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The Strategy & Goals of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian Revolution

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Introduction

In March 2011, a popular uprising in Syria – following the lead of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Bahrain – challenged the stability of the apparently unshakable Assad regime that had ruled Syria for the previous four decades. During that time, the absolute power of the security services, the high echelons of the Army and the core of the regime had only been challenged once. That was during the so-called Muslim Brotherhood uprising between 1976 and 1982, the study of which is beyond the scope of this writing, but which resulted in the ousting of the Brotherhood in Syria and the near elimination of their political and social role in the country.

However, the beginning of the revolution in Syria in 2011 brought the Brotherhood back to the political scene, where they have played a very important role, various aspects of which are examined in this paper, which deals with the period from 2011 to mid-2013 although a short historical introduction to the past decade is provided for contextualisation purposes. Building on the analysis of this short period, it is the aim of this study to describe the strategy used by the Muslim Brotherhood to become a prominent political actor and the representative of the mainstream Islamic current in Syria, as well as stating their degree of success in achieving that.

Due to the immediacy of the data and the ongoing changes to the political and strategic equation, this study is mostly based on primary

sources such as interviews and direct testimonies as well as press releases and articles in the Brotherhood's main official mouthpiece.

Background: Overview of the Brotherhood's Political Strategy During Bashar al-Assad's Era

Formally opposed to the Syrian regime, when Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000 the Muslim Brotherhood expressed their hope that the new leadership would bring change to Syria and that a political opening would take place¹. Following that premise, in 2001, they presented the National Honor Pact, a gentlemen's code of conduct where they suggested that all political forces unite without excluding anyone². No answer worth mentioning was received from other opposing entities or figures, who were conducting their own activities of civil society development, taking advantage of a short-lived political opening sponsored by Bashar al-Assad during his first year of rule known as the Damascus Spring, one that quickly turned into winter when the regime perceived the threat it posed to its stability³.

In a particularly difficult year for the Syrian regime, when its Army was forced to withdraw from Lebanon as a result of the Cedar Revolution against its presence in the country (2005), an amalgam of both the opposition inside and outside the country united under the banner of the Damascus Declaration⁴. They demanded a change in the regime and a transition to democracy, as well as, for the first time, the granting of rights to Kurdish individuals deprived of their citizenship since 1962. They made sure to emphasise the national character of this coalition so as not to give the chance to the regime to accuse them of being part of the international conspiracy initiated by the US invasion of Iraq and followed by the accusations of the Syrian regime's involvement in the Lebanese ex-Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2004. However, the margin of action was limited and the scope of influence on society, due to the overwhelmingly intellectual orientation of their premises, remained almost non-existent.

Surprisingly, in a move that has been widely criticized and only partially explained, less than one year later, the Muslim Brotherhood joined the National Salvation Front in March 2006 established by the man who had long served as the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice President but who had turned against the regime in 2005 as a result of a factional struggle with the Assad clan: Abd al-Halim Khaddam. As a result of the materialisation of this marriage of convenience, the Brotherhood's membership in the Damascus Declaration was frozen, while the honeymoon with Khaddam lasted until 2009, when after the Israeli *Cast Lead* operation against the Gaza Strip, the Brotherhood announced that they would keep their opposition activities on hold in recognition for the regime's support for the Palestinians⁵.

Eventually, when the uprising of 2011 began, the Muslim Brotherhood took on a series of activities (that will be addressed in this paper) and formally announced on May 2011 the resumption of their opposition against the regime⁶, in an attempt to pave the way for a future accession to power in the event of a regime collapse or change.

1. The Muslim Brotherhood's role in the Syrian revolution

1.1. The calls for demonstrations

The Egyptian revolution proved to be an important model for the Syrians to follow and some of those who believed something similar could also happen in their country set up a *Facebook* page calling for a Syrian "Day of Rage" on February 15, 2011⁷, but to no avail. In spite of this initial reticence, only a few days later, on February 17, 2011, a spontaneous episode in the Hariqa souk in Damascus ended up with dozens of people shouting at a policeman: "The Syrian people will not be humiliated" (*as-shaab as-suri ma biyenzall*)⁸. It was a popular explosion of "rage" nobody could claim to have orchestrated.

Another *Facebook* page, created on January 18, 2011, surfaced under the name of *The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad*⁹. Initially, and following the regime's discourse which blamed the Muslim

Brotherhood for stirring the uprising and leading the demonstrations, media close to the Syrian government reported that those running the above mentioned page calling for demonstrations on March 15, 2011 were members of the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁰. Although it proved to be true as we will see, people responded to those claims emphasising their independence from all factions and shouting “(We are) Not Brothers and not Salafis, we just want freedom”.

However, while no single political faction can claim to have sponsored or ignited the revolution, it is interesting to note that the Muslim Brotherhood, after the events in Tunisia and Egypt, worked out a plan to deal with the possibility of a revolution taking place in Syria, as Molhem al-Droubi, one of its prominent members, stated:

“The Brotherhood took part in the revolution before its beginning, as the revolution is the reaction to the various expressions of injustice accumulated during the past four decades [...]. There was a meeting of the leadership in January 2011 to study the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and I was appointed to draw a plan for what could happen in our country. I presented a plan called ‘Leave, Bashar’ (Erhal Bashar) where I summarised what we had to do in case a revolution started in Syria [...] and among the most prominent points we agreed on was that we would not have any specific demands, but that our demands would correspond to those of the people. We also set four strategic frameworks for the revolution at the time: the peaceful character of the revolution, its national character, the preservation of the unity of the territory and the refusal of any foreign (meaning non-Arab and non-Muslim) military intervention”¹¹.

