Damascus Criminal Court sentenced them to five years imprisonment. The remaining eight activists, Riad al-Turk, Aref Dalila, Walid al-Bunni, Kamal al-Labwani, Habib Saleh, Hassan Saadoun, Habib Issa and Fawaz Tello were referred to the Supreme State Security Court, which sentenced them from 2 - 10 years imprisonment.

"With the arrests of 10 prominent activists from the civil movement in 2011, the phenomenon of the Spring of Damascus was brought to a standstill. The security services and the entire system were shocked by how a meeting of this magnitude could have occurred in Damascus without the knowledge of the security authorities. The most prominent opposition leaders were imprisoned for two and a half years just because they attended that meeting."[133]

Some activists and civil society organizations continued to work, despite pressures and constraints, in an attempt to obtain work permits from the Ministry of Social Affairs, and met with the latter's repeated refusal.[134] In 2005, the document *Damascus Declaration* was published, which outlined the process of democratic change within the framework of the compatibility of various Syrian national forces.

Since then, Syrian authorities have regularly arrested political activists and human rights activists. Human Rights Watch documented the detention of at least 92 political and rights activists from when Assad took power until mid-2010.[135]

The declaration was made after the end of the honeymoon period between the government and civil society actors. They insisted, however, that meetings should be held in public as an expression of a desire to work peacefully and transparently, which the security forces sought to emphasize. Most importantly, the Syrian opposition managed to overcome sectarian, religious and ideological divisions, which had constituted a chronic weakness. It sought to find a consensus formula, which brought together everyone.[136]

The National Council of the Damascus Declaration was held and its Secretariat was elected on 1 December 2007. The government did not accept this initiative and launched a campaign of arrests and accusations against its members. Most of its leaders were tried on charges such as 'weakening the will of the nation' and 'joining a secret society with the aim of overthrowing the regime.' And some of them went into exile to split the General Secretariat of the *Damascus Declaration* into two parts, inside and outside the country.[137]

The level of repression during the decade before 2011 may have been less severe than in the early 1980s, when security forces carried out large-scale forcible disappearances and extrajudicial killings. However, this was hardly an achievement or a measure of improvement given the different circumstances. "In the 1980s, we were imprisoned without trial; today we get a trial but we still go to prison."[138]

"I want to say that the system after 2000 was not the same system as before that date. It had lifted its security grip on the people somewhat, although the regime always reminded us of its repressive nature by the brutal arrest of a group or a party, as happened to a group of leaders of the *Damascus Declaration*."[139]

State of Emergency

The state of emergency continued from 1963, and the security and intelligence services continued to detain people without warrants. They often refused to reveal their whereabouts for weeks or months, and used torture regularly. Special courts were established under the Emergency Law, such as the Supreme State Security Court, which administered cases of unjust trials, including those of journalists, bloggers, and ordinary citizens who dared criticize the authorities or the president.[140]

The detainee was brought to interrogation immediately after arrest. Very routine torture practices were used to extract information from him. The techniques of torture varied according to the organization, and were more severe for the Islamists than the Communists, and were adapted according to the detainee's importance or the information he supposedly possessed. On the whole, the torture of the communists was "intentional" and stopped if information was obtained or the torturer could convince his torturers that he had no information, whereas there was a strong retaliatory element in the torture of Islamists.

In all cases, the torturers and their superiors enjoyed absolute immunity, which prevented them from being held accountable for what they did during investigations.[141] There were mandates that provided them with this immunity. First was the emergency law, which was in force from 1963 until 2011, and was taken beyond its application in the practice of administrative detention, torturing detainees to death in many cases, and imprisoning vast numbers of citizens for more than three decades without justification. Second, were the

extensive security provisions afforded by the Syrian Penal Code. One such provision allowed the detention of 'those who were in Syria during wartime or who aimed to weaken national sentiment or awaken racial or terrorist strife' (Article 285 of the Syrian Penal Code) or those supposedly engaged in 'the dissemination of false or exaggerated information that would weaken national sentiment in Syria during wartime or when it is expected to occur' (Article 286 of the Syrian Penal Code). It also allowed detention for 'every action, every letter, intended to provoke or resulting in the provocation of inflammatory or racist strife or incitement to inter-communal conflict' (Article 307 of the Syrian Penal Code). In addition to the above, from its establishment, the security service benefitted from wide legal immunity for acts of torture. Legislative Decree No.14 of January 15, 1969, which established the General Intelligence Department (one of the largest Syrian security services), stated that 'no one of the employees of the Department may be prosecuted for crimes committed by them during the execution of the specific tasks entrusted to them, or in the course of their execution, except by virtue of an order issued by the Director of the Department.'[142]

"The Emergency Law is a well-known, an unjust law that the security branches used, whereby any person who was arrested by military, air, political or state security may be held for one year or 20 years in a so-called customary arrest without being brought to court."[143]

On September 30, 2008, Bashar al-Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 69, enforcing a decision from the General Command of the Armed Forces extending immunity to other members of the security forces, including any member of the Internal Security Forces, Political Security and even Customs.[144]

Civil Society

The term civil society (as defined by the World Bank) refers to the wide range of non-governmental organizations and non-profit organizations that exist in public life, and that express the concerns and values of their members based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or charitable concerns.

