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“We Thought We Were Playing”: Children’s Participation in the Syrian Revolution

By Layla Saleh¹

Abstract

This article explores the participation of children in the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad. The involvement of children in democratic social movements and regime transitions has not been addressed in the literature, although some works describe the role children can play in making public policy or in the humanitarian domain. I argue that just as the role of women and of university-aged youth was gradually incorporated in the body of research on the social movements and regime transitions, so should the role of children be studied. I then characterize the role of children in the Syrian uprising as a three-stage cycle, whereby children unwittingly sparked the revolution, then were targeted by the regime in response, and finally, have been, along with adults across the country, spurred to further anti-Assad action, rather than silence and submission, as a result of the regime’s brutality. Providing empirical evidence to illustrate how this cycle plays out in Syria, I suggest that additional research is needed to further examine and theorize about the role of children in social movements and regime transitions.

Key Words: Arab Spring, Syria, children, democratization theory

Introduction

The grotesque images have become all too familiar, so that perhaps the viewer barely flinches anymore. We are bombarded daily by pictures and videos of young Syrian children whose limbs are severed, or whose bodies are riddled with bullet and artillery wounds, their corpses wrapped in white shrouds, giving them the appearance of bruised angels. Media and social network coverage of the two and a half-year old Syrian revolution-turned war has focused on the targeting and victimization of children by the Assad regime, and it can be easy to forget that children have served as anything other than the youngest and most vulnerable class of regime casualties.

This article seeks to highlight the role of children in the Syrian revolution, placing it in the theoretical context of the social movement and transition politics literature. I argue that in Syria, the bloodiest and most protracted case in the so-called Arab Spring, a cycle exists whereby children were unwitting initiators of a revolution who were then victimized, leading to further revolutionary activism by other children and adults alike. Due to the vulnerability of children, their targeting by the Assad regime has become a rallying cry for people of all ages. Adults, youth, and other children have decided not to stay silent after seeing their friends and children tortured, murdered, and mutilated by a government that has repeatedly professed to be fighting against “armed gangs” and “terrorists.” The uniqueness of this case lies not in the participation-victimization-increased participation cycle, but in the fact that this cycle involves children, previously ignored, as an important part of the democratization or regime transition process.

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In the following pages, the first section of the article will review some of the relevant literature on democratic social movements and the role played by groups such as women and children, demonstrating the evolution of the literature and eventual inclusion of these previously ignored groups in the research on transition politics. In examining the existing body of research on the role that women played in Latin American transitions, or the central involvement of university student groups in the post-Soviet transitions, it becomes apparent that no parallel exists for children. I will then discuss some other research that has focused on the role children and teenagers can play in policy-making, whether in mock European “youth parliaments,” in conflict zones, or in poverty-stricken nations. There is a clear gap in the literature when it comes to the part that children may play in democratic social movements or political transitions, as in the Syrian case.

The second part of the article will present an empirical account of the role that children have played in the Syrian revolution thus far, divided into three stages. In the first stage, schoolchildren in Dar’aa unwittingly initiated mass protests that became the Syrian revolution. Following that, the children became clear victims and targets by the Assad regime in the second stage, which led (and continues to lead) to the third stage, whereby the targeting of children strengthens the resolve for revolutionary or opposition activity by children and adults alike. Important to mention is that the second and third stage do not occur in linear fashion, but rather represent a cycle of victimization and further anti-Assad activity, even as the uprising has escalated into an armed conflict. This phenomenon or cycle, the victimization of children that leads to further participation of children and adults in the revolution in Syria, represents an important empirical as well as theoretical innovation to the literature on regime change and democratic transition. The uniqueness of the Syrian situation lies in the vulnerability of children that spurs this cycle ever onward.

Theoretical Background

Definition

Before beginning any discussion of the role that children play in a particular context, it is important to define what is meant by “children,” a term whose exact meaning involves some disagreement among researchers and policymakers. The UN Charter on the Rights of the Child, or CRC (1989), defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” Disaggregating this broad category, Williams (2004) suggests that a distinction can be made between a “child,” or someone 12 years and under, and a “young person,” or what we might call a teenager, aged 13-18 (p. 6). Craig (2011) presents a somewhat different categorization, describing people aged 6-15 as “children” and 16-30 as “youth” (p. 146). For the purposes of this article, the UN CRC definition will be used, and the term “children” will refer to people aged eighteen and younger; this cohort is clearly distinct from the “youth groups” made of university students in various social movements.