As it has been mentioned above, it was also before the revolution that the *Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad* page was created by a group of Syrians among whom were Fida’ al-Sayyid, member of the Brotherhood born in Sweden and one of the founders of the office of the Damascus Declaration in that country, and Hamza al-Abdallah, whose membership can be presumed, although he only defines himself as a Syrian activist and film-maker, besides being a member of the Nahda Project, which aims at developing the capaci-

ties and skills of Arab citizens¹². It is interesting to note how after the controversy regarding whether the Brotherhood were behind it or not, in 2013 they showed no reticence in admitting it publicly and even attributing the sparking of the revolution to themselves:

“The Syrian street had reached a situation where it was about to explode like a volcano and was waiting for someone to shout first and knock on the door first, [...] and from that need the initiative of the Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad page was born; an initiative that, thank God, sparked a revolution all over the country”¹³.

Moreover, Hamza al-Abdallah added that:

“Regarding the people’s response to the calls for demonstrations, it is important to note that the Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad page was not the first that appeared in this context, but before it many others came that paved the way, and when we called for demonstrations on the 4th and the 5th of February (2011), they were not successful and so, we set the new date for mid-March. Among those pages we can find ‘For a Popular Movement Towards a Syrian Day of Rage’ and the ‘Syrian Day of Rage’”.

This means that the previous calls for demonstrations had also been organised by individuals belonging to the Brotherhood. But whether activists on the ground knew this or not, nobody seemed to have any reservations regarding the people behind the *Facebook* activities until the names proposed for each Friday became gradually more religiously oriented and more divisive. Although the context of radicalisation, mainly along sectarian cleavages had been developing since the destruction of much of “Sunni” Homs (while leaving “Alawi” Homs largely intact) by the Syrian Army in February 2012, and the sectarian policies that followed, the controversy regarding the *Facebook* page reached its peak with the clear sectarian cut reflected in the name *Friday for the Protection of the (Sunni) Majority* chosen for April 26, 2013¹⁴. Criticism against the *Syrian Revolution* page escalated as it seemed to give arguments to extremist Salafi and Jihadi currents to develop their sectarian discourse, already exacerbated by the regime’s sectarian massacres like the one in Baniyas in May 2013

among many others. Therefore, this situation clearly threatened any future coexistence in the country. Many alternative pages appeared as a counterbalance¹⁵, but it remained the dominant one and where most people still voted for the names of each Friday. The fact that this page never tried to address a more moderate audience, maybe for fear of being overshadowed by Salafis¹⁶, might play against the Brotherhood in the future if it has not already done so.

1.2. The political front

Since the beginning of the revolution, it was clear that there was no effective leadership due to its loose popular nature. Despite their setting up the *Syrian Revolution* page, the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood declared that “starting the revolution is an honor we cannot attribute to ourselves”¹⁷. But as many political analysts have pointed out, a revolution needs a leadership that can guide it through so difficult a process and achieve part of its political demands. With that purpose in mind, and maybe following the Libyan example, especially when both the Libyan and the Syrian regimes responded with live ammunition against peaceful protesters (setting aside the differences between both), the Muslim Brotherhood, once again, and according to many because they were the only group considered to be organised¹⁸, took the initiative and organised a conference in Antalya in May 2011. Only a few days later, another conference took place in Brussels, under the individual auspices of the former leader of the Brotherhood, Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, hinting at the fact that the regional division between Aleppo (former leadership) and Hama (current leadership, until november 2014), which had led to a split in the organisation in the past, was still present.

Finally, it was in the National Salvation Conference of July 16, 2011 in Istanbul, when the Muslim Brotherhood defined the lines of its strategy and its view for the future Syria. In his speech, Bayanouni, while emphasising the national character of the revolution, insisted on the Arab and Muslim character of Syria. Whether it was due to this or to any other reason, the fact remains that many of the Kurdish representatives decided to leave the conference. As if it had been a premonition, since the end of 2012, a clear division appeared be-

tween the Islamists operating on the ground and the Kurdish brigades after the attempt by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to take control of the city of Ra's al-Ayn in Al-Hassake province. Add to that the fact that in July 2012 many Kurdish political factions had already formed their own coalitions separated from the main Syrian opposition bodies.

Maybe in an attempt to appease the general mood, although they had already published in 2005 a document with their view regarding the Kurdish issue¹⁹, on October 7, 2012, Muhammad Riad Shaqfa, the leader of the Brotherhood at the time, but who has remained more in the shadows than others like Ali al-Bayanouni or Faruq Tayfur (ex-deputy of Shaqfa), presented his condolences on the anniversary of the murder of the Kurdish leader Mishal Tammo²⁰ insisting that the Muslim Brotherhood would continue its efforts in order to build a homeland for all “without exclusion or marginalisation”. Only a few days later, Shaqfa visited the leadership of the Iraqi Kurdistan although nothing about the meeting transcended besides the fact that they had spoken about “mutual interests” in Syria.