Syrian civil society has always been strong and grounded. The first Syrian civil organization emerged at the end of the 19th century. Civil society activity continued through the constant troubled political periods throughout the history of modern Syria from independence until the rule of the Ba'ath Party. Civil work during these troubled years witnessed periods of harassment as well as breakthroughs, and continued until 1970. The state then manipulated the work of civil society. President Hafez al-Assad did not cancel all forms of civil society, such as unions, associations and sports clubs but he abolished or prevented the formation of any association related to human rights, democracy and civil liberty. Instead of trade unions and civil society actors working to defend their ideas and activities before state authority, their role was to defend this authority.[145]

This practice continued until 1999-2000. Civil society then witnessed the creation of a new form previously alien to Syria yet practiced in some countries of the world such as Indonesia, Egypt or unconstitutional kingdoms in which the queen assumes a social role. This new organism can be called, paradoxically, a civil government organization (GONGO) or the so-called government-organized non-governmental organizations sometimes called First Lady NGOs (FLANGOs), which are NGOs sponsored by the First Lady.

One example of this type of government NGO is the Syrian Trust for the Development of Syria, a non-profit civil institution under the administration of Asma al-Assad, the wife of President Bashar al-Assad. The Secretariat monopolized civil work and became the only space for young people who wished to be active in society and civil society work.[146]

"An obsession with freedom led us to organize a women's group inspired by feminist discourse but we defined it in terms of literary women's discourse so that we would not have a problem with the security institutions. We met each time at a different member's house until we were found out by security and called in for interrogation. I remember the general who interrogated us said, 'What do you want?' I said, 'We just wish to work to achieve women's rights.' And he responded: 'Who said that women do not have their rights! In the Ba'athist state, women have their rights and more. If you wish, there are organizations tied to the Ba'ath Party that work on women's rights.' I remember that was the last time we met and didn't face trouble from the security forces. They rejected any movement outside of party institutions, and we, as women and as employees, could not violate their orders."[147]

Civil society organizations that existed in the past were closed, but were harassed. Civil society was allowed only to work in the margins in some domains, such as the environment or business administration. The state also did not permit the licensing of new associations and organizations.[148]

The main obstacle to the registration of these organizations was the Private Associations and Institutions Law 93 of 1958, which governed the establishment of any association or organization of any kind in Syria, and authorized the security services to reject the application of these groups. As a result, the rejection of human rights organizations had a direct impact on their activities, allowing the government to arrest its members on charges of participating in 'illegal organizations' and banning meetings or activities.

"At the time of unification with Egypt in 1958, all the associations and parties, including the Syrian Women's Association, were dissolved. In 2000, we tried to restore the association's license and the matter reached the Office of the Presidency but things got bogged down and we could not obtain the license, and other associations and organizations also did not have licenses."[149]

In 2005, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the ministry officially responsible for the administration of Law 93, said it would reconsider the law with a view to liberalizing its provisions. However, the campaign to reform the law stopped completely short thereafter without any explanation.[150]

Five years later, Asma al-Assad said at a conference in Damascus in January 2010 that, 'the state wants to give more space for civil society to work, develop and participate in the government, and to implement development-oriented policies. We will learn from our mistakes after consultation with civil society to provide non-governmental organizations with the guarantees they need to work effectively.' However, no draft of such a law has been submitted to the public.[151]

"I contributed to the formation of 16 civil associations in Damascus, none of which received a permit, and we worked for periods of time until security came and silenced us. In 2002, we formed the Syrian Human Rights Association. We were 49 people and we held a public

meeting and elections. We were called into security divisions several times. Many members of the prison association joined us."[152]

One of the disadvantages of the monopoly of the General Women's Union was women's role in preventing the emergence of women's civil society organizations. Despite this, some women's organizations were able to continue their work, albeit outside legal frameworks. They, in fact, benefited greatly from this space of autonomy, of not needing to work under the supervision of the relevant ministries. They benefited, too, from the enormous opportunities afforded by international organizations, and managed to develop the capacities of their members. Although not licensed, these civil women's organizations were able to undertake numerous campaigns to amend discriminatory laws against women. However, this same problem of licensing limited the size and power of these organizations, their access to larger organizations, as well as the possibility of influencing Syrian women extending to larger segments of society. These unlicensed organizations are represented in international organizations and their programs in a way that is disproportionate to their actual size on the ground and the number of their members.[153]

Freedom of Expression in Society

Within the context of Syria, a centralized state where everything was linked to the ruling Ba'ath party, there was no room for society to be free or successful in the fields of artistic and cultural production. Everything was monitored and controlled by the political authority, not by community or religion, and there was little room for religious control to influence cultural output except through authoritarian censorship.

