

Lama Kannout

In the Core or on the Margin:

Syrian Women's Political Participation

The backstage of the Syrian political elites who propose themselves as a democratic alternative, and the reasons that have led to the weakening of women's political participation



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The Syrian Feminist Lobby is an independent non-partisan lobby that is committed to equal participation of women and men in all political decision-making processes in Syria at all levels.

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اللوببي النسوي السوري
Syrian Feminist Lobby

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Introduction

The Significance of the Topic

The lives of women are governed by discriminatory economic, legal, social, political and religious structures. All faces of oppression have amalgamated to put a collar around their necks and to impede the path of their struggle for their rights. Syrian women once broke these shackles when they took the lead in the March 2011 revolution, which restored politicization to society after decades of dictatorship.

Yet, this did not improve their political participation within local governance and in the political forces that have taken the lead. This lack of participation does not only stem from the exclusion of women in a time of political transition, leading to the inevitable demise of a democratic transition in a new Syria, but also from shortcomings of some opposition forces that have since taken command, be that exclusion in the approach, the discourse or practice, which have all hindered the political participation of women.

Female Syrian revolutionaries face substantial challenges. First, international discourse aims at dismissing their political role in the riddance of a despotic regime, and to re-drawing for them entirely similar roles to those drawn by the patriarchal structure within the dichotomy of war and peace: Tough male fighters inflaming the wars and female victims as mere peace actors, pressing the males to solve the conflict. This contrast signifies an utter disregard for the freedom of individuals in choosing their positions and perspectives. It's an attempt to strip women of their ultimate cause towards desired radical democratic transformation and the establishment

of sustainable and just peace, peace that is founded upon holding the war criminals accountable, as well as separating women from a revolution and social movement that sought freedom, justice, equality and a state built around citizenship.

The second challenge faced by Syrian revolutionary women is a discriminatory political blockade imposed by the forces that have taken the lead in the political scene, who do not view women as qualified political leaders with enough capacities to make change and decisive choices. In the name of preserving the balances within the political bloc, doors are shut before women; and in the name of quotas women are excluded. In order to retain influence cards, an utter silence looms over violations perpetrated by Salafi armed factions; and for the sake of women's slogans of democracy and citizenship, they settle for symbolic participation; and under the pretext of priorities their rights disappear. These forces which effectively blockade women's participation completely disregard that, if qualified women were to be alienated or excluded, it is impossible for parties to be democratic. It is not possible to be a democratic alternative and to claim the representation of a population while ignoring half of it.

Among the acts of terrorism committed by the regime and those fundamentalist al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, in addition to the extremism and violations committed by other Salafi military factions, which have considered the goals and slogans of the revolution to be heresy and have fought, kidnapped and expelled activists, both male and female, we have been deprived of the emergence of women's local leadership and the development of their work and political representation. Thus, their contributions have receded, remaining in a closed environment, under extremely severe conditions.

This research explores women's participation, starting with the coordination-committees and local councils, following along different paths within the political negotiations in Geneva 3 while focusing on women's political participation within the political forces that have proposed themselves as a democratic alternative.

The context of this research and its recommendations stem from our pursuit to establish democratic parties; to critique in order to correct the path and overcome the obstacles standing in the way of women's participation; to

highlight the depth of the masculine mindset. The desired democratic state cannot be established upon the isolation and exclusion of women, but only through their full and diligent political participation, including participation in negotiating political resolutions and transitional period, a participation that would provide them with equal opportunities and access to decision-making; and to found a constitution that is sensitive to gender, precluding the elimination of all forms of discrimination and persecution justified by the laws governing their lives, and the denial of violence against them, and forming a social elevation to eliminate the historical injustices from which they have suffered.

The new Syria will not be democratic if it does not abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the foundational agreements on women's rights such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPA), and Security Council Resolution 1325, as well as all relevant resolutions.

The reason behind this research is my interest in the political participation of women, the scarcity of research on the subject in the post-revolution Syrian context and among Syrian opposition forces, and my desire to provide feminist analytic substance whose ultimate reference is human rights, for men and women, and which is based upon testimonies and conversations that attempt to describe reality and not embellish it.

Literature Review

- Maya al-Rahabi, "Women's political participation in Syria," March 2005¹.

It focused on the numbers of women in Syrian parties and in parliament for three electoral cycles from 1972 to 2003, in addition to municipal institutions, unions and syndicates. The paper concludes that conditions of meager political participation of women resembles the case in other Arab countries because of many obstacles hindering their participation, among which are:

(1) مية الرحبي، «المشاركة السياسية للمرأة في سورية»، الحوار المتمدن، 8/3/2005:

<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=33062>

- Political obstacles which “pertain to the totalitarian regimes that prevail in the Arab world, the lack of democracy which has led to keeping politics away from society, and to the withdrawal of individuals, who, under oppression and despotism, had to opt for safe retreat from any political concerns.”
- Legal obstacles that relate to the constitution which guarantees for women the right to vote and to candidacy, and granted them full citizenship with rights and duties, purportedly encouraging them to participate in social, political and economic life, while what prevails in reality is the state of exceptional provisions; and on the other hand, the liberties granted to women by the constitution are hindered by the personal status law that deals with women as deficient human beings.
- Social obstacles that have to do with community pressures to which women who are active in the political sphere are subject. A woman's attainment of leading positions is often contingent on her loyalty to the authority, or to kinship to traditional leaders, not necessarily achieved by her merits. There is a high participation of women in the [social] constituency of the regime and opposition parties, while this rate is eroded as we climb the pyramid structure until it is almost nonexistent. There are also obstacles relating to women's low economic status. Furthermore, the unavailability of education opportunities for women, as is the case for men, limits their intellectual capacities, hence their political participation.
- Lama Kannout, “Women revolutionaries are disappeared from decision-making: political participation of women and their access to positions of decision making in some opposition forces since 2011,” March 2015².

This study is focused on the number of women in nine political opposition forces, most of which were formed after the revolution. How their rhetoric during the establishment posed the issues of women in terms of using

(2) لمى قنوت، «الثائرات مغيبات عن صنع القرار: المشاركة السياسية للمرأة ووصولها إلى مراكز صنع القرار في بعض قوى المعارضة منذ 2011»، الحوار المتمدن، 3/3/2015
<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=457666>

a gendered language (male and female citizens, men and women) is discussed as well as how they promised equality between men and women in rights and duties, empowering women and guaranteeing their full rights, employing their capacities in development, overcoming the obstacles preventing them from doing so, standing up to masculine hegemony and the exclusion and discrimination against women, and promoting their political participation. The paper questions these promises and asks whether these political forces ever sought to make what they had mentioned in their political literature a goal and a platform for their work to promote democracy, a citizenship state and human rights for men and women. The paper also deals with what was not mentioned in the literature of these political formations, such as proposing a gender quota (except one party of the sample), committing to lift the reservations against the CEDAW convention, and a constitution concordant with gender, adjusting all the laws of personal status, punishments, citizenship and social security to be concordant with it. Neither did the nine political formations tackle violence against women in general, and sexual violence in particular, which has impacted many women during the conflict and made their bodies a means of retaliation against the other. The political formations that were formed after the militarization of the conflict did not mention the Security Council Resolution 1325, or any other relevant resolution. The paper concludes that, in order to gain insight into the role played by women and the shape that role takes within those political formations, it is not nearly enough to simply count the number of women in their ranks and survey their rhetoric, though these are some of the indicators. The paper gives an example of one of the nine highlighted parties which places women's rights on its agenda and whose leadership is joint between a man and a woman. However, in its control areas where its military arm dominates, many violations of human rights take place, in addition to forceful recruitment of male and female children, and its female co-leader made a statement inconsistent with democracy and freedom. The paper also concludes that "terms like democracy and citizenship that have appeared in all political literatures of the aforementioned forces will remain but mere ink on paper unless they are combined with serious and real actions that empower the marginalized half of society and places women's causes and rights among its goals. The low rate of women in the bases of

these parties and their decision-making positions are but evidence that they deal with their symbolic political representation as cosmetic, which is not proportionate at all to their role in the revolution and in reality.”

The paper also identifies the role of political parties in promoting women's political participation, and the role of women in placing gender equality at the top of decision makers' agendas.

- Siham al-Najjar, “Enhancing the role of parties and unions in promoting the political and public participation of women,” December 2014³.

This research was conducted in the context of a regional project in five Arab countries: Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon.

It focuses on the role of parties, unions and democratic frameworks in promoting political participation of women and the sources of weakness in each of them. It provides examples from the experiences of some political parties in strengthening women's participation and access to decision making positions and exerting their rights. In Lebanon for instance, Sadi Allawa's study “Organizational needs to promote women's participation in parties in Lebanon,” which was conducted by The Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering, finds that political parties are by no means different from the Lebanese sectarian regime that prevails in Lebanon and governs all of its key institutions, since “it is not a coincidence that the share of women in the political bureau of one of the secular, progressive parties in the sample does not exceed one woman.” The case is the same for another party in the sample that has a religious background and an ideological discourse based upon religious and sectarian foundations. From that example, and the overall presence of women in parties in both the base and leadership and decision making positions, the study arrives at a fundamental conclusion, suggesting that the positions of female members of any political party do not change according to the identity and discourse a political party might have, or differ from any other party. The study also identifies the obstacles related to parties: “The incapability of parties to change, the lack of endeavors to empower women, the poor support for

(3) سهام نجار، «تعزيز دور الأحزاب والنقابات في النهوض بالمشاركة السياسية والعامّة للنساء»، 1/ 2014
<http://www.rdfwomen.org/archives/691>

women's access to decision making positions within parties, the lack of consideration for a women quota system within parties; the disregard for women's issues which are of major importance and urgency." Added to these are general obstacles, such as "the masculine, family and religious authority acting upon women, the social culture, the poor involvement of women in decision making processes in 'the two families': nuclear and extended, the personal status laws that are discriminatory against women, and the lack of civil laws of personal status, the sectarian political system, the electoral laws that adopt sectarian and confessional allocations of seats and quotas, the domination of "clientelism", favoritism and personal interests over genuine partnership, the lack of a sense of citizenship, which applies to both men and women, legal discrimination against women, denying them a host of social, economic, political and legal rights, discrimination against women in work and institutions, the refrain of a majority of women from undertaking their responsibilities to struggle, and the abandonment of all women from undertaking their responsibility to enhance their skills and develop their capacities and knowledge." The recommendations proposed by the study came on many levels: that of the constitution and laws, that of policies and national action/proceedings, and that of political parties.

- United Nations Development Program, Democratic Institute for International Affairs, "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties," October 2011⁴.

This is a guidebook to promote women's political participation, and it focuses on the role of internal organization of parties in establishing an organizational base of gender equality, in addition to the most efficient strategies to enhance women's participation and empowering them according to four phases, following an electoral cycle approach.

The guidebook states, "The incorporation of women's perspectives in politics and their participation is a precondition for democratic development and contribution to good governance [...] it is beneficial for parties, politically and financially, to actively work on initiatives that promote women's

(4) برنامج الأمم المتحدة الإنمائي، المعهد الديمقراطي للشؤون الدولية، «تمكين المرأة من أجل أحزاب سياسية أقوى»، 10/2011.

empowerment during the electoral cycle. Through official and open support for women's participation, political parties can apply reforms which change public opinion and create new support bases for them, attracting new members and increasing the flow of government funds for the party, in addition to improving their position before other countries."

The role of political parties is essential to the overcoming of obstacles standing in the way of women's political participation, and it reflects on social, economic and political life. In many countries, it is a recurrent to "discourage women from direct competition with men and from public appearance and interaction. Instead, women are assigned roles that keep them away from decision-making positions [...] that contributes to exacerbating the inferior economic situation of women and their relative poverty and to the persistence of this issue around the world. This is one of the main direct obstacles that make the political participation of women nearly impossible in any stage of the electoral cycle." Political parties have shown that no method is better than another as long as there is commitment to gender equality, but evidence shows that procedures based upon quota mechanisms have proved to be effective in granting more women access to influential positions.

In general, papers and studies are convergent in their recommendations as well as in their description of what prevents women from political participation under despotic regimes, in the Arab world in general and specifically in Syria. However, there are some gaps that need to be filled. These have mainly to do with highlighting the discriminatory practices against women and their political participation inside the constituent and practical stages of political parties and forces that have purported to be a democratic alternative, especially following a popular revolution in which women have most courageously and compellingly participated. These studies also do not tackle certain details within the dynamics of relations within a political group, and the depth of the masculine mindset to which even some democratic seculars who claim to support women's rights have descended, be it in rhetoric, practice or thought. This has made many female politicians reluctant to venture into the political scene, pushing many of them to instead join civil society organizations.

Research Problematic

Political opposition forces have failed to achieve any change in the way the issues of women's rights and gender equality are dealt with in general, or in ensuring political participation for women in particular. The discourse of these political forces did not tackle the issues of discrimination against women in all mediums, and their practice rather reflected the patriarchal mentality that settles for symbolic representation of women, contradicting their constituent documents and the principles they claim to be pursuing, and counteracting the project of the democratic state of citizenship that abides by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the major agreements regarding women's rights.

Women's rights activists believe that ending the process of marginalizing women and excluding them from political participation is extremely crucial in building a democracy. There must be a recognition of equal rights for women and men in accessing decision making positions in order to establish democratic parties based upon gender equality and to challenge patriarchal traditions and discrimination against women. These issues encompass the key demands required to build a democratic society devoid of all forms of oppression. The prime test of the efficiency of the democratic process within opposition is overcoming the stated obstacles that hinder women's political participation and prevent them from equally accessing decision-making positions. This process has shown flaws that prevented the implementation of any effective change until today. **Women's political participation does not mean disputing over control of despotic exclusionary authority, but rather the inclusion and fair representation that builds upon and carries a democratic, emancipatory and progressive project that can contribute to the social prosperity.**

The research aims at:

1. Highlighting the backstage of political elites, which create the policies and exclude women from closed-door decision-making circles.
2. Unveiling the severity of the discriminatory mentality against women and their political participation that plagues some political elites at the forefront of the political scene.

3. Arriving at results and providing recommendations to correct the imbalance stemming from the weak political participation of women.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative methodology of research, through conducting individual interviews with 45 persons, 17 of which were in-depth and took between 60-210 minutes, while 28 persons were sent questions at their request.

The respondents were selected as to cover a wide range of persons who have held essential roles in the political movement that took place in Syria in the recent years, or who are very well-informed about it. Despite the fact that women's participation in violent conflict has come under media interest recently, this study mainly focuses on the civil and political movements, because those are the most significant determinant of women's roles in the future.

The surveyed people to whom the questions were addressed were:

- Members of the political elite from different political backgrounds, both women and men, who still exercise politics whether independently or within political organizational structures present in the current political scene.
- Women revolutionaries who took part in the revolution and were involved in establishing civil society, as well as civil society activists.
- Two political writers and researchers.

Side interviews on specific topics:

- Fifteen interviews were conducted with activists in different Syrian regions, some of whom were members of local councils (and still are) while others are very knowledgeable about the function of these councils. These interviews focused on the degree of women's representation in said councils.
- Four interviews were conducted with members of the opposition delegation's Women Advisory Board. They focused on the standards and expertise in the Board and the magnitude of their utilization, in

addition to the extent to which their papers access the negotiation table and the degree of their inclusion in the negotiation delegation.

- Fifty side interviews were conducted over the time of writing this research dealing with relevant partial issues.

Interviews and main surveys were conducted in a period spanning July 2015 to January 2016. The responses were then analyzed in order to form a conception about the actual reality of women's participation in the different structures of the political institutions and organizations of the opposition, thus identifying what key issues were discussed, such as the mechanisms of selecting leadership and setting political agendas for their work. The main factors that the participants in the research expressed were identified by making connections between the various responses.

Background

In order for Bashar Assad to inherit the power of Hafez Assad following his death on June 10, 2000, the parliament, within only a few minutes, "unanimously" approved the amendment Article 83 of the 1973 constitution as follows: "A candidate for the post of the Syrian Arab Republic must be an Arab Syrian who enjoys his civil and political rights and has completed 34 years of age." The only difference between the two articles was making the age of the candidate 34 instead of 40 so that it fits the heir. On July 10, 2000 a "referendum" took place and Bashar Assad gained 97.94% of the vote, becoming the President of the Republic. In his oath speech on July 17, 2000 he promised to execute reforms that yielded some relative openness and freedoms, in comparison with his father's reign. In addition, 600 political prisoners were released and the Mazze Prison was closed down. Dialogue forums began to take place, and intellectuals launched several initiatives, the first of which was a statement by 99 intellectuals, followed by one by 1,000 intellectuals, which is the foundational document of the Committees to Revive Civil Society. The regime soon returned to its previous practices and to silencing people until it aborted what came to be known as the "Damascus Spring," whose figures were all thrown in jails and whose forums were forced to end their activities.

To measure the indicators of women's political participation in the center of decision-making, international and national reports, as well

as many researchers, rely on numbers and ratios. The representation of women in legislature is considered the epitome of political activity, as the legislative branch holds the power and influence to initiate political and legal change and to make decisions. In despotic countries like Syria, however, it is needless to note the conflation between mere participation in the parliament (considered "decision-making") and actual democracy. In her paper "Women and Politics,"⁵ which makes a comparison between the percentages of women in several Arab parliaments during the same electoral period, including fifteen countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates), Mona Fayad states that "the highest percentage of women representation is the Syrian Arab Republic's 12% (3/2003), followed by Tunisia's 11.5% (10/1999), while the least is in Yemen's 3% (4/2003)." She added that the political representation of women in Arab and Islamic countries "resembles personal donation or endowment by the ruler to a specific woman meant to be honored, or to be a means of portraying a good aspect of the regime. That may facilitate obtaining financial funding and endowments from international actors, since this is one of the requirements of the United Nations Development Program. But after applying scrutiny, we find that women are far from the entirety of the process of decision-making." Fayad wonders "about the meaning of the highest percentage of parliamentary representation in one-party regimes whose parliaments are exclusive to a specific group of citizens." She cites Hafiza Choukair's research on women's entry to parliament in the Tunisian case: "Women's entry to the parliament concurred with the rise of the Constitution Party in June 1959, particularly after the consolidation of the Party's status and the marginalization of its opposition as early signs of monopolizing power." Fayad questions "the meaning of representing women in a domain that does not really represent wide communities," thus it seems that this very representation indicates an increased marginalization of the real and active political sphere." Fayad also agrees with Ottaway⁶ in

(5) منى فياض، «المرأة والسياسة»،

<http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/papers/2005/fayad2.pdf>

(6) منى فياض، المصدر السابق.

Ottaway, M, "Women's rights and democracy in the Arab world," Carnegie papers, No 42 Feb. 2004, pp7-8.

concluding that no Arab regime can be considered progressive. Regarding increased women's participation in Arab political life, she commented: "It does not have a big impact of the political regime, and at best its impact on politics is but modest [...] as for the autocratic yet secular Syrian government, just as Iraq was before, it has no problem in making concessions to women." Fayad concludes that "the problem in the Arab world is precisely dominion by despotic regimes."

The numbers show that when women gained 30 seats, amounting to 12% in the eighth legislative cycle 2003-2007 (out of 250 seats, 167 of which were for Progressive National Front and 83 for independent members), that was the highest percentage in 15 Arab countries, according to Fayad. The percentage of women in local administration in the same cycle, however, was only 3% in 2003⁷ (Local administration includes the governorate, the city, the town, and the municipality, and among 8,552 representatives only 294 were women). In the ninth legislative cycle of 2007, the percentage of women in parliament rose to 12.8% (32 seats of 250), and in this term in particular, there were no independent women candidates among those who ran for the elections (982 candidates)⁸ and all those who won the elections were members of the Progressive National Front⁹, which had already won.

This disparity between the percentage of women's representation in the parliament and that in the local administration, on the one hand, and the fact that the percentage of female members in the Syrian parliament that set a record as the highest in the Arab world in 2003, and then increased

(7) شاهر إسماعيل الشاهر، «المشاركة السياسية للمرأة في سورية»، مجلة نقد وتنوير، شباط 2015
<https://goo.gl/13GqdY>

(8) موقع حزب البعث العربي الاشتراكي - القيادة القومية «انتخابات الدور التشريعي التاسع لمجلس الشعب في سورية»، 1 / 1 / 2011.

http://www.baath-party.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4031

(9) Progressive National Front was founded in March 7th, 1972, and it is a coalition of Syrian parties: Socialist Arab Baath Party, Syrian Communist Party (with its two wings: Wisal Bakdash's and Yousef Faisal's), Arab Socialist Union, Socialist Unionists Party, Arab Socialists Movement, Democratic Socialist Unionist Party, Democratic Arab Union, and since 2001 Syrian Social National Party participates as an observer. During the revolution no criticism or condemnation by any or the Front's parties against the regime's crimes were recorded.

by two seats in the following legal term, all highlight the reality of the politicization of women's representation. Women are utilized to embellish a totalitarian regime that would not lose much power if it grants women some seats, but would rather present itself as an advocate for women's rights and political participation. Meanwhile, women's lives are burdened with humiliating laws that women's rights defenders demand be changed, to which the regime only shrugs its shoulder and turns a deaf ear.

As for the secular character of the Syrian regime, on which Fayad and Ottaway agreed, this is a claim Bashar Assad has insisted on asserting in many media appearances, stating that "the more important thing for Syrians and for me is that the constitution and the whole regime and country be secular"¹⁰. This is utterly wrong, however. In the 1973 constitution as well as the 2012 constitution, Article 3 in each states that "the religion of the President of the State is Islam, and Islamic law is a principal source of legislation." In the same article of the 2012 constitution, an added sentence to the fourth item indicates that "personal status of religious sects is to be preserved and fostered."

In their research on "Parliamentary Performance of Syrian Women"¹¹, Samuel Abboud and Hala Suleiman study the performance and representation of Syrian members of Parliament and analyze interviews they conducted with them, and conclude that "most of them reached the parliament through their parties that are part of the Progressive National Front, whereas few of them were independent". Additionally, most of these women were members of the Women's Union, and had been participating in conferences or symposiums either through their work before reaching Parliament or after entering their terms.

The paper shows that 91% of the chosen sample came to the parliament as representatives of workers and farmers. Concerning their electoral program, most female MPs stated that they settled for the electoral statement of the Progressive National Front, which had nominated them before, thus releasing no personal statements. One lady was an exception.

(10) موقع بيروت برس، «الرئيس الأسد في مقابلة مع محطة فينيكس الصينية»، 22/11/2015: <http://beirutpress.net/article/256434>

(11) الأداء البرلماني للمرأة العربية: دراسة حالات مصر وسوريا وتونس، مركز دراسات الوحدة العربية، بيروت، 5/2005.

A member of one of the Front's parties, she mentioned her personal electoral program that demanded some amendments to the Front's statement, especially concerning the right to labor, freedom of expression and of the press, punishing wrongdoers and preserving historical sites.

The female MPs of the sample mentioned that they defend social, economic and national demands, along with women's rights. Few of them identified the most essential issues in their parliamentary experience, and those few mentioned details related to inheritance, age of custody, arbitrary divorce, horizontal expansion of universities and the modification of their courses to meet labor market demands, housing and the rights of slums residents, defending holy sites and beliefs, and reclaiming dispossessed rights. A majority of the women interviewed ignored the question of their most fundamental issues.

Each of the female MPs chosen in that sample said that she does not have a parliamentary consultant bureau that conducts studies to assist and guide them in their parliamentary duties, as do their male counterparts.

When asked if they would oppose the position of the party they belong to in order to defend their own beliefs, 59.3% of respondents answered with a definitive "No," explaining that their beliefs are in line with those of the party or the Front. As for the remainder, 25% answered with "Sometimes." 8.3% said they have their own independent opinions, and 8.3% ignored the question.

In a section titled "Female MPs: What is accounted to them and what's accounted against them," the two researchers add that the parliamentary activity of MPs has depended on the legislative cycles as well as the personalities of the women taking part in them. In general, a comparison between the standards of parliamentary debates and discussions between mid-1960's and the years that came after would favor the former. The study notes that "if a woman was appointed by the authorities or elected as a representative of the Progressive National Front, her performance would be affected by those centers of power rather than by popular support. This does not negate the fact that there have been some exceptional female members whose performance had an impact on the official level. For instance, the government once responded to a female MP who demanded that the current oil policies be questioned, and a committee be formed

for that matter. Additionally, there still remain female MPs concerned with women's causes, albeit in a limited way. The personal status law has been repeatedly evoked and female MPs called for its amendment several times. But strategic issues were still absent from most interventions by female MPs. They mainly focused on issues that concern unions, municipalities and local councils, such as the issue of domestic workers; where some female members called for cancelling their servant status and regulating their work in the social security law. Here, we can also add how many female MPs were distracted by formalistic matters, instead of suggesting law drafts more related to substantial issues that are of national interest". Concerning the lacking performance by female MPs, the two researchers explain that female MPs averted many constitutional battles and left them for their male colleagues, including enacting laws concerning literacy and job opportunities for women, in addition to facilitating starting a family for young people of the two sexes. Perhaps, this little interest in women's issues has to do with the female MPs' desire to confirm that they represents the entirety of the citizenry and not only the female half (despite the significance of some issues, such as the expenditure of divorced women, and even though representing both groups is not contradictory), or to some ragged social traditions that prefer not raising issues exclusive to women."

The two researchers do not clarify the issues they consider of essence to national interest, such as democracy, peaceful transition of power, brutalization by security apparatuses, separation of powers, corruption, human rights, and other essential issues. When some of these were raised by two MPs (Riyad Seif and Mamoun Homsy), their immunities were immediately lifted and they were arrested¹².

In addition, the two researchers categorize raising women's issues in the parliament as a women's specialty. This categorization is similar to the sexist categorization of political participation as a men's specialty, which is a big mistake. The emancipation of women is the emancipation of society. Even some female MPs had that misunderstanding and believed that raising issues related to women makes them less representative of the entirety of citizens and weakens their political standing. Those tend to ignore or to

(12) أنور البني، تقرير عن محاكمات «ربيع دمشق»،

forget that the feminist movement is primarily a political movement *par excellence*, and that it aims at a radical democratic transformation.

Other than those who already defend women's rights, female PMs and politicians who represent their parties tend to refrain from raising women's issues even when they are aware of them. Otherwise, they would be subject to partisan accusations of being less loyal to the party's agenda than they are concerned with minor issues¹³. Syria is a country ruled by a totalitarian regime, and one cannot speak of women's political participation while women are utilized to burnish the regime's image. The last incident was the nomination of Hadiya Abbas who was elected as Speaker of the Syrian Parliament on June 6, 2016, while the regime responds to popular revolution by systematic violence and by committing war crimes and crimes against humanity¹⁴.

The two researchers also pointed out that all the respondents to their survey answered that they do not have a parliamentary consultant bureau that would conduct studies to assist them in their parliamentary work, something that their male counterparts enjoy. This discrimination between male and female MPs is somewhat similar to the discrimination faced by female detainees in Adra Prison, where women cannot borrow books that are available only to men in the same prison. I learned that from a former female detainee, who said that they were denied books "so that they do not incite imagination and lead to obscenity!"

According to Maya al-Rahabi¹⁵: "Theoretically, a Women's Union is a civil society institution that by definition includes parties, unions, associations and charities. It functions as a representative body of a specific sector of society that shares interests and aspirations, and it is responsible for forming what are known as pressure groups that push governments towards enacting laws or taking actions that would ensure the interests of the sector represented by the Union. However, the aspirations, goals and decisions of the Syrian

(13) النساء والسياسة، الإسكندرية 2011.

(14) The report of thorough periodic exploration of human rights: civil and political rights in 2016. Conducted under the supervision of Syrian Feminist Lobby and co-authored by many civil society and human rights organizations: <http://www.efi-ife.org/publication>

(15) مية الرحبي، «واقع المرأة السورية اليوم»، الحوار المتمدن، 6/5/2005
<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=36799>

Women's Union, since its founding in 1967 until today, have been identical to political decisions, and it has never posed pressure on the successive governments towards enacting laws or making decisions in the interest of women. Moreover, the Women's Union has undermined the independence of women's associations and taken over their role of working for women. It has proclaimed itself as a custodian responsible for the policymaking of all existing women's associations, directing and developing their activities so that they abide by the objectives of the Union, as a prelude to the inclusion of all women's activities in the organization." (Al Hadaf 11).

It might be unfair to deny the Union's role in the domain of literacy, organizing vocational training, and establishing nurseries for working mothers' children.

However, the Union played a major role in the prevention of licensing for any association working towards the same objectives the Union was created for: supporting women's issues and empowering them. The Syrian Associations Law does not allow for any civic assembly without a prior authorization by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, therefore Syrian women were deprived of any independent representation on the level of civil society organizations.

One of the women's associations that managed to get an official authorization, the Social Initiative, was disbanded in 2007 following sermons delivered publicly in mosques calling for the halt of feminist and women's rights associations and the prohibition of their work. For example, on April 11, 2005, Sheikh Mohamed Said Ramadan Al-Bouti "waged a violent attack on women's rights male and female activists, describing them as "dirty agents," "traitors," "dwarfs" and "slaves whose masters seek to eradicate the Islamic civilization from its roots."¹⁶

I once asked a board member of this association about that particular incident, and she responded: "The Social Initiative was licenced in 2005-2006, and we started by launching a survey about the personal status laws that we sought to amend. They were oppressive to women. We worked

(16) عبدالله أمين الحلاق، «في الإسلام السياسي والإسلام الحربي في سوريا»، مركز دراسات الجمهورية الديمقراطية، 13/12/2013.

<http://drsc-sy.org/في-الإسلام-السياسي-والإسلام-الحربي>

under the supervision of legal experts. We obtained all the necessary licences and went to the street. We started in the countryside then moved to urban centers in Damascus, and then to other governorates. We enjoyed the support of Mrs. Asma al-Assad. The survey results showed the courage of rural women who are far more marginalized than urban women. We then started preparing to issue a booklet that contained our results, but we were nonplused by a ferocious attack in the mosques from a sheikh in Al-Midan district. A pamphlet was issued and distributed at the gates of these mosques, which accused us of being dissolute prostitutes conspiring against religious taboos, such as inheritance, polygamy, custody, customary marriage... Then, we were again surprised when Diala Haj Aref, the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor, asked of our board members to meet with her. Once we arrived at her office, we were confronted with a barrage of insults and accusations. The association was soon dissolved, and its funds confiscated by the Ministry. We made several calls and approached many lawyers but all in vain. The association was dissolved after five years of work prior to the licensing, and only one year after finally managing to obtain it."

The booklet that was distributed at the gates of mosques was titled "Responses to the Fallacies in the Women's Personal Status". On its cover, a statement read "copyrights are free for every muslim, to be requested from the author," followed by a cellular phone number for whoever wants a copy. The booklet consisted of the scripts of nine sermons delivered by shaikh Abdulaziz al-Khatib Al-Hasani al-Shafi'i in Darwish Pasha Mosque. He had attacked the association, condemned the survey, declared the infidelity of association members and described them as the lapdogs of George Bush and the enemies of Islam, women, the homeland and honor, characterizing their work as an imitation of the infidel West. He added that Muslims will defend their religion to the last drop of their blood. Moreover, the booklet states that "Every person who signs this referendum is an enemy of God, an enemy to the Messenger of God, an enemy of the Quran, an enemy of the Sunna, an enemy of the the Prophet's Companions and an enemy of Muslims [...] therefore I call for the closure of that association, from this pulpit, and on behalf of all Muslims, since it aims at spreading sedition among Muslims and seeks to ruin families and destroy their religion."

The majority of Syrians know well that printing and distribution any publication cannot happen without an approval from the security agencies.

Similarly, no cleric can use the sermons to attack anyone if he does not know beforehand that the authorities would allow it, since mosque preachers are appointed and dismissed by those authorities, and that the security apparatus interferes in the content of their speeches in some cases.

Many defenders of women's rights stood in solidarity with the association. On February 8, 2006, the Committees to Revive Civil Society¹⁷ issued a statement titled "Stop the Mosque Preachers' Campaign Against Women's Associations in Damascus,"¹⁸ which declared: "With deep regret, the Committees to Revive Civil Society learned that some mosque preachers and Islamist clerics in Damascus are, through their sermons and religious events, attacking the activities of feminist organizations and associations in Syria, sowing distrust of these organizations and associations and accusing them of promoting unacceptable social behaviors and immoral values, ignoring the real issues that concern citizens, such as corruption, pillaging public resources, prostitution, discrimination between citizens, unemployment and poverty...." The Committees considered that "the attack on women's organizations and associations is incomprehensible and unacceptable," and called for dealing with the matters of social dispute away from bickering, incitement, accusation and defamation, calling at the same time for laying the foundations for a calm and open-minded debate, grounded in a spirit of ethical and social responsibility." The statement concluded: "Women in our country are subject to different types of discrimination and marginalization, which requires a serious and satisfactory tackling of the issues that engulf their lives."

The role played by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, represented by the minister who dissolved the organization and confiscated its funds,

(17) Committees to Revive Civil Society are independent, decentralized and non-partisan social committees that represent an open space for diversity and respecting pluralism and the right to be different. They took shape between fall 2000 and spring 2001 in two foundational documents, which were issued in the name of the Committees to Revive Civil Society and encouraged prioritizing social and civil structure in political action independently from political parties.

(18) بيان لجان إحياء المجتمع المدني «أوقفوا حملة خطباء المساجد ضد الجمعيات النسائية في دمشق»، http://www.metransparent.com/old/texts/syria_stop_campaign_vs_2006/2/8/women_associations.htm

and who had refused to license many other organizations that had applied for official licenses from the ministry, highlights the political role played by some women in favor of, and in collusion with, oppressive authorities. Consequently, we cannot consider the percentage of Syrian women in executive authority positions, which had reached 10% in 2010¹⁹, as an indicator of democracy or women's empowerment. It is rather an indicator of the use of women as a guise to polish the image of tyranny. These women only represent the official discourse, and as such they do not dare criticize the authorities, and they fiercely defend decisions that are in opposition to their rights. Their appointments are based on loyalty and further despotism, a climate in which women and men behave similarly. In 2011, some professors of international law at Damascus University tried to found an association they called "Syrian Association for International Law." While establishing it and drafting its goals and charter, two of the founding members were appointed as ministers: Dr. Jassim Zakaria as Minister of Social Affairs and Labor and Dr. Najm al-Ahmad as Minister of Justice. When the drafts were presented to the two ministers, both rejected to approve.