Going back to the meetings of the opposition, those conferences represented the first steps towards the creation in October 2011 of what came to be known as the Syrian National Council (SNC), a loose body of approximately 94 political representatives which in the beginning did not include members of the “revolutionary movement” (*hirak thawri*)²¹ but which later widened its scope to around 300 members.

Since then, and because of the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood organised most of these conferences²², rumors and more direct accusations have been cast against the Muslim Brotherhood as to their having a far wider influence on the SNC than what corresponds to their real weight in the revolution, through their membership and that of their allies (some of them representing the “revolutionary movement”) in the opposition bodies. This was confirmed, but nuanced, by a person close to the SNC²³: “In the SNC the Muslim Brotherhood are more numerous (than other Islamist trends) and they are one of two main blocks [...]. The Islamists (all trends) form about half the

opposition, and we could say that all the rest are their allies. They do not want any problems with the Islamists now, it is not their priority". By being allies he meant that, despite their differences, there is a common denominator joining the SNC: the "no to dialogue". This explains why many members of the SNC harshly criticised the formation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in November 2012 which they feared would be forced into a dialogue with the regime.

In this context, the Muslim Brotherhood had a "very violent reaction" to the formation of the National Coalition (NC) because "they believed that this would play against all their previous work, the negotiations they had conducted and the alliances they had made", including the resumption of their previous alliance (in the eighties) with Riad al-Turk's communists. "They were afraid of the Damascus elements' irruption (mainly religious figures from the city like Moaz al-Khatib –who became the President of the NC, with no ties with the Brotherhood²⁴ and with a better understanding of the internal dynamics in the country), as they had been totally neglected in the SNC, especially when there was a sour sense among the revolutionaries that Aleppo, through the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and others, had all the control, despite its late incorporation into the movement"²⁵.

Eventually, as the so-called Friends of Syria dug their heels in the necessity of forming the NC, "two actors influenced the position adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood on the issue: the AKP in Turkey, and Muhammad Badia (General Leader of the International Muslim Brotherhood Organisation) through Muhammad Mursi²⁶". And "that is where the Aleppo-Hama division came once again to the forefront", as those in Hama were very reluctant to the idea of losing their predominance in the SNC, while the Aleppo faction was more willing to accept compromises for the sake of support and listened to their counterparts in those two countries. "I thought the Muslim Brotherhood was more organised than it is and it seems they are really affected by their internal disputes"²⁷.

In any case, however divided they are, they have been able to prove their hegemony (in alliance with other Islamists) over the SNC as it became obvious during the elections held in Doha in November 2012, where a very complex system of voting based on lists and not individuals was set up and by which “they were able to push all their candidates forward by presenting various lists, all of them having one of their candidates in the first place”. Nevertheless, “truth be told, despite everything that we hear about the Muslim Brotherhood and episodes like the one of the elections, they are patriotic and don’t **just** work for themselves: they care for Syria and they work for it not to become a toy in the hands of the international community, and that is precisely the spirit of the SNC”²⁸.

1.3. The external alliances

In relation to what has just been said, being patriotic or not (that is, being a traitor: *kha'in*) has become a description used by the opposition itself especially after calls for an international intervention multiplied (among the first advocates of such demands was Haytham al-Maleh, ascribed to the Muslim Brotherhood because he worked as their lawyer in the eighties but who developed his own line of work after feeling he had been sidelined within the SNC). The deep divide between the “internal” political opposition, mainly composed of secularists who formally reject any kind of international involvement, something which today is totally unavoidable, and the “external opposition”, where Islamists in their variety play the leading role or hold a dominant position, and which from the beginning cast its bet on external support (mainly Western) has become an insurmountable bump in the efforts to unite the opposition. This, and especially the fact that countries in the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have led the effective support, has brought a lot of *takhween* (tag someone as a traitor) to the forefront: the Muslim Brotherhood has not been spared its own share.

In this context, the frequently highlighted relationship between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey has been underemphasised

by the leaders of the organisation²⁹ and according to their former official spokesman Zuhair Salim, the reason why they usually organise their events in Turkey is because Syrians do not require a visa to enter the country³⁰. Leaving that as an anecdote, it is interesting to note that the Hama wing of the Brotherhood, led by Shaqfa and Tayfur, which has always been more radical in its postulates, appears to be closer to the Turkish leadership, which they consider a model for the future Syrian state³¹ and whose military intervention Shaqfa³² appeared to be ready to accept, while the Aleppo faction seemed more keen on an Arab intervention³³. In any case, their taking advantage of their special relationship with the AKP, the fact that they now all reside in Turkey and that it is there that they develop most of their activities cannot be denied.

However, it is the so-called Qatari-Brotherhood bond that raised the diplomatic alarm in March 2013. The election of Ghassan Hitto – later followed by Ahmad Tu'mah- as president for the future Transitional Government and the ensuing resignation as President of the NC by Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib, who had occupied that position since November 2012 after his exile from Syria where he used to work as a religious preacher and scholar, was interpreted as the imposition of Qatar's will being contested by Al-Khatib. However, Ghassan Hitto is not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and he was not even the initial candidate of the Brotherhood for the elections³⁴. There was more to it that exceeds the scope of this writing, but which puts a question mark on Qatar's real power on the NC, which was then the main body of the opposition³⁵.