In Syria, there were three basic taboos: religion, sex and politics. Religion had no direct control over cultural output but did have control over social behaviour. Cultural production was governmental rather than civil. Since the government in Syria was not hard-line religiously and allowed a measure of religious freedom, it was possible to produce religiously unacceptable cultural works that could be shown but would be subsequently judged by religious authorities. An example of this is the novel *A Banquet for Seaweed* by Haider Haider, or *Rain Palace* by Mamdouh Azzam. Haydar's novel was allowed to be published. The first version was printed and a second edition followed. It was then rejected by the Egyptian sheikhs, who saw it as blasphemy. The effect of this on Syria ricocheted: the book was also contested on religious grounds but not by the state. *Rain Palace* was published in the mid-nineties by the Ministry of Culture but some Druze authorities saw in the novel an attack on the community and organized a movement to condemn the book. However, a group of young intellectuals from the province of Suweida demanded that the Druze clerics did not interfere with the book. The Forum for Cultural Dialogue in Damascus also presented a statement and formed a delegation of intellectuals in solidarity with the writer Mamdouh Azzam.[154]

At the beginning of 2006, former Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri issued a circular boycotting the publishing houses Itana and Petra. This followed many protests against the censorship authority at the Ministry of Information, which had permitted the printing and distribution of the book *So Take the Hijab* by Iranian writer Shahdarout Javan, translated in Syria by a Moroccan, Fatima Belhassan.

In the same context, authorities stopped the performance of *The Good Lady* in the city of Hama following a report sent by a journalist to the security services and the party branch in Hama, in which he accused the play and the production team of being immoral because of the word "prostitute" in the dialogue. The work was not in line with Islamic ethics, nor was the actresses' clothing, he wrote. The play was shut down by verbal order and without anything in writing, in fear of provoking the indignation of the Islamic groups in the province.[155]

With these exceptions, there are no striking cases that reflect the interference of religion and society in cultural production. The acknowledged authorities of Syrian society were weak because the normal social leaders such as sheikhs, tribal sheikhs and dignitaries were powerless compared to the intensifying authority of security.[156]

Despite the lack of community control, censorship exists, especially in non-political domains. Many social groups such as doctors, lawyers or even families (of a certain denomination) protest when negatively referenced in televisions dramas or theatre. This happened in the case of one Syrian series starring Ahmed Adas in the role of "Abu Eisha." The residents of the Houran area protested that the serial harmed their image. Here lies the danger of social censorship. Despite its weakness, it remains far more extensive than the scope of state control, which is concerned only with political prohibitions and related issues.

"The writer can avoid falling prey to state taboos, whereas it is difficult to avoid social taboos, and how many there are!"[157]

Conclusion

Through this research and the Syrian citizen testimonies, we can conclude that:

- The margin of 'liberty' was permitted or obtained according to the sector, and according to the ingenuity of those dealing with the authorities through literary, journalistic or cultural productions.

- One of the most powerful tools used by the state that undermined the freedom of expression was the implementation of a state of emergency for more than 50 years. This law was exploited by the security authorities and facilitated the detention of any citizen without an arrest warrant or clarification of the reasons for detention. Also, the eighth article of the 1973 constitution was implemented until 2012. This article merged state and party, allowing the regime to penetrate and control all institutions. Any production (even if private) was considered to be the property of the state and party.

- With the continued crackdown on freedom of expression and creativity, artists continued to invent methods to escape the grip of the censors, shine in many domains, and win Arab and international awards for their work. Over the years, there have been significant achievements in all areas (journalism, literature, theatre etc.).

- One of the most productive fields to receive a margin of freedom was television drama. The sector was supported by the government from the 1990s and there was a boom in Syrian production and in the Arab world. Perhaps because this popular art form could enter every home, it allowed for a kind of venting that did not need to adhere to elitist standards, as other forms of art such as theatre, cinema and visual arts did.

- As for writing, publishing through the Web was a welcome change from traditional publishing. But bloggers were constantly being blocked online.

- Cinema represented the jewel of Syrian cultural and artistic production, whereby its pioneers managed to transform pressures and repression into an impetus for aesthetic creativity, and many films won prizes internationally.

- Centralized state control weakened social control over and attention to cultural and artistic production.

- Finally, the most inflexible space left by the state was political. Political activists, through clandestine work, tried to change the situation in the country from the 1970s, beyond the Damascus Spring of 2000 and the *Damascus Declaration,* without a glimmer of hope or real change to the status quo. Some paid with years of imprisonment or even their lives for such change. Others have been fighting since the 1970s to this day.

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