I mentioned what happened to the Social Initiative association for two reasons:

First: To demonstrate **the alliance between religious and political tyranny in Syria, each of which guaranteed its support for one another. They share dominion over both private and public domains by way of splitting the tasks, space and boundaries: Religious tyranny and its doctrinal laws control the lives of women in the private sphere and in the household, whereas the political-security tyranny perpetuates the subjugation of women and men in the public sphere**, which leads to suppressing human rights and the de-politicization of society. Meanwhile, all opposition groups were pursued and barred, all attempts at democratic change were thwarted, and women and feminist associations were deprived of legal licensing and of bringing about any change to the coercive rigged conventions which regulate their lives.

The regime permitted, even facilitated, the prevalence of a certain

(19) شاهر إسماعيل الشاهر، «المشاركة السياسية للمرأة في سورية»، مجلة نقد وتنوير، 2 / 2015: http://edusocio.net/files/watfa/participation_politiques_des_femmes_syriennes.pdf

religious trend that called for obeying rulers and political leaders, the most famous among whose figures were al-Bouti and Kaftaro. Religious charities were granted licenses, and branches of the Assad Institute for Quran Memorization were opened all over the country, while long hours of radio and TV were assigned for pro-regime clerics, such as Al-Bouti's "Quranic Studies" in the late 80s. Al-Bouti was one of the main supporters of the Qubaysiyat²⁰, a religious women's movement led by Mounira al-Qubaysi, who was also a student of shaikh Ahmad Kaftaro (the former grand mufti of Syria). Al-Qubaysi occupies the highest religious rank in the organization's hierarchy²¹, and the structure of the organization is characterized by absolute loyalty to the master (shaikha). Their numbers are estimated to be 75,000 women, working with clear distance taken from politics, and focusing mostly on education and the youth. According to Mohammed Habash, the Qubaysiyat own around 200 schools, and "apart from Christian private schools, most of the private education in Syria is owned by the Qubaysiat. One can say that Mounira al-Qubaysi has become a godmother of this type of education, which involves an increasing number of children including those of regime officials, who had long struggled for socialism but now prefer to educate their children in the private sector."²² The support for the Qubaysiat reached a peak when one of them was selected for a promotion in the governmental positions until her appointment as an assistant to the Minister of Awqaf in early 2008, when "an Office of Women's Religious Instruction was created and Salma Ayash was appointed as religious advisor of the Minister of Awqaf."²³ The website of the Ministry of Awqaf explains: "Mr. President graciously issued a decree appointing Dr. Salma Ayash as the first female assistant to a Minister of Awqaf in the Arab and Islamic world, and the Prime Minister's Office issued an executive order to include the Office [of Women's Religious Instruction] in the organizational structure of the Ministry of Awqaf and to create a Women's Directorate of Preaching."

(20) سلام إسماعيل، «جماعة الأخوات القبيسيات»، مركز برق للأبحاث والدراسات: <http://barq-rs.com/barq/القبسيات-الأخوات>

(21) المصدر السابق.

(22) محمد حبش، «القبسيات... الملف المجهول»، الموقع الرسمي: <http://mohammadhabash.org/2016/08/23/الم-القبسيات-المد-محمد-حبش-الموقع-الرسمي>

(23) «لمحة عن مديرية الدعوة النسائية في وزارة الأوقاف»، موقع وزارة الأوقاف، 26/8/2014: <http://mow.gov.sy/edarat/في-وزارة-الدعوة-النسائية>

Second: Despite the strenuous work by feminists to counter the stupendous amount of coercive and discriminatory laws that subjugate women, such as the Personal Status Law and the Penal Code, to name but a few, only few legal amendments were made. This further confirms the presence of a political decision to prevent any real and fundamental shift in women's issues, except in the formal manner, i.e. official appointments. This also confirms that the struggle of women cannot be separated from its holistic emancipatory dimension, which is the riddance of all forms of tyranny.

Here are some of the laws that have been amended:

- Article 19 of personal status laws, which concerns raising of the age of custody, was amended in 2003 to be as follows: "The custody period ends after completing thirteen years of age for the boy and fifteen for the girl."
- The Primary Education Law was amended by Act No. 32 in 2002, which made education obligatory until the end of the 9th grade.
- The Amendment of Literacy Law by Act No. 16 in 2002, which expanded the concept of literacy to include continued education for adults, including cultural development.
- Increasing the duration of maternity leave by Legislative Decree No. 35 on May 13, 2002.
- Article 508 of the Penal Code, which exempts a rapist from any penalty if he marries his victim, was repealed in 2011. It was replaced by the following text:
 1. If there is a contracted marriage between the perpetrator of one of the felonies mentioned in this chapter and the victim, the perpetrator shall benefit from the mitigated penalty in accordance with the provisions of Article 241, but the penalty shall not be less than two-year imprisonment.
 2. If there is a contracted marriage between the perpetrator of one of the offenses mentioned in this chapter and the victim, prosecution shall be halted, and if a decision was made the sentence shall be suspended.

This article has dismayed many women's rights advocates, since it provides criminals with impunity and punishes the victim by forcing her to live with her rapist, all the while society already considers her rape a "scandal" and thus supports such forced marriages.

- Additionally, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was ratified on September 25, 2002, despite reservation against Article 2, Article 9 paragraph 2, Article 15 paragraph 4, and Article 16 item 1, paragraphs C, D, F, G, and Article 29, paragraph 1. These reservations have actually rendered the ratification obsolete. For example, Article 2 mandates the States parties ratifying the Convention (paragraph A) to embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation, and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, including sanctions where appropriate, to prohibit all discrimination against women (paragraph B). Article 2 also demands the State parties to establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent tribunals the effective protection of women (paragraph C), and to refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women, and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation (paragraph D), and to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise, and to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women (paragraph F).

The Syrian government did not approve the optional protocol annexed to CEDAW Convention.

It is only consistent with the policies of the religious-political alliance within the Syrian regime to object to the aforementioned articles and paragraphs of the CEDAW Convention, and to ratify the discriminatory laws, which continue to govern the lives of women despite all attempts to abolish them. The regime has also refused to legally license different civil associations and organizations, only allowing religious associations. The public official discourse about the secular nature of the State in Syria and the rights Syrian women enjoy are but counterfactual.

The former director of the Syrian Women Association, founded in 1948, Nawal Yazigi was active in the 2004 campaign, which sought to amend the Syrian citizenship law to allow Syrian women to pass their nationalities to their children. On the difficulty of battling discriminatory laws against women, she said, "I keep wondering how we failed in amending such a simple fragment of legal text that pertains to citizenship rights, how it took us two years of vigorous effort. What would occur if the feminist movement tried to put forth all of women's aspirations?"²⁴ Of course, the citizenship law has never been amended in the slightest.

Following the revolution of freedom, dignity and equality that was sparked in March of 2011 and confronted by all kinds of weaponry, including prohibited ones, a new Syrian constitution was drafted in 2012. Article 8 of the old constitution, which had included the statement: "The Socialist Arab Baath Party is the vanguard party of state and society. The party leads a National Progressive Front that works on unifying the capacities of the masses and placing them at the service of the goals of the Arab nation." Moreover, the new constitution granted the President of the Republic sizeable authorities:

- Article 83: "The President of the Republic and the Prime Minister exercise executive authority on behalf of the people within the limits provided for in the constitution;"
- Article 97: "The President of the Republic shall name the Prime Minister, his deputies, ministers and their deputies, accept their resignation and dismiss them from office;"
- Article 105: "The President of the Republic is the Commander in Chief of the army and armed forces; and he issues all the decisions necessary to exercise this authority. He might delegate some of these authorities;"
- Article 106: "The President of the Republic appoints civilian and military employees and ends their services in accordance with the law;"

(24) «مطلوب قرار سياسي يضعها في أولوياته... المرأة السورية تتقدم... وتتعثر بالقوانين»، شبكة نساء في ظل قوانين المسلمين،

- Article 111: "The President of the Republic might decide to dissolve the People's Assembly in a justified decision he makes;"
- Article 113: "The President of the Republic assumes the authority of legislation when the People's Assembly is not in session, or during sessions if absolute necessity requires this, or in the period during which the Assembly is dissolved;"
- Article 117: "The President of the Republic is not responsible for the acts he does in carrying out his duties except in the case of high treason; and the accusation should be made through a People's Assembly decision taken by the Assembly in a public vote and with a two thirds majority in a secret session based on a proposal made by at least one third of the members. He shall be tried before the Supreme Constitutional Court."
- Moreover, in the chapter on the Courts and Attorney General's Office, Article 132 states that: "The judicial authority is independent; and the President of the Republic insures this independence assisted by the Supreme Judicial Council;"
- The president of the Republic is also the head of the Supreme Judicial Council, according to Article 133: "The Supreme Judicial Council is headed by the President of the Republic; and the law states the way it shall be formed, its mandate and its rules of procedures;"
- Finally, in Title IV that pertains to the Supreme Constitutional Court, Article 141 reads: "The Supreme Constitutional Court consists of at least seven members, one of them shall be named president in a decree passed by the President of the Republic."

The 2012 constitution was tailored to produce an omnipotent presidency that is granted the entire three authorities: legislative, executive and judiciary. The opposition did not take part in drafting that law and rather boycotted the referendum. Meanwhile, a popular uprising was still raging, and many regions had already fallen out of the regime's control. According to lawyer Anwar al-Bounni, "This is the first constitution in the world to be tailored to a president in office. A president writes a constitution to grant himself more powers and declare himself the absolute leader of his State and the sole dictator of his society's destiny. This constitution is only

a means to secure the country's transition from a party's leadership of State and society to a president's leadership of State and society"²⁵.

Al-Bounni would later describe Syria as "the land of impunity and absence of punishment"²⁶. In addition to Article 117 of the 2012 constitution, Syria is not party to the Rome Statute, the founding document of the International Criminal Court, effectively placing the crimes committed in Syria above the reach of the international community, and the United Nations Security Council, which is tasked with delivering the Syrian case to the ICC, is internally divided. Additionally, we can add to this article several exceptional laws that seek to shield the perpetrators of human rights violations and grant them immunity, such as legislative decree no. 14 of the year 1969, which affords protection to security officers from any legal prosecution in regards to any crimes they might commit. Additional legal measures which bear mentioning are exceptional tribunals such as Counterterrorism Court and Military Field Courts which lack the most basic principles of a just trial and due process.

The regime is masterfully carrying out its slogan "Assad or we will burn down the country." This phrase sums up the plan to suppress and humiliate rebellious communities through the devastation, besiegement, starvation, and forceful displacement of its people. The regime has also welcomed invaders with sectarian agendas, to help him fight an already besieged Syrian society, pledging the nation's sovereignty to whoever could help sustain its rule. The fruits of that all-out chaos, have been radical jihadist groups that finalized the plan for the country's ruination.

Having monopolized power and prohibited any form of peaceful political activity for decades, the regime was seasoned enough to deploy the most loyal men and women to pivotal positions of power, who in turn never question its exercise of arbitrary violence and systematic violation of human rights, but rather take part in these practices. Since the spark of the revolution, only four women who held political and diplomatic positions

(25) «أنور البني: الحل وضع سوريا تحت الوصاية الدولية»، صحيفة العرب، 11/9/2016
<http://www.alarab.co.uk/?id=77307>

(26) أنور البني، «سوريا: أرض الإفلات من العقاب»، المركز السوري للدراسات والأبحاث القانونية، 22 شباط 2016.

<http://www.sl-center.org/news/48?language=arabic>

have defected from the regime: The first defection was on July 24th, 2012, when Syria's ambassador to Cyprus Lamya al-Harriri declared her defection. The second occurred after three days, when MP Ikhlas Badawi declared her defection and urged her colleagues to do the same. Badawi also urged the international community to interfere before more massacres take place²⁷. The third defection was declared by Huda Orfali, the diplomatic attaché in the Syrian embassy in China, on November 19th, 2012²⁸. The last defection was by diplomat Lama Iskandar, who issued a statement declaring her defection from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on June 26th, 2013. In her defection statement, Iskandar said:

"As part of the free people of Syria, and given my deep belief in the humanity of Syrians and in their right to live in a democratic, civil and free state, I announce my defection from the murderous and bloody Assad regime, and that I join the great Syrian revolution. I condemn and renounce the ruling criminal gang and underscore my continuous belonging to the Syrian entity that I hope to serve and preserve. I raise my voice and address the free world and ask them to consider Syria carefully: we are being murdered in the streets, our houses remain wreckages, and our children are petrified to look at the sky. Assad's terroristic machine does not differentiate between an armed man and a child, between a family or a group of rebels. I call upon your love for an honorable life, your love for your children and your support for your modern national histories: stand with us to stop the ongoing massacre. Stand with us against the punishment Assad has inflicted upon us for demanding dignity, freedom and a new Syria built around institutions and equal citizenship"²⁹.

The remaining women who serve in the regime's ranks, as diplomats, ministers, or MPs, opted to continue being instruments of violence and violation by the authorities, just like their male peers.

(27) «الانشقاقات إبان ثورة سوريا»، الجزيرة. نت، 24 / 6 / 2012.

أهم-الانشقاقات-إبان-ثورة-سوريا/2012/6/24/reportsandinterviews/ <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2012/6/24/reportsandinterviews/>

(28) «لقاء مع هدى أورفلي، الملاحق في السفارة السورية في الصين»، 19 / 11 / 2012:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUg_WyHdH4k

(29) «بيان انشقاق لمى إسكندر أحمد وهيثم حميدان وتجمع دبلوماسيون من أجل دولة ديمقراطية»، موقع

كلنا شركاء في الوطن، 26 / 6 / 2013:

<http://all4syria.info/Archive/87814>

Before shedding some light on women's political participation in this extremely critical juncture of the Syrian conflict, we first ought to look at their growing participation in the revolution since the beginning in March 2011, and what shifts women's roles have undergone at every stage of the conflict through today.

Part One:

Women's Political Participation During the Revolution

Women have participated in the popular revolution, alongside men, and their roles have developed as the regime increased the levels of violence and oppression with which it has confronted the peaceful protest movement.

Some women have led protests³⁰, alone or alongside men³¹. In many cases, women have organized and went on all-women protests³². In some areas, especially places that are conservative, a patronizing trend emerged as women revolutionaries were given mandatory male protection. They were reduced to being essentially and almost entirely women, and happened to be surrounded by male protesters³³, forced to walk behind them³⁴, segregated from men³⁵, or simply prohibited from participating³⁶. There were, however, many rebellious women who refused that patronizing protection and insisted that they too share ownership of the revolution. In

(30) شبكة أو غاريت، «حمص حي البيضاء الفنانة فدوى سليمان تقود المظاهرات ثالث أيام العيد 8 / 11 / 2011»: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9x7-eMaybl>

(31) تنسيقية حي الخالدية، «حمص حي الخالدية مظاهرة رائعة بقيادة الساروت والفنانة فدوى سليمان 7 / 12 / 2011»: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nT329nbsVXs>

(32) جولان حاجي، إلى أن قامت الحرب: نساء في الثورة السورية، دار رياض الريس للكتب والنشر، بيروت 2016، ص 49 (داريا) وص 73 (الزبداني).

(33) المصدر السابق، ص 48.

(34) المصدر السابق، ص 75.

(35) المصدر السابق، ص 53.

(36) المصدر السابق، ص 48.

Darayya for instance, all of those cases occurred, including those of women walking side by side with men. A revolutionary woman from Darayya commented: "The majority of the people of Darayya stood against women-only protests, since the regime does not fear God and its ruthlessness knows no bounds. While they considered the detention of men a Medal of Honor, they believed that the detention of women is a sign of disgrace and dishonor, due to the likability of rape that might encumber families and break their backs [...] but we forced our determination and insisted to prove ourselves"³⁷.

From the start of the revolution, threats of rape have been a major tactic of the regime's oppressive war. A revolutionary woman from Jisrin, a Damascus suburb, narrated that³⁸ "when the regime's army raided the Eastern Ghouta, we heard that officers did not want to walk on land but rather on the bodies of the dead. They threatened to rape women if people do not hand over the terrorists." Another revolutionary woman tells the story of Hiba, who was thrown in the security bus to be taken to the branch, and how she witnessed a security private harassing another girl who was crying and begging them to not rape her. The private then pinched her leg and pulled her from her hair, before the rest of the privates began slapping her: "The privates went even more berserk when they learned that she is from Homs, and they began to taunt her with their horrifying rape fantasies"³⁹.

At the same time, the media and many opposition figures portrayed women as voiceless victims, or as mothers of martyrs or detainees. Rarely did they focus on their agency and revolutionary struggle. In a conference held in Stockholm between 17-20 February 2013, about "the influence of women and their roles in Syria after the fall of the authoritative regime," George Sabra said, "The woman is the sister, the mother and the wife..." On the other hand, many security officers were trying to reduce women's engagement in the revolution to romantic reasons. "Woe unto you, Shehwaro! You seem to be in love with a Sunni man," activist Marcell Shehwaro recalls her interrogation, and what the officer said to her. She added: "That was humiliating, and in fact sums up their indecent sectarian

(37) المصدر السابق.

(38) المصدر السابق، ص 104.

(39) المصدر السابق، ص 170-181.

and masculine mentality [...] there are women in the liberated areas who fiercely struggle to work in medical aid on the frontlines! Others are challenging men's monopoly over the opportunities of working in the public arena, and they run schools and community centers. All that stubbornness and insistence to participate does not only stem from the fact that we are an integral component of this country and that we are subject to whatever comes of it... No. We were also afraid that, with time, this would be labeled as a male revolution and consequently we will not have a role in the future of Syria"⁴⁰. When asked about his opinion of the political participation of Kurdish women and whether the support they receive is a result of taking up weapons and engaging in the struggle, one of the respondents replied: "This is a transformation in the nature of women." This opinion intersects with the prevailing view that women's role should be limited to protesting, medical and humanitarian aid, documentation and media reporting, artistic and mobilizational writing, peacemaking, etc; any activity but fighting.

Alma Shahoud was one of the women revolutionaries who witnessed the whole transformation of the revolution from the peaceful protests into armed conflict. In addition to her participation in the protest movement and then in relief work, she first helped smuggle ammunition to the rebels, before she joined them and led a brigade. She was nicknamed "The Free Woman", and her group came to be known as "The Free Women group"⁴¹. On January 10th, 2013, another all-women brigade was formed: Khawla Bint al-Azwar Paramedical Brigade. According to its first statement, the brigade's aim was "protecting ourselves and our field hospitals"⁴². Some of those women smuggled weapons to the rebels. Safa', a former detainee, describes one of the Khawla Brigade's members, "who was recently released from the Military Security with recent bruises on her wrists, and many burns on her body due to electricity torture, just because she helped smuggle weapons"⁴³.

(40) مرسيل شحوارو، «جَوَا الطوق»، مدونة لمحات، 23/3/2016:

http://www.marcellita.com/2016/03/blog-post_23.html

(41) فادي بعاج، «ألما شحوود وتحولات الإنسان من الزهور إلى السلاح»، صحيفة العرب، 6/12/2015: <http://www.alarab.co.uk/?id=55244>

(42) «تشكيل كتيبة خولة بنت الأزور في اللاذقية 10/1/2013»: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnyEvEPkjMU>

(43) جولان حاجي، مصدر سابق، ص 181.

Women's Role in Decision-Making: The Case of Coordination-Committees

As the peaceful protests developed and spread, both women and men took part in the coordination-committees⁴⁴, whose function was preparing the banners, social media coverage, and food and water supplies. The coordination-committees were considered the first building blocks of the peaceful social and political structure of the revolution. Given the expected systematic violence of the regime, their activities were secret. The role of women in decision making processes within the coordination-committees varied between regions. For instance, more than 50% of Latakia's coordination-committee members (founded in April 2011) were women. Between 2011 and 2014, Latakia's coordination-committee had three offices, medical, relief and media, and each office had two branches, one in Syria and another outside Syria, and four of these six offices were held by women activists. Moreover, many coordination-committees were founded by women revolutionaries, and some were secular and democratic while others had Islamist leanings. Women coordination-committees spread quickly after October 2012 in many Syrian regions: The Coordination-Committee of Salamiya Women, Darayya Women Assembly, The Women Revolutionaries of Free Tal, A Grain of Wheat (also in Tal, Damascus Countryside), The Coordination-Committee of Free Douma's Women (which is considered the largest women coordination-committees), and finally Damascus Daughters, which was formed after the merger of Damascus Free Women and Qasioun Free Women. The roles of these female committees varied and followed the transformations of the conflict and the necessities dictated by it: relief, media, medical aid, organization, documentation, and so on.

The usage of the term *hara'er* [a patronizing plural of "free woman"] in some committees' names reflected the religious background, while the term

(44) Following the spark of the revolution in March 2011, innovative organizational bodies started to emerge around April called coordination-committees. They spread in most of the cities and towns that witnessed protests, each consisting of small groups of male and female youth, all over Syria, who used to meet, plan, organize and mobilize the protesters, securing logistical support for them and framing their main political orientation and demands, trying as much as possible to represent the rebellious masses away from any ideology. For more: <http://arabic.babelmed.net/societe/36-generale-culture/589-2012-06-20-22-33-47.html>

tha'erat [revolutionary women] signified a secular background. A member of Women Revolutionaries of Free Tal recalled what happened in her town: "At some point we noticed that an Islamist trend was emerging, as black flags were being raised in the protests. We prepared huge banners that read "Sovereignty is the people's not the *sharia's*" and "No military. No clerics. We want radiant citizenship." We held those banners and walked around the cities with them. Then we hanged them close to Tal's Great Mosque. In the next day, an extremist statement appeared on al-Jazeera news channel denouncing "what the foolish among us have done." After that incident we started to distinguish ourselves as a secular group"⁴⁵.

The most widely known Facebook page dedicated to the Syrian Revolution was one of the conservative platforms that caused many controversies because of the names of Fridays that its administrators used to choose on behalf of the revolutionaries. On May 13th, 2011, the page named the following Friday "the *Hara'er* of Syria Friday." Many had doubts about the voting results. Later in 2013, Local Coordination Committees (LCC, or the Committees)⁴⁶ issued a statement titled "Our Friday: The Syria's Revolutionary Women Friday" that clearly stated: "This is not the first time that the Friday names options cause dispute and division. The malfunction of the mechanism of naming our Fridays continues to lead to miserable and contradictory names. Some of those names conflict with the genuine principles of the revolution. Although we, the local Coordination Committees and many other revolutionary entities, often overlook these pitiful names in order to protect our unity, and believe that certain developments and events are worth being considered in the naming process. We chose to honor Syrian women on International Women's Day, which falls on this Friday March 8th, 2013. We invite activists to participate in our protests and revolutionary activities under the name Friday of Syria's Revolutionary Women"⁴⁷.

(45) جولان حاجي، مرجع سابق، ص 113.

(46) One of the main gatherings of the coordination-committees, Local Coordination Committees (LCC) was a political and media organizational body that had branches in most of the Syrian regions, and they played an important role in covering the news and representing the revolution both in media and in the opposition institution. For more information: <http://www.lccsyria.org>

(47) «جمعتنا.. جمعة المرأة السورية الثائرة»، بيان لجان التنسيق المحلية، 6/3/2013: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/-المرأة-السورية-جمعتنا-جمعة-سوريا/المنسق-المحلية-في-سوريا/>

According to *al-Maany* dictionary, "*Hara'er* [free women] is the plural of *hurra* [...] and also of *hareer* [silk] which is a thin thread produced by silkworms." Sahar Mandour linked the two meanings in her discussion of the female body as a tool in times of conflicts over which women have no claim of ownership. She uses an example from the Syrian revolution: "The argument that defends the female body only to tighten the closure of this circle. It uses the description of women as *hara'er*, which is the plural of both *hurra* and *hareer*. And while *hareer* has only one plural that is *hara'er*, *hurra* has another plural form which is *hurrat*, which seems clearer that *hara'er* in terms of freedom-seeking. But society did not choose *hurrat*. Clerics prefer *hara'er*, an adjective that is used in the interpretation of a religious text about the non-slave women (the texts prohibits her marriage). So she is *hurra* in this sense. People lean to the meaning of *hara'er* so smoothly and softly as if they touch silk. This smooth softness is lacking if they were to face the implications of women's struggle towards freedom, which is critical and perilous"⁴⁸.

The prominent human rights activist and the co-founder of LCC, Razan Zaitouneh, recounts⁴⁹ a conversation she had with an LCC activist, who "regretfully mentions that the reputation of LLC in his town is not good, as there are people who say 'LCC is led by women,' which is undermining the position of its activists in front of the people there. It is true that women's roles were distinguished, but only one Committee is led by a woman, which is natural since it is Darayya's Women Assembly." Zaitouneh continues, "We distributed surveys to the LCC committees about the numbers of female members among their activists. Only 16 Committee responded, and the result speaks for itself [...] all the rest of the Committees have no female members at all. The ones that had more than 4 members were those of Shahba, Jdeidat Artouz, Hanano, Misyaf, Hasakeh, and Inkhel! LCCs with 2-4 female activists were those of Ariha, Atareb and Al-Sanamayn, while those with 1-2 female activists were Kafrouma and Zabadani. The rest: zero women."

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(48) سحر مندور، «الاعتصاب الحربي» والنكاح الحلال: هذه ليست قضية استغلال، هذه مسألة عرض وطلب»، مجلة بدايات، العددان 3-4 خريف 2012 - شتاء 2013:

<http://www.bidayatmag.com/node/216>

(49) رزان زيتونة، «المرأة في لجان التنسيق: المبني للمجهول»، مجلة طلوعنا عالحرية، 6/3/2013: <http://www.freedomraise.net/المرأة-في-لجان-التنسيق-المبني-للمجهول/>

Despite the fact that the revolution was accumulated with credit to the efforts of women and men alike, the abovementioned survey drew Razan Zaitouneh's attention to what was expressed by male activists about the role of female activists in some Committees. It indicates the typical roles assigned to women, despite their various and diverse activities. This is often justified by comments of the sort of "women's inclinations are different than men's," so they better do what men leave behind or what requires a "feminine touch".

In the Ariha Committee, women activists printed flyers, wrote banners and reported to media. In Jdeidat Artouz, they organized painting events for children and produced different sorts of homemade artisanship. In Inkhel, women made flags, wrote banners, distributed food baskets, cooked for Free Syrian Army fighters, and cared for the injured. They even took very dangerous risks such as hiding wanted activists and helping them escape, not to mention smuggling arms to defected soldiers. In Kafarouma, the Committee representative said, "Women effectively participated during the protests phase, and they stood between the army and the protesters to prevent their detention. Today they play the role of the unknown soldier, as they cook for the rebels and undertake the rest of their domestic tasks, in addition to their participation and rescuing the injured and participate in paramedical work."

One Committee representative clearly states the reason behind women's exclusion: the conservative nature of the communities in some areas, such as the Eastern Ghouta of Damascus. The representative of Hammouriah's Coordination-Committee added: "Women play a crucial role in the revolutionary movement. But their activities are limited to the medical and education sectors. Women are considered better suited to these fields." Al-Sanamayn Coordination-Committee representative went on to say that women themselves prefer to restrict themselves to socially acceptable forms of activity. Tseil's Coordination-Committee's representative mentioned the security concerns as another reason.

Despite all the activities undertaken by women, whether in relief, media, documentation, and even field work, such as cooking for rebels and smuggling weapons, they remain overshadowed. Women's voices are rarely heard in the coordination-committees, whether to suggest an activity or to discuss an issue or simply take part in the heated debates that regularly erupt, Zaitouneh adds. She wonders how their work is not considered as

revolutionary activity: "Or is their work okay as long as it is not organized and public?" Zaitouneh admits that "after two years of my involvement in the Committee, I still have not met any of these female activists. In other words, male activists did not introduce any of them and did not give them an opportunity to participate. The Committees did not ask about them either." She concludes her article: "The Committees must take pride in the presence of women in their decision-making positions. But that does not make them a role model, since hundreds of women activists are risking everything and then are only excluded from all the organizational frameworks, from the coordination-committees to the local councils. It is strange how people trust women to stand as a barrier between them and the security forces during a protest, or trust them to hide wanted activists or to rescue an injured one. And then do not trust them to participate in making a future for their children."

The significance of the survey and its results was the manifest conclusion that, despite women's defiance and objection to restrictions imposed by the masculine social culture, and despite their participation in the revolution and their involvement in dangerous activities, they were still excluded from decision-making positions such as representation of coordination-committees. The fact that some reached decision-making positions has to do with their strong personalities that imposed themselves, and with their civil activism prior to the revolution, which had been recognized and conceded by local communities. However, the majority of women were limited to typical roles that, while significant, were carefully assigned to them, such as banner preparation, medical relief, distribution of food baskets, and cooking for the rebels.

It is clear that without intervention by truly democratic elites and political parties, as well as civil society organizations - whereby they raise awareness about the necessity of women's participation in organizational political structures, it would be difficult to end the state of oppression and exclusion that is imposed by society, and which denies women access to decision-making positions. We are witnessing a revolutionary juncture that necessitates that. Yet, the political forces that were taken by surprise at the revolution chose to lead from above, and did not invest in the popular base that was available to them in the revolutionary climate. Those elites never

had access to such popular bases during the rule of Assad the Father or the Son, since the repressive regime did not allow them breathing room, let alone space to build a popular base.

Democratic political forces did not invest in the roles played by revolutionary women, and they never considered attracting them to organized political activity. These women had already cultivated close relations with local communities, especially with their active relief role. On the other hand, Salafists and other Islamist parties utilized relief work and the related women's role to garner popularity in many Syrian regions, and to enjoy a stature they had never dreamed of having or accessing.

Laws are considered tools of elevating societies in general, and male-dominant societies in particular. Therefore, without amending the repressive laws that govern women's lives, achieving justice and gender equality will remain impossible, and the glass ceiling that hinders them from assuming leadership positions will remain unshattered.

Women in the Core Body of Establishment and Participation: The Case of Local Coordination Committees

Local Coordination-Committees are a union of local coordination-committees active across the governorates, cities and towns, which was formed during the revolution and aimed at coordinating political positions, media reporting and ground mobilization. According to the former representative of LCC in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the number of the Committees reached 80-100 between 2012 and 2014. **Women had a prominent and essential role in those Committees, and we can consider their participation both revolutionary and democratic. In this sense, they represented a role model: qualified women were co-founders, decisions were made democratically, women took part in the decision-making process, legitimacy stemmed from the community, principles were not separate from practices, the work was institutionalized, and the political spectrum was generally secular-leaning⁵⁰.**

(50) Both terms «secular» and «nearly secular» were used to describe the LCC, despite the fact that the word «secular» was not mentioned in any of the LCC view of Syria's political future. For more: <http://www.lccsyria.org/958>

A former spokeswoman of the LCC told me that four out of eight members of their Executive Bureau are women. This bureau is concerned with political projection and drafting statements. She added: "The LCC is a large assembly of coordination-committees that function in different Syrian regions, each choosing two representatives in the General Chamber to discuss all of LCC policies. A democratic election is held among these members for the Media Bureau, Executive Bureau, Revolutionary Bureau, Documentation Bureau and Finance Bureau. The founder is Razan Zaitounah, a prominent revolutionary figure and human rights activist and, before all of that, a woman; the LCC Arabic spokesperson is a woman; and so is the English spokesperson; and finally, the chief of LCC's *Rising For Freedom* magazine is a woman. All decisions are made democratically, and the Committees' general tendencies are considered as generally secular. The LCC was one of the most credible media sources between 2011 and 2013." An activist from Raqqa Media Bureau had this to say: "The LCC's task was maintaining the revolutionary secular spirit, which had once prevailed in the beginning of the revolution."

In Douma, Eastern Ghouta, which is controlled by Jaysh al-Islam, an unknown armed group raided the Violation Documentation Center (VDC) on December 9th, 2013 and kidnapped its manager Razan Zaitounah, her husband Wael Hmadeh, in addition to their fellow activists Samira al-Khalil and Nazem Hammadi. Two months prior to that incident, Razan had received "serious death threats by a well-known brigade in the Eastern Ghouta, warning her to leave Duma within a time-limit of three days," according to VDC's statement. The statement also refers to the fact that "some brigades tried to shirk the moral and legal responsibilities and refrained from looking for the perpetrators and delivering them to justice before returning the kidnapped to their homes. Some of the brigades did not lift a finger in this regard." The statement added: "this delay in revealing the identity of the perpetrators is a dangerous indicator that places the credibility of all the brigades on the line, especially after they denied any involvement in the kidnapping and promised to cooperate and offer full support"⁵¹.

(51) مركز توثيق الانتهاكات في سوريا، «بيان ثالث بخصوص اختطاف المحامية والناشطة رزان زيتونة وزملائها»:

<http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/ar/reports/1390232185#.WAMoUCTz6ro>

The leader, Jaysh al-Islam Zahran Alloush, declared in a press conference in August of 2014 that an investigation committee was formed to delve into the issue. Zahran wondered "why Muslim women are being ignored? We support the investigation in Razan's issue but she is not the only kidnapped one person"⁵². He also called for preparing lists of the names of other kidnapped women.

However, writer and researcher Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Samira al-Khalil's husband and a friend of the three other kidnapped activists, published an article in April 2015⁵³ where he mentioned several facts and presumptions that allude to his role in the kidnapping, given that nothing was concluded from the committee Alloush had formed. Many journals and newspapers discussed al-Haj Saleh's accusations and evidences, such as *Enab Baladi*⁵⁴ and an *al-Modon*⁵⁵. Moreover, dozens of solidarity campaigns, statements and solidarity sit-ins were organized by civil society activists and organizations, in addition to legal persons from around the world, which all demanded the release of the kidnapped activists and the liberation of all forcibly disappeared others. The slogan "He who kidnaps a revolutionary is a traitor", was extensively used on social media and graffitied on many walls inside Syria, including Eastern Ghouta⁵⁶.