Women in Democratic Transitions

The literature on women in democratic transitions is a good starting point for this article that seeks to examine the role that children have played in the Syrian uprising, placing their participation and victimization into the theoretical context of the literature on democratic or revolutionary social movements. It is thus useful to discuss briefly the involvement of other

groups that were added to the body of classic democratization literature in recent years, and the participation of women in democratic transitions is an important example. In a widely-cited article that has become part of the mainstream literature on democratic transitions, Waylen (1994) writes that the “orthodox political science literature” on democratization does not attribute much importance to the role of gender or women (p. 327). She goes on to argue that any examination of popular movements, a cornerstone of the democratization literature, must also include a “gendered analysis” as women often participate politically based on their roles as women (p. 328). Thus, Waylen (1994) brings attention to the various women’s movements in Latin America, such as the human rights groups in Chile and Argentina, the urban community movements led by women, and the “avowedly feminist” groups, all significant to the democratic transitions in those countries (pp. 336-7).

Waylen (1994) further argues that women’s groups helped “bring about ‘the end of fear’”² in the respective cases she examines, often because they were allowed to mobilize as women in an informal political space afforded to them by the governing regimes (p. 339). She also assesses the impact of democratization on public policy concerning women in post-Communist states, suggesting that democratization does not necessarily yield positive results for women. Years after its publication, Waylen’s (1994) call for a more “gendered” examination of democratic popular movements has become part of the mainstream literature on democratization and a basis for further study. Viterna and Fallon (2008), for instance, add a new comparative dimension to the research on the impact of democratization on gender equity, assessing what factors lead to more “women-friendly” outcomes (p. 669). Just as the role of women in democratic social movements and transitions had to be consciously added to the mainstream literature, so too, perhaps, does the role of children in democratic social movements, as well as the impact of revolutions or regime transitions on children, need to be studied. This article is a step in that direction.

Youth in Democratic Transitions

Similar to the way that the role of women in democratic social movements became part of the mainstream democratization literature, so too, has the role of “youth,” here a term describing the university student cohort, been studied extensively. Taras (2008) and Laverty (2008) highlight the part youth groups played in post-Soviet transitions. Youth movements can be included as one of the ten causal factors leading to democratic revolutions in post-Soviet countries such as Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine (Taras, 2008, p. 98). Youth groups “played strategic roles,” in these countries by working through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), pressuring opposition politicians to unite against ruling or incumbent regimes, using new technology such as the Internet and mobile phones to facilitate their activism, and working through think-tanks and Western-funded organizations (p.105).

Laverty (2008) applies Tarrow’s social movement theory to demonstrate how youth groups in Georgia and Ukraine were important players in the social movements that led to the color revolutions in those countries (p. 143). The Rose Revolution in Georgia was in large part spurred by Kmara, the youth group derived from the Georgia Students Movement at Tbilisi State University (p. 148). The Ukrainian youth group Pora, heavily involved in the country’s revolution, was also a university student group (p. 149). In Serbia, the social movement Otpor, whose membership was made up in large part of the “youth” cohort, helped bring down Slobodan Milosevic through nonviolent resistance, getting out the vote in the 2000 elections,

² This term is frequently used to explain the onset of the MENA revolutions that became known as the Arab Spring

using marketing tactics for anti-regime activities, and even trying to “soften” police officers by bringing them flowers and food³ (Nikolayenko, 2012, pp. 145-149). In fact, Otpor’s nonviolent movement against Milosevic was seen as so successful that one of the leaders of the anti-Mubarak April 6 movement in Egypt, also a youth group, actually traveled to Serbia to learn more about Otpor’s tactics in person (p. 153).

Thus, the role of youth in recent democratic social movements is clear, and has been empirically documented and theoretically developed in the broader political transition literature. The democratic movements in the Arab Spring are no exception, and scholars have written about the role of youth, as well as youth public opinion, in the revolutions rocking the MENA region. Al-Momani (2011) presents the seemingly standard explanation of youth participation in the Arab Spring: the long list of grievances among the youth includes high levels of poverty and unemployment, widespread repression, corruption, and the use of social media among the youth helped amplify and spread the “spark” started by the self-immolation of Bouazizi in Tunisia (pp. 161-2). Hoffman and Jamal (2012) disagree, concluding based on public opinion surveys before the revolution that the youth cohort (aged 15-29) was not motivated to protest out of grievances against the regimes in Egypt and elsewhere. Since unemployment rates were not an important predictor of protest before the revolutions, it may be that youth participate in the Arab Spring because they found opportunities, “both real and perceived,” to mobilize (p. 185). Like Hoffman and Jamal (2012), Sika (2012) suggests that despite efforts by the Mubarak regime to stimulate youth participation in the National Democratic Party and state-dominated civil society organizations, Egyptian youth were disinterested and organized only in a “broad spectrum of dissent” outside of the formal Mubarak-sanctioned avenues (p. 190). Egyptian youth generally stayed out of political activism and civil society organization, despite their pro-democracy attitudes, because of their distrust of the Mubarak regime; once they found an opportunity to mobilize in the 2011 uprising, they did not hesitate to join (p. 199). Craig (2011) adds that the effectiveness of youth participation in countries swept up in the Arab Spring stems partly from dual mobilization and activism, virtually through the internet, but also face-to-face through protests (p. 149). Whatever the exact causes for youth participation in democratic or revolutionary activity, they appear to be an important and effective set of actors in recent regime transitions. The literature, however, does not specifically examine the role of children (18 and under) in these contexts; perhaps children did not participate in any meaningful way in the post-Soviet transitions, or did so only within existing social structures of protest, such as the Church or labor unions. I will argue that the Syrian case is an example where children, and not just university-aged youth, have been important actors in the revolution-turned civil war, and their role merits empirical and theoretical examination. Children like Hamza AlKhateeb in Syria were perhaps as important to the development of the Syrian uprising as were the adults Mohammad Buazizi in Tunisia or Khaled Saeed in Egypt.