It is true, nevertheless, that the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar have developed some kind of alliance as a few members of the SNC acknowledge³⁶, and that it is based on the historical enmity between Saudi Arabia and its small neighbor and the Saudi relationship with the Brotherhood, which we will summarize for the sake of simplicity and due to space restrictions. Throughout the past decades the Muslim Brotherhood (especially the Egyptian branch) and the Wahhabite power in Saudi Arabia had developed a symbiotic relationship. During the 1920s and the 1930s, "the Wahhabites and the Muslim Broth-

erhood shared a unified objective to combat materialism and immorality", but "the Muslim Brotherhood (who diverged with the Wahhabites on the issue of legitimate authority) made a more instrumental use of Saudi political authority, as they were very happy to find shelter in Saudi Arabia where they could escape from the persecution of nationalist regimes"³⁷. In the 1950s, the Saudi monarchs, opposed to nationalist regimes, were the natural allies of the persecuted Brotherhood, and the latter held important positions in the field of education in the Kingdom. However, when the Saudi regime accepted the American protection in exchange for setting up military bases in its territory, it became clear that "the order of priorities was not the same for the Muslim Brotherhood as for the Wahhabi sheikhs"³⁸. Moreover, since the Brotherhood had been expanding its ideology, which questioned some precepts of the Kingdom such as hereditary monarchy, it had become a threat to Wahhabi ideology. The former supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi regime, became its most bitter foe (although a few leaders of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in exile remained in its territory). It was at that point that Qatar tried to take the lead, becoming the main supporter for the different branches of the Brotherhood especially by means of its recently created (at the time) TV channel *Aljazeera* which promoted a moderate view of Islam and which during the revolution has given the prominent role to Islamist spokespeople close to the Brotherhood³⁹. However, in the case of Syria, although Qatar has always been fond of the Brotherhood's ideology, the existence of a particular alliance with this country has been denied by the Hama wing of the organization⁴⁰.

Nevertheless, since the revolution started, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has tried in various communiqués to attract the attention and support of Saudi Arabia by praising the efforts made by the king to support the Syrian cause⁴¹, something that, for instance, they have not done with Qatar and Kuwait except for a few words by Faruq Tayfur⁴². Whatever their efforts, it remains clear that Saudi Arabia wants "anyone except the Muslim Brotherhood: they hate them"⁴³. As a result, they "threw themselves into the arms of those willing to support them: the Qataris"⁴⁴. In any case, due to the never-ending

rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it seems that whatever displeases one pleases the other at least in this specific aspect. As such, it comes as no surprise that Qatar favours the Brotherhood, although its support is being gradually constrained.

1.4. Political rivalries:

The choice of Hitto provides some clues about the real power of the Muslim Brotherhood in the NC despite initial accusations of having forced Hitto on the Coalition. In June 2013, they only had seven formal members in the Coalition, and as a matter of fact, “the non-Muslim Brotherhood (Islamist) faction in the NC is stronger than the Muslim Brotherhood block”⁴⁵. Therefore, what needs to be acknowledged in the struggle for power is that the strongest rivalries are not, as presumed, between secularists and Islamists in the political front, but among Islamists themselves because they are “competing for the same public, the same social base”, whereas secularists and Islamists cannot, by definition and in principle, share the same social bases.

The Muslim Brotherhood, in this confrontation (which at times becomes a fluid alliance), has “followed the same line it set to itself since the beginning”⁴⁶. However, there is a point that must be addressed regarding this affirmation. While the document they presented describing their political view for Syria on March 25, 2012⁴⁷ made almost no references to religion and reaffirmed the Brotherhood’s will to set up a civil State omitting the famous expression “with an Islamic framework”, the one they presented only a few months later, (September 27, 2012) named *The Syria That We Want* – which had been first published as an appendix to their political project in 2004⁴⁸, seemed to be a step back in their postulates: “We want Syria to be a country with an Arab and Islamic identity because Islam is a religion and a civilization for Muslim citizens and a civilizational identity for non-Muslims” or “We want it to be a country where everyone can be happy under the rule of God’s Law by satisfying everyone and giving them the right to choose”. This might have come as a counterbalance to the escalation of radical discourses on the ground

with the increasing strength of Jabhat al-Nusra (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham had not been established yet) and people's relative dissatisfaction with them, as well as a means of distancing themselves from radical discourses -within the Islamist framework- especially when "people tend to distrust the Muslim Brotherhood"⁴⁹.

1.5. Relief campaigns, religious schools and preaching (*da'wa*):

As the revolution and the regime's response provoked the displacement of many Syrians due to the bombings of neighborhoods or cities, relief works started to proliferate in the area. According to Abdulrahman al-Haj:

"When the protests turned into a real revolution, the Brotherhood started to expand the scope of its influence in Syria again by means of relief activities (they set up a specific organisation that started working immediately) [...] (but) it was soon obvious that the division between Hama and Aleppo had an impact on the Brotherhood, in the sense that Aleppo and the Eastern areas of the country received less relief and logistical aid in comparison to Hama and Idleb [...] (which led to) the formation of a new organisation made up of the Aleppo elements (the second generation of the eighties) and with the support of the Spiritual Fathers (Bayanouni and Zuhair Salim), the so-called National Action Group led by Ahmad Ramadan"⁵⁰.