The significance of the Committees decreased with time due to increased militarization. The kidnapping of Zaitouneh, al-Khalil, Hmadeh and al-Hammadi was a tremendous tribulation to their activism in Syria. The Committees' former representative in the National Coalition said: "This setback was not a matter of numbers, but matter of qualified people within

(52) الغوطة نيوز «ما هو مصير رزان زيتونة؟ الجواب من زهران علوش»:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wso41WLB6Gw>

(53) ياسين الحاج صالح، «لماذا زهران علوش هو المتهم»، موقع الجمهورية، 22/4/2015:

<http://aljumhuriya.net/33430>

(54) محمد رشدي شربجي، «الانتهاكات في عيون الإعلام البديل: هل من تحيز؟»، جريدة عنب بلدي،

2016/5/8:

<http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/78298>

(55) علي العبدالله، «عام على جريمة الاختطاف»، جريدة المدن، 10/12/2014:

<http://www.almodon.com/print/cba4e9c4-93b6-41ce-acd9-46dfec8074c5/a8e4abb1-5021-47b8-af43-d7feda0beb89>

(56) «أهالي مخطوفو دوما: سندافع عن أحبائنا بكل قوانا ولن نتوقف»، حكاية ما انحكت، 20/12/2014:

<http://www.syriauntold.com/ar/2014/12/%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86>

the coordination-committee, since most of its activists left, were killed, migrated or engaged in violent action.” He added: “The environment was not suitable for renewed capacity building. The Committees were not only targeted by the regime but also by some armed opposition factions.

The Committees maintained their independent political positions, and were represented in the Syrian National Council. On May 17th, 2012, the Committees issued a statement that accused the Council of “betraying the spirit and the demands of the revolution.” The statement read: “After our decision to boycott the Council’s activities during the last two months, and most recently, the General Secretariat meeting in Rome which ended up electing Burhan Ghalioun, we find Council’s continuous deterioration another motive to take further measures. We will initially suspend our membership, and might be led to withdrawing it if the mistakes are not reviewed and the demands we deem necessary are not addressed.” The Committees’ statement pointed to the Council’s political paralysis, the total absence of any harmony between its view and the revolutionary movement’s view, and the appropriation of decisions by some influential executives, which had recently led to extending Ghalioun’s term for the third time.” The statement expressed the Committees’ regret “over the Council’s recent development, which reflects the massive distance between the Syrian opposition and revolution’s spirits, demands and civil state line it hopes for, including the principles of transparency and transition of power”⁵⁷.

On November, 9th 2012 the LCC officially withdrew from the National Council, accusing it of falling under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. The LCC spokeswoman denounced the council’s failure to elect any women for membership in the General Secretariat⁵⁸. Then the Committees participated in establishing the National Coalition, only to suspend their membership later on in October 2014. Finally, on May, 31st, 2015, they issued an open letter to the Coalition in which they addressed the reasons behind their withdrawal:

(57) «لجان التنسيق المحلية تهدد بالانسحاب من المجلس الوطني السوري»، جريدة الجمهورية، 17 / 5 / 2012: <http://www.aljournhouria.com>

(58) «لجان التنسيق المحلية»، مركز كارنغي للشرق الأوسط. <http://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50432>

"The mechanisms of the Coalition's function did not take an institutional direction, but rather depended on fronts and blocs that had ties with external actors and foreign powers, which has been the biggest reason behind the internal discord on personal aims and interests by some Coalition's members [...] the internal discord is shameful, and has no relevance to political or revolutionary positions [...] some Coalition members are seeking personal ambitions that are often pathological [...] It was necessary for us, having exhausted all our hopes of positive change, to take this step and to continue our modest activities outside of the coalition"⁵⁹.

The exacerbated systematic exclusion of women revolutionaries targeted at the end Razan Zeitounh and Samira al-Khalil, alongside their fellow activists Wael and Nazem. That has been an exclusion of brave voices that insisted on living among the people and sharing all sorts of coercion, shelling, hunger, and besiegement that the regime inflicted upon the Eastern Ghouta. Razan and Samira, who have long defended freedom and human rights, chose the Eastern Ghouta that were supposedly "liberated" from dictatorship. And yet, they were kidnapped by the rebellion's tradesmen and warlords: Jaysh al-Islam and their likes. Razan had documented the violations committed by armed opposition just like she had documented those committed by the regime. She had also witnessed the chemical massacre perpetrated by the regime, after which the international community exchanged the aspirations of the Syrian people with a deal with the regime. The regime gave up its chemical arsenal and was granted an international license to continue killing its people with the rest of its weapons.

As Yassin al-Haj Saleh puts it⁶⁰:

"We stand witness to two free women, taking initiative to work in the public sphere within a conservative environment, harboring all due respect to this environment, yet without hiding their outward appearances as two liberal women, having an appearance that shapes their identities and their roles as representatives of an alternative public project. This poses a challenge to a patriarchal authority that loses its core influence if women

(59) «لجان التنسيق المحلية تنسحب من الائتلاف السوري المعارض»، عربي 21، 2015/8/2، <http://arabi21.com/story/848997/لجان-التنسيق-تنسحب-من-الائتلاف-السوري-المعارض>

(60) ياسين الحاج صالح، «سميرة ورزان: وقائع أسطورة معاصرة»، جريدة الحياة 2 كانون الأول 2014. <http://www.alhayat.com/Opinion/Writers/6005462/سميرة-ورزان-وقائع-أسطورة-معاصرة>

were not subjugated to it.”

We can set the date of kidnapping Razan and Samira as a turning point in the revolution's periodization. That kidnapping has been a premeditated murder of struggling secular voices whose opposition to the Syrian regime is deeply rooted. That political forces did not mobilize to focus on that crime and to demand the release of the kidnapped activists, and that Jaysh al-Islam's Muhammad Alloush was later appointed as the chief negotiator in Geneva 3, were both but a part of faulty political alliances between some opposition forces and Salafist groups that committed numerous crimes and violations continued the suppression of Syrian communities that the regime had initiated.

Women Near-Absent From Local Councils

Local councils are civil entities present in all areas out of the regime's control. They are run by citizens and responsible for providing services for civilians, such as humanitarian and medical aid⁶¹.

The exclusion of women from local councils gradually surfaced. In October 2012, for instance, the percentage of female members in the Local Council of Idleb was 25% (5 out of 20 members). According to a study conducted by *Omran for Strategic Studies* between January and May 2016 on 105 local councils (out of 427 in all Syria), the percentage of female members is only 2%⁶².

Economist Omar Aziz (1949-2013) had initiated the idea of local councils in Syria near the end of 2011⁶³ in an attempt to provide a means of governance for the revolution to prevent its complete deterioration to militarism. Aziz's drafts considered that

(61) تعريف المجالس المحلية وأهداف عملها:

<http://www.etilaf.org/html/مكونات-الاتلاف/المجالس-المحلية-السورية>

(62) مركز عمران للدراسات الاستراتيجية «الدور الإداري والخدمي للمجالس المحلية في المرحلة الحالية والانتقالية - قراءة تحليلية في نتائج استطلاع رأي» - تاريخ الإصدار 5 آب 2016.

الأبحاث/ أوراق- بحثية/ قراءة- تحليلية- في- الدور- الإداري- والخدمي- للمجالس- المحلية- في- المرحلة- الحالية- والانتقالية
<https://www.omrandirasat.org/html/للمجالس-المحلية-في-المرحلة-الحالية-والانتقالية>

(63) عمر عزيز، «الأوراق التأسيسية لفكرة المجالس المحلية»، أواخر 2011:

https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=143690742461532

“it is clear that, as long as the social groups are independent from authority, the revolution would establish its social depth, and thus protect itself and its [local] communities from further oppression by the authority. It would also be protecting itself and its communities from a moral pitfall, whereby arms could take the revolution and the community hostages. Integrating the revolution into public life is therefore the indispensable condition for its survival until the regime vanishes. This requires flexible social entities that work on integrating the revolution into the people's everyday lives. Past experiences have carried different names of such novel institution. We shall call them in this paper ‘the local councils.’”

Aziz identified the form, structure, sphere and finance of those councils, and established with his fellow activists the first local council in Barzeh, Damascus. Aziz was later arrested at his house in Damascus on October 20th, 2012, and the Local Coordination Committees announced his death in Adra Prison on February 17th, 2013.

A report by *Omran for Strategic Studies* would later consider the local councils as extensions of the coordination-committees: “The councils began to gain legitimacy derived from their representation of the people and their adoption of their discourse.” Their roles were extended to cover not only the provision of civil services for people living outside the grasp of the regime, but they “gradually grew and gained a political nature”⁶⁴. The report points out that there were 950 local councils that began to take shape in 2012 by the time of writing the report, including the local councils of areas under the control of the regime or of ISIS.

A civil activist in Daraa who currently works in the Tamkeen project narrated how the mission moved from the coordination-committees to the local councils: “The coordination-committees were one of the revolution's most important components. Initially, their activities were limited to peaceful action and relief work. Following the start of armed rebellion, LCC structures began to change, and we started to hear about media offices that work in military reporting, as well as documentation committees specialized in documenting the regime's crimes. Many defections occurred among the

(64) مركز عمران للدراسات الاستراتيجية – «المجالس المحلية: كمون يتجاوز تقديم الخدمات»، 26 آذار 2015 <https://www.omrandirasat.org/الأبحاث/أوراق-بحثية/المجالس-المحلية-كمون-يتجاوز-تقديم-الخدمات/>

coordination-committees activists, due to disputes over the militarization of the revolution. After the intensification of regime violence, and the martyrdom, detention or migration of many activists, both men and women, in addition to the emergence of specialization, the coordination-committees slowly faded away. Their members joined the relief workers and field hospitals, which later became independent entities. After the liberation of several towns and villages, councils of community leaders and activists were formed to administer their affairs. These had different titles: Village council, tribal council, consultation council, and eventually local councils. Their establishment was improvised, as was that of coordination-committees. Then, the opposition interim government was formed, whose Ministry of Local Governance established a governorate council that promoted the concept of local councils and instituted their structures in cities and towns. It also offered some financial support which had been previously supplied by expats and well-off residents."

Concerning the representation of women within Daraa's local councils, there were only 3 women in 2014 in 136 local councils, and they were members of the Local Council of Tafas. The former respondent added: "Due to social traditions and customs, these local councils are not likely to have women members. There is also some fear of armed groups to which many local councils are implicitly tied. As for the southern area in the same year, there was only two women members, one in the Family Affairs Bureau of the Local Council of al-Jiza and another in the Education Bureau of the Local Council of Nawa." When asked about the religious committees and their influence over the local councils, the same respondents replied, "Religious men are represented in some councils, and religious committees either emanate from the council or are independent from it. But in either case they are implicitly influential in the decisions making," He added, "There is no single side controlling the local councils. Those who have the biggest control are those who provide it with the greatest amount of financial support." Another respondent from the southern region in Daraa, who is a lawyer and an activist concerned with women's issues and also a former member of a local council, talked about the ties between the local councils, the armed factions and the religious committees: "The local councils are affiliated with the governorate council, and they cooperate with the armed opposition forces and with Dar al-Adl court, which is mainly dominated by Ahl Horan

Association that has undeclared ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. The most powerful of those is Dar al-Adl court, which is backed by the brigades and the Free Syrian Army.” He added: “Without the brigades, the local councils cannot make any decisions.”

Following the breakdown of the state institutions, including the judiciary ones, and thus the absence of any legal reference and the multiplicity of ruling parties, religious courts of the sort of Dar al-Adl took over and spread in the liberated areas.

Women representation in the local councils is also lacking in the local councils of cities like Aleppo, Salamiya and Darayya, in addition to those of the villages of Jabal Zawiya, Salqin and Atareb. As the conflict, they gradually disappeared, as shown by the following table about the local council of Idleb:

The Local Council of Idleb exemplifies the gradual diminishing of women			
Percentage	No. of members	No. of women	Date
25%	5	20	October 2012
10.34%	3	29	February 2013
-	0	25	July 2014

The Local Council of Zabadani has a different story: in 2014 it consisted of 9 members, none of which were female. During the negotiation with the regime over the besiegement and the ceasefire in the city, 15 ladies from Zabadani demonstrated fearless courage, but their role was completely obfuscated. As one of these ladies explains, “that obfuscation happened in an agreement between us (with the Local Council and the rebels), but they consult us in everything.”

ISIS dissolved the Local council of Ragga when it took over the city and committed brutal crimes to strike terror and horror into the hearts of the people. ISIS deprived women of all basic rights, such as work and education, and it also prevented them from leaving their houses without a *mahram* [a male companion], forcing them to wear loose garments whenever they do so.

In an article titled, "The Coordination Principles of Local Councils in Syria," a group of human rights activists⁶⁵ tackled the challenges facing the work of local councils, such as "competition among them is political, and is aimed at possessing the conditions of public life within the city or town and the imposition of a sole political line, then conditioning the public services upon following that line. These developments have had negative results that may be of long-term impact. If this political competition persists, it threatens the unity of the country and fragments public administration on the national level irreparably. It also obstructs the formation of a national public political sphere that boasts democratic depth, one that guarantees the independence of national determination from regional and international influence, which has unfortunately become the primary determinant in the politically and military development of the revolution."

The activists added: "The direct mission of a local council is to confront the challenges of life preservation and management in the times of revolution, and amidst the destruction caused by the regime. It's not conflicting over the best ruling model to be instituted after the revolution. At any case, the situation requires that the local council always stay open and ready to involve all the components of the local community, including those who did not participate in the revolution, so that Syrians may meet and discuss their public affairs regardless of their opinions and affiliations."

The report by *Omran* center, which was mentioned earlier, provides a vision for how to empower local councils as the legitimate representatives authorized to negotiate on behalf of the local population. That can happen through recognizing them as a focal point in any political presentation, both legally and politically. Faced with such a proposition, we may ask how these local councils can be "legitimate representatives" for local population, in the absence of fair women representation and the suppression of feminist issues, under the patronage of one political color and the tyranny of authoritative military and religious forces, not only over the councils' work and role, but over the whole Syrian land?

(65) ناشطون وحقوقيون، «مبادئ تنسيق عمل المجالس المحلية في سورية»، موقع الجمهورية، 5/6/2015: <http://aljumhuriya.net/7651>

What is often referred to as elections is a much less democratic process: it starts with choosing a small commission that consults with some acting forces on the ground (fighters, civil society, notables, etc.); then a more public commission is appointed, one that is usually traditional in character and doesn't include women; and finally, this commission elects the council members, who are not elected directly by voters. Notably, the NGOs and Western countries (such as Britain for example) that support local council in fact do not care about women's representation or about the structural flaws in these seemingly democratic councils. Those same parties support and call for the representation of women and civil society in the official political process, i.e. the negotiations.

The absence of women in local councils needs a special in-depth analysis that can highlight the local obstacles, in every region and at each stage, which obstruct real and effective participation. Generally, however, we can trace their absences to certain factors:

1- The first of these would be the bloody violence perpetrated by the regime against civilians in the areas that rebelled against its dominion, which was later combined with systematic terroristic practices, such as besiegement, starvation and barrel bombing that does not distinguish between the armed and the unarmed.

2- Later on, Islamist forces backed by regional powers strived to create their own military and ideological formations, by way of gaining influence and domination. These Islamist forces sought to marginalize the military factions formed by Syrian Army defectors, who refused to shoot at peaceful protesters and also refused the practices conflicting with the goals of the revolution. We have since witnessed Islamist ideological brigades, which perfectly conformed to the regime's efforts to prove its secular and counterterrorism discourse. Prior to that, the regime had released hundreds of Salafist detainees who joined the revolutionary movement as Islamist leaders, changed its character and made it more Islamized, and subjugated the local population to their medieval *fatwas*. Most of these leaders are the most powerful and influential when it comes to local councils membership, and they played a major role in sidelining and marginalizing women, while consolidating the conservative culture that perpetuates discrimination and

gender inequality. In his article "Syria's Salafists and the Revolution"⁶⁶, Ali Abdallah takes "the Islamic Syrian Front" as an example of the Salafist-jihadist trend in Syria, and of its intellectual, political and social policy inclinations. He points out that it is a result of the merger of 11 brigades. On January 17th 2012, the Islamic Front released a charter that explains its political and social objectives⁶⁷. In its fourth chapter, "The Relationship between the components of the Syrian Society," the charter describes the relationship of women and men as complementary, stressing that the role of women must be based on *sharia* and its broad purposes. It also stresses the Front's rejection of the role of the West in Westernizing the role of women and deviating it from the Islamic principles. Moreover, the charter refers to Islam as "the religion of the State, [and] the primary and only source of legislation, and we will work with all legitimate means to make sure that no laws are enacted in the country that defy Islamic law."

3- The hegemony of extremist jihadist forces over Syrian regions, and the spread of their religious committees, led to the absence of law, more exclusion of women from public life, and to restrictions on women's rights to work, seek education, as well as freedom of mobility and attire. Journalist Zaina Erhaim talks about the new dictatorships and the restrictions imposed on the women's movement in the liberated parts of Aleppo, where she is forced to wear niqab, and to accompany a male attendant while passing through checkpoints "As an independent person, I need to be divided into two halves and to leave one behind me... I have to find a guy, any guy, to talk to me and to be one of his harem. Because I am a *hurma*, and I need to produce a man at every checkpoint. Ever since our sexist society has been weaponized, and its traditions and customs have received ammunition and bullets, I have now two brothers, three uncles, a cousin and two husbands." She also talks about female activists who married activists "they met during the revolution and on its frontlines, and now they are forced to stay at home or to travel to Turkey, fleeing what brought them together in the first place! The revolution, that is."⁶⁸

(66) علي عبدالله، «سلفيو سوريا والثورة»، موقع الجمهورية، 12/12/2013:

<http://aljumhuriya.net/22395>

(67) ميثاق الجبهة الإسلامية، 17/1/2012:

<http://archive.org/download/Mithaq/Mithaq.pdf>

(68) زينة ارحيم، «كريمته الحرمه تتنصر على زينة الصحفية بفارق شريط حدودي»، مدونة زينة ارحيم،

Jihadist authorities imposed strict dress codes on women. For instance, the courthouse of Al-Fateh Preaching and Awkaf, which is one of institutions of Jaish Al-Fateh (Army of Conquest), issued on December 14th, 2015 a call for the residents of Idleb, which read: "The male custodian of any sister who does not comply with the religiously legitimate dress code identified by Al-Fateh Preaching and Awkaf, will be held accountable and tried. This decree will be applicable in the streets and public markets. The criteria of the Islamic veil: loose, long, devoid of decorations and black- or brown-colored"⁶⁹. They did not spare the walls either. In Saraqib, Idleb they wrote slogans of the sort of "Democracy is infidelity," "Secularism is godlessness," and on the walls of Douma they sprayed "Your makeup and perfume delayed our victory," and a sign on the road between Atareb and Urum al-Kubra (in Aleppo suburbs) reads: "Beware of seculars."

4- The interim government, with its two constituent cabinets, is responsible for the exclusion of women and the ignoring of women's causes. It is symbolically the source of legitimacy of local councils, and one of their primary donors, and it communicates with many of their members despite the fact that it does not have a real impact on the ground. It could have played an important role by:

- Raising awareness among local populations and community leaders, in every region they communicate with and provide support for, about the dangers of excluding half the society and not having it represented in the councils.
- Encouraging the councils to provide qualified women with equal opportunities to exercise an active role and be fairly represented, such as allocating extra funds for councils which have greater women representation among their members, thus enabling local women leaders to access decision-making positions.
- Adopting the quota system as a temporary positive discriminatory measure, to enable female activists to be members of local councils,

:2014 /9 /1

<http://zaina-erhaim.com/?p=1546>

(69) «قرار غريب من 'جيش الفتح' يقضي بلباس مخصص للنساء في مناطق سيطرته»، شبكة سوريا مباشر، :2015 /12 /13

<http://slnews.co/?p=36046>

and encouraging joint directorship by a man and a woman.

- Empowering local women through workshops held by the ministry, or through civil society organizations.

5- Women have undoubtedly shouldered a multiplied burden under the armed conflict, and many have looked upon their participation in the local councils as a luxury when faced by the horror and tragedy in which Syrian people are living.

6- The systematic violence against women, in all forms, led to rendering the female body a means of retaliation and humiliation, in addition to sanctioning it by forcing women to stay at home as dictated by the men and authoritarian forces. This has considerably decreased opportunities for women to assume leadership roles or to participate in public, except within predetermined and constrained limits.

7- Women's undertaking of a minor role facilitates their exclusion from organized participation and access to decision-making positions, as shown by the example of Zabadani women activists who were not represented in the local council.

8- Donor States that support local councils have ignored the absence of women, which contributed to consolidating the multiple obstacles and barriers preventing their representation. Consequently, a real change from the bottom was absent, and so were gender-aware policies.

Current Political Forces

The revolution did not produce its own parties or political experience, since the regime had annihilated the first, second and even third ranks of revolutionaries, whether by killing, detention or arrests and forced displacement, while traditional parties continued to take the scene. The last few years have produced a variety of alliances that are ideologically inconsistent, as we saw politicians, fighters, revolutionaries, and clergymen all allied together⁷⁰. These alliances may yet sustain and persist for a brief

(70) For example, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was formed in November 2012, included, in addition to four main political blocs, the Free Syrian Army, the Revolutionary Movement, Local Councils, Syrian National Council,

and relatively stable period of time, but are unsustainable in a context of prolonged internationalized conflict. Our experience over the past 5 years has shown that, in alliances or political conferences that include a broad spectrum of the opposition, which require the appeasement of most forces to secure the balance, seculars would inevitably yield to Islamists, sacrificing women's rights in the process. In the opposition conference held in Cairo under the sponsorship of the Arab League (July 2nd and 3rd, 2012) the National Covenant document stated that⁷¹ "The Constitution guarantees the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and seeks to create the required legislative and legal environment that enables her political, economic and social empowerment, in accordance with all relevant international conventions, as well as in harmony with the societal culture." We can see here the glaring contradiction, and the attempt at voiding this point of its contents after adding "in harmony with the societal culture," which was not present in the first draft and Islamists insisted on adding it.

A major characteristic of this phase has been the emergence of political blocs that soon faded away, and the fluctuation of elites between blocs. These parties and individuals have lost the public reverence they once enjoyed before the revolution due to the harsh oppression they had received from the regime. These forces failed to produce the necessitated revolutionary umbrella, and opted to continue working with the same mindset, tools and discourse. This is not to mention their heated exchange of accusations, and the deep distrust among them, which all gradually distanced them from the trust of the revolutionary movement. They have disputed over who ought to represent this movement, and ended up only reaping public distaste for their poor performance.

"These quasi-political forces that are still alive are aging and are drawing their last breaths, having had no real impact at all," said one of my respondents, who had spent almost a quarter of a century in the Assad

Syrian Forum of Businessmen, Syrian Religious Scholars Association, and independent national dignitaries, in addition to the Assyrian-Syriac component, the Turkmen component, and the Kurdish National Council. For more: <http://www.etilaf.org>

(71) «وثيقة العهد الوطني»، مؤتمر المعارضة الذي عقد في القاهرة تحت رعاية جامعة الدول العربية،

:2012 /7 /3

<https://www.facebook.com/Follow.up.Committee/posts/336206329806871>

Senior's prisons. "Therefore, they cannot attract the younger generation of male and female youths, nor can it compensate those who leave them behind. On the other hand, the parties working under the authoritarian regimes are also unattractive, except for those looking for jobs or for protection over past or future wrongdoings." A former member in the National Syrian Council objected to the term "political force," and she explained: "There are no political forces, but only one big bloc: the Muslim Brotherhood. Although I am far from their political line, I admit that they are organized, and that they have a history, partisan loyalty and political morality. I am not referring to their political outlook but rather their political performance. Other blocs appeared and proliferated so quickly, like seasonal mushrooms. That was because, in order to establish what came to be known as the National Council, we came in contact with people who have nothing to do with political action, let alone revolutionary action. Some of them were summoned by the largest force, that is the Muslim Brotherhood, so that they have an influence and pressure over the Council's decisions, while others were involved in two or three groups, and lastly there were the independent individuals. Women were the most organized compared to the political opposition, but their organizations were more oriented towards civil than political activity."

The political forces did not propose a real political project that aims at achieving social and political change, committed to building a state of citizenship, and promoting the human rights of men and women. Their attempts at staying in tune with the rebellious street since the beginning of the revolution confined their roles and rendered them rather passive in the subsequent stages.

The former president of the National Coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, justified the influx of jihadists into Syria and considered them brothers and honored guests⁷². This was after the regime had called upon sectarian militias to fight Syrians, which made the country a swamp for radical sectarian jihadists on both sides, ultimately altering the revolution that had once called for freedom, justice and equality.

(72) كلمة رئيس الائتلاف الوطني لقوى الثورة والمعارضة معاذ الخطيب في القمة العربية، 26 / 3 / 2013، الدقيقة 7:27

Another cause for the revolution to deviate from its path was the dependence of opposition blocs on regional and international powers. This recently culminated when the High Negotiation Committee nominated for the position of chief negotiator Mohammed Alloush, who belongs to Jaysh al-Islam, a military Salafist faction that has committed numerous human rights violations in the areas it controls.

Many political forces that have taken the lead in the scene have gone astray from the principles of the revolution. They focused on gaining fraudulent influence and possessing false cards in front of the international community, merely by allying with armed fundamentalist and sectarian Salafist forces, whose agendas are a refutation of the revolution's objectives. These political forces provided them with political cover, turning a blind eye to their violations, and above, all, remained powerless in front of their decisions and conditional funds, while neglecting their initial alliances with the revolutionary forces, such as the LCC and others. This has led to the elimination of any unequivocal speech related to the rule of law and the state of citizenship. Additionally, this has limited the possibilities of the support from revolutionary and politicized women for those forces, let alone their engagement in their different entities.

Those political forces did not provide a democratic model that could attract Syrians to engage in their various organizations. They were rather repelling to all vivid forces of society, and were busy in their own crises. Their methods and institutions suffered from deficiencies, as they seemed weak and unstable. Moreover, they did not try to grow or broaden their bases, preventing them from gaining the confidence and reasonable popular legitimacy that can enable them to represent the fight for national emancipation, and to make Syria a State for all Syrians, rather than Assad's Syria. The existing alliances between the opposition blocs are short-lived; most of them are narrow-minded and dominated by a masculine mindset totally indifferent to the issues of women and their participation in deciding the fate of their country. Therefore, those alliances did not help to overcome the obstacles to women's political participation. In other words, they did not have a radical attitude against injustice and oppression, but merely against an unjust and oppressive ruler.

One can say, however, that the main reason behind the compulsory departure of female and male revolutionaries from political participation,

and the restriction of their scope of influence to strictly roles in relief efforts, is the systemic violence with which the regime confronted the popular movement, and which has reduced the character of the peaceful revolution to military action.

Additionally, the cause of the Syrian people has been internationalized, and transformed into a humanitarian issue, or a refugee crisis. There have also been attempts at legitimizing the regime through focusing on counterterrorism and ignoring the regime's terror, instead of pressuring it into political transition according to Geneva 1 and arriving at a just and sustainable peace based on prosecuting the perpetrators of the war crimes and crimes against humanity. These transformations also led the politicized women, who were forcibly displaced outside their country, to establish civil society organizations, and to explain the Syrian cause and the revolution's aspirations of freedom, justice and equality, calling for a democratic transition and for stopping the continuous crimes against the Syrian people.

Women in Post-Revolutionary Political Forces

Political parties are considered means of promoting women's engagement in the political sphere. By the political forces we mean those that were formed after the revolution and took the scene, which are listed here by date of establishment: National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (June 25th, 2011), the Syrian National Council (October 2nd, 2011), and finally the High Negotiation Committee (December 10th, 2015). These three forces include a group of parties/blocs and dignitaries⁷³. The National Council and the Coordination Committee were represented in the first opposition conference that was held in Cairo under the patronage of the Arab League on 2-3 July 2012, and the National Coalition and the Coordination Committee were represented in the conference that was held in Riyadh on December 9th, 2015, and are now represented in the High

(73) للاطلاع على مكونات القوى السياسية المذكورة، انظر/ي لمى قنوت، «الثائرات مغيبات عن صنع القرار: المشاركة السياسية للمرأة ووصولها إلى مراكز صنع القرار في بعض قوى المعارضة منذ 2011»، الحوار المتمدن، 3/3/2015:

<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=457666>

Negotiation Committee that emerged after that conference. Following the formation of the Coalition, the role of the Council began to recede, and it now has become an inactive bloc only represented within the Coalition. Of course, we cannot overlook the role of other political forces, but they had less impact on the political scene in general, and on the negotiations and official political talks in particular. This research tries to reflect the views of some respondents who belong to those smaller forces.

The respondents agreed unanimously that the political forces formed after the revolution, which presented themselves as a democratic alternative, did not make any effort to attract women activists. It is fair to say that the efforts, if any, did not exceed being a pretense, to give an impression of openness and modernity, symbolically and cosmetically. This is confirmed by the low figures of women participation in the last five years. "Women's departure proves the failure of these parties and forces, and does not necessarily indicate that women retreated entirely, but rather that they turned to other forms of activism that they deemed more effective," one of the respondents commented.

One researcher pointed to two mechanisms with which political forces exclude qualified people, especially women: "Personalization, which overwhelms these institutions, and the predominance of traditional figures that prefer patriarchal hierarchies in political institutions or parties. Both mechanisms exclude women." Many respondents agree with the second part of this remark, and one stressed that the reason qualified people abandon these institutions is "the domination of historical leaders who spent dozens of years occupying their positions, and the favoritism and old loyalties surrounding them, and ensuring their continuous leadership."

One respondent mentioned the "conflicts within the political forces, and the centralization of power in the hands of one or two people within each, who often run the theater from behind while the rest are only puppets." Many others considered quotas, circles and cliques to be among the reasons behind that lack of qualified individuals. Another respondent remarks: "What I found is that politics is not founded on the qualification of men and women, but rather on public relations, both external and internal. All of the practices I have seen cannot be called responsible political action, and it is therefore alienating to qualified people and to those who believe

in political action and wish to be involved. There is no access to those in the aforementioned institutions, and they have no real authority to make decisions, and this is why many have opted to distance themselves out of self-respect, lest they enter a whirlpool that does not resemble politics. All prior experiences have proven that these forces lack autonomy, or are bound to a specific group of specific people that led them to this pitfall."

A well-versed political writer explained the reasons behind the departure of female expertise, which are "the lack of political awareness, emanating from personal interest in every action, and the distorted perception of national political responsibility."

A member of the Opposition Coalition leadership referenced "the absence of work methodology, and the deadly disease of ego, and the presence of coalitions and parties aimed at controlling existing formations and securing hegemony over decision-making mechanisms within them, as well as the absence of the principle and mechanisms of accountability, and ethical foundations of accepting the other." Most respondents emphasized that the reason is the absence of democracy within parties, and that the masculine mentality is what excludes women.

However, one veteran politician shed light on a very old issue: "Women also had negative practices that did not encourage others to endeavor in political activity, especially in regards to intersex relations within partisan organizations, for example. Those were established upon marriage promises, which were later rescinded. Some women took revenge by reporting others to the secret police. These events actually took place in the wake of an arrest campaign conducted by the secret police of the United Arab Republic against one of the parties, and it led to the detention of large number of people as a result of these acts of reporting. The result was a recession in inviting female activists to join the party." This opinion reflects one of the oldest male excuses for excluding women, and it holds all of them collectively responsible for the mistakes of some. A woman's success, on the other hand, is often considered an exceptional and individual case.

These forces, in their aggregate, did not work towards creating more non-partisan representative channels for female activists within a coalescing national framework. Such channels are the foundations of democratic political activity, and they can empower their positions. Instead, those forces

took the easy road and sufficed with arbitrary negotiations to increase the number of women's seats in this conference or that. The National Coalition, which was recognized by the State members of the Friends of Syria group on December 12th, 2012 as the sole representative of the Syrian people, did not care for these representative channels.

Despite the pressure exerted by feminist and women's organizations to increase the representation of women in political blocs and at the negotiation table, only 10 women attended the latest opposition conference in Riyadh on December 9th, 2015⁷⁴ - out of 115 attendees. From the conference emerged the High Negotiations Committee, which included 32 people among whom are only 2 women. This committee formed the negotiating opposition delegation, which included only 3 women out of 15 members, adding one seat to their representation in Geneva 2.

Syrian Women Advisory Board (WAB)

On February 1st, 2016, the High Negotiations Committee established the Women's Advisory Board (WAB), which was comprised of 40 women and tasked with supporting the negotiating delegation. The Committee's media office clarified that the reason for its formation was that it had "noted the weak representation of women in the present negotiation process, and emphasizes its dire need for Syrian women's active participation within the framework of the High Negotiations Committee and its negotiating team, which would elevate the Committee's representativeness and expertise"⁷⁵. Despite the significance of this board's establishment, it is contingent upon the knowledge of who estimates these women's competence. What are standards adopted and expertise employed in the selection of female members and the extent of their utilization? Were they committed to or were they subject to certain polarizations?

(74) «بالأسماء... المشاركون في مؤتمر المعارضة السورية بالرياض»، جريدة المصريون، 2015/12/9: <https://goo.gl/PFT7An>

One of the attendees confirmed to me that the number of male and female attendees in the second day of conference activity reached 115 persons

(75) «الهيئة العليا للمفاوضات السورية تشكل لجنة نسائية»، جريدة العربي الجديد، 2016/2/1: <https://goo.gl/as9XqG>

One female respondent to questions about the role of the committee, who is an academic and a researcher, said: "The standards adopted in the process of selecting members to the HNC's Women's Advisory Board were ambiguous, and there was a considerable lack of transparency in this regard, as no full list of Board member names was ever disclosed. Members were also constantly being changed in a manner that is not organized or institutional, but subject to mere individual decisions." She confirmed that the responsibility of the committee's formation within the HNC did not comply with demands by all female participants to know the full list of names on the Board. Another journalist added that the new participants in the first and second round did not exceed 15 members, "and we were only informed that among the participants are former detainees and revolution activists, mothers of martyrs and wives of detainees, in addition to female representatives from religious and ethnic groups. It was clear that this, like other opposition projects, was implemented under the pressure of several usual problematics related to the question of whom to invite. It seems that a mechanism and criterion was consolidated on the basis of quota and recommendations, without the presence of real standards relevant to the specialization required of an adviser." So the attention was limited to establishing a sectarian, ethnic, partisan and personal equilibrium. The journalist concludes, "There was an unconcealed disparity in expertise, lengthy and copious practical experience between participants, be it in political, civil or academic activity."

When asked "We always blame 'them', who are they? And how does negotiation on quotas occur between them?" one of the respondents answered: "They are the persons who have attained positions within the Syrian Opposition, and despite the ineffectiveness of the opposition and its failure to represent the actual Syrian mobilization, they cling to their positions with no democratic legitimacy or popular representation, and they control the mechanisms of involving additional entities, while refusing to modify these mechanisms. This has constituted an additional burden on the Syrian people."