Children, Public Policy, and Humanitarian Action

One significant assumption underlies any research on the role of children in uprisings aimed at regime change, such as the one in Syria: children can in fact play some sort of effective role on the political scene. Unless it is clear that children can be recognizable actors in social movements or public policy debates and decision-making, we can focus on them merely as

³ This is a tactic also used in the Syrian revolution, where protestors brought roses and food to regime soldiers to demonstrate their goodwill and the peaceful nature of their activism, as well as to the US ambassador when he visited the city of Hama (Shadid, 2011, *New York Times*; Mackey, 2011, *New York Times*).

victims of government repression or conflict or civil war. Some literature has documented children's activism in various contexts across the world, assessing to what extent children's involvement has any bearing on actual public policy or the political ramifications of conflict and humanitarian disaster. Shephard and Patrikios (2012), for instance, study the phenomenon of "Youth Parliaments" in European countries, asking whether such institutions, whose members range in age from 6 to 25, in fact have any impact on policymaking in their respective countries. Children and youth in these Youth Parliaments carry out both formal and informal activities, such as writing articles, using social media to discuss specific issues, in-class and extra-curricular school work in some cases, writing manifestos, participating in political campaigns, and making policy recommendations (pp. 13-14). While the existence of Youth Parliaments in Europe "appear[s] to fulfill" Article 12.1 of the UN Convention on Rights of the Child by allowing children's voices to be heard in matters related to them, children and youth's participation in such institutions has very little direct impact on actual policy (p. 14). Rather, the benefits of belonging to Youth Parliaments are more indirect, as the children and youth involved in them by providing them with civic education, insight into and knowledge of political processes, and cultivating personal skills such as public speaking, networking, teamwork, and qualifications for future employment (p. 15).

We can conclude from Shephard and Patrikios's (2012) study that children and youth's participation in Youth Parliaments may have little direct bearing on public policy in Europe. Any immediate benefit children and youth appear to derive seems to be personal, or at least impacting youth and children as a cohort or a set of actors in society, rather than public policy affecting broader society or the political system. If the political role of children in established democracies is limited, then can we expect the part they play in countries in turmoil to be any greater? Williams (2004) and Hart (2004) both suggest that in developing countries facing poverty or conflict, children can in fact be important actors that help shape political outcomes. For instance, in her study of how children can successfully influence policies surrounding child poverty, Williams (2004) concludes that children were most able to influence decision-making at the local level when it did "not significantly challenge society's power relations," and where formal channels were available to enforce accountability (p. 1). Furthermore, children's efforts, whether through children's labor unions in India and Bangladesh or through the Sri Lankan Child Parliament, were most fruitful at the agenda-setting change of the policy process (pp.1-2), where their activism could bring attention to a particular issue.

Interestingly, Williams (2004) draws a parallel between views on children in development and the trajectory of views on women and development; over the decades, the role of women evolved from a widely resisted "add-on" generally labeled "Women in Development" to the more central "Gender and Development" focusing on societal dynamics between men and women (p.5). In a similar fashion, the role of children in democratic social movements has been generally neglected in the literature—perhaps because it has not previously existed empirically to any recognizable degree. Children's involvement as significant actors in the Arab Spring, particularly in the Syrian case, suggests a new avenue to explore and research.

What are the benefits of children's involvement in the policymaking process, particularly in poverty-stricken nations experimenting with various development strategies? Like Shephard and Patrikios (2012), Williams (2004) explains that children's participation can be instrumentally beneficial for their critical thinking, dialogue skills, and civic education, but can also be seen as part of their right to be involved in making policies that will directly affect them (p. 8). The risk of including children (or any newcomer) in the policymaking process, however, is that they may

be used by other actors as sources of information, and their role outside of that function can be viewed with skepticism by more established or long-standing policy actors (p. 12). In his study of children's participation in humanitarian action in conflict zones, Hart (2004) adds that resistance to children's involvement in places like eastern Sri Lanka or the Occupied Palestinian Territories stems from the inherent instability and danger of those environments. Still, children's participation can help in building and shaping peace, and when allowed to do so, children can "make a valuable contribution" not just to other children and youth but to their broader communities (p. 4).