The truth remains that although the Aleppo faction has more power now, it is the Hamawi group that has called the shots in the relief works since the beginning. "The Brotherhood was the only group who, despite their organisational leaks, had a budget before the revolution of which they spent a lot in the first months"⁵¹. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Faruq Tayfur, ex vice General Controller of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (he resigned after accepting the post of vice President of the SNC and was succeeded by Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni, former leader), is the president of the Syrian Association for Humanitarian Relief and Development (Istanbul, 2012), which according to its executive director was the only one recognised by

the SNC at the time⁵². “They insisted on supervising the humanitarian aid and relief activities. [...] Every time I visit the hospital the SNC has in Tripoli (Lebanon), one of them has to come with me”⁵³. Whatever their aims, many rumors were spread from the very early days of the revolution pointing to the Brotherhood giving out help in exchange of some kind of loyalty and refusing to give it to those who did not comply with it⁵⁴. However, it is difficult to prove those accusations. In any case, spreading their moderate religious ideology has been the main objective for the Brotherhood

On a level related to the spread of ideology through education and health care, the second issue of the Brotherhood’s magazine dealt with children and their proneness to Post-Dramatic Trauma Syndrome (PDTS). In the list of steps to take in order to prevent it or treat it, it is very remarkable that the first thing they suggest to protect children from depression is:

“... reinforcing their faith in God and their satisfaction with God and his designations, something which can be achieved by teaching the child the names of God and his characteristics and establishing a link between that and the child’s life and reality, because God will help us go through this [...], making it a habit for him to read the Quran [...] since reinforcing the child’s relationship with God will make him stronger, and making sure not to establish a relationship between negative things and the fact that God is their cause without explaining that God wants something good from that which will eventually become visible”.

This comes before suggesting more professionally-oriented tasks such as “exercising his capacity of smiling and being optimistic”. It is evident that with these kinds of articles emphasising faithfulness in God, in an attempt to show themselves as the guarantors of a moderate discourse, the mouthpiece of the Brotherhood is working on its social bases for the future, especially insisting on the defamation campaign being waged against them⁵⁵. To achieve that aim, the magazine is distributed inside Syria⁵⁶ in different areas where the Brotherhood is working on rebuilding its networks, starting with family links⁵⁷. In this respect, an ex-member of the SNC⁵⁸ acknowledged

that while the rest of the opposition was scared of approaching Hatay near the Turkish border, the Muslim Brotherhood were already inside Syria, and in fact, a source close to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood admitted that they were trying to build their own cadres inside the country by spreading the ideology of the organisation⁵⁹. According to the same source, those people being trained to become members of the Brotherhood were paying small fees in exchange for their training. In this same line, Riad Shaqfa explained: “in the beginning we said that this was a time for revolution, not ideology, (but) now there are many groups inside so we feel we should reorganise”⁶⁰.

It is difficult to estimate how far-reaching their support is at a point when they have already formed their first political party although it has not been very much publicised⁶¹. What is true is that the most radical currents are still leading the way both in humanitarian aid provision in liberated areas and in the armed struggle.

1.6. The Arms Factor

In an interview with *Al-Magharibiyya* TV (14/03/2012), Zuhair Salim insisted that “the only thing that we have asked for is the right to demonstrate peacefully”, and it is this peaceful character of the revolution that the Brotherhood emphasised for months, highlighting the fact that people were forced to take up arms (although the first armed actions were carried out by the defected soldiers) in order to defend themselves from the attacks of the Syrian regime. Nevertheless, they have admitted to having their own brigades: “We cannot lead armed groups while the death penalty is applied on us just for being members of the Brotherhood”⁶².

“How on Earth can we have our own brigades after thirty years outside the country? [...] The Muslim Brotherhood do not have their own brigades, but some brigades with an Islamist character contacted us for coordination purposes when they were formed, and in this respect, we have no problem with speaking to everyone. If some of them are more prone to the Brotherhood it is because we have been

*treated very unjustly during the past decades and that has provoked some empathy towards us*⁶³, insisted Muhammad Riad Shaqfa.

And he added that “with a view to uniting the brigades and their divisions that trust the Brotherhood through a moderate line of thought, we invited them to Istanbul, where the Organisation of the Shields of the Revolution was created as an independent Islamist-prone organisation close to us”⁶⁴. However, despite such claims, according to a deep study by Aron Lund⁶⁵,

“the Tawhid Division has fought alongside Islamists from non-FSA factions such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Fajr al-Islam. According to some sources, it is funded by exiled Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike these groups, however, the Tawhid Division is not primarily a religious movement, and it is not fighting to bring about a religious state”.

This, however, does not mean that they have their own brigades, but, as a well-known Lebanese journalist⁶⁶ declared, emphasising the moving sands on which the armed opposition rests:

“When the Tawhid Division was formed in the northern area of the Aleppo countryside and part of the city itself, the Brotherhood supported them [...] but they do not follow the Brotherhood’s doctrine, and [...] in fact, the Zanqi Brigade defected from the Division because they had financial problems and little ammunition [...], so the Brotherhood came and agreed with the brigade that they would receive individual help [...], but its men are not Brotherhood”.

In any case, at least until the time of writing in mid-2013 (although the tendency has not changed much) it seemed that the Muslim Brotherhood was only supporting the less extremist brigades that call for a civil state because they are “a political party”⁶⁷, not religious sheikhs. Following the logic of this statement in an informal speech with expert François Burgat in Beirut (March, 2013), he divided the armed opposition into various categories, among which he described the category “belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood” as being the one formed by those brigades “that raise the flag of the revolution, in

contrast to the Salafists and Jihadists, who do not, and instead prefer the black flag”.