Regarding the types of consultations and papers submitted to the negotiating team, the extent of cooperation and information sharing between the women and the HNC, the influence their papers had on the negotiation table, the official visits conducted by the board to the HNC and

the number of those visits, and whether those visits were limited to visits of female members of the negotiating team, a female participant answered: "The process that was called 'advisory activity' was characterized by considerable organizational deficit, and the lack of clear mechanisms for exchange and dispatch of consultations between the WAB and the HNC. Inconsistency and dilution of issues prevailed, as there was no indexing or documentation for any activity done by the participants, nor was there any serious action regarding proposed consultations. This activity was instead no more than individual initiatives taken by the active ladies, who were met with disregard and irresponsibility and were not forwarded to relevant people and entities." I asked her about the results of the support and training provided by one international organization, and she answered: "Yes, there was support and training by a Swedish organization, Kvinna till Kvinna. I attended one workshop with them that was serious and effective. We drafted a work paper that was dearly valued by them, but the Syrian side did not take it into consideration. It was rejected by the woman responsible for the formation of the WAB within the HNC."

Another member of the committee referred to the fact that some of them, upon the HNC's request, have worked on a paper related to detained male and female minors. She added: "Members of the WAB were not given access to all of these papers, due to the sensitivity of the matter and because it is not for publishing and circulation, and this exclusion did not only target women but also the male consultants and experts who were there to give advice and work with the HNC and the delegation."

The participant who is a human rights activist confirmed that her invitation to participate was due to her résumé, as she had worked on documenting gender-based sexual violence and closely followed cases of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance. She added that it is a significant case that will occupy considerable interest in the negotiation rounds: "They needed my presence to support the delegation and supply it with information. I was called upon early to participate and submit a list of names of female detainees and demand their release as a sign of good will. That was before they went to Geneva and accepted to participate in the first negotiation round. The impasse started here. I submitted a list of names of female detainees according to standards that I had set, as I was the only one

with experience in this field. I believed that I am a consultant and that my opinion is to be taken into consideration. But then they added another list to mine, thinking that the more expansive the list the better.”

Members of the WAB put forth their suggestions to launch their activities on March 23rd, 2016, but it was met largely with disregard. The active members then submitted draft proposals for HNC’s founding document (Annex No. 3) aimed at “rendering functions clear and institutional, away from personalization, “clientelism”, circles and gangs, which largely contributed to the failure of the opposition and to the Syrian people’s suffering for five years. This document was not taken into consideration, despite its ratification by consensus of active members,” said one member. “We emailed all the members of the Board who participated in drafting the document on April 8th, 2016,” and she noted that “the decision on these matters is reserved for the HNC exclusively, and none of the women have the right to decide any matter related to matters like work organization, representation, the criteria of selection new members or any other matter. That is a result of the insistence by qualified women to follow a clear method of work, and to refuse existing within an ostensible organization aimed at misleading Syrian public opinion by claiming the presence of a WAB that is inactive. The coordinator had been notified, and she in turn conveyed that to us, that the HNC wishes to dissolve the WAB, and building on that, a group of members submitted an evaluation letter directed at the HNC, following conventional protocol, and has not received a reply in its regard” (Annex No. 4). She confirmed: “No sharing of information or papers with the Advisory Board occurred, and the ladies were instead excluded from working on cases, and barred from having insight into the papers submitted by the Office of the UN Special Envoy. The Advisory Board also did not conduct official visits, as it was restricted to female members of the HNC and to the negotiating delegation. Decisions in naming who would conduct official visits to represent Syrian women were taken on a personal basis.”

Another respondent, who had attended WAB meetings during the first and second rounds of negotiations, emphasized that the participants were not introduced in an advisory capacity during their sole and unofficial meeting with the HNC. She described that meeting as silent, due to the lack of their knowledge of what was to be explored and discussed, and

she confirms that there was insistence by the coordinator of the WAB to invite all the members to the official meeting with Mr. de Mistura and the other meetings with ambassadors of Western States. She added that the questions of the ambassadors revolved around "our role and function at the HNC. They asked questions that expressed skepticism of how serious the role and function of the group is... Meanwhile, it was apparent that the aim of our invitation was to impress these ambassadors, and nothing more."

Three respondents confirmed that the existence of the Board did not compensate for the lack of women's representation in the negotiating delegation. One of them, an academic and researcher, mentioned that "On the contrary, the Advisory Board contributed to weakening women's representation, as it was an ostensible claim to mislead Syrian and international public opinion, while the active participation of Syrian women was not permitted, and any active woman with competence and expertise of any kind was excluded." She went on to say: "Despite the presence of women participants from the Advisory Board in the negotiations in Geneva, they were not involved in studying the cases relevant to negotiation, and they did not have access to any papers submitted to the negotiation delegation. Women's participation was limited to a media display, in response to pressures by the UN and Syrian civil society. This participation remained frozen and inactive, despite the image that was conveyed that these ladies are contributing to the negotiation process, which is not true."

Regarding the exclusion of active women, the last email I received on September 10th, 2016 was only to notify me that the Board has confirmed its 12 members and its board of directors, without listing the women who have been installed, most of whom were actually women already on the negotiation delegation and the HNC, and who will be on the WAB as well as the HNC. This rendered the mission of increasing women's participation in the negotiation process and truly activating it non-existent. The persisting absence of any active role for Syrian women, which rendered this Board all but obsolete, as the same personalities remained in the essential and advisory roles."

As for the mechanisms of directing the Committee, she added: "We had submitted through a workshop conducted in Sweden a draft that included administrative mechanisms, but it was not taken through consideration,

and the administration remained the responsibility of the one tasked by the HNC to form the WAB.”

When I asked about the challenges facing their work, she answered:

“The reasons reside in the following possibilities:

1. The absence of real will on the HNC's part to increase the representation of women in the negotiating delegation, in which case the HNC must revisit this flawed orientation.
2. If we assume a real will on the HNC's part to activate the WAB, then they handled it in an extremely ineffective way, one that intentionally diluted issues and dragged things to failure.
3. We sensed unwillingness on the part of the women in the HNC and the negotiating delegation to expand the base of women's participation. We were expecting their attitude to be cooperative and inclusive, not autocratic and exclusive. The WAB now primarily consists of female members of the HNC and the negotiating delegation. We find it illogical that the female members perform an advisory role to themselves, and that they are at the same time members of the HNC and the HNC's Advisory Board.”

Another respondent specified the challenges of the Committee as follows: “Invitees were treated in an inappropriate manner that lacked respect and recognition. A state of chaos and personal headship prevailed. So did the non-institutional work outside the framework of the founding document, which was prepared and unanimously issued as an introductory paper, which governs the group's activities. The group was not dealt with as a formal entity with a legal character where female consultants enjoy equality and are granted the same roles and opportunities in an advisory capacity. There existed disparity in treatment, in all regards, between invitees and those labeled ‘essential women’ when it came to attending meetings, legal capacity, assigned roles, and the manner of introduction and speaking, and even distributing rooms and accommodation.”

She concluded by saying: “Overall, it was a negative experience for me as participant, to be added to a record of other negative experiences with ‘the official opposition’ and its manner of dealing with women's activity and typifying their political role. This role is mainly about portraying them

in the media and before the international organizations and ambassadors, without truly affording an actual role and without any explicit recognition of them. In our case, this recognition did not come through the HNC, even internally, while it was the one to have issued a decision to establish the WAB to overcome the deficit in actual women's representation."

Another respondent attributed those hardships to "the poor communication between organizers of these visits and missions." According to her, there were positives to the presence of this Board, compared to its absence. She explained: "Despite any practical service of actual papers submitted by the Board, it did pose the presence of women as an inevitable before the opposition, which has seldom included women in their committees; it also presented a model of an historical precedent which confirms the necessity of women's presence in any delegation, committee, governmental institution or political transition."

The human rights researcher who had withdrawn from the Board considered the main challenges to be: "The adherence to a male line by women who connected us with the HNC and the negotiating delegation, and who consolidated the typical roles of women as secretaries working behind the male negotiator, rather than his peer, doing what is required of her and not having her perspective taken into consideration. This was confirmed during the next round, as the opinion of a male expert, which came identical to that of a female expert, was considered after it was had been initially discarded. I withdrew because I did not feel I represented any added value. There were excellent expertise, especially in the first round, and in later rounds there were some exceptions of distinguished women, who were not utilized or effectively activated. The issue might surpass the WAB itself, which already did not have a clear role in the process. However, this should not mean that we accept offence to women by rendering them a tool with which the HNC and its delegation can cover their disappointing performance."

About the withdrawal of some of the members, one respondent clarified their objections regarding:

- "The rejection of institutionalizing the Board's work, in order to be more official and effective, and the insistence on directing it in a chaotic manner and restricting it to be ostensible.

- The rejection of democracy and the freedom of expressing opinion within the Board, and a total lack of the values for which the Syrian revolution had begun.
- Offensive treatment of female members, a lack of respect for them, and considering their invitation to be a privilege, which was all due to the personalization and monopolization of command, and the prevalence of a despotic mindset.
- The administration residing in the hands of one person, in a Women's Advisory Board that which is supposed to represent the women of Syria."

She added: "In case the negotiations resumed and the board was to be activated, the administrative mistakes that have led to the failure of the women's advisory board can still be rectified, through the following measures:

1. Publicizing the official declaration issued by the HNC, which stipulates the establishment of a Women's Advisory Board, and adding an annex clarifying the official functioning mechanism between the Committee and the Board.
2. Issuing the founding document of the Board and its ratification by the HNC.
3. Authorizing a team nominated and selected by the Board itself, and consisting of its members, for the administration."

Another member of the Board stated that "What rendered the WAB dysfunctional and unsustainable, be it whomever was tasked to make it a reality as an advisory entity or the head of the HNC, was personalization not unlike what is happening in the HNC." In addition, she added, "The Board's problems and complexities that hinder its work are not very different from the problems and complexities that hinder the work of the HNC itself. There were no standards and no agreed-upon bylaws to run the HNC (perhaps there are and I am unaware). From my experience, even when there are bylaws in a Syrian political institution, they are not abided and applied unless when deemed convenient and agreed-upon by everyone." She added: "The Coalition has a 15% quota for women's representation, but women's representation does not exceed 5% despite all the efforts to

activate this article of the bylaws⁷⁶. We at the WAB were also gathered in Stockholm to draft an introductory founding document for us, and it gained consensus, but it was a mere piece of paper until this moment. All the reservations against the Board are the same ones against the HNC, which means that its ineffectiveness is not a result of it being a women's board, as much as because it emerged from the Syrian opposition which still suffers from generally inadequate conditions, be them the lack of international cooperation or the absence of a successful political institutional model to be followed. Also, it ought to be added, that one of the main hindrances to the WAB is precisely that it is an advisory board, as in, it is subject to another Committee and it has no capacity to make any decision. It can at best influence already taken decisions. The Board was founded to silence the voices demanding larger representation of women in the HNC and negotiation delegation. This is the same strategy employed by de Mistura to silence voices—from civil society and international organizations—which demanded a more substantial presence of women. By the mere fact of dubbing it 'Advisory,' it was deprived of any real power to effectively make decisions. It was only given space through which it can just try to influence made decisions. As usual, it was placed in the second or third degree of significance and effectiveness."

I have thus far highlighted the WAB experience as it holds within it alarming indicators about the methods of function of the opposition councils that have taken the forefront. This does not only relate to women's political participation, since the establishment of support bases and the bottom-up representation legitimacy are substantial principles of political activity. The issue that now persists is that some opposition forces are detached from their constituents, and are seeking representative legitimacy through their inclusion in lists made by others, and by randomly including people and excluding others, and thus the criticism is directed at marginalization and exclusion. In the case of the WAB, the question is: What entity determined which women are qualified and to be included on the Board, and what clear standardized criteria is followed? These same mistakes were repeated at all political and procedural stages, among which is the participation in opposition conferences.

(76) Two female members of the National Coalition confirmed to me that there is no written quota stipulated in its bylaws.

Furthermore, the outcome of what happened in the context of WAB encapsulates the manner with which women's political participation is dealt, and the large gap between rhetoric and practice. The public rhetoric for the WAB establishment was "noting the poor representation of Syrian women representation in the current negotiation process, and emphasizing the dire need for Syrian women's participation in activities within the HNC and its negotiating team, which would elevate the Committee in regards to representation and expertise." In actual practice within its lobbies, however, it was a mockery of qualifications and an exclusion of them. The questions remain: How and why did the number of women on the Board drop from 40 to 12 women, with no clarification for public opinion, and those who participated in it?

Members of the Board tried to salvage it and institutionalize its functions as not to render it completely hollow, or as a cosmetic response to voices demanding the right of women to determine their country's future. However, their attempts were not met with attention and support from the HNC and the negotiating delegation, and were largely unaddressed.

Forming a Women's Advisory Board, which ought to involve expertise and qualifications in different fields, does not justify the haphazard selection. Neither does it imply the inclusion of a martyr's mother or a detainee's wife as an expert, unless she truly is an expert in some field, with all our respect to the grave sacrifices given by the Syrian people along the path to freedom. This conflation in the minds of males and females who have a masculine mentality is a result of failure to see women as free and independent beings, but rather as subjects of males. Their existences are reduced to the males in their families, which begs the question: Was a male member added to the negotiation delegation or to the Expert Consultant Committee because he is the husband of a female martyr or detainee, or even a former detainee themselves?

The manner in which the Committee's work was administered on one hand, and the relation between the Board, the HNC and the negotiation delegation on the other hand, would result in aversion to political participation by many qualified women in the opposition entities prevalent in the current scene. This grave failure would be added to a host of failures, which are to be listed over the course of this research.

Backstage of Political Elites

The objective of this chapter is to shed light on the backstage of political elites that draft policies and exclude women from the closed decision-making circles, and to unveil the depth of the discriminatory mindset against them and their political participation.

In the backstage of the largest political bloc, the National Coalition, a former female deputy head of the Coalition confirmed that, after establishing the bloc, they began searching for a female personality, regardless of her qualifications. She believes that this incident alone is sufficient reason for women's aversion to these committees and blocs. She also contrasted the behavior of some opposition elites before and after the revolution. According to her experience, during the Atassi Forum⁷⁷, "they used to think that the presence of a woman in a leadership position would constitute protection for this entity vis-à-vis the regime, because according to them, the latter would think long before detaining a woman, while if it were a man, the odds of their detention are higher." She added: "Women's contribution to the Forum was crucial and active, and to be active in it meant making sacrifices, not attaining benefit."

She reminisced, "In 2005, after the assassination of Rafic Hariri, the late Prime Minister of Lebanon, everyone had considered that the regime is done for, and that the formation of any entity would reap benefit." She mentioned that "some individuals came to talk to me about such an entity, and as they left, they said precisely: 'We wish to have a handful of women and a handful of young men,' and I replied: 'I feel as if you're asking for 5 kilograms of potatoes and 3 kilograms of tomatoes! People, this is not how we ought to go about this.' Indeed, in times of harvest, people would think as such. They are cooking something up, and then they consider a dash of parsley; this parsley is that 'handful of women'."

She added: "When I was invited to the formation of the Coalition, it had

(77) The Atassi Forum was formed in 2001 in conjunction with "Damascus Spring" era, which witnessed expansive political and civil mobilization. The Forum focused on political and cultural issues and on promoting the values of democratic dialogue. Its experience did not last long, however, and the regime soon shut it down and detained most of its figures. The Atassi Forum was the last one to be dissolved in 2005.

already been cooked up for months. My colleague and I were discussing representation of the revolutionary mobilization, and giving the youth a third of the seats. We sat with Riad Seif to set the standards of this participation and its principles. We were not with him every minute of every day. We had a partial view of this scene, but not all of it. By the time the invitees arrived to Qatar, we had found things to be finalized. There was something about the founding, and at the core of it, that was inequitable. At the time, the prevailing view was that the regime will be toppled and that support for the revolution would arrive. We eagerly pursued support, and I believe we made a mistake. We told ourselves 'Let's start, and later we correct and adjust course, and make the change we want to see.' Unfortunately, we found ourselves faced with an obstructing third that is present in the bylaws and we could not move anything an inch in any direction. We found ourselves powerless."

Another former member of the Syrian National Council gave her account on what transpired during the Friends of Syria conference, held in Tunisia on February 24th, 2012: "All members of the Syrian delegation who entered the hall were men, numbered around 25-30. Women were situated outside the hall. They later tried to bring some women in because the assistant to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was asking about them, and one of them asked me personally to enter, but I declined because the request came from a western power, not from Syrians themselves. Imagine the insulation of these women. Clinton was shocked not to find women in the opposition delegation, since for her the political scene is of little value unless it involved women representatives of at least a percentage of 30%." She added: "The number of women was considerable during the beginnings of the Syrian National Council activity, and they were efficient and vigorous, but they receded and withdrew as a result of the treatment they had received."

The SNC lost nearly a third of its 270 members in March of 2013⁷⁸, and within it are currently only 3 women, who are entirely absent from its executive bureau, despite that it criminalized all forms of oppression, exclusion, persecution and discrimination between the sexes in its paper

(78) يزيد الصايغ، «المعارضة السورية ومشكلة القيادة»، مركز كارنيغي للشرق الأوسط، 4/4/2013: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2013/04/04/ar-pub-51412>

*The Political Project*⁷⁹.

Female revolutionaries did not venture into the battles of organized political activity with might among political blocs, and their numbers were very low. This activity is a precedent, and is the precursor to moving towards establishing any political bloc. One of the respondents from Building the Syrian State Movement pointed out “the unwillingness of female activists to engage in political activity. When I hold a workshop with feminist civil action, the female activists show up, while when there is political activity, they shy away from it. Do not forget, we at the Movement were on the inside, and inside Syria, the situation is more sensitive. On the outside, we are now undergoing a transitional period, rebuilding what we had lost. You cannot judge our experience now, but on the inside we had 40 people on a daily basis attending the art exhibitions we held at our office, but if we held a political symposium, no one would attend.”

She added: “Many female activists have had a vanguard role in the revolution, be it in the protest movement, raising awareness or contributing to health services, and who have suffered many violations, such as detention. But this mobilization was very short-lived, for many reasons: First, many activists, male and female, averted political activity with the excuse that they do not wish to engage in it, meanwhile the axis of our struggle against the regime was political activity and surpassing it on that regard. There was a wave of prevailing reasoning that we ought not to engage in political activity because it stains the revolution. Thus, there was no desire on the part of female activists, party members and feminists who are versed in political activity to play a political role, and women opted for civil activity. They believed that civil activity is detached from politics, and that it is unsoiled while politics is rotten. I do not agree with this of course, because I believe that even civil action is political *par excellence*, and I do not believe that if politics is dirty, then civil activity is any cleaner. These delusions are some of the most prominent which have possessed the minds of Syrians, and that is why we do not see female and male activists in political movements.”

One young female activist spoke of two reasons which led to female revolutionaries' aversion to political activity:

(79) المجلس الوطني السوري، «سورية الجديدة - مبادئ عامة»، المشروع السياسي - المرحلة الانتقالية.

"The first reason is that it does not fulfill them the way the revolutionary condition does, 'does not give them an adrenaline boost' so to speak, as politics is more slow-paced, and requires patience and calm. They had believed that the regime would be toppled during the first six months of uprising." What contributed was the division of political blocs, and the struggle between two positions: The first was represented by the National Coordination Committee, which was the first political bloc to be established after the revolution, and it was famous for raising its three No's: No to violence, no to foreign intervention, and no to sectarianism; the second bloc was represented by the Syrian National Council, which believed in the military option and demanded foreign intervention. This bipolar struggle was part of the reason young men and women took distance from engaging in organized political activity, and preferred the 'puritanical' state of revolution. Instead of the two blocs forming a political umbrella for the revolting street, quite the opposite occurred: the street, which was disorganized due to suppression, became the compass. Here and then, efforts to critique and organize became absent, and so did any role of the political elites which have taken the scene.

"The second reason is that most women who held official governmental positions within decades were not role models or a model to be followed," the respondent added. "On the contrary, they were the targets of mockery by most groups of society. I remember when I was little, we used to poke fun at one of them when she gave a long speech in the al-Mahabba Festival inauguration, so how would we consider her a role model?" Conversely, the regime sought to smear the image of female opposition politicians who were detained during the reign of Assad the father. This mindset was continued and even intensified during the revolution through continuous and methodical media output against the opposition by the regime's media apparatus. She digresses: "The regime pushed towards the establishment of a collective consciousness that dictates that women who were detained in the 1980s were 'immoral,' and that they did not choose political activity because they are free women, but rather because they are outcasts from social norms, conventions and traditions. There was an expression used for them: 'They are as loose as their hair'!"

I belong to a family of historical dissidents, and women in my family used to help political prisoners. Female detainees were cast from their

communities, because the regime used to conflate their political interest with bodily liberation. The regime played this game in a broad manner, even when the revolution was sparked. I was proud to have participated in protests since their beginning, and many of my female friends said to me "What are you doing? Do you want to act like these 'loose' women the regime detained during the 1980s?" Generally, the political sphere is not one in which women can be engaged.

Another respondent agreed with the abovementioned perspective about the image the regime had presented of women in public affairs. He also said that the opposition did not offer a face that represents Syrian women and their societal role: "It is unfortunate that the image of women conveyed by the regime through the systems of 'quota' or 'modernization' were repulsive and offensive to women in public affairs (female ministers, MPs or popular organization reps). Regrettably, the opposition did not present faces that truly represent Syrian women and their societal role. I think that we, looking back a few years, could have found women in 'parliament' and in civil society organizations and social work that are a more credible representation of Syrian women."

Several respondents were in consensus that, the reason for the aversion of some young women who participated in the protest movement during the beginning of the revolution and were forcefully displaced from the homeland, was a sense of disappointment and dismay, and a conviction that there is no use for their activity any longer. What they aspired to was far from what actually materialized. However, the respondents confirmed that most of them would have contributed to the revolution if the clock was turned back.

I once described this stage as the "last matter of priority," meaning that anyone who assumed the forefront of the political scene would eventually be politically discarded. In this context, I spoke to a female politician in the Coalition bloc and she described the scene as follows: "The revolution needed political leadership, and somewhere, leaderships and entities were established, and some of them were influential." She added: "We were subject to accusations of negligence, irresponsibility, opportunism and self-interest. The problem is that the political decision for a resolution in Syria was not contingent to our will only, but to international will as well. The entities were described as a match box, and that people within them are matches

that burn and go out at the end of the revolution. None of them will have a role to play in the end”.

She also confirmed that “the accusations directed at us are from traditional elites that spent decades struggling against tyranny and were not successful in bringing about change, and they are yet accusing us, newer entities, of not doing enough.” She noted their failure to give advice to the young revolutionary generation during the peaceful protest stage.

All respondents who were organizationally involved in political blocs after the revolution expressed the dismay they felt in regards to the aversion of politicized and feminist women to political activity. One respondent said: “I am in a state of lament and blame over political and feminist figures that have been historically present in Syria, but who refused to engage in this stage as not to burn themselves. They are sparing their participation until a forthcoming transitional period. This has affected the feminist political mobilization, and by virtue of this aversion, they made the existing voices less resonant, as whenever women’s political participation surged, the challenge was less severe, and our voices—as women— were heard more loudly within the political process existent today.”

The following testimony from one female politician in the Coalition highlights the role of foreign intervention in the exclusion of capacities generally, and those of qualified women especially, during the Coalition elections: “The issue with the Coalition is that there are political considerations. Whenever there is a nomination, they find the most favorable person. The matter does not have to do with competence. Politics today is about polarization and political figures, whether male or female, so those who are not internationally sponsored and are not subject to the process of polarization have little chance of ascending. And it is not possible to advocate and support these. To be clear, there was polarization between the Qatari and Saudi blocs, and in turn, those in the middle who are not subjects of either have little chance of getting anywhere. This is how matters used to occur.”, More generally, she added: “Look at the state of women in regional State sponsors. Do you expect them to be supportive of women’s participation?” When asked about the quota that had availed women to be coordinators for the Coalition’s General Director, on one hand, but withheld

the directorship from them on the other, a politician in the Coordination Committee also alluded to the role of foreign intervention: "As a first step, it was positive, but the issue of withholding the directorship has to do with partisan sharing, which is dominated by males on one hand, and is governed by subordination to international and regional powers on the other."

Those at the forefront of the scene in some political blocs are those with connections and influence, who are supported by states that are influential on the Syrian issue. Most of these are men, but of course this applies to some women who opted for their activity to be within the context of civil society.

Revolutionary forces alerted to the role of regional and international interventions, and the importance of the autonomy of national determination. There was a statement⁸⁰ issued on May 28th, 2013 and signed by the Local Coordination Committees, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union, and the Supreme Council for the Leadership of the Syrian Revolution. It emphasized the importance of representing the revolutionary movement by expanding the National Coalition by 50%, instead of "a desperate attempt at patching" – as per the statement. They also refused that it be restricted to "the inclusion of persons and entities which do not enjoy active and influential presence in the revolution." They added: "the Coalition, in its current organizational reality, is unable to fulfill its assigned duties, due to negative polarization among its constituent blocs. This has led to egregious interventions by many regional and international powers, with which the autonomy of national determination has been at risk of loss". Concerning the organizational deterioration of the Coalition, they considered that it was solidified by fait accompli powers, transgressing on what was agreed upon during founding discussions."

In the same context, Western States were never but supporters of tyrannical regimes, which tend after their interests. There has not been any relieving outcome on any axis after the internationalization of the Syrian case, and the several UN resolutions on political transition in Syria. These were ambiguous as to the fate of the head of the regime and his aides, and the necessity of separating the humanitarian case from the political (UN Resolution 2245),

(80) «بيان صادر عن الحراك الثوري في الداخل السوري»، 28/5/2013.

which was demanded by the opposition. These factors, combined with the inability to make any noticeable progress, were sufficient reasons for the retroversion and withdrawal of many politicized and activist women.

Regarding women's political participation in these forces, some Western States exerted constant diplomatic pressure on the opposition, and demanded them to increase women's representation and broaden their active participation, especially during negotiations. But "these pressures, which caused some embarrassment to the opposition, cannot be exerted the entire time. In the end, it is an internal decision, and should be one of their priorities since it is a matter of national interest," one respondent commented.

Furthermore, these diplomatic pressures targeted only the political forces, which were at the forefront of the scene, while local councils were subject to no such pressure, despite the fact that the participation of women there was absent, and that part of the funding of Councils came from the interim government, the National Coalition and international organizations.

In conclusion regarding foreign intervention, some opposition forces needed international recognition, which is necessary, but they made their legitimacy sourced only externally, considering external powers to be the lung from which it breathes to sustain, and abandoning the notion that legitimacy cannot be real and strong but from society and the autonomy of national determination. An observer would witness the amount of manipulation exercised on this regard, which would not have occurred had it not been for the opposition's acceptance of it in the first place, and had the opposition been willing to found all-inclusive entities, of all current dissent movements, with a clear and fundamental position regarding the tyrannical security regime, settling for nothing less than a democratic transition.

Initially, the Syrian National Council had been established in October of 2011, and was recognized by the Friends of Syria Group as a "legitimate representative of all Syrians, and the umbrella under which opposition organizations are to be included." Later, the Syrian National Coalition Of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces would be established in November of 2012, and recognized by 120 States in the Friends of Syria conference held in Marrakesh, Morocco on December 12th, 2012 as a sole representative of the Syrian people. The Coalition represented the opposition delegation in

Geneva 2 talks, the first round of which was held on January 22nd, 2014, and the second on February 10th, 2014. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was tasked after Vienna 3 with gathering the opposition and unifying it, and that culminated in the Riyadh conference on December 9th, 2015, "and they handled the task by themselves, except for invitations"⁸¹. After the Syrian National Coalition and the National Coordination Committee finished listing their representatives, "they responded to all the requests by all Arab and international powers." As such, many qualified politicians and activists were excluded, both men and women, and the nomination of the High Negotiation Committee, which in turn formed the negotiation delegation of Geneva 3, was done by quotas.

The numbers of female politicians in political organizations before and after the revolution are by no means convergent; instead they have dwindled. Below is a table clarifying the magnitude of women's representation in 9 political forces that were formed during the revolution⁸². This table can be considered a clear indicator of the weakness of women's representation, and of their inability to make a difference by inserting their rights within the general policies and agendas of their organizations. Despite the fact that many female politicians and activists make more effort than men to prove their competence and not be marginalized, as confirmed by many female politicians who currently work within organizational frameworks as well as independents, their numbers are in steady decline.

(81) ميشيل كيلو، «عن مؤتمر الرياض السوري... بكل صراحة»، العربي الجديد، 2015/12/25
<https://goo.gl/e49yfm>

(82) لمى قنوت، «الثائرات مغيبات عن صنع القرار: المشاركة السياسية للمرأة ووصولها إلى مراكز صنع القرار في بعض قوى المعارضة منذ 2011»، الحوار المتملن،
<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=457666>

Name	Date of founding	Number of members	Num-ber of women	Decision-making center		Deputy Secretary General
				Political Committee	Num-ber of women	
Syrian National Coalition Of Syrian Revolution and Op-position Forces	November 2012	117	6	24	3	Woman
National Coordina-tion Committee for Democratic Change	June 25 th 2011	-	-	Executive Bureau 25	3	Woman
Union of Syrian Democrats	Septem-ber 28th 2013	1227	145	Executive Commit-tee 11	3	Man
Syrian Republican Party	April 17 th 2014	87	6	Executive Commit-tee 7	2	Man
Democratic Union Party	June 16 th 2003	Quota 40%		Executive Commit-tee 11	9	Joint direc-torship, Man and woman
Syrian National Council	October 2 nd 2011	General Secretary 42	3	Executive Bureau 13	-	Man
Forum of The Na-tional Call	March 4 th 2014	97	-	Political Bureau 9	2	-
Kurdish National Council	October 26 th 2011	First round 2011		-	-	Second term 2 deputies, man and woman
		250	17			
		Second round 2012				
		200	28			
Building the Syrian State Movement	Septem-ber 10 th 2011	Upon founding		-	-	Woman
		24	4			
		-	28			

Since the end of 2014, which is the date of this count, until today (over a year and seven months), some of those political forces became stagnant and inactive, and some of them were forcefully revived for the purpose of participating in Geneva 3 talks. The rate of women's participation within those that are still active has also receded. The number of female members of the National Coalition, for example, dropped to only five women before the recent expansion of their quota percentage.

The Coalition's female members had submitted a request in July 2014 pertaining to the expansion of women's representation to a rate that does not fall short of 30%, demanding that this percentage be added to the bylaws as a principle article (Annex No. 5). The goal of such a quota increase was complete and fair participation of women in all committees, councils and offices of the Coalition - especially in centers of decision-making. The female members suggested a mechanism of implementation and selection, and they also demanded the appointment of a female advisor to the Coalition in order to guarantee women's participation in decision-making and in all fields, delegations, committees and activities. Finally, they mentioned the following in their paper that expected outcomes would fulfill:

"Ending the policy of excluding a group that constitutes half of society; promoting democratic practices; contributing to bridging the gap between the Coalition and the Syrian people, through a consolidated relationship with refugees, the displaced and migrants; providing wider credibility before other nations and States which support the revolution."

Regarding the mechanism of selection that they had proposed, the Coalition's former deputy director said that prior experiences of expansion only solidified the concept of quota, and we wish women to be active, not only to be an electoral vote.

The expansion proposal was resubmitted on January 2015 but was not discussed. On April 26th, 2016, the Political Committee ratified the women's expansion to 15%, raising the number of women from 5 to 20⁸³.

Issuing the decision of expanding women's representation within the Coalition took a year and nine months, and at a percentage less than the

(83) «الاتتلاف يبحث عن 15 امرأة لرفع الكوتا النسائية»، العربي الجديد، 26 / 4 / 2016:

<https://goo.gl/40AaGv>

30% demanded by the female members, which is internationally recognized since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Some Coalition members attributed the rejection of women's expansion to 30% to the possibility of disrupting some balances within it, which is categorically rejected by the main blocs⁸⁴.

This was also confirmed by a female respondent who was a member. She added: "When they sense powerful pressure being exerted upon them to expand, then it is actualized. As for increasing women's representation, they considered the inclusion of female activists who share their political alignments, hence not those who can improve the work and enhance the performance. Consequently, they do not support strong activists or personalities, except to the extent that these personalities would support this bloc or current or that."

To truly understand women's political participation, one must learn about their functional role, and whether they contributed to democratic structures that promote cooperation, transparency and guarantee the rights, or contributed to exclusive structure that serve oppression and male domination.

In one respondent's opinion, which was shared by several others, "the functional role of women within current political forces is not different from that of men, as some of them had active roles and some had weaker ones. In this, men and women are equal." The opinions of feminist respondents agreed that their role was generally the same as any man in any party, and they doubted that there could be any active role within the forces to which they belong. A number of male respondents also agreed with the feminists in questioning their roles being of any effect and influence, but they also described it as being subordinated. One civil society activist said: "We

(84) In the context of periodical meetings organized by the Feminist Lobby with many opposition political forces, which are aimed at promoting women's political participation and making way for equal opportunities with men reaching positions of decision-making, a meeting was held with the head of the Coalition and a number of its members on November 25th, 2014. The delegation was informed of the rejection of a proposal by its female members to increase the rate of women's participation to 30%, which was justified by saying that it would upset power balances within the Coalition. Eager for the proposal, one member said that it is possible to pass a decision of a 15%-increase.

must admit that, over five years of struggle, no role of political forces was sufficiently clear, i.e. none have been active makers of events as opposed to mere reactors to them. It goes without saying that this also applies to decision-making mechanisms and women's roles in decisions. One cannot compare the responsibilities on the popular level which were borne by women to how little it translated into actual participation." One young woman in the Coalition bloc had this following perspective:

"The crisis for women was typification, as women's effectiveness turned in public perception into certain types of work, paramount over which is humanitarian work. But there is a large disparity between women's effectiveness in political leadership, since the formation of the National Council and until today, each according to her field and capacity, and also to the stormy political climate that the Syrian situation undergoes."