So while children are the most vulnerable population, particularly in conflict zones and places facing humanitarian disaster, they can also contribute to both protection and peace-building. As a result of conflict, children are negatively impacted by inadequate service provision and infrastructure; facing a larger role in family and community duties, including economic and emotional support; and being exposed to countless physical, social, emotional, and psychological risks (Hart, 2004, p. 10). Clearly, the consequences borne by children in countries facing conflict are monumental, whether in Syria or Sri Lanka. Yet, when given the opportunity through projects run by NGOs such as Save the Children, children participated in humanitarian work, which led to increases in their self-confidence and self-efficacy; improving family and community relationships; dealing with abuse; providing community access to basic services through involvement in projects such as building schools; helping improve communal identity through sharing stories and highlighting traditions; and, potentially, helping to improve their own psychological well-being (pp. 18-22). Furthermore, Hart (2004) argues that children already involved in such "self-empowerment" activities are well suited to be part of effective conflict resolution and dialogue with other children in conflict zones, whereas peace-building efforts initiated solely by adults can be less sustainable (26-27).

Whether or not the role of children as important political actors, either through their participation in the public policy arena or their contribution to humanitarian work in conflict zones, can pan out beyond the specific cases discussed above is not the point here. Rather, the studies by Shephard and Patrikios (2012), Williams (2004), and Hart (2004), suggest that children can in fact be significant participants in the formal and informal political arena when given the opportunity. If children can help build schools in war zones so that they and other children can continue their education, or if they can participate in dialogue and peace-building efforts with other children, then perhaps they can play a role in democratic social movements. The Arab Spring broadly, and the Syrian case specifically, bears out this deductive reasoning, and thus the part children have played and continue to play in the Syrian uprising-turned-civil-war is worth empirical examination, as well as theoretical incorporation into the social movement and democratization literature.

Children in the Syrian Revolution

The above section provided some theoretical background in the literature on democratic transitions and children's involvement in policymaking and humanitarian work. Using such a backdrop, this section empirically explores the role that children have played in the Syrian uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. I argue here that in the Syrian case, a three-stage cycle exists: in the first stage, children participated and unwittingly sparked a revolution. They were then brutally victimized in the second stage, leading to the third stage, where more children and more adults participated in various ways in the revolution, even as it has slid into a full-scale

war between supporters and opponents of the Assad regime. The second and third stages have been playing out repeatedly since the early months of the revolution in the spring of 2011.

Stage 1: The Children of Dar'aa

The Tunisian uprising that began in December 2010, followed by the Egyptian uprising of January 2011, took most of the world by surprise. These two popular movements led to the removal of dictators that had ruled their respective countries for decades, and the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia opened the door for further revolts across the region, collectively turned the “Arab Spring.” To the amazement of many, Syria was no exception to the movements in the region, despite the embedded and pervasive nature of its security or *mukhabarat* state. What was even more shocking, however, particularly in light of the literature on popular movements or democratic transitions discussed above, was that the Syrian revolution was started, albeit unwillingly, by schoolchildren.

In what can be described as the first stage of the cycle of children’s participation and victimization in the Syrian uprising, these young schoolboys heard adult men arguing about how best to exploit the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Deciding not to wait until the deliberations of their elders resulted in any clear plan, they took matters into their own hands. Three young middle-schoolers, Bashir, Issa, and Nayef, wrote on the walls of their school some slogans being used in the Tunisian and Egyptian movements: “The people want to topple the regime” and “Leave!” They also added their own version, specific to Syria: “Your turn is coming, Doctor” (Hanano, 2012), referring to Syria’s own dictator, Bashar al-Assad, who had been trained as an eye doctor in London before inheriting the presidency from his father Hafez.

Scrawling such graffiti on the walls of their school in Dar’aa was an act of tremendous courage, but the boys insist they did not intend to start a revolution. Bashir says in an interview two years after the fact, “We only wanted to spite the regime. We had no idea that there would be a revolution” (Hanano 2012). Elsewhere, one of the three boys said in another interview two years later, after having left Syria, “We thought we were playing. It was for fun” (BBC News, 2013). It is clear, then, that these young boys participated in what evolved into the Syrian revolution—indeed, their spontaneous and brazen actions *began* the uprising—but they did not do so as part of a clear plan. Unlike the university student movements in Serbia and other post-Communist revolutions (Kuzio, 2008; Laverty, 2008; Nikolayenko, 2012), or even the April Sixth movement in Egypt (Nikolayenko, 2012; Sika, 2012), the actions of the schoolchildren in Dar’aa were not meant to snowball into the country-wide movement that would be described as a revolution, eventually descending into a civil war. Here, then, the uniqueness of the participation of children becomes apparent: Bashir, Issa, and Nayef’s actions were perhaps no less consequential than the self-immolation of Bouazizi in Tunisia, but the effects of their actions were unintended. Syrian children initiated the revolution in that country, but despite themselves; they were only playing, by their own admission.