Leaving this aside, it is interesting to note a move made by the abovementioned Ahmad Ramadan, in June 2012, when in the name of the SNC, he founded the Revolutionaries’ Front of Syria (which seems to have been an attempt by the Aleppo faction to have a more prominent role to counterbalance the Hama faction), which was defined as a body incorporating the armed factions working all over Syria against the dictatorship. Although it has established its own councils it seems to have had a short-lived existence responding to a specific aim whose characteristics never became clear.

Taking into consideration what has been described above, it seems that the Muslim Brotherhood do not have as far-reaching a sphere of control as it is usually alleged, especially when analysing the difficulties in forming a unified command. Nevertheless, in December 2012, a letter was sent by a self-appointed spokesman of the FSA in Paris (Fahd al-Masry) to the Muslim Brotherhood accusing them of trying to hijack the revolution and impose their will, and of being responsible for the prolongation of the suffering of the Syrian people (March 30, 2013). No official response was issued besides an interview with Riad Shaqfa⁶⁸ and an article by Omar Mushaweh, editor in-chief of *Al-Ahd* magazine, which does not expressly refer to this issue, but to the campaign being waged against the Muslim Brotherhood⁶⁹. The fact that no other declarations were made on the part of the FSA itself casts many doubts on the FSA’s unanimity in issuing this statement, especially taking into consideration that it was issued from Paris and not from inside Syria or the neighboring countries⁷⁰. According to Shaqfa, Al-Masry was only “pretending” to be the spokesman of the FSA.

1.7 The Regional factor

One of the main suspicions cast on the Muslim Brotherhood, building on the examples of Tunisia and most significantly Egypt (whose errors they acknowledged even before the coup against Mursi), is the

fact that they are working to gain access to power through the support of their networks, and thanks to the fact that they seem to be the most organised group in the opposition (although, in due course and because of the prolongation of the crisis, other groups might become an important rival such as the Liberal Islamists on one side of the spectrum or the Salafists on the other⁷¹), to impose a religious-dominated system of government.

Furthermore, it is the Egyptian example that has cast important doubts on their intentions because, as a matter of fact, after saying they would not present any candidates for the presidential election and expelling one of their members (Abu-l-Futuh) for doing so independently, they presented a candidate who eventually became the Egyptian president. The same goes for the creation of a party technically independent of the Brotherhood, but which seemed to be more influenced by the organisation than it should.

Since the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has also created a “national party”⁷², an idea which in a conversation with Zuhair Salim⁷³, he said they had been working on for a long time, suspicions have increased, although the role of the party remains so secondary that those suspicions have been very much reduced. Regarding the presidential elections, they have not spoken yet about any presidential candidates as it is too early, but what can be stated is that they have refrained from presenting their own candidates for any important positions such as the presidencies of the SNC or the NC, or the Transitional Government. In the same line, they have also insisted that they do not want to monopolise power⁷⁴. Moreover, despite the accusations of their predominance on the political, humanitarian and arms-provision levels, the escalation of other Islamist groups on the ground has somehow reduced these accusations and questioned the possibility of a reproduction of the Egyptian scenario in the event of a regime fall, leaving aside the enormous differences between both cases.

Although suspicions have not changed much in recent months, the Brotherhood has distanced itself from the experience in Egypt and has defended democratic procedures instead of emphasizing the positive aspects of the Egyptian Brotherhood’s short period of rule. Inter-

esting as it is, the experience of Al-Nahda in Tunisia, whose shared values they could emphasize, has been widely neglected in the official and individual statements of the Syrian Brotherhood.

Tentative Conclusions

As any political faction, the Muslim Brotherhood “want to reach power”⁷⁵ and in order to achieve that aim they have set for themselves, they are making use of all the means at hand, especially after 30 years of forced exile, a limited scope of underground activities and preaching. In this, they do not differ from other factions within the opposition, who during the years of the Assad family dictatorship have been politically ostracised.

Whether they will achieve their aim remains unclear; however, their desire to create a religious state can be ruled out despite the accusations cast on them, as their emphasis on religion is more focused on the social than the political level. Moreover, the idea of an “Islamic framework” for the future state is not unanimously agreed upon.

In relation to their political action, they have shown their capability to adapt to different contexts despite their territorial divisions, which have appeared during the revolution and which continue to influence some of their actions and cause contradictions in their statements. This capacity to adapt might play in their favour in the future, but for it to work, they will need to overcome not only their territorial disputes but also the generational gap that calls for new faces in the organisation’s leadership, partly solved in the recent November 2014 elections, whose long-term effects need to be studied in the future. As a matter of fact, they have had to address more regularly their moderate audience or potential audience so that they do not fall into the Salafi camp, especially regarding the sectarian dimension that the struggle has adopted as a result of the regime’s policies and the prolongation of the crisis.

Precisely regarding this particular matter, in July 2012, Muhammad Riad Shaqfa declared that they were coordinating with Salafis to

form a united Islamist trend⁷⁶. However, by not issuing any statements adopting a firm position against some declarations that affect the unity of Syria that they allegedly cherish could be interpreted as a subjugation to Salafi postulates or them having chosen to show supportive silence in order to avoid the Salafis becoming their enemies, maybe with a view to making a future alliance.