One respondent commented: "In truth, I have not seen a role for female politicians in current political forces, neither in decision-making positions, nor the second level after that. I cannot name any activity they conducted that was an impactful achievement, and not merely a distorted image of the men in these formations, be it with their replicated rhetoric or their non-commitment to women's issues. The presence of female politicians in decision-making centers is already rare; the majority of those engaged in political activity are not politicians nor are they well-versed in doing politics. Their presence, if they were present, does not mean that they are feminists or believe in working towards politically empowering women, accepting them in that regard and broadly involving more of them in these formations; they are not even particularly insightful into the role of women and the prospect of their political activity; perhaps they share the same masculine perspectives, or even worse. Moreover, they neither consider their participation as a women's opportunity to achieve positive results for Syrian women. Those who worked on women's involvement in politics for a better Syrian future have been more impactful than the women belonging to established political entities. An example of such is the success in women's participation during the negotiation stage, and specifying a quota for women's participation in delegations." One male member of the Coalition had a contradicting view: "When women are a minority in current organizations, their role is usually strong and influential, since they would

have the incentive to prove that role by participating in decision-making and be present within decision-making circles.”

Through the interviews, I discovered that the discussion of promoting women's political participation often correlates to the issue of “competence” and “experience,” suggesting skepticism of women's efficiency and political experience, while not approaching men's competence and experience. Conversely, many respondents who were involved in political structures were in consensus that they make multiple efforts to prove themselves and their capacity. However, it has been clear how absent feminist thought is among most of them, since they failed to include women's rights in public rhetoric and in political literature and documents. Their emphasis has been mostly on increasing the numbers of women and to incorporate quota system, and later in the Riyadh conference they pressured towards establishing the negotiating delegation's Women's Advisory Board.

Some respondents from different blocs spoke of support that they had received in certain stages. But respondents from the Communist Labor Party were in consensus that the party provided them with support. A member of the Labor and the National Coordination Committee said: “Marxist parties are the most attractive to women who struggle towards human rights, justice and democracy. The presence of women in the decision-making center is good and influential within the hierarchical organizational structure that informs decisions. The Political Bureau makes decisions based on regional committees across Syria. In the NCC, nomination to decision-making positions was not quite an issue, but we suffered from the meager presence of women and from the lack of commitment and activity of any profound impact. We also suffered immensely from the NCC delegations, in which we struggled to be fairly and democratically represented. It had nothing to do with skepticism on our part, but with the conventional partisan considerations that tend to prioritize historical leaders. Let's bear in mind that we are keen to stress our political positions even if at the expense of representation. Let me give an example: Our refusal to participate in Moscow 2 and in the Cairo Conference had weakened women's representation on our part. We did not consider the necessity of being there just because we are women. We were also able to independently impose representation for women in the central council, i.e. the General Committee, despite being

affiliated with parties that guarantee our nomination. In fact, I participated in amending the bylaws in the year 2014, and the outcome was somewhat satisfactory: three women in the Executive Bureau and one on the Review Board, whose task is to regulate the organizational and political line and to monitor Executive Bureau meetings.” One political veteran, who has been a pillar of decision-making in most political backstage lobbies, both the old and the new, gave this plain comment: “I believe that political parties and blocs nominate women to decision-making centers for reasons that do not involve a genuine necessity, but rather to avoid criticism from others, and to present themselves as modern and progressive. The same applies to women’s participation in official delegations. I witnessed skepticism of women’s capacities during their nomination, as well as verbal disputes within parties and political institutions. Whenever things surpassed ostensible selection that constitutes the bare minimum, selection disputes grow.”

What I have also noted during the discussions I have had, is the conflation of being women and being feminists. A feminist is she who is aware of discrimination that befalls women in patriarchal systems, and thus aims to empower women and eliminate discrimination and violence against them and to establish equality in all fields.

The Case of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)

The case of the Democratic Union Party, an offshoot of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), is considered unique in the case of Syria. There is political will –towards the political participation of women– that distinguishes this party from any other Syrian party or political force, including other Kurdish parties. In the PYD, women are partners in authority, decision-making and war, and their rights are distinctly stated in the party’s rhetoric, which draws on Abdullah Öcalan’s thought that considers the liberation of women part of the liberation of the Kurds⁸⁵. However, this policy is in contradiction with UN reports that accuse the party’s military arm, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) of repression, violating human rights and legal procedures,

(85) عبد الله أوجلان، «العصرانية الديمقراطية هي عصر ثورة المرأة»

<http://www.pkkonline.com/arabic/index.php?sys=books>

conscripting male and female minors⁸⁶, forcefully displacing resident groups, prohibiting displaced locals from returning to their homes, and conducting arbitrary detention campaigns⁸⁷. According to the Human Rights Watch report "Syria: Abuses in Kurdish-run Enclaves," published on June 18th, 2014: "The Party, as the fait accompli authority, is required to respect international human rights law and to grant basic rights to people in the areas it controls, be them Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, and others." In its statement on August 19th, 2016, the Syrian Network for Human Rights mentions⁸⁸ that it had recorded "no less than 49 cases of arbitrary detention on the mere basis of expression of dissent or exercising political or civil activity that does not align with the Administration or its constituent party. Detentions have primarily targeted politicians and activists of the Yekîti Party, the leaders of the Kurdish National Council and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, as well as media activists, writers and even civilians who participated in protests or criticized PYD policies." The statement noted that the PYD-led Administration forces "follow a similar detention policy to the Syrian regime. There is no arrest warrant, but it is rather conducted by kidnapping from streets, markets and public spaces. Sometimes they raid political parties and civil events and kidnap people, bills of indictment." The Syrian Network of Human Rights also documented that several detainees were subject to severe beating and threats. The statement demanded that the United States, being the PYD's prime sponsor and arms provider, ensure that these weapons are not used to consolidate authoritarianism, tyranny and repression of liberties.

Several respondents commended the positive attitude of the party towards women, but the majority voiced their disapproval of the violations committed by the party, and rejected its pursuit of a canton that enables the partition of Syria. Many respondents, both women and men, were skeptical of the overestimation of the political role of Kurdish women within the

(86) هيومن رايتس ووتش، «سوريا: انتهاكات في المناطق الخاضعة لإدارة حزب الاتحاد الديمقراطي»، 2014/6/18

<https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2014/06/19/256575>

(87) تقرير منظمة العفو الدولية لعام 2015/2016:

<https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/research/2016/02/annual-report-201516>

(88) بيان «قوات الإدارة الذاتية تصعد عمليات الاعتقال التعسفي وقمع الحريات في مناطق نفوذها»، الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان، 2016/8/19

<http://sn4hr.org/arabic/2016/08/19/6824>

party, since the Kurdish community has similarly inherited the patriarchal structure. They deemed that top-down decisions protected by military, if not rendered a cultural phenomenon, might ultimately diminish. One male respondent did not agree that mere political will is behind women's active role within the party, and went on: "The PYD is the Syrian branch of the PKK, which had employed the conscription of women since the 1980s. Women's percentage in these militias is 50%, so involving them in leadership at a rate of 40% is not a political will, but a realistic necessity posed by the demographic composition of its militias. And still, despite this quota, the political decision in the party remains in the hands of one male person - who is Salih Muslim."

One female respondent considered that "the Kurdish partisan experience is more mature than ours, and the spanning of Kurds across several States gave them the opportunity to work abroad. Kurdish women are strongly present in society, and are an integral component of the Kurdish political struggle. Not all Kurdish figures live in Syria, and whoever could not be active in the country would work abroad. Established Kurdish parties have connections to Kurdish parties outside of Syria, and the experience grew and developed inside and outside, and there has been an exchange of experiences. We must not forget the significance of the secular nature of these parties, which is a very relevant indicator. The majority of the Kurdish community is inclined towards secularism, and secular environments promote women's participation."

Another respondent does not deem it sound to consider PYD as a model to study women's participation in political parties. He said: "It is a militia that is called a party. ISIS militias also include Al-Khansaa Brigade, and also the regime has the Lionesses of National Defense Forces. What would you say about them? And what about the female paratroopers who removed women's veils in Damascus? This organization has its own functions, among which is repression. Women there are participants in this repression, and this does not mean that they are a party? Talking about a militia is one thing and talking about political parties is an entirely different matter. The nature of internal relations in the PYD is based upon military hierarchy. Nobody can deny the fact that it is an armed entity. When we talk about women, we talk about peace, democracy and equality, but where do you find that in a militia? If I had weaponry I would rule whomever you want. How has ISIS

managed to rule Raqqa for over two years? Even armed formations have political bureaus and are politically active, but are they at their core political parties? A militaristic party is a militia. In Syria today, we have parties and we have militias, regardless of them being good or bad, near or far. The PYD are armed militias and therefore are not parties. In the National Coalition and the Coordination Committee, for example, no one is armed.”

Another researcher attributed the gains made by Kurdish women within their community to “the Kurdish nationalistic trend that is still alive, which has protected these organizations from religious conservative leanings. We can also add the need of Kurdish organizations for propaganda and rhetoric opposed to the rhetoric of conservative regimes ruling over Kurds in Iraq, Turkey and Iran, and the fundamentalism that has infiltrated Syria. However, that rhetoric contradicts the essence of many of the PYD’s practices, such as the conscription of female minors.”

One respondent wonders: “What irony is this that gives women their rights and conscripts minors! Is this democracy? Of course not! This is an unnatural state if we’re to measure it to society. The party’s need for whoever can carry arms had necessitated at times some alteration to its internal laws and mechanisms of recruitment of fighters. But what does it do with women fighters? Where does it go with them? It cannot discard them, as their percentage has become too high. It had to find some leadership positions for them –and I do not even wish to say ‘political’– so that it can attract the next generation into carrying arms. That is the main aim. And for this to be attractive, they discovered that they need to shuffle the cards in leadership positions. But Öcalan remained the symbol, and Syrians in general only heard the names of two people: Abdullah Öcalan and Salih Muslim. Has anyone heard of names of women in the Kurdish sphere? I do not see this to be the case.”

She added: “I went to Amouda in 2013, and along the road there were checkpoints attended by little girls who have not matured yet, carrying arms and standing there. Is this women’s rights? No. Is it the right of women to be among two or three girls, each 14 or 15 years of age, standing among men in their 30s and 40s? When we attended the Nowruz celebration, the veiled face of one very young girl was uncovered, and when she started to inspect us she was yelled at by a man. You cannot imagine how shaken she

was, which encapsulates how she has no right to speak. Even if Kurds have developed the state of their civil society more than the rest of Syrians - which is very likely, in reality Kurdish parties in the Coalition, including the Kurdish National Council, do not include a single woman among 11 representatives. They do not believe in women's political participation. Even leftist parties are not so different, and let's not keep talking about Islamists all the time: neither do leftist political parties have women's rights on their agendas, and this mentality is one of the main challenges."

One female member of the Coalition refused to consider what was achieved in the PYD as an achievement for Kurdish women: "I do not see it as a gain, but rather as an attempt to flirt with the international community. To put it more precisely, these gains are for the party's cadre, not to Kurdish women in general. The stories of Kurdish minors who are forcefully conscripted do not heed well for the prevalence of rights or living up to the slogans being raised."

A political researcher had a different opinion: "I do not consider numbers to be the prime indicator in understanding the mentality and its development. PYD knew that the issue of promoting the role of women, in form and practice, could distinguish it from religious entities and bring it closer to powerful international actors. It uses that in the best possible way." One respondent likened the experience to that of China and Korea, saying: "I never believed in the Chinese or Korean experience, and I do not think that this example is very distant from these two. Spiritually, the effacement of individual identity within the collective spirit is not an appropriate conclusion in my opinion." Another spoke of it as a nationalistic experience: "Nationalist and chauvinist parties, in practice, are not democratic and do not recognize the other, and they often foster inclinations centered around the 'national' self. Consequently, their attitude towards women is cosmetic (an example here is the Baath Party and the quota it applies). I believe the practices and violations of PYD against women (forcing them to volunteer in the armed forces, including minors) does not qualify it to be an equitable party towards women. And as I said before, the 'quota' is a tool of authoritarianism, not an actual participation, and it rather obstructs real participation." Two other respondents answered that they are not familiar with the context, and one added: "It does not fool me to see women sitting

in the center of a platform or carrying arms in the field. The cause of the developing women's societal character is much more complex. Productive societal presence on all levels is a goal that cannot be met with ostensible changes."

When asked, "is what women have achieved in the PYD indicative of political will?" a female leader in the Movement for a Democratic Society answered: "I see that it is a raw experience being materialized in reality. All what had been sketched in literature is being actualized in these regions. Women there have gained their wills, become aware of their rights, garnered the society's trust and challenged the masculine mentality. Before the joint leadership decision, men would say 'If women are not present, then we can sign, decide and ratify what we choose.' Now when women are absent, men say 'our female partners in this struggle are absent and we cannot sign any document.' Men now have to consider women's opinions in every discussion, and activities suggested by women are to be discussed with men."

In light of the wide violations and repression that take place in areas controlled by a totalitarian PYD, and given the role and participation of women in making this PYD's decisions, we conclude with one statement by the party's co-chairwoman Asya Abdullah, in a televised interview on RonahiTV on the first anniversary of the establishment of the Autonomous Administration: "We have made our decisions in the Autonomous Administration, and those who do not like it have to leave the country, because they will not be dealt with gently"⁸⁹.

Women in the Muslim Brotherhood

The Society of Muslim Brothers, or simply the Muslim Brotherhood, is considered among the most organized political forces. The MB participated in founding the Syrian National Council (SNC) in 2011, and had, and still has an outstanding weight and role in it. They constitute a quarter of the 310 total number of the SNC members, amongst them are female members of

(89) جوان سوز، «حزب الاتحاد الديمقراطي مستعد لاستبدال الشعب الكردي في سوريا بشعب آخر حسب مقاساته وتصريحات رئيسه المشتركة ليست الأولى من نوعها»، 22/7/2014.

<http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=196545>

the Society. Later in 2012, they participated in founding the Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, where the influence of "Syrian Sisters" grew within the MB organization, following the recession of their role due to systematic detention and torture in regime prisons. In 2014, six women were elected into the MB's Consultative Council, and two of them were assigned to the leadership hierarchy of the organization⁹⁰. Despite the wide presence of women within the MB organization, many of whom have formed local charity foundations, none of their names surfaced in the political scene, and they have no representation in the Coalition.

The reason for that lack of representation, according to a number of female and male respondents, is that "the permissibility of women's leadership is still an unresolved question within Islamic jurisprudence to which the MB subscribe." A number of feminists agreed with these respondents: "Despite the actual broad presence of women in the MB organization, which has led to their promotion to decision-making positions, the mentality that prevails over men and women in this party considers Islamic jurisprudence to be a source of political thought, and has contributed to keeping the MB women of a lesser political standing".

It is worth noting that the MB had issued on March 15th, 2012 the "Pledge and Charter" document⁹¹ in which they specified the guidelines of their political vision of a new Syria, which was widely considered as a positive development in their rhetoric and vision. Those guidelines included: A civil and modern state [...] A democratic, pluralistic state that operates on the principle of transition of power [...] A state based on citizenship and equality, in which all citizens are equal and every citizen can attain the highest positions [...] a state in which men and women are equal in human dignity and legal capacity, and in which women enjoys their full rights [...] A state committed to human rights as dictated by divine law and international conventions: dignity, equality, freedom of thought and expression, freedom of religion and worship, freedom of the press, political partnership, equal opportunities, social justice [...] A state that rejects discrimination."

(90) «كيف تدير جماعة الإخوان المسلمين في سورية قواعد التنظيم؟»، موقع ساسة بوست، 20/8/2015: <http://www.sasapost.com/how-the-muslim-brotherhood-in-syria-manages-the-rules-of-the-organization-now>

(91) «عهد وميثاق من جماعة الإخوان المسلمين في سورية»، 21/9/2012: <https://goo.gl/Mj0b7c>

One veteran politician stated that, “Despite all the positive development the principles of MB have undergone, and despite their selection of several women in their leadership positions, I still believe that they are very cautious to employ women in effective and decisive roles.”

The organization did not work towards empowering its female members, and did not introduce dynamic female leaders who can actively participate in political life.

A former imam said: “The MB have addressed several issues pertaining to civil society and women’s role and participation, but there remains a constant fear that they be labeled infidels by Muslim fundamentalists. They dream of leading Muslims everywhere, but are already considered infidels by Salafists and extremists and wish not lose credibility. Now, they must emerge from this disguise. They must emerge from the traditional, Salafist culture.” He added: “If they had a female leader such as Zainab al Ghazali, she would have taken the political scene by a storm. But if women members are only decorative, then they cannot take over. The mentality of MB leaders only views women as an extension of men.”

The previous leader of the MB mentioned that the prevailing view in political parties and blocs towards women’s participation is very distrustful, for a number of reasons mentioned in your question #11. He added: “The most substantial challenge faced by women within these parties is the dominant masculine mentality. They are sidelined and absent, but cannot be absolved from responsibility for this absence, since rights are taken, not granted.”

A number of respondents did know about the active participation of MB women outside the preaching frameworks. One of them said, “Women’s rights do not align with the MB thought and approach. If they recognized women’s equal rights to men, they would be going against *sharia* and religious teachings, the enforcement of which is the core element of their social role. What they are currently doing is a kind of modernization and going with the trend. This is but an attempt at gaining “good behavior” certificates from the West, which they deem to be the ultimate decider of positions and shares in the future of Syria.” According to one respondent, a researcher, the absence of any female name from the MB in the Syrian political scene is due to the fact that active women are restricted to the internal world of the MB organization, which it prefers not to show to its female supporters for now. But

in the end, it will found a women's organization parallel to the main political organization." Another political researcher commented: "Moderate Islamist parties, such as Al-Nahda in Tunisia, have heavily depended on their female activists for reasons they may not share with secular groups. But as a result, they succeeded in this endeavor and they reached the highest number of women participants in the last parliamentary elections, securing the largest number of seats for women. Some of these activists are distinguished ones, while others do not even deserve their seats. I believe that, given the more developed knowledge of the political game than other opposition groups, the MB would resort to the same method."

An economist had this to say: "The MB in particular, and Islamist parties in general, realized the significance of women's participation in political preaching activity. Despite their conservative attitudes towards women, they know that women are a key to win over the children, and that gaining women in their preaching activities means a greater outreach within society. The MB focuses much on social activity to win popular support: charity foundations, charity hospitals, etc. The concept *zakat* (or alms-giving) helps them in this regard, since donating is highly encouraged religiously, and it results in greater resources for the MB and similar political forces (including Hezbollah, which is masterful in utilizing women). On the other hand, democratic businessmen and citizens have limited contributions to democratic parties. Those are not incentivized religiously to donate, and this generates large disparities in capacity and leverage. Just look at the experience of Egypt and how Egyptian MB activities have infiltrated Egyptian society."

Another respondent emphasized: "Women in these organizations themselves do not accept equality, because it goes against *sharia*." A female member of the MB Office of Women's Action said: "The MB Society has made strides in women's participation, but unfortunately that was restricted to participation in activities within the Society, and our movement is yet to produce active female leaders who can better participate in political life."

Fatima Sbaity Kassem conducted research titled *Party politics, Religion and Women's Leadership : Lebanon in Comparative Perspective*⁹², in which she distinguished between the levels of individual religiosity, i.e. between

(92) فاطمة سبتي قاسم، سياسة الأحزاب، والدين، والمرأة في القيادة: لبنان من منظور مقارن، مركز دراسات الوحدة العربية، بيروت 2015.

personal religiosity and institutional religiosity, which indicates the religious components in partisan political programs. The latter, the researcher suggests, is the key indicator to explaining women's attainment of leadership positions within parties. Those positions have different names across the various internal structures of parties, such as political committees or bureaus, higher councils, and/or advisory committees or consultative councils. Sbaity Kassem chose Lebanon as a unique and telling case study, and her research concluded important points:

1. "Women's membership in religious parties is expansive, but women's share in leadership committees is miniscule. This is because of religious recruitment, and the utilization of several tools and mechanisms to target women, including fiscal and corporeal incentives, such as 'money in exchange for wearing the hijab,' which may draw women in and cause them to remain silent.
2. Religious parties do not promote women to leadership because they are against women's assumption of leadership positions. These parties justify this with sharia, especially the principle of men's qiwama (or chaperoning), and the notion that politics is for men whilst women's spaces are their homes, which blocks their path and prevents them from assuming leadership. This has conclusive results especially when clergymen are themselves heads of religious parties, and where they interpret the doctrine according to their interests, setting political agendas, identifying the partisan religiosity, and ultimately limiting women's representation in leadership committees.
3. Religious parties may be willing to reinterpret sharia or dismiss it when it is advantageous to them. They utilize women to polish the party's image for electoral aims, because women's presence is a symbol of modernity.
4. The diversity in the culture of political parties is tilted by partisan religiosity, which serves as a barometer of women's representation in leadership.
5. The relevance of women's membership to their representation in leadership is relatively greater in secular and civil-sectarian post-war parties than in religious parties. [...] In religious parties, there is a discrepancy between women's broad membership and

their meager share in leadership committees. It is self-evident that religious parties would not take initiative to elevate women to leadership positions, unless they undergo transformations that would decrease the level of their partisan religiosity.”

Women's presence in religious organizations is not an indicator of equality between men and women, as long as their frame of reference is masculine jurisprudence, where *qiwama* and *wilaya* (chaperoning and custodianship) reside with men within patriarchal family structures. Therefore, women's participation cannot be regarded as a step towards the state of democracy and citizenship, as was claimed in the “Pledge and Charter” document.

Civil Society Organizations with Political Guise

Just as the regime monopolized the sphere of politics, it did not hesitate to restrain any civil activity, attaching all of its organizations to the authority: Unions, non-governmental associations, student activities, cultural centers, community organizations, and so on. The regime realized that political activities and civil activities are mutually beneficial. For decades, however, the two forms of activity have been conflated, in an attempt to find a form of activity whose cost (in repression) is lower than that of organized political involvement. Moreover, Syrians were looking for sphere of activity to compensate for the repressed political opposition, which had been rendered powerless and ineffective. During the years of 2000 to 2001, some male and female intellectuals employed the cultural sphere as an entrance to civil mobilization, and politics was used as a platform for civil activity. Committees to Revive Civil Society were formed, but were quickly killed in the crib by the regime, which arrested and persecuted most of the members. Some human rights organizations had political dimensions, and some were attached to certain political entities, which in fact damaged both. Many civil society organizations, including feminist organizations, were deprived of licensing, although a blind eye was turned to some of them by way of underestimating their work.

Following the peaceful popular revolution, civil society organizations were massively spread, and had multiple motives: The desperate need to serve the society and revolution, the absence of convincing political

alternatives, seeking to activate spaces of public affairs and make an impact, seeking income, the presence of international non-governmental and governmental organizations ready to fund, and so on. Directly or indirectly, however, this massive engagement contributed to the sidelining of activists, both women and men, from organized political activity, which was direly needed by the revolution in order for it to be expressed as a democratic emancipatory project.

Female activists were not satisfied with existing political parties and forces, which failed to reflect their aspirations for freedom and equality. Neither did they form new parties to express these aspirations, with the exception of the Republican Party, which is headed by a woman. It was clear that female activists could not withstand marginalization any longer, and as such came their strong involvement in the establishment of civil society organizations. Some of these involved political activity masked as civil society, motivated by the determination to work in public affairs and to realize the aspirations of radical democratic change. One respondent, a civil activist and former member of Coalition and National Council, said: "Women are capable of giving and rising and working in civil society organizations without facing political rifts currently present on the scene, and without risking defamation and dirty battles to which women involved in political parties are subject. Before the revolution, women worked in civil society, and thus the barriers were broken between women and this type of activity that is close to the street and to the people's needs."

Two respondents confirmed that civil activity is important and essential, but that without a political authority to protect it and consolidate its achievements, it would be ruined and vulnerable, and even a waste of time and money. They also confirmed the importance of women's action in both directions: working in politics and aspiring for a role in the new Syrian state, as well as continuing the civil action and preserving its accomplishments.

Many civil society organizations and women's and feminist organizations demanded that women be involved in the peace process, with no less than 30% for women on the negotiation table and 50% in civil society organizations.

Mr. de Mistura stated during a press conference in Geneva on January 25th, 2016 that he would invite Syrian women and civil society actors to participate in the peace process. He said that "Women are important to us,

because they have many ideas about the future of Syria. We will meet with them separately.” To consultative purposes, he also established the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board, which was comprised of 12 women, among them are 2 regime loyalists and 6 selected by the Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy, which is sponsored by the UN Entity for Gender Equality. He also established a Chamber for Civil Society organizations, which included one woman in the first round of negotiations, and had a total female presence of 42% in the third round. The Board and the Chamber involved opposition and regime loyalists and in between.”

Male and female participants in the Chamber of Civil Society issued a report about their work on social media during the third round⁹³, while members of the Advisory Board only published two brief statements about their activities, both of which never addressed authoritarianism and transitional justice: the first statement was issued on February 27th, 2016; and the second was read during a press conference⁹⁴ held on March 22nd, 2016. The press conference was widely criticized by many parties engaged in public affairs, as well as two women’s organizations: The Syrian Feminist Lobby⁹⁵ and the Syrian Women’s Network⁹⁶, in which it suspended its membership in the Initiative. This conference raised the issue of lifting economic sanctions, and some of its articles included “Lifting the economic sanctions from the Syrian people, which obstructs the arrival of medicine, food and medical aid.” Here, views were divided between those who were supportive of the sanctions, believing that the regime would exploit the aid to empower its military machine against the people, and the proponents to their lifting. But this article mentioned in the press conference contradicts

(93) «قاسيون تنشر... ورقة مناقشة المنظمات في غرفة المجتمع المدني على هامش محادثات جنيف»
:2016 /4 /3

<https://goo.gl/cwr9oB>

(94) «مؤتمر صحفي للمبعوث الدولي إلى سوريا مع المجلس الاستشاري النسائي السوري»، 22 /3 /2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clsYclaHAns>

(95) اللوبي النسوي السوري، «بيان»، 23 /3 /2016
https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=984774201575689&id=696085977111181

(96) شبكة المرأة السورية، «بيان ورسالة تجميد عضوية في مبادرة نساء سوريات من أجل السلام والديمقراطية»
:2016 /3 /25

<http://swnsyria.org/?p=4463>

the document of the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy, which ties the lifting of sanctions to the immediate launch of the transitional period. This was clarified in the statement of Syrian Women's Network: "There were demands of lifting sanctions that go against the Initiative's founding documents, which stated: 'Members view that the lifting of economic sanctions over the Syrian people should arrive upon the entrance into a transition process, and this article does not include sanctions against individuals and private institutions.' We in the Syrian Women's Network, while realizing our Syrian people's economic strife, fear that released funds would be used by the regime to renew its war, and it would use them because it desperately needs them. We also believe that the economic suffering of the people is not only a result of sanctions, but primarily of the unfolding war, the lack of employments, the prevailing war economy, and most importantly the sieges imposed by the belligerent parties –especially the regime– on civilians, and the use of 'starvation or surrender' policies. We do not believe that lifting the sanctions would positively impact our people in the besieged areas." This position was also echoed by the Feminist Lobby, which emphasized that the regime's policy of starvation and besiegement, which was largely ignored by the conference, has nothing to do with sanctions: "We object to the lifting of sanctions until after the establishment of a transitional government committee upon Geneva 1, and we emphasize that the regime's policy of starvation and besiegement has nothing to do with sanctions, but is a systematic policy used to oppress communities and bring them to their knees." In addition, a number of sanctions target institutions or persons whose crimes and violations are documented, which is another issue the press conferences largely ignored. During the conference, one of the Board's members (Diana Jabbour, the former director of the Syrian State TV, and current director of the Radio and Television Production Institution) said: "We believe that women can form a state of consensus through which political considerations can be ignored or cast aside, to reach the Syria we decide: united, safe and free." This was criticized by the Feminist Lobby: "The role of women and feminists cannot be flattened in such packaged concepts such as 'peacemakers,' away from their political role and struggle for rights against all forms of oppression." The statement by the Syrian Women's Network also tackled another point in the conference: "The words 'a civil and democratic Syrian state' were retracted and replaced with 'a safe Syria,'

which in our opinion is a tradeoff of democracy for security, which is exactly what the regime seeks and what the revolutionary Syrian people rejects. The Syrian people renewed its rejection of this view of 'a safe Syria' through protests that have immediately resumed upon the beginning of a fragile ceasefire." Moreover, "When we demand the release of detainees, and of course we demand all parties to release all the detained or kidnapped, it should have been noted that the largest number of those are victims of the Syrian regime, and that its systematic torture has led to the death of many. The photos leaked by Caesar still circulate the world to stand witness to this crime."

The Syrian Women's Network withdrew the suspension of its membership in the Initiative on May 11th 2016, after members of the initiative on the Advisory board sent a letter which⁹⁷ clarified their views on the points raised by the Network in its statement, among which is the transgressions over the Initiative documents.

One member of the Initiative said that, what dismayed her the most, was what was mentioned in the letter regarding the way negotiations are held within the Council: "There are different political opinions within the Board, and hence arriving at a consensus is practically a negotiation in itself - between the Board members. In this negotiation, we bring in the Initiative's papers and aims which we abide by and negotiate to adopt as much as we can, but we cannot guarantee that what will be agreed upon is exactly the Initiative's point of view."

In an interview with the UN radio on August 31st, 2016, Advisory Board member Monira Hwaijeh clearly described the dynamics of the relations between Board members, and the mutual concessions between them concerning points of disagreement. She said, "There is a high level of disagreement. There are issues we can never agree upon, so we can neutralize them. We work to enhance women's contribution to the overall political process, and we are provided with a very wide margin with which to work on women's rights, humanitarian issues, development and even political issues, in addition to trust building measures. There is common ground

(97) شبكة المرأة السورية، «رد عضوات المبادرة في المجلس الاستشاري إلى شبكة المرأة السورية»،

:2016/5/18

we try to expand as much as possible, sometimes with mutual concessions. There are women who deem the regime national and engaged in a war against terror, while others consider those who fight as revolutionaries, and those have detainees, while the former have kidnapped... When it comes to this point, we say "the release of the ones detained or kidnapped," referring to the same suffering in a phrasing that represents everybody [...] also when it comes to democracy and secularism, we know that women cannot have their rights without democracy. Even Salafists say 'Why not? As long as women want to play a role to build Syria, so be it.'" The interviewer deduces that "women have managed to convince Salafists of the necessity of democracy for women to have their rights." Hwaijeh answers: "When we say that we are for the citizenship state, everyone agrees, but when we delve into details, disagreements arise: When we state that women and men are equals in rights and responsibilities, we disagree on these details... but as long as we agree on the citizenship state, we consider this to be a positive and all-encompassing step"⁹⁸.

It is worth mentioning that, before Mr. de Mistura's announcement of establishing the Advisory Board, he had held a private meeting with some members of the Women's Initiative in Geneva on January 27th, 2016, where he told them of his decision regarding establishing this Board, and that its members shall not be partial towards either of the two negotiation delegations. He also mentioned the alternation of members according to the case at hand. The attendees of that meeting added the article of alternation to the six standards of women's participation in the Board, which were later sent to the members of General Committee. They included:

- Members of the initiative must abide by our principles mentioned in the Initiative's founding document: ending all forms of dictatorship, a democratic state of equal citizenship, united in its land and people, committed to human rights and women's rights and criminalizes violence and discrimination against them.
- Sensitive topics such as those that hinder democratic transformation are to be addressed by the General Committee.

(98) «منيرة حويجة: الرسائل التي نحملها تتضمن وجع السوريين ورغبتنا وأملنا في بناء سوريا الديمقراطية»،

إذاعة الأمم المتحدة، 2016 / 8 / 13

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/arabic/radio/archives/213343/#.WBTKMiTz6rq>

- In case the negotiations reach a point, or points, which contradict the Initiative's founding document, the General Committee must be informed in order to take the proper measures.
- Alternation in representation of the Initiative within the advising body according to the experience and the cases at hand (emphasized personally by Mr. de Mistura).
- Transparency and inclusion are cornerstones of the Initiative's participation in the advisory body
- Regular reporting to the members of the General Committee.
- Commitment to the principle of consonance in order to draft one paper.
- The General Committee retains the right to evaluate the performance of the participating members in the advisory body based on reports and available information.

The six members of the Initiative did not abide by participation standards. A member of the Women's Initiative said: "The Initiative was not colorless, tasteless or odorless. It was initially established according to a founding document the members had worked on. The principal demand in this document was a democratic state and the elimination of all forms of dictatorship, in addition to other important articles as well. This document has not been modified or amended, so it is considered the precept of our work. The Follow-up Committee is not authorized to change or to make decisions in its regard. It is clear from its name that it is tasked with pursuing and following up issues; it's not an administrative council or committee". She added: "The idea of an advisory board was proposed to the Follow-up Committee or to some of its members. Then, in a meeting in Geneva, the idea [of the Board] and some agreed-upon names were proposed, and the Follow-up Committee selected the names of participants without consulting the General Committee. Committing to the founding document for Initiative deputies is mandatory, but they ignored it and rendered the advisory board such an ambiguous formation, in the name of peace and peacemaking. They ignored the stipulation of Resolution 1325 and all the relevant resolutions issued by the UN. On the other hand, there were some ladies who were not among the founders or main members of the Initiative, and who did not adopt its founding document and did not even advance

this document that is supposed to bring together all of those who believe in democracy and peace. As a result of this lack of a concrete basis to be built upon, the Board's performance was poor and disadvantageous to the cause of Syrian people. The Initiative deputies made concessions and ignored the agreed-upon principles, while others maintained their attitudes towards the revolution."

She emphasized that "this transgression over the founding document and the principles of participation had enabled Initiative deputies to stay on the Advisory Board, in disregard of the alternation article. This is something that satisfies Mr. de Mistura and helps him dilute the causes of anti-dictatorship women, since those women did not object to any instruction they had received, and showed positivity towards the other women who are a part of the regime's structure, authority and mindset. From the ground up, there had been no serious principles to be agreed upon in order to build and proceed with the Board's mission to achieve the desired outcomes. Additionally, following de Mistura's choice of members, the main articles in Resolution 1325 and the relevant resolutions were largely ignored, although the UN is required to implement them during wartime. Given even minimum reservations, the Board cannot achieve any real work. By way of raising vague and false peace slogans and appropriating the selection of peacemakers to the conditions and wishes of the pre-drawn general line, the Board's work has reduced the role of women in sustainable peacemaking to mockery. It has neglected women who live outside regime-controlled areas, who are vulnerable to violence and whose basic personal and medical needs cannot be fulfilled. Jumping over priorities has become a farce. Instead of being real advisors who address sensitive and critical issues, the women of de Mistura's Advisory Board turned –as he wished– into a cosmetic guise he can add to his CV as a history maker: establishing an advising council. They have been but a title and false victory with which he sought to cover his powerlessness."