Yet the results of this “playing” were quite serious, even deadly. Soon after the boys had written the revolutionary slogans and signed their names on the wall of their school, they were arrested, tortured, forced to confess, and give the name of other co-conspirators. Other boys turned themselves in, and “then they disappeared” (Hanano 2012). Bashir was detained for a month, and he recalls being beaten for five days in a row, placed naked in solitary confinement, hung and spun from walls, and undergoing constant interrogations until he was forced to confess to accusations of trying to overthrow the regime. When the boys’ parents tried to intervene and rescue their children, they were told by the branch chief of Political Intelligence to “forget their

children,” and this was the breaking point: the parents and other residents of Dar’aa organized a protest for March 15. As the now familiar narrative goes, the peaceful protestors were met with violence by the police and security forces, and two people were killed: Mahmoud Jawabrah and Husam Abd Al-Wali Ayyash. At their funeral, crowds showed up, turning the somber event into a new protest; this protest was met by more regime violence, resulting in a continuous pattern of “protests, violence, and funerals” (Hanano, 2012).

Through the quickly evolving events in Daraa, we see two stages of the cycle that characterizes children’s involvement in the Syrian revolution: in the first stage, they sparked the revolution through the first de facto protest, scrawled onto the walls of their school, even if it was just for fun. In the second stage, the boys were arrested and tortured, victimized and targeted by the regime. The third stage involved protests and a surge of revolutionary activity by their families and other Dar’aa residents, but children, including the schoolboys themselves, were also spurred to action by the regime’s repression. Bashir himself says in the interview two years later, “When I heard there were martyrs [at the protest], I said: ‘I will be with them until death with those who died to get me out of oppression.’ I will never let go of the Syrian revolution” (Hanano, 2012). Probably contrary to what the Dar’aa security forces had anticipated, the violence they exercised, the detainment and torture of children, and the killing of peaceful protestors, served to turn what had began as mere taunting of the regime into a serious rebellion. Dar’aa in the first month or so of the revolution serves as a microcosm of the cycle of children’s participation, then targeting and victimization by the regime, then further participation by children and adults alike.

Stage 2: The Victimization of Children across Syria

The events that played out in Dar’aa in the spring of 2011, what I have called the second and third stages in particular, were repeated and amplified across the country for the next two years, and to this day. Due to the spark lit by the Dar’aa schoolchildren and its evolution into a nearly countrywide uprising, children across Syria have been targeted and victimized by the regime—they are not just collateral damage. Hart (2004) described the multi-faceted consequences of places struck by conflict on children: as the most vulnerable population, children face inadequate service provision, bear excessive economic and support roles in their families and community and face physical, social, and psychological harm (p. 10). The situation in Syria, however, exceeds this general impact on society and can be described as nothing but a deliberate targeting of children, along-side the broader society-wide repression and violence by the Assad regime against its people.

For instance, by September 2011, six months into what was still a peaceful uprising against the Assad regime, 72 children had been killed, according to the Local Coordination Committees, an umbrella activist group (Al Ahram, 2011). The murder of Hamza al-Khatib is a prime example of the regime’s actual targeting of children: this 13-year old boy from Dar’aa was arrested after participating in a protest, and was tortured, killed, and mutilated at the hands of the regime intelligence and security agencies. His hand and penis were severed, holes drilled in his body, after which regime forces returned his corpse to his family, a warning to children and adults alike who would dare to engage in protest against them. Syrian state television claimed that Hamza was killed by “armed groups” and militias. Other children killed by the regime’s security forces have been repeatedly described by turns either as guilty “terrorist infiltrators,” or, like Hamza, as victims of the mysterious “armed groups” blamed for regime actions against protestors and civilians across the country. In another chilling incident, the regime cut off power

to Al Hurani Hospital in the city of Hama, and did not turn on the back-up generators; twenty infants in intensive care were killed as a result (Al Ahram, 2011).

Hamza al-Khatib has become a symbol of deliberate victimization and targeting of children by the Assad regime, but the Syrian government has done more than torture and murder children. Another noteworthy casualty of regime violence has been the education of children; according to the British-based humanitarian aid agency Save the Children, 3,900 schools had been destroyed or closed as of January 2013, almost two years into the uprising in Syria. The impact on children has been enormous, as the demolition of schools has left the education of 2.5 million children “jeopardized.” To put the situation into perspective, Save the Children reports that the wrecking of schools in Syria accounted for 70% of all violent incidents involving schools around the world in 2012 (Reuters, 2013). A United Nations report based on the Secretary-General’s report to the UN Security Council in May 15 describes thousands of child casualties in Syria, and points out the missiles, shelling, and artillery that have bombarded homes and schools across the country, resulting in “severe psychological distress” among children (United Nations, 2013).