If this double-faced image persists, it seems that the Brotherhood will lose support and might not achieve as many votes as they seemed to be prone to achieve in the beginning. Previous experiences in other countries and their alleged dominance over the opposition and their making use of all means to achieve power, especially outside the country, might become too difficult obstacles to surmount.

Passing from relative passivity to full-fledged opposition is a wide gap that needs to be well calculated. To be effective in all fields, a clear statement of refusal to extremism and the promotion of new younger leaders (although according to many Zuhair Salim is a widely accepted figure in Syrian society) can provide a boost to their goal of “reaching power” (not necessarily meaning a monopoly over it), as well as showing their capacity to adapt, especially after the fiasco in Egypt and the rise of Salafism. That adaptation, building on their networks, could set a new model for Brotherhood governments in case they reach power.

¹ EFE (12/06/2000). Retrieved from in Fuentelsaz, J. 2010. *La imposible adaptación de los Hermanos Musulmanes al sistema egipcio: su relación con el régimen durante el mandato de Muhammad Mahdi 'Akif (enero de 2004-enero de 2010)*, Phd dissertation. P. 118

² The original text in Arabic is available at: <http://www.mokarabat.com/mo2-14.htm> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014].

³ For a more detailed insight on this period, see –among others- George, A. (2003). *Neither Bread Nor Freedom*. Zed Books: New York.

⁴ The original text in Arabic is available at: <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/newsanalysis/special-folders-pages/syria/documents-and-data/82709-2005-10-17-000000.html> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014].

⁵ The official reason why the alliance was broken was the dispute over their position with regards to the Israeli operation on Gaza. According to Al-Bayanouni, Khaddam “has forced us to make such a decision, because he has not understood our position regarding the Palestinian struggle and our compromise with the Palestinian resistance; moreover, he has not understood the strong relationship between the suspension of our opposition activities and our demands regarding the national interest and the victory of our people in Gaza”. *Al-Quds Press* (08/04/2009).

⁶ *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (01/05/2011).

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/DaysOfRage?fref=ts> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb5IL5YdCOs> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/info> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]

¹⁰ https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=209661022394433 [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]

¹¹ Interview in *Al-Ahd*, n.1, page 8 (01/03/2013).

¹² The original plan of the project is available at: <http://4nahda.com/content/1008> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014].

¹³ Fida al-Sayyid, interview in *Al-Ahd*, n. 2, page 12, 15/03/2013.

¹⁴ Reductive as it is, but for the sake of academic simplicity, the fact remains that the majority of the population in Syria are Sunni Muslims, while the most prominent figures who hold the effective power in the regime are Alawites. It has been widely promoted that the Syrian regime is the protector of minorities, and the international community has called for their protection as well, in a largely sectarian tone, as if they were under the threat of a majority with whom they have coexisted for centuries.

¹⁵ January 27, 2012 was named *Friday of the Right to Self-Defense* (while many people were still reticent to accept the Free Syrian Army and the use of arms) while an alternative page called for a *Friday of the Civil State* (against the military and

religious authorities). The link to the page is: <https://www.facebook.com/names.of.syrian.days> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]

¹⁶ In this sense, a Syrian activist from Homs admitted that “in Homs, for example, Sheikh Dalati, near to Moaz al-Khateeb’s speech, was very influential, but it does not work now because tension and bombings don’t call for moderation [...], so he turned to a more Salafi current for the sake of the young people” (Beirut, 02/03/2013).

¹⁷ Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanouni in *Al-Hiwar* channel (13/05/2011).

¹⁸ In an interview with a member of the Syrian National Council, it was made clear that, despite the general mistrust towards them, one had to acknowledge the fact that they were the only ones organized when the rest had been working for years on publishing statements and hiding themselves “under the soil” until the next statement, only forming coalitions for specific temporal purposes (Beirut, 22/01/2013).

¹⁹ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=289103567803706&id=166704280043636 [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]

²⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B46s812K1oI&feature=plcp> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]

²¹ Interview with an ex member of the SNC who represents the Local Coordination Committees (Beirut, 04/04/2013). The revolutionary movement is a loose denomination for those members representing the LCCs or any other civilian organizations supporting the revolution and with real connection to the ground, as opposed to most of the political figures in the opposition at the time.

²² According to Shaqfa (*Financial Times*, 25/04/2013), “if we hadn’t pushed to form the Syrian National Council it would not have been formed, because there were no other parties”.

²³ Interview in Beirut (30/03/2013)

²⁴ Since the inception of the Brotherhood in Syria, the Damascus branch had been very active and prominent; however, after the death of its founder Mutapha al-Siba’I and the assumption of the leadership by Issam al-Attar, who rejected the violence of the seventies and eighties, his followers left the organization and the presence of the Brotherhood was somehow diminished while those sympathizers who remained in the city built new ties with more independent religious figures from the country.

²⁵ Interview with an ex member of the SNC (Beirut, 04/04/2013).

²⁶ Whose declarations in support of the Russian position towards the crisis have angered the Syrian Brotherhood.

²⁷ Interview with a Syrian activist from Homs (Beirut, 02/03/2013)

²⁸ Interview with the son of a prominent member of the Damascus Declaration in Beirut (30/03/2013).