As for Rola Assad, the executive director of the Advisory Board's Syrian Female Journalists Network, "the Board is comprised of 12 Syrian women with expertise in women's rights and gender equality. Since they were selected by the UN on the basis of their knowledge of Syrian context, their mission was to offer consultation. The trap into which they have fallen, however, and tried to make the Syrian women's movement fall into as well,

was that they sought to represent the feminist movement without being selected by this movement, i.e. by women on the grassroots level. The Syrian feminist movement is active on the grassroots level, while women's presence on high levels can reap some benefit, but it is still not sufficient to truly assure women's engagement at the negotiation table. Working with grassroots activists is what matters, because this is what can lay foundations for a broader women's mobilization that contributes to women's access to higher decision-making positions. Unfortunately, the grassroots level is being neglected in favor of small and temporary successes. The civil society sphere continues to be vital in the Syrian context, and mainly represented by civil organizations, but the high levels are not beyond the control of Syrian women's movement and hence are not representative of it"⁹⁹.

On April 2nd 2016, a group of Syrian women organized a protest in the Bekaa, Lebanon¹⁰⁰ to protest the formation of the Advisory Board. They raised banners that read: "De Mistura's Women's Board: you do not represent us and you have not voiced our demands." The Equal Citizenship Center also issued on March 29th a report that expressed total solidarity with the Board in the wake of the press conference: "We express our total solidarity with the women's Advisory Board, which we believe is a step towards women's participation in shaping Syria's future. We also see in the Board's statement a balanced attempt at approaching the Syrian situation from a human rights perspective in general, and Syrian women's rights perspective in specific. We, while supporting what the Board has achieved so far, wish that it be promoted and activated further, since it is the closest representation of the Syrian situation, and since it –in addition to other Syrian civil initiatives– is the rational and humane voice for which Syria and its people are in dire need of at this stage"¹⁰¹.

Members of the Advisory Board have been subject to smear and symbolic violence campaigns, just as many other women working in public affairs have.

(99) «(صور) تحاور الناشطة النسوية الصحفية رولا أسد عن واقع المرأة السورية»، صور، 28 / 8 / 2016: <https://goo.gl/hmWTFi>

(100) «المجلس النسائي لدى ديمستورا... أنتن لا تمثلتنا»، جريدة عنب بلدي، 3 / 4 / 2016: <http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/72104>

(101) مركز المواطنة المتساوية، «بيان رأي»، 29 / 3 / 2016: <https://goo.gl/zOr2Qw>

Many Syrian feminists stood against that campaign. A report by the Syrian Feminist Lobby, which was critical of the Board's press conference, clearly stated: "With all due respect to the feminist and political struggle of many figures within the Board, we still regard that the Board does not represent a broad sector of Syrian women, and is therefore only representative of the views of its members."

Despite the Advisory Board's supposed commitment to international laws, Diana Jabbour transgressed some of these laws when she was introduced as a Board member in a UN session titled "Media advisory: Syria Women engaged in the peace talks." The session took place in New York¹⁰² on August 26th, 2016 and was dedicated for some Board members to present their ideas. Jabbour cast doubt onto the reality of regime besiegement, and said "Is it believable that a tank can enter Darayya while medicine cannot?" This contrast was mentioned to deny the besiegement and starvation tactic employed by the Syrian regime against rebels-controlled areas. This tactic has been observed and documented by all local and international human rights organizations, including the United Nations. This incident begs the questions: "to what extent do some Advisory Board members abide by international laws that are supposed to frame their action? And how much do they benefit from promoting their opinions that are identical to the regime's narrative on international platforms?"

Following their press conference, there has been an utter blackout regarding their work within the Advisory Board. By not counseling and informing the main civil society and feminist organizations, including the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy, the Board members are contributing to a huge gap in the Syrian women's movement.

According to some information and reports, the members of the Chamber for Civil Society are usually alternated between one round and another, while the members of the Advisory Board are permanent attendees until today.

The Chamber for Civil Society has addressed many issues during the third round: humanitarian work, including relief, health and education; human

(102) UN Women "Media advisory: Syrian women engaged in the peace talks meet in New York," 26/8/2016: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/8/media-advisory-syrian-women-engaged-in-the-peace-talks-meet-in-new-york>

rights, constitution and transitional justice; stability and development. The Syrian Women's Advisory Board has worked on trust-building on multiple levels: economic, political, security-related, humanitarian, and social. Mr. de Mistura also sent both the Chamber and the Board, in addition to the two negotiation delegations, the twenty-nine questions regarding the interim governing committee.

Providing the UN Special Envoy with consultation and dealing with the highly politicized negotiation files makes us label it as political participation.

The Syrian Women's Advisory Board has specified its function into six points: 1) Discussing all the matters relevant to the content of the negotiations; 2) Dealing with the main points of dispute at any stage and providing creative visions, solutions and options to be considered; 3) Providing analysis from a gender perspective to each point on the agenda of the talks; 4) Revising texts and documents to make sure they live up to the highest standards of gender awareness and involvement; 5) Communicating with independent civil society representatives who were invited to participate in the peace talks.

It is needless to state that women's participation in the political process, whether through an advisory board or a civil society chamber, is not an alternative to their presence at the negotiation table.

My comments on the frameworks of women's participation in the political process outside the negotiation delegation are as follows:

Given that the fate of the dictator and his backers has been shelved - or rather vaguely proposed, in many UN resolutions since Geneva 1 until Resolution No. 2245, and given the fragile political process that has not made any progress, while Mr. de Mistura had requested that the six members representing the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy within the Advisory Board not be biased towards either negotiating side and commit to international laws:

- The roles and participation are conditioned by Mr. de Mistura's attempt at staying away from the essence of the conflict, which is the necessary issue to be tackled in order to build a democratic state and just and sustainable peace based on bringing war criminals to justice.

- Women's causes cannot be considered abstract and beyond political disagreements. They are political to their core, and are based upon freedom, democracy, equality and justice in the distribution of power and resources. Consequently, going along the conflict resolution and crisis management lines, and seeking a realistic solution that re-legitimizes the regime and revives it will not contribute to anything but deforming the feminist struggle, diluting it and making it subject to the anger and bitterness of the oppressed and persecuted.
- Representing Syrian women should be based on qualifications, not random recommendations having to do with circles of favoritism, nor should it be based on ethnic and sectarian quota.
- Negotiations between the opposition and the regime go through different paths, including outside the UN delegates, which requires circumventing issues and arriving at agreements that do not serve the desired political effect towards a new democratic state of citizenship. On the other hand, the dynamics of public relations and the concessions the Women's Board are making are only voiding their values from their real meaning. That was notably demonstrated by Hwaijeh's interview when she talked about citizenship.
- Entangling the opposition alongside the loyalists – or regime representatives – in these frameworks, without considering their qualifications, first constitutes an insecure space for those who will return to Syria or have family members inside the country, but also limits the expression of views and opinions as not to cause troubles with the regime. This will portray the whole political scene as a mere quarrel, not as a major conflict of a democratic project facing a security-based dictatorship project.

There are many persistent attempts at typifying the role of feminists and women, who are being essentially portrayed as mere victims with one mission: to bring men to the negotiation table, for a reconciliation they call peace. This is but a replication of previous women peacemakers whose countries underwent conflicts between two groups fighting for power and resources: Good and benevolent women vis-à-vis evil men who fan the flames of war. This implies discrimination against men and a

superficial view of women's roles, who might otherwise be free politicians and revolutionaries fighting oppression, let alone distorting the desired democratic alternative and disregarding the grave sacrifices that the Syrian people have made. Hence, we should clarify two points:

1. The typification of the role of women as peacemakers: Whatever peace or compromise that such women might engage in concocting, without addressing the dismantling of dictatorship and real democratic transition that ensures holding war criminals accountable while launching a transitional justice process, is but a fragile and unsustainable peace that will not end the conflict.
2. Promoting women's roles in the political negotiation process and in the transitional period: This cannot be achieved by disregarding politics and political considerations, which indeed means equating the victim with their executioner. Women's roles can be promoted through proposing what has been absent in UN resolutions. Separating feminist struggles from struggles against all forms of dictatorship is like severing a head from its body, for there can exist no rights for women without a democracy and a state of citizenship, and there can exist no democracy without ensuring their rights and their real contribution to determining the future of their country.

Mr. de Mistura's response to feminists' demands regarding their participation in the political process has exposed the misery of the Syrian opposition and its failure in involving and empowering them politically. As for the regime, hiring women was but a cosmetic step aimed only at showing how modernistic of a regime it is, whereas the official roles of both men and women aim only at supporting its role and consolidating it with iron and fire.

On January 22nd 2014, the opposition delegation included 2 ladies out of 15 members, while 2 other ladies were in the regime delegate.

As the demands of feminists and women mounted, a third woman joined the opposition delegation while two new female members joined the regime delegation. In addition, Assad appointed 3 female ministers out of 32 ministers in his cabinet on July 3rd, 2016, while the interim government that the opposition had formed on July 11th, 2016 involved no female ministers.

The surrealism of the regime's behavior culminated when it appointed Ms. Hadiya Abbas as the head of the legislative authority on June 6th, 2016. The personal status laws that govern the life of the female head of the parliament as well as the rest of Syrian women continues to belong to a medieval era, derived from a patriarchal jurisprudence that wishes to perpetuate their oppression and subjugation. I will discuss some of these laws in detail later in the section about judicial violence.

These facts ought to highlight the necessity of the path of liberation and renaissance entrusted with the opposition, which is still invited to present a democratic model that promotes women's political participation and adopts their causes, rather than overshadowing them and settling for their symbolic presence.

Part Two:

Four Main Issues in the Backstage of Political Forces

We will focus on 4 main issues that are relevant to women's political participation, and which occur in the backstage of political forces.

1. Democracy

A feminist respondent said that the most significant factors that contributed to the exclusion of capacities in general and women's capacities in particular have been "the absence of democracy and of rights discourse within political forces, and the prevalence of favoritism circles and gangs and of regional and sectarian distributions. What is required of these forces is to have programs supportive of women rights, programs that are courageous and critical of backwardness, discrimination and violence against women, programs that do not appease religious trends. They also need to dedicate a proportion of decision-making positions to women."

The core of democracy is freedom: freedom of individuals, societies and countries. Only free can we allow great principles of human rights and women's rights to be regulated into laws and rules, so that freedom can materialize to all people without discrimination, the freedom of every citizen that is possessed by all.

Democracy stems from a set of values, such as equal rights, freedom and inclusion, and human dignity. It also means providing all citizens, men and women, with equal opportunities, and eliminating all forms of discrimination that impede women's participation. Democratic struggles

cannot be separated from women's causes and rights that are lost due to different forms of oppression: political, religious and social.

Women's political participation and access to decision-making positions is an indicator of the democratic progress. On the other hand, depriving them of effective influence in decision-making contradicts democratic principles that give power to the entirety of the people and not a portion of it. Women's empowerment reflects on social progress as a whole. Moreover, women's involvement in the labor market and their economic participation can enable them to make policies and affect them, in order to eliminate all the constitutional and juristic obstructions to their lives and roles.

Without struggling for freedom, social justice and gender equality – in participation, practice, mechanisms and influence – even the act of raising democratic slogans can be carried out within an authoritarian, patriarchal structure that solely aims at garnering power. We can describe a party as democratic only if it is a genuine product of society, and if it has plans for change towards a humane system that allows women to equally contribute and access decision-making, on all levels and in all structures, putting women's rights, freedom and dignity as a priority for the promotion of social change. One of the most crucial roles political parties play is in shaping, mobilizing and shifting public opinion through communication with citizens and representing the will of the people. This is how they gain legitimacy.

We aspire that in the new Syria, after salvaging it from the oppressive regime, the struggle for power among major political forces can take place only through peaceful means and without denying or marginalizing the other. One of the respondents said, "Democracy is such a broad term if you do not define its essence: its form, color and method. A democracy that does not have liberating women as its pivot is not democracy. A political revolution that does not seek to liberate women is not democratic. Only then can women strongly participate in these parties."

Political elites who believe in democratic change did not play their desired role in breaking with political and religious oppression, as well as traditional culture. A revolution's success is not only measured by toppling the dictator, but by building a project of political, economic, and social change that represents a democratic alternative. Regrettably, the political elites that have taken over the scene restricted their vision to the broad

notion that doing away with political dictatorship, as the crippling force hindering the society's capacities, will eventually and automatically lead to women's attainment of all their rights. This has proven to be a grave mistake. On the contrary, the harmony between the political forces that have taken the scene and the religious oppression imposed by Salafist forces controlling the liberated areas has had a devastating impact on women's role at this decisive juncture of Syria's history.

Within political forces that are at the forefront, authority and decision-making are concentrated in the hands of one person or a few persons. Women are often excluded. Due to the divisions within each force, systematic exclusion has been repeatedly observed. After every conference or founding meeting, a follow-up and coordination committee is formed, which eventually ends up making decisions and sidelining the General Committee, rendering it unable to act and decide. This attitude underpinned distrust that already existed among individuals due to decades of dictatorship and the police state.

Most political forces formed in exile have excluded politicized and revolutionary women who have had major roles in the uprising. A veteran politician pointed this out: "Before turning to an armed conflict, Syrian women had begun strongly asserting themselves, but unfortunately, that context was untimely concluded. As for opposition in exile, they should be perceived as temporary forces that cannot improve women's participation, especially with the domination of Islamist groups." In general, all respondents, men and women, were in consensus that political forces did not make any effort to attract female activists into political action, and that what has been done did not exceed a desire to impress the international community with a void pretense of openness and modernity. There was no systematic effort to enhance the role of women in proportion with their actual role in the uprising and in society.

One of the respondents said: "given the masculine mindset, political groups can control female activists. But I can honestly say that this is not the only problem, since there is a deeper one: it is not enough for women to appear and be appointed in political groups and committees. We are challenging a legacy of patriarchy that has made the intellectual and cultural capacity of women less competitive when compared to that of men, and that is a fact, so let's not hide it. Let me give you an example: when a party

conducts a training course for its staff, you see 2 or 3 women out of 50 staff members. Historically in Syria, the percentage of women did not exceed 10%, except for a few cases, like some left-wing organizations in the 70s and 80s where the percentage of women was a notch higher. The low percentage of female members has consolidated patriarchy within parties. Unfortunately, in my experience, whenever an opposition entity was expanded to include more women, women were still less than men, and eager competitive women were even fewer. I can speak of a resistance to female presence in the major two entities: the Coalition and the National Coordination Committee. It has been two years of struggle to include more women in the Coalition, because it is a shame that those who claim to represent all Syrians and call for a democratic state have only 5 women out of 104 members. There are many latent forms of resistance to expanding women's percentage, and no one can deny this. We really need to knock on some new doors, to create new paths and invent new means of promoting women's role and standing in society and in political, economic, social, and cultural institutions. This is not to condemn anyone, but to describe what is happening. The situation should not continue to deteriorate. There should be some effort from within women's groups as well, without resorting to hostility towards the other, and also within society, that is generally a patriarchal one, to give women what they deserve so that there be real participation by both men and women. If we fail to make efforts in this regard, I believe we will be in an even bigger quagmire. The uprising could have solved this problem, and we witnessed this in the reality when women engaged in the beginnings of the uprising, and when cities like Douma turned from extremely patriarchal communities to humanitarian ones where men and women participate, whereas what had been known about women in Douma was that they do not have the right to talk or be seen; they have no rights to begin with, except their basic biological rights."

It is true that women's political participation has been generally limited, but following the uprising, and during the establishment of the Coordination Committee and the National Council, there has been considerable participation. The undemocratic practices, however, combined with favoritism, cliques and gangs and the monopoly of decision, let alone exclusion, marginalization and the miserable political performance, all have led to the withdrawal of many women and men. Regarding what the abovementioned respondent has recounted about the weak capabilities of

women, it is the function of political parties to prepare their staff, women and men, and to politically empower them. As for the city of Douma, which turned from a patriarchal city to a humanitarian city as of the spark of the uprising, was later captured by Jaysh al-Islam, which seized power and imposed its totalitarian rule over its inhabitants. However, women returned to protesting in 2015, in front of Jaysh al-Islam's headquarters, demanding the release of prisoners and accusing Zahran Alloush of authoritarianism and of collusion with their besieger. They screamed "Out, out, out; out with the tyrant," "We want our imprisoned back," "The Ghouta needs no more tyrants," "No to Zahran, and no to Bashar,"¹⁰³ "Where are your men, Douma?" "You are full and we are starving"¹⁰⁴. The absence of men in these protests does not signify that only women oppose Zahran, but of the troubles that might have befallen men had they protested against Jaysh al-Islam, which might soon have their names circulated for arrest¹⁰⁵. Such violations and repressive acts continued after the assassination of Zahran Alloush.

Among the practices that have led to the exclusion of qualified women were attempts at preventing women from having a say in decision-making, when many men from different ideological backgrounds realized that such women constitute competitive peers to those dominating decision-making processes, due to their expertise and leadership qualities.

A member in the Coalition said, "there has been little space for women to appear as leaders, and when a woman in a decision-making position is strong and willing to make a difference, they would break her or prevent her from advancing. They would also bring weak personalities whom they can to control, and when these get out of line, they attack them once again and try to sideline them. This matter has to do with a deeply rooted social and cultural heritage, which needs lots of effort to be battled, part of it is women's mission to assure their presence and struggle be part of political

(103) «مظاهرات حرائر دوما من اجل إسقاط زهران أنتم أهل النخوة والكرامة» 2015 / 8 / 2
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXHe89kUJHg>

(104) «نساء دوما... مظاهرة تطالب بإطلاق المعتقلين من سجون زهران علوش» 2015 / 6 / 19
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lgxhT4lp0Q

(105) يمىنى الدمشقي، «سوريون يتظاهرون ضد علوش و'جيش الإسلام' في الغوطة الشرقية»، عربي 21،
 2015 / 8 / 10

action.” When I asked about the factors and practices that exclude qualified women from political forces, she responded: “An advocacy campaign is often launched against women in order to prevent them from reaching any place with decision-making capacities. Honestly, there is more effort in this regard coming from Islamist forces, since some of them believe that women shouldn’t lead or be in a leadership position, and must instead remain subaltern. But there are also secular forces with a patriarchal mindset that do not believe in women’s capabilities of leadership. But there is another factor, which is competition; in democratic environments men often elect men, while women do not have enough representation to constitute a support basis, and their numbers are usually so few that they do not make a difference either way.”

A retired female member of the Syrian National Council elaborated the last point: “Women’s problem is that they enter political forces or run for elections while dispersed; they do not act as a bloc. I tried to achieve that in the Riyadh conference before the elections, but many of them preferred their blocs, while some independents refused, so I remained alone with one other female activist. It did not come to fruition.” I believe this is an important point. Activism within blocs allows for better opportunities for political action. This is what Kurdish women do, whether in the PYD, or when they form parties and co-direct them, being in the core process of establishment and participation, or when they strongly engage in committees and coalitions. That did not happen only after the uprising. Women’s meager numbers within the blocs, however, and their reluctance to propose a feminist agenda, will continue to prevent them from making a difference, be it in attaining more of their rights, enhancing their political participation, or accessing higher positions of power. Women need to ally with each other, and with supportive forces and figures. What happened during the Riyadh conference was only a natural outcome. A female member who was nominated by a bloc cannot but commit to it. In fact, many of these women had not met or worked together before the conference. About her experience on the National Council and the reasons for her resignation, the same respondent said: “The mentality behind political action is dominated by the notion of authority. The Eastern man thinks it is exclusively his own, and this is how he was brought up in his home. So they want people they can manage, but do not want the public opinion to

know that. This requires manageable women, who can be of service to the higher interests they subscribe to. There are less manageable women, not because women are not good at organized work –to the contrary, they are very organized– but because organized work has laws and rules, and is not exactly managing other people but managing work itself. That’s why they have failed to attract other people to work with them. In fact, many female activists left the Council – myself included. I resigned on March 18th, 2012 at the airport, after I left a meeting, because of the disasters I had witnessed in that meeting. It was held with the purpose of forming its committees and political body. Firstly, there was total absence of transparency. In that meeting, we found an already chosen director for each committee. I was in the Media Committee, surrounded by around 40 reporters and media activists. But one of them stood and said, ‘I am head of the Media Committee and I would like to be introduced to you.’ I said ‘Introduce yourself and tell us about your work in media!’, and I also said that we are supposed to elect our head! The same scene took place itself in the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Financial Committee. They treated us like extras. I took issue with that. Secondly, I found that the Council enjoyed tremendous funding. I inquired about its resources, and demanded that the Council be registered as a non-governmental organization; that donations enter its treasury, and that an independent Financial Committee monitor this treasury. But when I finished my remarks, there were many who stood against me, just because I confronted *someone*¹⁰⁶ who is revered by them; how could I ask about his qualifications in the media field or demand some monitoring and accountability! I saw that they did not welcome what I had proposed, so I resigned on the spot.”

Dr Basma Kodmani, spoke to me of her political experience and withdrawal from the Syrian National Council, in a conference held for the purpose of this research. The conference included a presentation of experiences by female politicians from different states, and took place on the November 21-22 2016. “The Council was formed from the alliance of difference political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood. There was a strategy to present a moderate secular face. At a certain point, a discussion was held between the seven members of the executive office, who sought

(106) She refrained from naming the person.

to choose an eighth member. The choice was between me and an Alawite women, and I was chosen due to reservations they had against the Alawite women," she said.

Dr Kodmani adds: "A few months following my participation in the SNC, the process of militarization of the revolution had begun, and defections from the military began accelerating. We had to handle them as matters of fact. Rima Flihan and I put forth a number of discussion points regarding cooperation and coordination with the Free Syrian Army (Riad al-Asaad). We vehemently pushed to go to al-Rihaniyah and speak to them. We imposed that upon the council after heated debate. Rima was with them, and everything that was agreed in regards to organizing the relation with FSA was shattered the next day. The Muslim Brotherhood focused on two cases: militant and relief. It was possible at some point for the militant option to be under a national umbrella, and this is the central issue which has led to my departure from the executive office, which was not only led by the Muslim Brotherhood, but an alliance of other forces as well. At one point, someone in the council said to me: where are you going with this? You are imposing yourself onto the gravest issue: armed action. Warnings arrived to me from behind the scenes; that I should step away from the FSA file or else, and until the vote which led me out of the executive office. Someone said to me: You should resign! It's better for you to preserve your dignity."

On the other hand, some women acknowledged their old-formed partisan expertise, and talked about the encouragement they received from their parties and fellow members, and about women's political participation on all partisan levels. Sadly, however, while all these parties are parts of different elites, we did not witness first hand any roles of these parties and their elites in promoting equality, as if some democratic elites have been abdicated of their role and mission.

Some politicians believe that the problem is the lack of organized political action by feminists and rights activists, and therein lies the solution as well. The problem is separating rights from politics, democracy and citizenship, whereas the start of the solution is to have a grounded knowledge of the forms of constitutional and legal oppression and discrimination against women, and to work for ending this oppression and discrimination.

Whenever feminists exist in a political bloc, the issue of involving women's rights in the bloc's political rhetoric arises. One of these feminist activists says, "In the meeting preceding the National Coordination Committee's founding conference, we were 5 women out of 40 attendees. I strived to add an article pertaining to women's rights in the Committee's first document, which was faced with mockery by some members. They told me, 'You only talk about women's rights, although it is just one article!' Everybody thought it was not the right time to address this topic."

Prior to the establishment of the National Coalition, 14 political activists were invited to some consultations that took place in Amman, among whom were 3 women. When I asked one of these three, who is also a feminist, "Why did you not demand and nominate other women to participate?" she replied, "We did, but after the meeting we did not know what had happened. Then we received an invitation to Qatar. All things were almost arranged for the invitees, and a few months after forming the Coalition, I suspended my membership and demanded more women's representation as a precondition for my return. My request was supported by many other members, and indeed an expansion took place; we became 5 after we had been only 2. But even that was not enough, and I demanded third but they did not comply."

All political forces reference democracy and equal citizenship in rights and duties in their rhetoric, and emphasize their refusal of discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity or religion, all adhering to the international laws and human rights covenants. The Syrian National Council took it further in its "Political Project document," as it criminalized all forms of oppression, exclusion, subjugation, and discrimination on a national, sectarian or gender basis. The PYD also had several articles about women's liberty in its political program, especially in a document titled "Social Environment of Syrian Society"¹⁰⁷. But the attitudes of these forces against violence, repression and violations in general, especially against women, have been different in reality. The National Coordination Committee has largely ignored the incidents of oppression and forced conscription of female minors committed

(107) لمى قنوت، «الثائرات مغيبات عن صنع القرار: المشاركة السياسية للمرأة ووصولها إلى مراكز صنع القرار في بعض قوى المعارضة منذ 2011»، الحوار المتمدد،

<http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=457666>

by the armed militia of the PYD party, a former member of the NCC alliance –before freezing its membership on January 8th, 2016– and a so-called advocate for women's liberty. The National Coalition of Revolution and Opposition Forces has been silent about the incidents of violation, violence and discrimination committed by armed Salafist groups, against women in general and against female activists in particular. The Coalition has at many stages considered these groups part of the revolution.

The women who took part in both the revolutionary structures that were formed at the beginning of the revolution –such as the Local Coordination Committees, the General Committee of the Revolution, and the Revolution Coordinators Union – as well as in later, current, political forces, spoke of the big difference between the two experiences: in the first, women were not just present in the beginning, but since before the beginning, i.e. they were co-founders; in the second, far fewer women were invited, and mostly just in the last stage of consultations and preparations, and while drafting the founding papers. This has been a repeated behavior by many elites in the formations that appeared after 2011.

Clannish and partisan behavior is dominant in these consultations, and they only use women later as a facade for their political activity, not as an active and dynamic presence.

Most political forces that have taken the scene are ruled by patriarchal, socially inherited traditions. They believe that politics and momentous matters are men's specialty. Most current politicians, regardless of their backgrounds, perceive women's role in a stereotypical image, and do not trust their capability to take initiative and contribute to putting forth programs and projects the new entity requires. A few respondents pointed to concerns about women's incapability of keeping secrets, if the work required discretion.

Some respondents suspected the role of female vice presidents that some political blocs adopted, considering it to be an embellishment policy. A former activist on the National Coordination Committee said: "At some point, a lady was appointed as deputy general coordinator, only because she was present - not because she was the best suited. Neither did she improve her skills, nor did the Committee benefit from that choice."

Some female respondents who belong to the Labor Party assured me that they do not feel excluded, and that they were part of the establishment process, where they participated in drafting the founding documents. They attributed the absence of women to their inactivity.

A former female political prisoner and leader in the Labor Party narrated her experience: "My party is a secular left-wing party, and does not differentiate between men and women. Despite that, no women have assumed a leadership position during the secretive work. Even after 2000, when I became a member of the Political Bureau, whenever a political position is needed, I feel that the debate is a backstage discussion, not an objective one, so I'd rather voice my opinion and walk away. If they liked it, fine, and if they did not, I walk away all the same. I admit that it is a flaw of my character, but they used to arrange matters before I enter the conversation." When I inquired about what she meant by "backstage discussions," she talked about mobilization towards a specific idea, or a collective desire to nominate specific persons for an election. Regarding what takes place in the backstage, another female politician said: "Men always work in the backstage then ask women to come and discuss the topic. What is lacking in women, in my opinion, is that they do not pay attention to such issues; they always work with clear intentions and pay no attention to these backstage plots. They realize later how men had already discussed the topic and considered it done, and how she only came to know about that decision. Women should be outraged at this type of practice, and compel them to go back and discuss the topic openly from the beginning, or at least announce that they do not agree with their behavior and withdraw. A conscious woman can foil a man's plot even if she is alone in the party, whereas a subaltern woman says 'Alright, you discussed it! I'll agree with you.' This is a fatal error. Women must reach a level where no topic is discussed without them, they must prove their presence."

Whether we call it backstages or kitchens, they have the same function, and often - if not always, women are excluded from them. In a discussion with a Syrian researcher interested in women's political participation, he pointed out the following: "All politics in the world takes place in the backstage. The idealists subscribe to the notion that politics should be a public matter, and that is a part of the problem. Women have always

dealt with politics idealistically, and that was interpreted as naivety or disqualification within parties. That difference between realistic and idealistic perspectives should be discussed more and more, since it is one of the exclusion mechanisms men use; they bind women with political idealism then act upon the contrary.” Back-stage political debates are an integral part of political action, and last two female respondents are two examples that reflect two opposing views: the first refuses backstage discussions while the second wants to “ruin their lives” if women were excluded, and she calls upon women to refuse any decision discussed without their presence. Backstage discussions are not limited to political action, but they exist in civil work as well. A former Coordination Committee member who is currently a member of the National Coalition, when asked, “Why are women excluded from political kitchens where decisions are made?” he hesitated at first, then slipped into a discriminative comment: “They settle for the kitchen at home.” After he felt my insistence on knowing the reason, he clearly talked about this policy of excluding women: “Because these kitchens need hawks, because hawks seek them. Women do not. This has to do with the nature of political organization and the nature of problems within them, which is not extraordinary. Of course this is needs to be handled, but not by having women in the policy kitchen. You need someone in the kitchen who... if they were a woman; it’s about the characteristics of the participant - not their gender. These kitchens are usually for decision-making, and unfortunately women are generally far from these kitchens. We already talked about the general features of women’s participation, which is fragile and weak, which does not amount to much, and does not enable them to be present in kitchens where fateful decisions are made”. That discriminative and symbolically violent judgment against an entire gender came from a politician labeled secular and democratic, and it is telling of the extent of submission by those elites to social norms and traditions and their incapability of casting these inherited ideas aside and building a liberatory movement.

Another female former political prisoner from the Labor Party, since its secretive work stage, talked about her experience in the party and women’s standing in politics. She considered that “politics corrupts, and puts a person’s principles at stake. Partisanship that have developed, away from qualification and the greater national project we dreamed of, pushed me towards more caution and vigilance, as not to be exploited. I do not wish

to be a pawn, submitting to a leadership I do not entirely trust. Since the spark of the revolution, I wanted public and organized political engagement, despite its difficulty under dictatorship, and I sought it in an entity some comrades and I tried to form and build upon our capacities, looking forward to a project our country needs the most. I entrusted a man, not a woman, as he did play that role played by others. My experience taught me that if you want to work in politics, then you should be with democratic people where respect, not appeasement, reigns supreme - people who know how to improve their potential." She added, "How would you build a strong, public party under dictatorship and in fear of retaliation and arrest, which I do not wish to occur to me again? What are the concessions you will make? How do you build trust under a state of fear? It is difficult and complicated."

One respondent, who participated in the first days of the Coordination Committee, confirmed that the number of women present back then was extremely low, mainly due to fear of arrest. Their total marginalization was not possible, however, due to their formidable characters and extensive political expertise. Nevertheless, they withdrew at the end from the Committee because some took over decision-making and marginalized women.

A young female activist said: "Some conflicts used to take place with old people who deem all younger generations to be immature compared to their accumulated experience." They used to look down to the youth as "too naive," as another female respondent said: "One of the young female activists was once told: 'Oh, all of that is coming from you? When we sat with your dad you were only yea tall!' indicating her young age back in the day."

Between overshadowing and masculine monopoly over political action, on one hand, and women's departure from organized work within the major political forces on the other, all respondents, men and women, confirmed that this will affect women's rights in the new Syria. Precisely from this point stems the persistent activity of feminists, and their demand for effective female presence at the negotiation table and through the transitional process. All of the stages of this process will be preparatory for the constituent committee that would eventually draft the constitution, and if women were not present in the early stages, they will not be in the constituent committee, and thus, it will be a constitution that does not ensure women's rights and gender equality.

2. Stereotypes

A veteran politician said: "We still believe, deep inside, that fateful and decisive matters should be reserved for men, and this belief will not change overnight, for it requires struggle by women themselves as well as a different political culture."

Some revolutionary women had an important role in decision-making on the ground. They rebelled against the masculine mindset and surpassed it from the beginning. One of the LCC activists told Razan Zaitouneh about the Committees' reputation as "led by women," and the stereotypical roles attached to women such as tailoring and domestic arts, were overcome by some women in many coordination-committees in different regions. Women established platforms through which they expressed themselves and the uprising. After the militarization, however, their gradual exclusion started to consolidate in the local councils until their near-total disappearance. Males identified some shadow roles for women, i.e. far from decision-making. An example of this would be the Local Council of Zabadani; the self-proclaimed democratic political elites, especially those who have controlled the major political decisions and taken the scene, should have faced what happened in the Zabadani Council, instead of observing with absolute negativity the discriminative and repressive actions imposed by fundamentalist armed forces that took over many regions in Syria. In Douma, for example, women had a prominent role during the revolution, and they founded the largest women coordination-committee, the Coordination-Committee of the Women of Free Douma. They chanted in protests to evoke men to join them: "Oh men of Douma, rise up! On Fridays do not hide!" Nowadays, however, some of Douma's walls read: "Your makeup and perfume delayed our victory," and "Your makeup and perfume are offensive to the men of the resistance."¹⁰⁸ Of course, part of this came in context of the regime's brutal endeavor, when it quelled peaceful protesters through killing, arrest and exile, while releasing Salafist jihadist prisoners from Saydnaya Prison in July

(108) راديو روزنة، حلقة عن: «الجنדר... لتمييز الأدوار الاجتماعية بين الرجل والمرأة»، مداخلة ناشطة من الغوطة الشرقية، الدقيقة 38:00، 10/10/2015:

2011, who then played a huge role in Islamizing the uprising, pursuing and kidnapping activists and pushing most of them out of their areas. We should add to this the alliance between many political forces and these Salafist jihadist groups that are actually fighting a religious war, which by no means represents the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people. The guardians of patriarchal roles among the political elites do not see it problematic to consider Salafist jihadist groups as part of the revolution; it is fine, they say, as long as these groups point their guns at the regime, even if they publicly harbor hostility towards democracy and impose different forms of subjugation over society in general, and over women in particular, behaving as guardians of the moral system in their areas and dividing the social space inside and outside, private and public. We can call these actions a “symbolic live-burial of women.”