Not only have schools across Syria been destroyed by government attacks, but 2,000 of them throughout the country have been used as shelters for internally displaced persons. And despite the Assad regime’s characterization of itself as a staunch supporter of the Palestinian cause, the last Arab country of “resistance” against Israel, Palestinian refugees in Syria have by no means been immune to regime violence. In fact, 69 out of 118 UNRWA (United Nations Works Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East) have been shut down. The refugee crisis has also impacted children’s education. Half of the country’s 4.25 million internally displaced people, forced to leave their homes because of the regime violence that spiraled into a civil war, are children (United Nations, 2013). According to one estimate, by October 2012, 3,000 Syrians were escaping the country every day, many to already overflowing refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon. Schoolchildren were deeply affected by this displacement; in Jordan, for example, they have been forced to go to school in improvised classrooms in the Za’atari refugee camps due to inadequate room for them in the Jordanian public school system. In Lebanon, many Syrian students have been expelled from the public school systems and given access to schooling in tents instead. Adding another layer of difficulty to the dire situation, 70% of Syrians aged 15-17 in Lebanon have been leaving school, due to the challenges they face after being out of school for almost two years, forced to study a curriculum far different from what they are used to (Jabareen, 2012).

Compounding incidents such as the torture and killing of Hamza al-Khateeb, and the destruction of schools across Syria, the regime and its *shabiha* thugs have also engaged in mass slaughter of Syrian children, notably of the Sunni sect. In the village of El Houleh in Homs, for example, government forces and *shabiha* massacred more than 100 people, at least 41 of whom were children, and bombed the village school (United Nations, 2013). While the Syrian foreign ministry’s spokesman described the massacre as a result of “hundreds of gunmen” attacking regime soldiers, activists report first the shelling of Houla, followed by house-to-house raids by *shabiha* who either shot or slit the throats of the inhabitants. One elderly resident of al-Houla described hearing gunshots, after which a man in military uniform entering her family’s home and shooting all the family members with her: six grandchildren, her sister-in-law, her daughter, her daughter-in-law, and her cousin (BBC, 2012). Not only have children been massacred, but the regime has carried out a broad pattern of aggression similar to the experiences of Bashir and Hamza al-Khatib of Daraa. Children have been detained and tortured “for alleged association

with the opposition,” subject to electric shock, beatings, stress positions, and sexual violence; sometimes children have been held for ransom by their families (United Nations, 2013). Children are by no means immune from sexual victimization: Save the Children, a British-based NGO, issued a report documenting the impact of two years of unrest-turned-war on Syrian children. Not only have they been victims to bullets and shelling, but they have also been victims of rape crimes. Even fleeing Syria with their families does not guarantee children’s safety from sexual exploitation, as some refugee families have been marrying off their daughters, as young as 14, as a way to protect them from rape (Reuters, 2013).

It is clear, then, that the impact of the Syrian uprising on children goes far beyond just incidental collateral damage characterizing more traditional armed conflicts. The violence in Syria since the earliest days of the uprising in Dar’aa has been unique, ungoverned by the laws and norms of warfare and featuring a regime going to war against its own people, who for the first six-to-eight months engaged in nonviolent resistance to the Assad regime. This extreme nature of government response and aggression has extended beyond its general reaction to Syrian activists and the cities that house them. The Assad regime has targeted not just unarmed protesters and civilians, but children, a vulnerable population traditionally seen as off limits to deliberate violence or attack by any group. In what I describe as the second stage of children’s involvement in the Syrian uprising-turned-civil-war, Assad forces have intentionally targeted and victimized children, detaining, torturing and murdering them, and destroying their schools. While it is difficult to explain such brutality, it is equally hard to avoid drawing connections between the participation of children in the uprising, from the writing on school walls in Dar’aa to actual presence in protests, and the deliberate regime targeting of children as a result. The message by Assad and his forces has been clear: children are not off limits. The aggression against children, combined with the violence against the broader Syrian population and the continuous shelling of homes, schools, and entire neighborhoods and villages, has been Assad’s failed attempt to try and stamp out any resistance and rebellion against his iron rule.

Most recently, chemical weapons were used in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, where the Syrian government had been fighting insurgents for some time. The attack, identified by US intelligence as the work of the Assad regime, killed 1,429 people, almost a third of whom were children (New York Times, 2013) and is the most dramatic example of the Syrian government’s targeting of children. Since March 2011, out of 82,614 documented deaths a total of 7,995 children (age 16 and under) were killed in Syria (as of September 29, 2013); Table 1.1 below (adopted from March 15 Syrian Revolution Martyr Database, 2013) breaks down the numbers by province.⁴

⁴ The exact numbers of deaths varies by organization and has been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate. See also UN report (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Human Rights Data Analysis Group. (2013, June 13). Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic. *United Nations*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAG-Updated-SY-report.pdf>) for more general statistics about the death toll in Syria since March 2011. The March 15 database is one of the eight organizations cited in the UN report on death tolls, and was chosen for the purposes of this article because of its detailed breakdown of child deaths in Syria. In fact, the UN report documents the total number of deaths in between March 2011 and June 2013 as 92,901 in its compilation and analysis of the figures from all eight organizations.