²⁹ Interview with Muhammad Riad Shaqfa in France 24 (12/05/2011).

³⁰ Interview in London (28/07/2011).

³¹ Interview in *Cumhuriyet* (22/09/2012).

³² Interview in *France Press* (17/11/2011).

³³ Interview with Zuhair Salim in *Al-Mustaqilla* (15/11/2011).

³⁴ Interview with the son of a member of the SNC (Beirut, 30/03/2013) and with an ex-member of the SNC (Beirut, 04/04/2013). As a matter of fact, the Brotherhood supported a different candidate, as explained by the interviewee: "Saudi Arabia wanted anyone but Hitto, but because they are slow in their political decisions, they did not tell their supporters (among them, many Brotherhood members) who they preferred until half an hour before the elections, and it was too late".

³⁵ Precisely in line with this questioning of Qatar's power over the Syrian opposition, *The Monitor* (15/04/2012) assumed that Saudi Arabia was rebuilding its ties in Lebanon to create a Sunni front to counterbalance the Turkish-Qatari-Brotherhood alliance, while a month later, according to *Al-Arab* newspaper, Qatar had received American pressure to step aside and had handed the Syrian file to Saudi Arabia (08/05/2013). Since then, it has been Saudi Arabia who has called the shots in this respect.

³⁶ Interview with a member of the SNC (Beirut, 22/01/2013).

³⁷ Commins, David (2008): "Le Salafisme en Arabie Saoudite", in Rougier, Bernard (ed.) *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme ?*, Proche-Orient, Paris, pp. 39-40.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 41

³⁹ Interview with Salame Kaileh (Beirut, 09/04/2013).

⁴⁰ Interview with Muhammad Riad Shaqfa in *Al-Quds* (03/04/2013).

⁴¹ For instance the one they published on February 22, 2012 praising the King's refusal to conduct any dialogue with Russia in the present situation.

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- ⁴² <http://tiny.cc/mazljx> [Retrieved : 25/07/2014]
- ⁴³ Interview with the son of a member of the SNC (Beirut, 30/03/2013).
- ⁴⁴ Interview with a member of the Syrian National Council (Beirut, 22/01/2013)
- ⁴⁵ Interview with the son of a member of the SNC (Beirut, 30/03/2013).
- ⁴⁶ Interview with a member of the SNC (Beirut, 04/04/2013).
- ⁴⁷ <http://tiny.cc/rbzljx> [Retrieved : 25/07/2014]
- ⁴⁸ The original text in Arabic is available at: <http://tiny.cc/bczljx> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014].
- ⁴⁹ Interview with a Syrian from Homs (Beirut, 02/03/2013).
- ⁵⁰ <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2012/05/2012521101415565424.htm> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]
- ⁵¹ Interview with the son of a member of the SNC (Beirut, 30/03/2012).
- ⁵² <http://tiny.cc/rdzljx> [Retrieved: 25/07/2014]
- ⁵³ Interview with a member of the SNC previously cited (Beirut, 22/01/2013).
- ⁵⁴ Various interviews with activists inside the country from different backgrounds and at different times from May 2011 to April 2013.
- ⁵⁵ See the article “They Abandoned the Fight Against the Regime And Concentrated On the Brotherhood” by the editor Omar Mushaweh (n. 4, page 16, 15/04/2013).
- ⁵⁶ <http://tiny.cc/qr1ljx> [Retrieved: 26/07/2014]
- ⁵⁷ <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2012/05/2012521101415565424.htm>
- ⁵⁸ Interview in Beirut (04/04/2013)
- ⁵⁹ Interview in Beirut (31/01/2013).
- ⁶⁰ Interview in *Financial Times* (25/04/2013)

⁶¹ The National Party for Justice and the Constitution was founded in summer 2013 and it has some representative in the National Coalition; however, it has not engaged in strong media campaigns. It might be interesting for the reader to know that some of its core members are Christian, as the Brotherhood does not define the party as “its” party. At the time of the presentation of this paper in June 2013 it has not been announced, but it was formally founded a week later.

⁶² Interview in *Al-Quds*, 07/07/2011

⁶³ Interview in *Okaz* (12/01/2012)

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*

⁶⁵ Lund, Aaron (2012), *Syrian Jihadism*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, p. 17.

⁶⁶ Interview in Beirut (24/01/2013).

⁶⁷ Interview with an ex member of the SNC formerly cited (04/04/2013).

⁶⁸ *Al-Quds* (03/04/2013).

⁶⁹ See note 48. He also explained that the FSA had called them to deny any relationship between them and Al-Masry in *Al-Mayadeen* (30/03/2013).

⁷⁰ This accusations of “hijacking” were also cast by analyst Hassan Hassan in *Foreign Policy* (13/03/2013).

⁷¹ Their main rivals in winning people’s support.

⁷² <http://tiny.cc/yol1jx> [Retrieved: 26/07/20]

⁷³ Interview via telephone (29/07/2012).

⁷⁴ Interview with Riad Shaqfa in *Al-Quds* (07/07/2011).

⁷⁵ Interview with an ex member of the SNC formerly cited (Beirut, 04/04/2013).

⁷⁶ As a matter of fact, the Syrian Group for Reform, which includes 24 Islamist and patriotic parties was created in Istanbul (30/07/2012).