War discourse and alliances have also perpetuated masculine attitudes and contributed to marginalizing the role of women. Now, the UN discourse is trying to isolate women’s roles and their cause from national liberation, typifying them as peacemakers, whatever peace and whichever compromise.

Many look at the world of politics as a world of struggle and strife, a world full of conflicts and confrontations, which does not suit women’s nature. One respondent recalls, regarding his personal experience in founding The Democratic Forum that a dispute occurred between the leading males, which resulted in the quick withdrawal of female leaders. The respondent believes that the main reason for these withdrawals of female politicians from political action is the “retreating personality” that was characterized, as he mentioned, by psychiatrist Karen Horney as “resigned personality.” This is a type personality that is non-concordant with the nature of political action. He added that political action needs a special character, often called in psychology “type A,” which it is a highly ambitious personality that adorns prominence and is ready to fight for their goals. In his opinion, most women do not have that type of personality, as he points out that among major difficulties female politicians face within political forces is the nature of women itself. He believes that Western women have surpassed that and overcome these obstacles.

Some perceive the reason behind women's concentration in civil society organizations, especially after the revolution, to be that civil work suits their nature. Civil work includes no quarrels among members, is service-based and non-competitive, has horizontal and flexible relations and produces much less noise in terms of wrangles, offence and defamation.

Resorting to specific features to describe women's personal nature in general indicates a clear discrimination against them. Typifying women's roles and their social and psychological reactions is compliant with socially constructed norms and standards that impose gendered, patriarchal hierarchies, and assign certain gender roles designed specifically for women, supported by discriminatory laws and aggregated through long decades of marginalization.

Such a categorization that some political figures subscribe to and promote suggests that, unlike the world of civil society, the world of politics does not fit women's nature, and that Western women have surpassed this nature (two-fold discrimination). This brings us back to the core of women's cause, that is, possession of power, hegemony and control over women. That is a categorization accurately crafted by patriarchal societies, where men are suitable for politics: for they have bravery, love for competition, ambition, the tendency to analyze, ability to confront, challenge and overcome difficulties, power, authoritarianism, control, confidence, responsibility, supremacy, risk-taking, pressure endurance, leadership..., etc, vis-à-vis obedience, contentment, forbearance, sacrifice, compassion, sensitivity to others' needs, emotionality, forgiveness and so on.

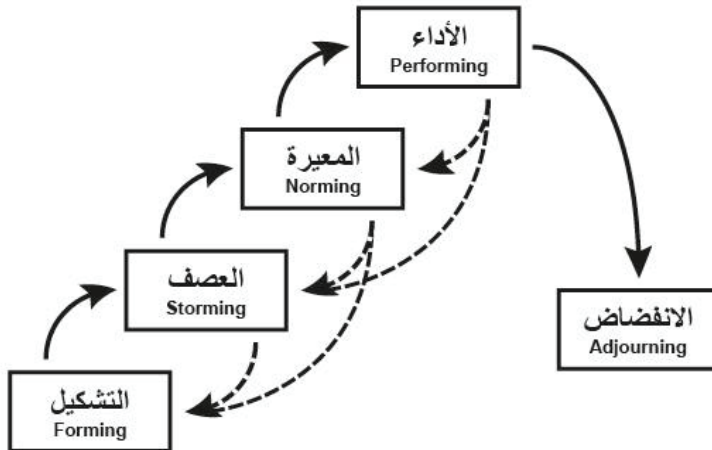
Man's nature	Woman's nature
Bravery	Sacrifice
Love for competition, confrontation	Compassion, sensitivity to others' needs
Ambition, superiority	Acceptance of luck, contentment
Strength	Obedience, politeness, propriety
Ability to make decisions	Hesitation, tolerance, caution at solving matters
Stamina	Kindness
Organizing thoughts, tendency to analyze	Emotionality
Authoritarianism, ability to take control	Submissiveness
Tending to be independent	Adaptation to society's demands

Failing to see the full scene of women *and* men withdrawing, those who attribute women's withdrawal (the stage of adjourning) to a natural dysfunction, something related to their personalities, often fail to perceive the five stages of development and evolution in the life of any team or group, which are¹⁰⁹:

1. Forming: the first stage is when members meet, break the ice and get to know each other. They test their positions and boundaries and propose questions to other teams for comparison. In this stage the team begins to build main, specific yet loose rules.
2. Storming: the second stage is characterized with conflict, since team members begin to discuss, disagree, debate and advise each other. Some assume leadership positions, and at this stage the hierarchy begins to crystalize.

(109) Konopaske, James L. Gibson, John M. Ivancevich, and James H. Donnelly Jr. "Organizations: Behavior, Structure, Processes," 14th Edition, 2012: http://dl.motamem.org/organizations_behavior_structure.pdf

3. Norming: at the third stage the team begins to work more effectively as a whole. There is more sense of teamwork and belonging at this stage, which is the beginning of cohesion.
4. Performing: at the fourth stage, the structure, hierarchy and standards are made clear within the team, where it focuses on achieving the goals and having efficiency. This stage is essential as it indicates the maturity of the team.
5. Adjourning or transforming: finally, the group team gets ready to dissolve itself or to fall apart, either because the goals have been achieved or because disagreements and conflicts resurfaced.



There is no definite timeline for each of the development stages of a team, as they are not separate from each other with clear and pronounced boundaries. In fact, some groups get involved in multiple stages at the same time, so a team might, for example, go through “storming” (discussions and debates) while “performing.” That is why we can say that team growth is a flexible, organic process that differs from one team to another. Therefore, gender has no scientifically proven relationship with team or group development.

A respondent who belongs to the democratic bloc within the Coalition compared parties and political blocs to buses: “People get on them from

the front doors and exit from the back door. Only those with ideological beliefs, are the guards, i.e. the driver and his assistants. It is a spinning circle, a centrifugal center that casts away the talented, because the diseases of political groups are inherent within it and cannot be easily overcome. The talented cannot fit easily into this mold”.

After long decades under dictatorship, some opposition blocs were not so different from the totalitarian dictatorial regime, as both used women's presence in decision-making positions for cosmetic purposes. The opposition went as far as to assign stereotypical portfolios for some ladies. After the interim government finished forming the ministries, a ministry of culture and family affairs was invented to find a place for women, which is a well-known story, according to a female respondent. This method of thinking continued during the two ministerial cycles, the second of which consolidated the political, sectarian, and ethnic quota for typical ministries.

Women's participation in forming these two governments intersects with two incidents one of the respondents recalled. The first was during a religious dialogue conference in Switzerland, where of the attendees who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, one said, in front of many State delegates: “There is no political or military seat for women; women's seat in our country is in education.” The second incident took place three years ago in a conference in Geneva, where a clergyman said, in the presence of the Swiss Minister of Foreign Affairs: “Know that, if women are at the negotiation table, then Syria is going to hell.”

Another researcher highlighted the main difference between the opposition and the regime in utilizing symbolic women's participation: “An essential difference: the opposition has ‘private’ institutions, i.e. has no authority over society, so anyone can join these institutions and anyone can leave them, whereas the regime's institutions are official and have authority, and they exclude women from positions and authorities that are supposed to be theirs based on their rights as citizens in the first place. Another issue should be noted, which is historical; circumstances surrounding opposition groups, which have never been ideal or civil enough to accommodate women's potential capacities.” Another member of the Coalition believed that the important reason is that “many traditional forces, including liberal and secular figures, could not break from conceptual sets and intellectual

means the totalitarian regimes had implanted over decades.” Another female activist considered that “women’s political participation is not a decision to be made, but rather an outcome of a long development, in culture and education that embeds this concept and puts it on the agenda. The potential of such a development under dictatorships is null. As such, the patriarchal minds that have grown up under these dictatorships carry the same customs and traditions that deny the function of women outside their stereotypical roles. In a diseased society, you cannot isolate the situation of women from the mental influence their society acts upon, and all practices regarding civil or political action are reflected images of what this society holds within it. We need serious and real work to reach real effective participation.” Another researcher did not disagree with the others: “Most opposition members have lived in a patriarchal, dictatorial society outside and inside their households. We cannot expect, no matter their claims of being democratic and supportive of human rights, that they abandon what they have lived through and submitted to for decades, and perhaps their lifetimes.” A young female activist commented: “We need more and more maturation of the democratic experience we aspire to. It is not easy, especially with the age groups that dominate the opposition, to quickly transform from one mentality to another. That does not only apply to the women’s participation issue, but many other issues as well, such as the real effective participation of the youth, which is the generation that ignited the uprising and fought for its sake.” Another respondent, who is an economist, added that it is because of “the deep-seated conservative cultural attitudes towards women; and because the regime had produced an opposition that has been, until today, similar to it, while the different political orientations do not receive proper support; more importantly, it is because of the tyranny of Islamism, most importantly the dominance of Islamism over most of the opposition activities, including relief, and schooling and education, in the camps and especially in Turkey...” A feminist respondent said: “Because democratic life and progressive discourse are missing parts from both sides, the regime and the opposition.” A comment by a politicized women was not in any way different: “I think that the opposition has the same diseases the regime has: exclusion, immoral compromise, distribution and favoritism. These are known issues, and we’re not revealing secrets here. Favoritism is not only sectarian, but on all levels: partisan, regional, tribal...,

you name it! It exists not only in the Coalition, but also in the Coordination Committee, and we all know how the distribution of positions occurs before every election, in the backstage or under the table. These compromises and favoritisms are the exact same mentality of the regime, found in the opposition, which naturally includes the exclusion of women from decision-making centers.” There was a respondent who refused this comparison, though: “No, there is a difference and a disparity in magnitude. Despite the negativities surrounding women’s conditions within the opposition forces, and even within civil society organizations, I think that there is an essential and fundamental difference, which is that these women have their dignity in the institution. This is important. Whenever they are present, nobody can violate their rights, unlike in the regime institutions, which have abused the reputation of many women and defamed them then expelled them.”

Competition between parties and entities for a bigger share in the political blocs has rendered the representation of women a matter of least priority. All this made working within them like a furnace, as many female respondents repeatedly said. This was not just about the withdrawals and resignations of many female politicians from these blocs; all the persistent efforts to convince women to be nominated for ministries of the interim government have been extremely difficult.

In the same context of the mentality that has shaped the interim government, and women’s reluctance to participate, a respondent, who is a member of the Coalition recalled: “We told them in the General Committee meeting: a government formed in name of the Coalition with no women! We threatened them that we will not agree, and of course we formed it and added one lady to its cabinet.” He added: “I spoke to many female colleagues with whom I had worked for more than 15 years, and all have refused.” During the interview with this same respondent, who defines himself as secular and democratic, he slipped into a discriminative approach against women: “I told my wife, ‘bring me a pen and paper’ and asked her to write down 20 names of women she thinks are competent for being ministers and prime ministers,” in a clear indication that there are not many!

Eventually, that threat bore fruit: with one lady added, things became acceptable, fair to women fulfilling of equality!

Some elites do not see that there are twenty women qualified to be

ministers or prime ministers, while there are so many eligible men for the task. These deeply rooted male structures are soon to be discussed in the section about symbolic violence.

Attributing women's poor presence among political forces to their incompetence is a clearly discriminatory discourse. Except for the short democratic period in Syria's history after its independence, between 1946 and 1958, no organization enjoyed healthy conditions for organized political work, as arrests and security pursuits never stopped for decades, and they continue to this day. Syrian political organizations have been exhausted and weakened, and the number of their members, whether male or female, have inevitably decreased over time. They could not weave any social depth, and their elites did not perform revisions or critiques of their experience, while most of them are still present in the current scene with their long legacy, working with the same tools and mechanisms. When it comes to competence, women and men are almost the same.

Within coalition blocs, meaning those that combine parties of different and even contradictory ideological and cultural backgrounds, influential and effective blocs push both their men and women to the front, as part of conflict over more power and influence. A limited number of respondents pointed that out. One of them expressed it in a way full of the masculine inheritance: "They push a woman to the position not because she is a woman, but because her voice is added to that of another man," instead of saying of another bloc.

Competition was not only about shares and seats, but also about formalities. A female leader in the Coalition said: "When I was the Coalition's vice president, I used to tell them all the time, especially during Friends of Syria conferences and other big and important conferences. I used to feel that men were rushing and jostling, as if they were competing over who walks the fastest, and since women's steps are smaller we were left behind." She continued: "This was repeated again during the Arab League conference in 2013." Another leader in the Coalition confirmed that she has witnessed that several times, and that male members threw off all diplomatic protocols regarding jostling.

In Geneva 2, a female member of the negotiating delegation recalled: "I had been assigned to handle the relief file, and when I objected, they

responded: 'If you do not want this file there will be no place for you here, many other men want this position in the delegation!'" She continued: "We were present there and assumed these roles in politics and were assigned to handling our files, but we were exercising politics. Yet in their minds they framed us in pre-defined roles." She also emphasized that women have never headed any of the Coalition's delegations, although at some point that was possible, and a woman was supposed to deliver a speech." She concluded: "That is their terrible mentality that really needs resolving."

Another female member of the Coalition, specifically within the Democratic Bloc, presents two other experiences. She was twice assigned as the head of a delegation, but both assignments were cancelled. The first was cancelled for financial reasons, during a visit to Tunisia when the Minister of Foreign Affairs tried to reopen the Syrian Embassy, and with the second, she could not travel for reasons related to her residency permit.

The female vice president of the Coordination Committee, who is also a former member of the Communist Labor Party, narrated her experience: "In the absence of the secretary general, and during our diplomatic meetings, I should naturally assume the role of head of the delegation, given that I am the deputy general coordinator. So it was my task to introduce the members of the delegation. But it happened twice that someone introduced me and began talking. I happened to draw his attention after each time, and his response was the same: 'do not worry, these are just formalisms!' I told him no, this is about his mentality. I warned him the second time that if he ever does it again I will interrupt him even if he was with whomever..."

A feminist who belongs to the Building the Syrian State Movement referred to an incident that occurred to her during a visit to the National Coalition in 2015, in which she talked about women's role and representation: "They told me, 'Oh give us a break... we escaped from our women, ha ha ha!'" She added: "Until now, men do not understand political action well to begin with. I think that our presence –us women– in the political arena is a right that is to be taken, not granted, so we must struggle, and part of our struggle within the opposition is to handle these issues."

One respondent whose background is Islamist said: "As for the environment to which I belong, there is still some particularity to the relation even when we are under one umbrella. Women tend to enjoy 'gossip' about

what matters to them, whereas men have their talks. The common ground is limited. When women are invited, they are invited through persuasion.” He added: “I belong to a political party which has many women, and the problem is that they do not feel any problem, and whenever I incite them to feel the problem and to confront it, they consider me provocative.”

On the other hand, we see another form of stereotyping among women involved in political entities. A feminist respondent articulated this issue: “There is a refusal to women’s rights among many female politicians, because they feel inferior. I have an experience with a female politician who categorically rejected any participation in any feminist activity, because she believed that this undermined her political status.”

A former female political prisoner who had been a member of the Labor Party expressed another level of discrimination against women: “In the wake of secretive work, and after the detention of one of our colleagues, we hid in the house of a female colleague to avoid arrest. She was the connection between the party and us. We spent days eating only noodles and fried eggs. One day we opened the fridge and found it full of meat, and we asked her: ‘Do you really have all this meat and let us eating noodles?’ She said: ‘This is for the guys.’ We were four ladies in hiding and eating only spaghetti and fried eggs, but meat is for guys.” She continued: “Yes, there is something profound here. Guys are privileged over us, women, so we have to feed them and nurture them, and we can eat whatever we find. That was reflected when our families visited us in prison; when a family has two prisoners, a man and a woman, the man would be provided with thousands of liras while the woman would be left with nothing. Perhaps if they could take something from us to give it to the guys they would not mind doing so.”

Another female respondent reluctantly expressed the level of discrimination within the National Coalition: “One of their criticisms is that I do not fast, although many men do not, but to them it’s okay for men to not fast. One of the reasons for not electing a female colleague as vice president is that she was ‘Druze,’ while they elected another female member just because she’s veiled. With all due respect for her, but they did not know who she was. Someone had told me jokingly ‘do not run for this position because there is a veiled woman who will beat you to it!’ He had a point. If they said ‘she is more politically knowledgeable than you are, and that is why

we will elect her' I would have understood. I assure you, this has become a major challenge, and unfortunately it has become dominant. I really feel sometimes that I am a minority there, despite being a Sunni but I'm just unveiled, I'm just like the Druze woman and even less recognized. The Druze have people who stand up for their rights, but nobody stands up for mine. I do not mean to be sectarian, but this is what is going on." A female colleague who did not win the elections echoed what this respondent said: "There were some within the political forces that were against my nomination, and the reason is political rivalry. I am categorized as a secular, a democrat, a pacifist and a Druze woman. These attributes bring full-scale hostility against me. Also, I have a strong character and no one can impose his or her opinion or position on me. I lost the elections because the bloc that supported me was small, whereas the Islamist groups were much stronger and were not willing to support a secular. Unfortunately sectarianism exists and matters here. The group that supported my nomination within the Coalition did so because I would be handling a sensitive and important case in Geneva 2, which is human rights."

One of the social hindrances that weaken women's participation is the responsibility they have towards their homes and children. A respondent pointed out that many decisions and dialogue sessions usually take place outside the conference rooms, whether in cafés or more social settings, where women cannot attend due to their domestic responsibilities. One of the female politicians talked about her experience: "When I got married and gave birth in 1979, I did not know that my husband also belonged to the Labor Party. It was during the secretive work stage. In 1978 when we were at meetings my presence was much more significant than his. But then I gave birth to my girl and my children became my priority, whereas he was dedicated to politics. I retreated and regressed. I couldn't leave my guests at home to attend a formal meeting, because that is not socially acceptable. But he could... This is how leadership was transferred to men." Another feminist who lives in a neighboring country pointed to other social hindrances facing female activists: "The families of young women who live in Syria do not allow them to travel abroad to attend workshops, even if they are active and doing a great job."

3. Quota

The quota system, or assigning proportions for women with no less than 30%, was one of the mechanisms suggested at the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995. It is considered a temporary procedure before a half-half, and it mitigates some of the obstructions that hinder women's participation and representation due to their historical marginalization and exclusion. Women's opportunities to access decision-making positions are considered low, due to cultural, social, political, and economical factors imposed by authoritarian patriarchal society on their lives in both the public and private domain. Until all these impediments to their empowerment are overcome, the quota system has been considered a positive, if temporary, measure acting in their favor.

Empowerment, in its general sense, means eliminating all stereotypical behaviors in society and institutions that typify women and their roles and place them in lower levels.

Political empowerment does not only mean establishing and developing capacities within current systems, but also adopting policies and new institutional and legal models that prohibit inequality and discrimination, to be reflected in discourse, rhetoric and practice, under and before the law, to ensure their equal opportunities, whether in institutions or in parties.

There are several quota systems, the most prominent are:

- Constitutional quota: quota stipulated in the constitution regarding women's seats in the parliament.
- Legal quota: quota stipulated in the electoral law regarding women's seats in the parliament.
- The quota adopted by political parties through election lists.

Quota types:

- Closed quota: women's seats are specified and they cannot be nominated outside them.
- Open quota: where women choose to be nominated inside or outside their quotas, so they can exceed their specified quotas.

- Minimum quota: the minimum rate of women's seats is specified and they can exceed it.
- Maximum quota: the maximum rate for women's seats is specified, and only women with higher votes win.
- Optional quota: parties impose a women's quota on their lists, where women's names are put in parties' lists that are likely to win, and where electoral lists are not accepted unless quota is applied.

Applying quota in the structures of some current political forces on the seat of the vice president/general coordinator needs some commitments and procedures to go with it:

- Documents and statements of parties and forces are like their constitutions, where they present their ideas, views and methods of materializing them. Any party or bloc that calls for freedom, democracy, justice, and citizenship, while neglecting women's rights and gender equality, or consider them non-political or less important issues, are simply parties with no liberatory thought and what they raise are meaningless signs.
- Assuring women's presence in all party structures and committees.
- Preparing a list of female nominees so that applying a quota system does not contradict democratic competitive elections in granting power to any political or administrative structure.
- The necessity of long-term initiatives linked to the quota and that supplement them, in order to build and develop capacities and enable women to qualify for leadership positions even without quota.
- Raising awareness among members regarding the importance of women's political participation, whether in leadership or other functions.
- Party conferences are considered the most significant events organized by parties, therefore it is important to put forth a strategy and mechanism that enables women to equally attend them.
- Founding a bureau for women within the party, whose goal is to promote women's participation in the party; to contribute to

developing its policies; to place women's issues and interests on the agendas and political programs; to network with party members; to raise awareness among members and educate them on gender equality and international covenants and agreements; to coordinate activities and symposiums with female party members; to support female nominees and communicate with voters inside and outside the party; to build alliances with election nominees to support female nominees; to give the party and its members consultation regarding women's rights; and to expand the social base of the party and attract new members.

The United Nations Development Program has issued a guideline titled "Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties," which includes some good practices to enhance women's political participation¹¹⁰. These include reforming political institutions, supporting female activists within parties – (inside and outside the party's structures), encouraging female nominees for official positions, and adopting a strategy throughout the electoral cycle - i.e. before, during, and after the elections.

On March 24th, 2016, during the Geneva 3 negotiations, the UN Special Envoy Mr. Staffan de Mistura issued a document about the common grounds between the regime and the opposition, which included: "Women will enjoy equal rights and just representation in all institutions and decision-making structures, with a percentage of no less than 30% during the transitional period and thereafter." This article was added following persistent demand by Syrian women and feminists.

We asked the respondents the following: "A quota system is suggested as a temporary positive discrimination to promote women's political participation, and as means to overcome long decades of marginalization they have endured and the obstacles hindering their political participation, what is your opinion?"

Some respondents used phrases that expressed disapproval of the quota principle: "a deception and a tool to consolidate dominance and

(110) برنامج الأمم المتحدة الإنمائي، «تمكين المرأة من أجل أحزاب سياسية أقوى»، المعهد الديمقراطي للشؤون الدولية، 10/ 2011.

control,” “under the pretext of giving unqualified women an opportunity to compete with men,” “a vacant pretense without any tasks or jurisdiction,” “this will not solve the problem,” “consolidating women’s inferiority,” “does not align with equality,” “some forces use it to show off their modernity and democracy,” “non-democratic,” “might lead to appointing unqualified women...” Nobody mentioned unqualified men, of course. Yet those who consider quota to be controversial and undemocratic admitted that it is a necessary measure until a social culture that believes in women’s capability, qualification and the inevitability of their presence in leadership positions can emerge. Despite objections expressed by some, they did not present an alternative to overcome exclusion and marginalization to which women are subject. All female politicians who are organized within political blocs, however, approved of its general importance.

Some female members of the Coalition confirmed that, had it not been for the quota, no female member would have reached the VP position, to which only men in the Coalition are nominated. While the bylaws of the Coalition do not prohibit women from running for its presidency, women have been rather practically barred from accessing this position. Some female members admitted during the interviews that had they run for the presidency, no one would have elected them. When asked “Why did no female member run for presidency of the Coalition?” a former member answered, “Because, practically, when you nominate yourself, you know that you provide space for you own ridicule, and a campaign would be launched against you so that you do not round up any votes, which will end up in fiasco. Moreover, the whole process of nomination and election has political calculations, so you should guarantee that you would get some votes at least, even if you fail. That is why no female member thought of nominating herself.”

In the documents of political parties and forces, no articles pertaining to the quota are found, except for 3 female seats for the deputies of the Coalition’s president and in the PYD. Some other political blocs, at certain stages, had female vice presidents, such as the deputy general coordinator of the National Coordination Committee, the vice president of Building the Syrian State Movement, of the Kurdish National Council. But of course, no woman nominated herself for presidency in any of these cases, since there is no transition of power in any of them. That is odd from forces that call for peaceful transition of power and do not practice it.

A female member of the Coalition recalled an incident that occurred to her: "The president of the Coalition has three deputies: a seat of women, the other for the Kurdish National Council and the last is open for nomination. During one of the official meetings I had attended, there was a man who was elected for the quota seat, and he knew about me during the meeting and learned that I was the president for the quota seat, but introduced himself as the deputy president, acting as if I did not deserve my seat, while he did deserve his!" She added: "After that meeting, I confronted him about the discriminatory way with which he faced me, and he never did it again."

A former female deputy general coordinator of the Coordination Committee also recalled what happened with her: "When I was in the Committee, I demanded 30% quota for women in the Executive Bureau and the Central Council. They did accept more than I demanded regarding the Central Council. In the Coordination Committee there is a half-half system, 50% parties and 50% independent personalities, and they considered every female member in the Committee a member in the Central Council, regardless of their political affiliation. As such, there was a prominent presence of women. But in the elections, women only won 3 seats out of 12, and they were only those who nominated themselves, except for one female detainee whom I had nominated. The three women won the most votes; I won 32 votes out of 36, and the detainee won 34 out of 36. Practically we won most of the votes."

She continued: "When you have an assemblage of 91 people, among them are 30 ladies, and only 3 out of these nominate themselves, then there is severe matter with both men and women. You cannot always blame political assemblages, because even women do not step up and take initiative to assume leading positions. Of course I don't mean to generalize, but the women who were in the Executive Bureau were 3 out of 26, i.e. less than 10%."

Despite this positive incident in the Coordination Committee, it is worth mentioning that its delegation to the opposition conference in Riyadh did not include a single woman.

A female member of the Executive Bureau of the Democratic Society Movement, which is a socio-political movement, talked about the gender quota they had applied in their movement and in the PYD party: "Previously,

we applied a gender quota to the effect of 40% for men and 40% for women, while the remaining seats were to be competed for by male and female members. Since 2014, we made it half-half, while having a joint presidency, male and female co-chairpersons, both signing everything and sharing most of the responsibility. We applied that in the Democratic Society and the Autonomous Administration. The Afrin canton used to be run by a woman, but now it's a joint presidency too. So is Kobanî (Ayn al-Arab) and we are also trying to apply that in Jazira."

4. Violence

- Legal Violence

Syrian women have been subjected to legalized violence and discrimination for decades, in both public and private space. The coercive laws against women (personal status, penalty code, citizenship, reservations against Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – CEDAW) are all based on Article 3 of the 2012 constitution, specifically on the first, second, and fourth paragraphs:

Paragraph (1): "The religion of the President of the Republic is Islam." This paragraph is combined with the content of the fourth paragraph of Article 84, which requires the president "not be married to a non-Syrian wife," which deprives women from their right in assuming the presidential position.

Paragraph (2): "Islamic jurisprudence shall be a major source of legislation." This means the applicability of the strictest and most discriminatory laws on women in personal status, penalty code, citizenship, labor and social insurance laws.

Paragraph (4): "The personal status of religious communities shall be protected and respected." This consolidates sectarianism in society and constitutionalizes it, since there are eight different personal status laws¹¹¹,

(111) التمييز في قوانين الأحوال الشخصية في سورية، بحث مقارن، إعداد مجموعة من الباحثات 2009-2010، دار أثار، دمشق. ونظام الطوائف الدينية: الصادر عن المندوب السامي الفرنسي «لا مارتيل» بالقرار رقم 60 ل. ر لعام 1936 والذي حدد الطوائف المعترف بها في سورية، والتي يحق لكل منها =

all promoting discrimination against and between women, depriving them of their civil rights and authorizing clergymen to control their lives.

In Article 3 of the 1950 constitution, the first and fourth paragraphs were the same *verbatim*, while the second paragraph was “Islamic jurisprudence shall be the major source of legislation,” i.e. with an added “the” to “major source.” **The legislator did not mention women directly until Article 38: “Voters shall be the male and female Syrian citizens who have completed eighteen years of age and met the conditions stipulated in the Electoral Law.”**

I referenced the 1950 constitution because many politicians believe it to be applicable, after amendment, for the transitional period, but neither the 1950 constitution nor the 2012 one are valid; the first because many international covenants and conventions were issued after it was drafted, and the second is rejected not only because of the plenty of articles that need to be amended, but rather because of the whole political heritage attached to those who ratified it and imposed it in a specific timing. We already discussed this point in the beginning in the “Background” section. The 2012 constitution is also devoid of any definition of discrimination against women as stipulated in the CEDAW agreement, and it does not prohibit violence and discrimination against women, which solidified infringement upon their rights. It also does not include a clear article that handles the international covenants vis-à-vis national laws, further depriving women legal odds of amending the discriminatory laws based on these international conventions.

We asked the respondents the following question: “Defenders of women’s rights assert that Article 3 of the constitution enables legislators to enact the most discriminatory laws against women, such as the personal status law and the penalty code, which contradicts the desired democratic citizenship state. How can we, in the future Syria, convince Islamists and seculars who concede to them at the expense of women’s rights that women are free and legally competent beings, in order to make Syria a country that commits to international human rights laws?”

= وضع قانون أحوال شخصية خاص بها.

The general personal status law for Muslims; for Greek Orthodox; for Armenian orthodox; for Catholic sects; for Protestant courts of Syria and Lebanon; Jewish laws of personal status for the Mosouites; laws of the Druze sect in Article 308 of the general personal status law.

Many respondents confirmed that building a secular democratic system that adopts values of citizenship is the only path towards constitutionalism and laws that protect the rights of both men and women, and towards the resolution of grudges and societal deformities. Many of them emphasized that enacting any article based on Islamic jurisprudence in Syria's next constitution will inevitably be a mandate for all sorts of discrimination against women, whether regarding personal status, inheritance, freedom of spousal choice regardless of their religion or doctrine, penalty code, "honor killings", domestic violence... etc. They also emphasized that the matter is not about convincing Islamists, whether men or women, since they will not accept equality no matter how much it is discussed and negotiated. Hence, there is no other way than disregarding their views and their hostile attitudes towards modern states and human rights. Others believed that the matter is more tied to power balances between the movement towards secularism and citizenship and political Islamists in general. This battle, they added, requires much more struggle, in addition to a powerful civil society. Many feminists added that women's substantial presence in all aspects of political and social life is an effective means of pressuring Islamists into accepting the state of citizenship, emphasizing the necessity of the decisive presence of women's rights defenders during the drafting of the next constitution.

One feminist pointed out that "real seculars do not need anyone to pressure them not to concede to Islamists. We have a lot of opportunities to exert pressure on them: the emergence of Islamist radicalization generates its antithesis; the Syrian revolution has been a revolution for dignity, which is a right for both men and women; Syrian women will play a definitive role in reconstructing the country, and they cannot do so if they are not to be emancipated from the shackles of backwardness; and past experiences confirm that societies that respect the rights of women possess inherent protection from violence and radicalism; the decline in development indicators in Syria before the uprising has been related to women's marginalization, and thus there can be no development without women."

One respondent perceived hope to not only succeeded in separating religion and state, but also in separating politics from religion. Another asked that we refer back to the Syrian constitution before the unity with Egypt, "Hasn't the Muslim Brotherhood accepted it?"

Another respondent expressed his pessimism regarding this issue in particular: "It would be very difficult [to persuade Islamists], especially that Syrian society has never been sufficiently secularized, and seculars have never enjoyed social depth or accepted and been sensitive to their social reality. Oppression, in turn, has contributed to the prevalence and utilization of intolerance and fanaticism. If we were able to conserve this text, it would be a triumph for secular forces amidst the religious incitement that we have been witnessing."

Several respondents stressed the difficulty of eliminating this article, and attributed that to current social awareness. But limiting its negative effects on women's right is possible by incorporating a sub-clause that dictates a judicial penalty against whoever infringes upon women's rights, undermines their liberties, forces into marriage or prevents them from adopting the lifestyle or practicing the profession they choose for themselves.

Islamists did not agree with what the question implied. They do not believe that the mere existence of Article 3 obstructs women from assuming their aspired role. To the contrary, they claimed that Islam has elevated the status of women in society, granting them full legal competence and rights. One Islamist added: "Those who think that Islamic jurisprudence unhinges legislators, and allows them to enact the most discriminatory laws against women, and that this contradicts the values of democracy and citizenship, should learn more about Islamic *sharia* beyond the titles. Many clergymen shared their thoughts on *sharia* and claimed to be in defense of it."

In my opinion, **when we, feminists, demand a gender-aware constitution that guarantees basic liberties, human rights, equality between male and female citizens, the rule of law, separation of powers, and social justice, this means that we wish to do away with all forms dictatorship, including authoritarian patriarchal heritage that has oppressed women and subjugated them, and by extension society as a whole. If the broad definition of slavery is the ownership of humans, then masculine jurisprudence that dictates the lives of women is the slavery of our age.**

And to deconstruct what I had just mentioned, we ought to look no further than into the spirit of laws related to women's lives and discriminatory violence, and scrutinize their language and context that are derived from masculine jurisprudence.

According to Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993), violence means “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

As for discrimination, Article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (adopted in 1979) defines it as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

“It is useful to bring these concepts closer together, so we can talk about discriminative violence, or discrimination which generates violence, and violence as a system aimed at perpetuating discrimination.”¹¹²

Masculine jurisprudence has heavily depended on the principles of *qiwama* and *wilaya* (chaperoning and custodianship), both of which contradict international human rights laws for both men and women. In their comparative research titled *Discrimination In Personal Status Laws in Syria*¹¹³, a group of feminist researchers state that “the concept of chaperoning has been connected in the minds of people and interested researchers exclusively with the Islamic religion, for many reasons: Firstly, that an explicit text in Quran mentions chaperoning; and secondly, because the vast majority of Syrians are Muslims; thirdly, these principles are related to personal status law for Muslims, which is the set of general laws related to inheritance, custodianship and guardianship.” The research highlights that many values correlated with religious thought actually have ancient social and historical dimensions, most closely related to the triumph of the masculine and patriarchal over the feminine and matriarchal. Consequently, these values have only acquired sanctity later on, because legislators used

(112) رجاء بن سلامة، بنیان الفحولة: أبحاث في المذكر والمؤنث، دار بتر للنشر والتوزيع، ص 86.

(113) التمييز في قوانين الأحوال الشخصية في سورية، بحث مقارن، إعداد مجموعة من الباحثات 2009-2010، دار أثار، دمشق.

to derive their legitimacy from God, as in the Code of Hammurabi is stated: "I am the king obeyed by the four quarters of the world; Beloved of Ninni, am I. When Marduk sent me to rule over men, to give the protection of right to the land, I did right and righteousness, and brought about the well-being of the oppressed." The researcher also notes that the manifestations of *qiwama* are also founded in pre-Islamic cultures, including religions like Christianity and Judaism.