Child Deaths in Syria by Province, March 2011-Sept. 29, 2013⁵

Province	Number
Aleppo	1701
Damascus Countryside	1576
Homs	1264
Idlib	1031
Daraa	722
Hama	554
Dair Ezzour	449
Damascus	401
Alraqah	160
Alhasakah	48
Lattakia	37
Tartous	34
Alqunaitra	15
Alsuwaida	3

Stage 3: Revolution Reinforced

The above sections have catalogued the participation of Dar'aa schoolchildren that unwittingly sparked the Syrian revolution, as well as the Assad regime's brutal response and targeting of children across the country. What has been the impact of continued regime attacks against children, their schools, and their homes over the past two and a half years? Here I argue that in the third stage of children's involvement in the uprising, children and adults alike have been spurred to further action against the Assad regime as a result of its ruthlessness, particularly against children. This final (albeit recurring) chapter of the cycle of children's involvement in the Syrian revolution cements the participation of children in what began as a peaceful movement seeking to remove an authoritarian regime.

The brutal torture, killing, and mutilation of Hamza al-Khateeb in the early months of the Syrian uprising, discussed above, did not put an end to anti-Assad activism across Syria. Instead of frightening children and adults alike into submission and acceptance that Assad could not be budged, the incident became a symbol of regime repression and a call to action across the country. Activists named the Friday (the Muslim holy day and beginning of the weekend, when the largest protests take place) after Hamza's corpse was returned to his family "Children's Friday," and called for mass protests across Syria. In the city of Hama alone, 50,000 protests took to the streets, calling for Assad to leave (National Public Radio, 2011). Activists even created a Facebook page called "We are all the martyr Hamza al Khateeb" in his memory; liked by more than 720,000 people, the page features posts about Hamza himself but more often, documenting the abuses and victimization of children across Syria by the Assad regime (We Are All the martyr Hamza al Khatib Facebook Page, 2013).

Children have joined the phenomenon of Facebook activism in the Syrian uprising in rather innovative and unique ways. Just as Syrian women have come up with a way to play their part in the uprising from the safety of their homes in an increasingly dangerous environment by posting videos of themselves holding up signs and reading statements (Saleh, 2013), children are

⁵ Adopted from: (2013, September 29). Martyr Statistics. *March 15 Syrian Revolution Martyr Database*. Retrieved from <http://syrianshuhada.com/default.asp?lang=en&a=st&st=13>

participating through Facebook as well. For instance, the Facebook page “The Child Martyrs of Syria” documents, through pictures and video, children who have been killed by regime attacks across the country. It also features many pictures of children carrying signs bearing anti-Assad, pro-opposition slogans; one recent picture shows children in Erbin carrying a sign that reads: “A question to the Muslim scholars: Do chemical weapons break one’s fast in Ramadan?” (Child Martyrs of Syria Facebook page, 2013), referring to the Muslim holy month of fasting. Another picture shows a child holding up a sign that says “Oh Allah [God]! Let us reach Ramadan, with the end of the siege and of Bashar. From the heart of the siege” (Ibid).

Other pictures show children holding up signs that are not explicitly anti-Assad, but that decry the dire circumstances in which they are living as a result of the uprising-turned-war. A recent picture shows a girl in Damascus holding a sign that proclaims, “I don’t know anything about politics, nor do I want to know. What I know is that I am hungry” (Child Martyrs of Syria Facebook page, 2013). This sort of activism also gives children a chance to poke fun at the turmoil around them; one picture from a protest last year shows children in Binish, Syria, carrying a sign that says, “Friday of. . .I want to name the Friday whatever I want” (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2012), referring to the activists’ weekly naming of Fridays in order to unify and spur protests across the country. Even children outside of Syria participate in this social network activism, showing their solidarity with their Syrian counterparts. One recent picture is of a boy in Jerusalem holding up a sign that reads, “From the children of Palestine to the children of Syria: We are with you until death” (Child Martyrs of Syria Facebook page, 2013). Of course, it is clear that this activism and participation on behalf of children is not carried out by them alone; they must be receiving help from adults, or older children and adolescents, in taking pictures and uploading them to Facebook. Nevertheless, children’s continued involvement in peaceful aspects of the Syrian uprising, however facilitated by their parents or older activists, is a noteworthy phenomenon in a country where much nonviolent resistance to the Assad regime was forced to morph into a full-out war.

Children have participated in other ways to support the uprising against Assad in Syria. When the revolution was just six months old, children across the country would trample on pictures of Bashar al-Assad, join protests and chant anti-government slogan, and even burn textbooks that included pictures of the current president and his dead father, Hafez. In another noteworthy example, children engaged in striking from school across Syria, responding to the use of schools by government forces to detain people, insisting that they would not return to school until Assad relinquished his power (France 24, 2011). It is unlikely that the striking children were able to keep this promise of their own choosing, more than two years into the uprising, although it is quite possible that many of them were unable to continue their education due to the attacks on schools. In an even more serious example of children’s participation in the uprising, some children as young as 15 years old have joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the armed opposition against Assad. Many children who attempt to join are returned by the FSA to their families, but those who are allowed to join often play a supplemental role, carrying and loading bullets; sometimes, they participate in combat (United Nations, 2013). While children’s involvement in the armed opposition can be viewed as an example of their victimization as a result of the uprising-turned-war, it cannot be ignored as a form of anti-regime activity.

Children are participating in the Syrian uprising in myriad ways, some less dangerous than others. The story of Omar Koraby embodies the experience of children in the Syrian revolution, although his narrative is different because unlike other children made famous by the recent events in Syria, Omar is still alive, and battling illness. The four-year-old hails from the

town of Areeha, where his mother, unable to get to a hospital in the city besieged by Assad forces, died giving birth to his younger brother. Omar then traveled with his grandmother to his uncle's house in Egypt to undergo treatment for liver disease, as Syrian hospitals were unsafe and had become places for detaining activists. Why has Omar become famous? Countless videos of him chanting revolutionary, anti-Assad slogans have surfaced on the Internet, watched by hundreds of thousands of viewers; he has even led protests outside of Syria. His uncle says that Omar just mimics the adults around him, and describes him as just "one line in the story of the agony and pain of Syrian children" (CNN Arabic, 2011).

Certainly Omar's actions are encouraged by the adults around him, who record him chanting anti-Assad slogans, take him to protests, and allow him to lead them. Nevertheless, Omar's story remains a prime example of what I have termed the third stage of children's involvement in the Syrian uprising. Children victimized by the Syrian revolution have, alongside, and perhaps encouraged by, the adults around them, used the abuse they experienced at the hands of the Assad regime as a springboard for further activism against Assad. The dire consequences of children's participation, on their own lives and on the lives of Syrian children more generally, cannot be overstated. A UNICEF report summarized the plight of Syrian children since the uprising began in March 2013. They are subject to sexual violence, bodily harm, being injured, killed, and orphaned, without access to health services and clean water. The trauma is not just physical, but also psychological, as children see their loved ones being killed and hear the constant noise of shelling and artillery, and many are displaced from their homes, often in unbearable conditions (UNICEF 2013).

Conclusion

Almost two and a half years into the uprising in Syria, it is clear that children have played an important role in what began as a non-violent movement seeking to remove a dictatorial regime from power. Children's involvement in democratic transitions or popular social movements has not, however, been discussed in the literature on these topics. Thus, this article fills a gap in the regime transition literature, arguing that just as women's movements and youth movements were eventually added to the traditional body of research on democratic movements in Latin America and Eastern Europe, children's participation must also be studied. The Syrian case is an important one, providing an opportunity for both theoretical and empirical innovation regarding the role of children in democratic social movements, even when they devolve into full-scale wars.

I have argued that as evidenced by the Syrian case, the involvement of children can be characterized by a three-stage cycle. In the first stage, the children of Dar'aa unwittingly sparked what became a mass uprising against Assad, and were targeted and abused by the regime in response. The second and third stages are exemplified by both the example of Dar'aa as well as the situation across Syria as the revolution unfolded. In the second stage, children are targeted and victimized by the regime; the third stage features more children and adults' participation in the uprising, spurred on, rather than frightened into silence and submission, by the brutality of the regime. To flesh out how this cycle has played out across Syria, this article has empirically documented the three stages in the cycle: children scrawling anti-regime graffiti on their school walls; children detained, tortured, killed, and mutilated; schools targeted and destroyed; and mass slaughter of children. This initial participation and targeting of children by the regime has not silenced Syrian children or their families, but resulted in a flurry of more activism and anti-

regime activity that actually cites the regime brutality as motivation: Facebook protests, actual protests, strikes from school, and, in some rare cases, even joining the armed opposition.

The irony of all this well-documented, highly publicized cycle of participation, victimization, and further participation of Syrian children in the uprising, which has repeated itself again and again since March of 2011, is that Assad's brutality and war against his own people remains unchecked. There is no end in sight to the non-violent movement that was forced, due to the violent, indiscriminate, and deliberate response by the Assad regime, to morph into an armed resistance to Assad's crusade against the Syrian people. As the conflict rages on, then, we will likely continue to see children's participation, as well as their victimization, across the country. This article is a step in the direction of theorizing and empirically documenting such involvement and incorporating it into the literature on social movements and regime transitions. There remains room for a great deal of further research on the topic, such as examining the role of children in other uprisings in the Arab spring, as well as in other regions of the world, and attempting to measure the impact of such involvement on the success or failure of the broader movement. Also, empirical and theoretical analyses of the relationship between children's victimization, media coverage, participation in opposition activities, and the subsequent policies or actions of major powers and international organizations is an important direction for additional research.

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