I will discuss Islamic jurisprudence, since it was referenced in Syria's 2012 constitution as "a major source of legislation," and in the 1950 constitution as "the major source of legislation."

Violent language and implications are prevalent in the personal status law and the penalty core, and they sometimes require a dictionary to explain some of their terms. For instance, in personal status law of 1953 (some of its articles were amended in 1975): *nushouz* (breach) (Article 74), *matou'atuhu* (his mounted woman) (Article 34-2) *ujrat ar-ridaa'* (breastfeeding fee) (Article 102), *ujrat al-hadana* (custody wage) (Article 142), *li'an* (oath of condemnation) (Article 129-3), *duna izn zawjiha* (without her husband's permission) (Article 73), *milla* (followers of a doctrine) (Article 215) *wali* (custodian) (Article 22). Moreover, the penalty code includes sentences like "protecting the honor of one of his kinswomen" (Article 531) and "preserving her honor" (Article 531).

The general personal status laws have propagated discrimination and violence, as well as women's inferiority in issues such as marriage, divorce, custody, guardianship, chaperoning, mobility, inheritance, testimony... etc. For example, according to enacted laws, women are not legally competent even if they have reached legal age, since they still need custodianship (Articles 27, 151, 163); the testimony of two women equals the testimony of one man (Article 14); the minimum age of marriage for men is not equal to that of women (Articles 16, 18); marriage terms are not binding to the husband (Article 14); permitting polygamy (Article 37); "The wife is obliged to travel with her husband unless the marriage terms indicate otherwise, or if the judge finds an exception to that." (Article 70); "The expenditure of each person is on themselves, except for wives whose expenditure is on their husbands (Article 154); "A married mother is not allowed to travel with her child without the father's permission," and the reverse is not true

(Article 148). Custodianship over a minor is to his father, then the closest grandfather, then the closest kinsmen (Article 170); In inheritance, the share of the male is equal to the share of two females (Article 277) although the law binds both the male and females with the expenditure of their parents (Article 158); the law allows the husband to divorce unilaterally (Articles 85, 87); violating women's privacy by observing their menses (Article 121).

Marriage in law is like selling a commodity: it has a price (the dowry) and is considered a privileged debt (Articles 54-3). Legislators did not find a problem in using phrases such as "breastfeeding fee," "custodial wage," since a husband can have the right to retrieve this half of this "price" or all of it should he discover a swindle: "If a person married a girl that was supposed to be a virgin but turned out to be deflowered" (Article 307). The law also specifies how much of the dowry is due: "If divorce occurred before the first intercourse and legal conclave, half of the dowry is due" (Article 58); it also specifies when the dowry is not due: "If separation occurred because of the wife; before the first intercourse and legal conclave, the dowry is not due" (Article 59); also, "the wife has to live with her husband after she receives her fee" (Article 66). Legislators consider the sale, or marriage, valid during the *iddat* (the period of waiting before a widow or a divorced woman might remarry), as stated by the "separation on grounds of absence" subclause: "If the absent or imprisoned husband returns while his wife is in her *iddat*, he has the right reconsider it" (Article 2-109). In the "separation on grounds of absent financial support," "the judge orders the separation retroactively, and the husband has the right to reconsider the ruling as long as he proves his solvency and readiness to provide financial support" (Article 111). In the marriage contract, a woman is transferred from her initial owner/father/custodian to the her new buyer/husband, but the authorities of the formed are not annulled should the husband be found disqualified: "If a woman of age married herself off without her male custodian's acceptance, then if the husband was qualified the contract is obligatory or otherwise the custodian can demand separation (Article 27); the husband's competence is assessed "according to traditions and customs" (Article 28). The authority of the custodian is also present in his authority to punish her if she disobeyed him, according to the chapter on custody: "The female's relative custodian can subjoin her to his household if she was under forty years of age, even if she

was deflowered, and if she disobeys him unrighteously he is not responsible for her expenditure" (Article 151). I could not even fully understand Article 154: "The expenditure of every human is on their own, except the wife it is her husband's": does it mean that she is not a human being, or does it only indicate the chaperoning and domination, or both perhaps! Non-Muslim women are subject to twofold discrimination, for they are deprived of expenditure: "No expenditure is due in case of different religions, except for the parentage or lineage" (Article 160). A testimony by a non-Muslim woman is also not acceptable in the marriage contract: "For the marriage contract to be valid, the presence of two rational, mature men or a man and two rational, mature Muslim women is required to witness the consent" (Article 12). Finally, non-Muslim women have no guardianship for the minor: "The guardian shall be fair-minded, capable of the guardianship, legally competent and shall belong to the minor's religion" (Article 178).

Article 305 states that the judge shall refer to the more predominant judgment in the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence according to Qadri Basha's law, which means subjugating women to laws enacted a hundred years ago: "All what is not stipulated in this law should refer to the predominant judgment in the Hanafi school".

A great deal of discrimination in the general personal status law applies to the rest of personal status laws for the Christian and Jewish communities.

The jurisprudence discourse stems from the notion that women's bodies are not their own (Penalty Code, Article 531), but are owned by the guardians of their virtue and chastity, i.e. the males of the family/tribe, by whom females bodies must be disciplined and subjugated. This is a basic theme in the patriarchal domination system.

The body is the epitome of seduction and the source of temptation. It must, therefore, be covered, isolated, monitored, beaten, possessed, objectified and even stoned. The more women's bodies are confined, the more chastity they have. It is in between the sacred and the impure, chastity and shame.

Islamic jurisprudence discourse only perceives women from a sexual perspective: marriage, pleasure, birth, breach, veil/unveil, and purity... This

is why women are responsible for delaying victory¹¹⁴ and causing chaos and social instability. They must be veiled and figuratively buried in their homes. Women are not good at politics, and hence cannot be in decision-making positions, let alone presidency. They reveal secrets...¹¹⁵ etc.

According to Raja Bin Salama, "The chaperoning principle that obliges wives to obey their husbands not only results in the exclusion of women from political life, but it has a parallel in public life, which is the obedience of the public masters in charge"¹¹⁶.

Jurisprudence *fatwas* stemmed from the centrality of masculinity and male domination. They reflect the oppressive structures and their notions of chaperoning, custodianship, testimony, and inheritance. There are the prevailing and the lowly, the dominant and the submissive, the leader and the obedient, the sacred and the impure, the perfect and the imperfect, the central and the marginal, the strong and the weak, the master and the follower..., all these opposites are related to autocratic sets of beliefs that oppresses and subjugates women, and that have deep and interconnected construction of religious, political, social, and cultural structures, all united to consolidate the patriarchal hegemony.

Discrimination and violence against women in the law has laid foundation for unhealthy relations between men and women as partners in the private sphere, and widened the gap between women's current reality and the backward laws to which all women are subject. More importantly, they have consolidated and implanted the "symbolic violence," which Pierre Bourdieu defines in his book *Masculine Domination*¹¹⁷ as a "quiet, invisible violence that is not sensible even by its victims." He adds that the structures of domination¹¹⁸ are the "the result of incessant labour of reproduction, to which singular agents and institutions –such as families, the church, the state– contribute. The dominated apply to the domination relations

(114) Salafists have repeatedly sprayed these sentences on walls in liberated areas. The sentence referring to delaying victory was famously written on a wall in Douma, Eastern Ghouta of Damascus.

(115) "Reveals secrets" was a repeatedly mentioned sentence by many respondents.

(116) رجاء بن سلامة، بنیان الفحولة: أبحاث في المذكر والمؤنث، دار بتر للنشر والتوزيع، ص 31.

(117) بيار بورديو، الهيمنة الذكورية، المنظمة العربية للترجمة، بيروت - نيسان 2009.

(118) المصدر السابق، ص 62.

statements derived from the dominating point of view, which makes them appear normal.” Bourdieu emphasizes in the epilogue¹¹⁹ that “while the domestic unit is one of the sites where masculine domination manifests itself most indisputably and most visibly (and not only through recourse to physical violence), the principle of the perpetuation of material and symbolic power relations exerted there is largely situated outside that unit, in agencies such as the church, the educational system or the state, and in their strictly political actions, be them overt or hidden, official or unofficial.”

What acts on domination relations within families, between fathers/husbands and women, applies to other relations in the public sphere, including non-democratic relations within political forces or in the state, such as the boss, the father, the supreme leader, and the leading patriarch.

Their severity and endurance are intensified as religious and political-security dictatorships are aligned, as happened in the example of dissolving The Social Initiative association. The shaikhs and preachers speeches were not provoked by amending the constitution in 2000 to fit the age of the inheritor Assad, but by a questionnaire on personal status laws provoking them and making them unsheathe their fiery *fatwas* that targeted female activists. This collusion clearly explains why it took activists decades to amend one sole subclause pertaining to changing the age of custody!

We all have to struggle, both men and women, to change the structure of the State and deconstruct all forms of dictatorship, in order for women living under oppression and enslavement, deprived from their rights and dignity, to be emancipated.

We have to choose in future Syria between women of modernity and women of Islamic jurisprudence. At the end of the day, it is not a matter of random interpretations and *fatwas*, but a matter of favoring the state of citizenship.

While still under social and historical resistance, unable to overcome what masculine jurisprudence has erected, we cannot enter modernity unless we originate a new legal structure that can uplift society and commit to human rights for men and women. This needs to stem from a secular, gender-

(119) المصدر السابق، ص 171.

sensitive constitution that guarantees the rule of law, separation of powers and social justice, while prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination against women, consolidating international agreements, guaranteeing protection for women from gender-based violence and from justifying abuses by religion or social customs. The major sources of legislations have to be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the international agreements and conventions pertaining to women's rights, and the principle of social justice and gender equality. It is also important that the linguistic structure of the constitution be gender-sensitive, specifying phrases like "men and women," "male and female citizens", instead of generalizing masculine or neutral phrases. A democratic constitution is one that commits to human rights and gender equality.

- Political Violence

The regime has resorted to violence as a tool of rule, which left a bloody heritage for political activism. Being politicized has always meant being powerless, which is a collective consciousness the regime sought to implant in the minds of its people, so that nobody dares to oppose its rule. This is a part of public violence that dominated the lives of people, let alone the lives of women living under multifaceted oppressive structures, in a patriarchal society that claims to be the guardian of virtues and morality! Political participation here becomes risky.

Women's participation in political groups has been limited for centuries, except for a few left-wing parties. On November 26th, 1991, the regime released 111 female activists who had been affiliated with the Communist Labour Party. Detention and security persecution have always been among the reasons for men and women's departure from political action.

After the revolution, the regime's official and semi-official media waged a fierce attack on the opposition to distort its reputation. The regime was equally oppressive and abusive with those who join a political organization, a relief organization or a protest movement. It prosecuted many of the female activists through its counter-terrorism courts¹²⁰, and many of them

(120) المفكرة القانونية، «محكمة الإرهاب في سورية: قضايا سياسية تحت غطاء مكافحة الإرهاب»، 19/5/2015: <http://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=1118&folder=articles&lang=ar>

were subject to detention, forced disappearance and arbitrary termination of work¹²¹. Systematic violence has led to the forced displacement of both female and male activists.

In a speech delivered to a group of shaikhs and female preachers in Damascus on April 23rd, 2014¹²², Assad described millions of Syrians as terrorists. He meant the communities of the towns and cities that had revolted against his rule. In another speech on June 3rd, 2012 in the parliament, he said¹²³: "And to be precise, the President is to those who stand under the ceiling of the homeland and the law, otherwise I would be equating the traitor and the patriotic, the victim and the executioner, the corrupt and the honest, who ruins and who builds." He meant that he is the president of his loyalists, and anyone who is against him is but a traitor and saboteur.

On the other hand, a number of female politicians in some political blocs were subject to fierce campaigns that aimed to undermine their reputation and reached the level of moral assassination. None of their political blocs tried to defend them, and they found themselves alone in the face of accusations and rumors, some of which have targeted their own personal lives.

In this regard, a former member of the National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition said: "I was in the General Secretariat of the National Council alongside another female colleague. The Secretariat was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, Damascus Declaration dissidents, and a number of seculars. The members of the General Committee did not have any influence, unlike the members of the

(121) هيومن رايتس ووتش، «التقرير العالمي 2014: سورية»، أحداث عام 2013، الاعتقالات التعسفية والاختفاءات القسرية والتعذيب والوفاة رهين الاحتجاز:

<https://www.hrw.org/ar/world-report/2014/country-chapters/260105>

(122) الأسد في لقاء مع العلماء (داعيات ورجال دين) يصف مئات الآلاف الملايين من السوريين (خلفهم حاضنة اجتماعية، هناك قريب جار صديق) بالإرهابيين:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_l0zcjPQv8Y

رابط مختصر للقاء السابق: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ueif2DLx6gw>

(123) In his parliament speech on June 3rd, 2012, Assad said, "And to be precise, the President is to those who stand under the ceiling of the homeland and the law, otherwise I would be equating the traitor and the patriotic, the victim and the executioner, the corrupt and the honest, who ruins and who builds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGQczlqsJ3c>

General Secretariat. There were attempts to silence and weaken the voices of women. I resigned after 6 months, because it was tragic. My female colleague, who has a powerful political presence and strong international relations, resigned too. The reason was political adversary, but they generally did not want any strong women.” She added: “There are political forces within the blocs formed after the revolution that do not believe in women’s participation and presence in decision-making positions. They might accept their presence inside the blocs, but only on the margins and as a decoration, and only because they know that the international community wouldn’t accept the lack of women’s representation. Some of them attempt to overthrow women in the elections by forming campaigns against their access to any leadership position, resorting to illegitimate and immoral means, such as vilification and incitement campaigns on social media...etc. This meant that some of them used everything at their disposal to break the strong women down and to prevent them from occupying decision-making positions.”

Regarding my inquiry on the incitement campaigns through relief work, the same respondent said: “When the women who are part of the political process attempted to play a role in relief work, they were fiercely confronted, as some groups consider relief to be their sphere. These groups aimed to build their political influence and popularity through relief work. They treated the funds as political money at their own disposal. That is why I think maybe it was a mistake to combine political activism with relief work. I also wish that the Coalition did not get involved in relief in the first place or formed the Assistance Coordination Unit or opened any relief offices anywhere”¹²⁴.

The respondent said that 50% of her decision to withdraw from the political scene was due incitement and vilification campaigns that targeted her reputation. She described that as “a dirty war”: “In a dirty war, where everything is permitted, they make up stories that touch upon your dignity and honor, they threaten to kill you, they discredit your integrity and circulate stories about you being a millionaire while you can barely pay your rent. The threats were going on before and after I left Syria.”

(124) The research and its questions did not tackle the question of Assistance Coordination Unit, and our inquiry came in the context of “defamation through relief” which was mentioned by two respondents.

Violence, in all its forms, including symbolic violence, has been undoubtedly one of the strongest obstacles that hold women activists back from organized political participation. Many female respondents noted that involvement in civil society is more secure and less violent on a personal level.

- Sexual Violence

Sexual violence in conflicts is considered an intentional strategy to dominate societies, to terrorize communities and to force them to leave their homes. Local and international human rights reports note the increase of sexual violence targeting women¹²⁵, as their bodies turned into a tool to exact revenge on the other¹²⁶. Regime prisons have been described as "human slaughterhouses"¹²⁷, where male and female detainees are subjected to the most horrible forms of systematic torture that have led to deaths¹²⁸⁻¹²⁹, rape¹³⁰ or fear of rape. These have been a major reason for the departure of women from the country¹³¹, inspiring great fear in women

(125) تقرير المنظمات غير الحكومية للاستعراض الدوري الشامل للجمهورية العربية السورية، «الانتهاكات الواقعة على النساء في سورية والأثر المجحف للنزاع عليهن»، 11 / 2016:

http://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ARABIC-REPORT_Online.pdf

(126) تقرير الظل قدمته 13 منظمة مجتمع مدني نسائية/ نسوية، «تقرير الجمعيات غير الحكومية مقدم إلى الأمم المتحدة - لجنة اتفاقية إلغاء جميع أشكال التمييز ضد المرأة (سيداو)»، جنيف، 7 / 2014:

<http://goo.gl/vId3Ng>

(127) «كيلة: سجون سورية مسالخ بشرية»، 22 / 5 / 2012 :

<https://goo.gl/bO7yT9>

(128) تقرير هيومن رايتس ووتش، «لو تكلم الموتى»، 16 / 12 / 2015:

<https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2015/12/16/284532>

(129) لجنة التحقيق الدولية المستقلة بشأن الجمهورية العربية السورية، «بعيداً عن العين.. بعيداً عن الخاطر: الوفيات أثناء الاحتجاز في الجمهورية العربية السورية»، 3 / 2 / 2016:

<http://www.ohchr.org/AR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17020&LangID=A>

(130) تقرير الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان، «العار المستدام - الاغتصاب في أفرع الأمن السورية: توثيق اغتصاب سبع نساء في فرع أمن الدولة بمدينة حماة»، 24 / 7 / 2015:

<http://sn4hr.org/arabic/2015/07/24/4374>

(131) تقرير الفدرالية الدولية لحقوق الإنسان «العنف ضد المرأة في سورية: الخروج من الصمت»، 9 / 4 / 2013

<http://goo.gl/5HRIUe>

who would otherwise be interested in getting involved in public affairs. The regime has resorted to all means that subdue entire communities: ballistic missiles, barrel bombs, chemical weapons, starvation, besiegement, and so on... all leading to transformations in the roles of women.

Women were not spared violence in the areas controlled by extremists; women have been the core subjects of their control and domination.

Crimes of sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls are considered violations of international humanitarian law. Rape crimes and sexual abuses are considered war crimes and crimes against humanity that do not abate with time and are not subject to amnesty according to United Nations resolutions 1820, 1325, 1888, and 1960, in addition to the rest of relevant decisions. According to the International Federation for Human Rights, most of the complaints and allegations submitted and reviewed by the Federation were crimes committed by the regime and its thugs in detention centers, at checkpoints and during house raids¹³². However, the political opposition has not highlighted these crimes and has avoided getting involved in them, although they targeted many women, men and young boys and girls. Moreover, the opposition has not condemned the violations committed by armed Salafist jihadist groups and religious courts. This can be attributed to several reasons:

1. The patriarchal position is responsible, according to many respondents, for not listing sexual violence among other major crimes and for not demanding its prevention and criminalization.
2. Considering these crimes as secondary might lead, according to some respondents, to damaging the position and reputation of the party or committee.
3. Combining legal work with affiliation with a certain political group weakens both. One of the respondents referenced an incident that occurred after publishing a legal report that documented violations and crimes committed by the regime and some armed formations. Many politicians refused to condemn the violation of the armed formations because it was not in their interests.
4. The weak legal discourse outside the opposition's ideologies, and

(132) المصدر السابق نفسه.

the poor knowledge and of the legal reports issued by national and international organization, as two respondents stated.

5. The activities of the female activists who are affiliated with leading political groups were not enough to push their blocs to adopt this issue as a major case among war crimes committed in Syria. Eventually, they were biased to the views of their political blocs and the criminalization became selective and in accordance with the group's political position.

A feminist respondent said: "Unfortunately, violence against women is treated according to two parallel lines of reasoning: the first is that it is the nature of things in our societies, and the second is evaluating violence against women starting from her relation to men, as the widow of a martyr or the wife of a detainee or the mother of martyrs... The most violent crime against women, that is rape, is treated as a violation of men's honor, while the suffering of the woman is totally ignored. For instance, there are always loud calls for 'defending the honor,' but when feminist organizations call for women's protection and provide them with medical and psychological support, these very women victims are hidden and covered in order to protect that same 'honor' of the family. Do political forces have statistics about the women who were killed because they were raped? I assure you that the answer is no! Every group has statistics, but none are accurate. And they all use their data to denounce their opponents. But what have they done to protect them? Were they killed? Were they forced to leave...? It does not matter to them, because every group thinks that it is "free" to use their possessions! Women are powerless property for the patriarchal mentality."

One of the respondents who is affiliated with an Islamist group said: "I do not think that sexual violence has received its share of condemnation. I think that sexual violence gave the militarization of the revolution its legitimacy. The Syrian burns in fury, if his *hurma* (possessed woman) was ever touched. The problem is that Syrians have discovered that all what is reported by the human rights organizations is a big lie. It's subject to political decisions. The only international political consensus is that the freedom and dignity of the Syrian people is not a priority. All what is being said about extremism and extremists and ISIS is an excuse to send Syrians back into

the bottle neck of oppression and corruption. Maybe a minor change will be made to the shape of the bottle neck or the degree of pressure inside it.” Another respondent commented: “I think that dealing with sexual issues in our countries is a sensitive topic. Nobody wants to open the door to disgracing a former female detainee as a raped woman. I think that the topic requires a lot of calm and deliberation.” Another feminist respondent stated “we know that the Security Council represents the interests of the powerful nations who emerged victorious after WWII, and that the UN is not independent in its decisions from these powerful nations. There are many resolutions against Israel but none of them were implemented. The truth is, we no longer trust the international resolutions, and I’m one of the Syrians who stopped counting on the international community to support our just cause. It is a part of an unjust and fake position taken by the UN to support justice. But I still find it strange that political forces do not support their own causes.”

The significance of UN Security Council Resolution No. 1325 of the year 2000 stems from the following facts:

1. The resolution guarantees women’s participation in the peace process, on all decision-making levels, and considers their protection an issue of international peace and security.
2. The decision paved the way to an encompassing empowerment of equality between women and men in participating in and observing the process of drafting the constitution, laws, legislations, electoral system, parties’ laws, the police apparatus, judiciary system and all governmental institutions and structures.
3. It is the first resolution of its kind to dictate women’s participation in the committees and centers of decision-making that have a security and military nature. This constitutes a quantum leap in the nature of women’s role and their participation on new, nontraditional political levels.
4. The decision emphasized that gender-based violence, especially rape and other forms of sexual violence, is a war crime that does not abate with time and is not included in amnesty provisions and relevant legislations. The resolution called for the protection of

women from these crimes in times of conflicts.

5. The decision was concerned with providing States with training materials regarding the protection of women, their rights and their special needs. It encouraged State members to increase their financial donations to the specialized funds and programs.
6. Resolution No. 1325 was promoted further by the Security Council's adoption of 4 other resolutions. Three of them considered resorting to sexual violence a war crime: Resolution No. 1920 of the year 2008; Resolution No. 1888 of the year 2009; the UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict was established as a result of these resolutions. Resolution No. 1960 of the year 2010 called for the preparation of systematic arrangements for monitoring and reporting the increase of efficiency in dealing with this war crime. The three resolutions 1820, 1888, and 1960 called for intensifying the efforts of United Nations member States to prevent the occurrence of systematic sexual violence on a large scale at times of conflict. Resolution 1889 of the year 2009 was concerned with gender equality and empowering women in the post-conflict era in the long-term, and with developing indicators to monitor the implementation of the resolution No. 1325.

Challenges and Facets of Deficiency

Internationally:

1. Resolution No. 1325, like many other UN resolutions and agreements, is not binding to member States. The problem also lies in the weak language utilized in expressing the demand, such as "encourage," "expresses anxiety" and "urges."
2. The politicization of justice and human rights, for both women and men, in addition to the reintegration of totalitarian regimes, such as the Syrian regime, who have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. Despite all the legal international reports that document these crimes, the international resolutions are taken in a reconciliatory manner that seeks to gain the approval of all international parties, except for the Syrian people. The fate of the

dictator and his backers is not tackled, and neither is transitional justice, without which a just and sustainable peace is not foreseeable.

3. Resolution No. 1325 treats the current wars and conflicts as given, and as if they are natural disasters or destinies that cannot be resolved even by the UN. There have been many warnings of the inevitability of the occurrence of such conflicts in many countries led by totalitarian police regimes, such as the Syrian regime. Therefore, the crimes and violations that reached an alarming frequency have had huge impacts on the surrounding countries, such as those of the European Union. The unprecedented refugee influx is but one of these impacts that cannot be reversed, except by a political solution that ends oppression and constructs a just, sustainable peace that is based on holding war criminals accountable, in preparation of democracy that is committed to international human rights laws.
4. In the Syrian context, there have been several attempts to dwarf women's role and rob it of its revolutionary political substance, as a national liberation movement that addresses all forms of oppression. Women's role is marketed in the peace process as an unbiased mediator. Women who refuse this role are often accused of resisting the peace and of being too idealistic, which will end up ousting them from any political role. I have discussed this in the section titled "Civil society organizations with a political guise."

Locally:

1. The limited awareness of Syrian decision makers of Resolution No. 1325, including those acting on a leadership level, and the absence of political will that places women issues higher on their agendas;
2. The oppressed people in Syria mistrust the international agencies and their decisions. This is a result of the international betrayal and inaction towards the suffering of the Syrian people. Whenever the international community spoke of a political solution, there was an increase in battles, air raids and shelling innocents, not to mention the proliferation of military bases of the countries involved in the conflict, such as Russia and the U.S., and recently the Turkish army intervened. Whenever the international community spoke of a political solution possessed and made by Syrians, it drafts

resolutions without the participation of Syrians, whose blood continues to be of lesser value;

3. Religion has always been utilized to suppress ideas and seek political gains. Similarly, the expression "cultural particularity" has always been utilized to oppress, subject, and terrorize half of society.

Regrettably, women acting within the opposition have neglected Resolution No. 1325, while feminists and many female civil society activists have paid attention to it. They constituted their discourse of demanding women's participation on the negotiations table upon this resolution. They eventually succeeded in securing a participation of 30% in the entire process.

In my opinion, building upon Resolution No. 1325, and the calls for wider women's participation in all power structures, will promote their protection and immunity. It is important to urge the upcoming transitional government committee, based on Resolution No. 2245 and Geneva 1, to endorse a national implementation of Resolution No. 1325 to put it in concord with the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Beijing's Declaration of the Fourth World Conference on Women and its framework. It is equally important to urge the regional countries to implement that resolution, and to prepare national plans for that purpose. None of the countries that have received Syrian female refugees, nor the local, regional and international organizations that are involved in the Syrian affair have endorsed the conception of Resolution No. 1325 in their programs. The numbers have surmounted to 4.8 million registered refugees, while 7.6 million are displaced inside Syria (according to UNHCR); 45% of Syria's population had to flee their homes, and many had to change their residence multiple times¹³³.

"More than 145,000 Syrian refugee families in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan - or one in four of all households - are headed by women facing a lone fight for survival," according to UNHCR report titled "Women by themselves"¹³⁴. They suffer from poverty, lack of aid, difficulties in obtaining

(133) «مواجهة التشظي - تقرير يرصد آثار الازمة السورية خلال عام 2015»، المركز السوري لبحوث السياسات 2016:

<http://www.arabcp.org/page/471>

(134) المفوضية العليا لشؤون اللاجئين، «نساء بمفردهن - صراع اللاجئات السوريات».

<https://goo.gl/HeaeHU>

legal documents, lack of work skills, exploitation, sexual harassment, sexual aggression, and forced marriage. And due to discriminatory laws, they are not allowed free mobility with their children, and cannot give them citizenship, and have no custody over them.

The average rate of poverty in Syria is estimated in 2015 to be 85.2%, while 69% of Syrians live in extreme poverty, unable to secure their basic food and non-food needs¹³⁵.

Violence against women must be condemned and confronted, regardless of the identity and motivation of the perpetrators, who must be politically uncovered. The UN has to abide by its Resolution No. 1325 and all the relevant resolutions regarding women at times of conflict.

Summing Up Main Masculine and Discriminatory Practices

To sum up the patriarchal practices within the political forces that pose themselves as a democratic alternative:

1. Stripping Syrians of their independent national determination, the complexity of the desired political solution that absolves them of all forms of oppression, in addition to the prolonged conflict that has turned into an all-out regional and international war, each of whose party is defending its interests and alliances, necessitates, first, that we reclaim our national decision and deal with influential countries as peers. This is the only thing that can uphold the Syrian revolution of dignity and freedom, and can make organized political activity more effective and meaningful. Furthermore, it is the only progressive and liberatory goal that is committed to the rights of women, men and children, which can encourage all politicians and activists to stand together and participate in supporting political entities that constitute a democratic model. This requires a new strategy and tactics, different from what it has previously adopted by the opposition. Only then can the opposition be legitimate, representative of the Syrian struggle for freedom, democracy, dignity

(135) «مواجهة التشظي - تقرير يرصد آثار الازمة السورية خلال عام 2015»، المركز السوري لبحوث السياسات 2016:

- and equality and backed by a popular support base as an inclusive, overarching umbrella of a national liberation cause.
2. Limiting decision-making processes within the political forces to men, while excluding women, is but a continuation of the discrimination and undermining of democracy.
 3. The low numbers of female political participants is primarily attributed to patriarchal elites that monopolize the political scene and limit women's presence to a mere cosmetic and marginalized decoration.
 4. Targeting women engaged in the public sphere, only because they are women, is relatively easy. This is often done through defamation, violence, moral harassment, undermining reputation, underestimating them, all resulting in their reluctance to participate politically.
 5. Democracy, freedom, equality, refusal of discrimination, citizenship... and all the rest of norms of the opposition's rhetoric are mere ink on paper to the guardians of patriarchy, as long as there are no strategies and democratic mechanisms that empower women and urge them to participate in politics, providing them with equal opportunity and working towards eliminating all forms of constitutional, legal, political, cultural and economic segregation.
 6. Patriarchal authorities in families have their equivalents in the political sphere: The political patriarchy. It is composed of elites who have monopolized political activities for centuries, and continue to view any female "newcomers" as primitive activists when compared to their long experience and knowledge of this field.
 7. Women under the patriarchal system are "beings by the virtue of others"¹³⁶. Their identity is limited to their being mothers, sisters, mothers of martyrs, wives of detainees...etc. This definition has been used by many elites to ignore women's role as strugglers and leaders.

(136) خالدة سعيد، «المرأة العربية كائن بغيره لا بذاته»، مجلة الموقف، العدد 12، 1970، صفحة 91-94.

8. The amount of dispossession and symbolic violence that women face is enormous, and deeply rooted in mentalities. This cannot be changed without knowledge and full commitment to human rights charters.
9. Violence against women is a denial of their capacities, rights, dignity, and humanity. It can only be understood as an authoritative mechanism to produce relations of domination and control. It must be therefore condemned and confronted, whoever its perpetrator is and whatever their motives are.
10. There is a vast difference between women who occupy decision-making positions and those who are change makers. There is a huge difference between the women who identify with exclusive patriarchal authorities and turn into tools at their hands, and the women who defend the rights of others and fight their battles as an authentic component of a larger struggle against authoritarianism and oppression. Therefore, it is necessary to obtain and adopt feminist agendas and to not separate values from practices.

Summing Up Why Women's Political Participation Has Been Undermined

The respondents were asked to rate the significance of each reason suggested to be weakening women's political participation, on a 1-9 scale, with 1 being the least impactful and 9 being the most impactful:

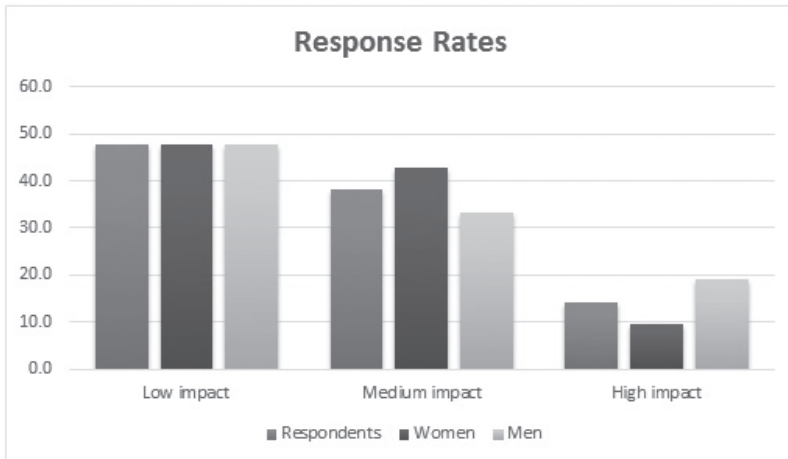
1. The international betrayal of the Syrian people and of their revolutionary aspirations to democracy.
2. The violations committed by the regime against its dissidents: oppression, detention... etc.
3. The distrust and vilification campaigns targeting the opposition.
4. Women's own abstention from exercising politics.
5. The miserable performance of the political forces and their undemocratic practices and fragmentation in the face of the savage regime.

6. The lack of experience.
7. The absence of women quota.
8. Sectarian quota.
9. The masculine mentality and the social and religious heritage.

42 individuals responded to this questionnaire: 21 women and 21 men. However, the majority of the respondents did not list the causes sequentially, from most to least impactful. They placed certain reasons in the same level. Therefore, during the analysis, the question changed from arranging the reasons sequentially to measuring the impact of each single reason in a graph divided into three levels: low impact (1-3), medium impact (4-6), high impact (7-9).

The first reason: The international betrayal of the Syrian people and of their revolutionary aspirations to democracy.

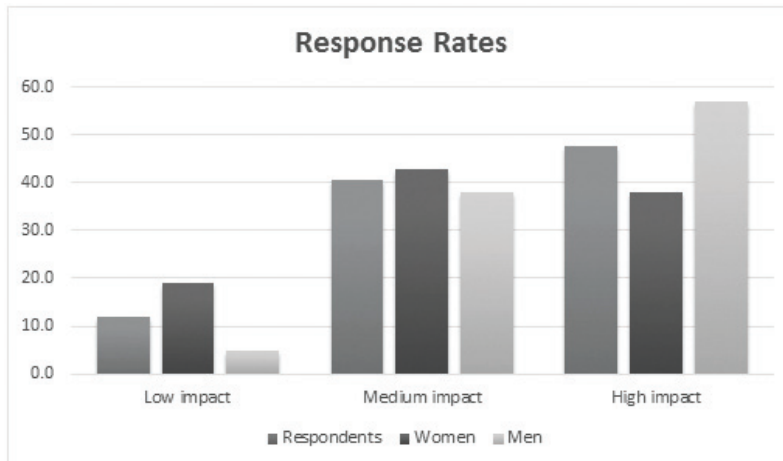
Around half of the respondents found this reason to be of a low impact on women's political participation, while third of them viewed this reason to be of medium impact on women's political participation.



The second reason: The violations committed by the regime against its dissidents: oppression, detention... etc.

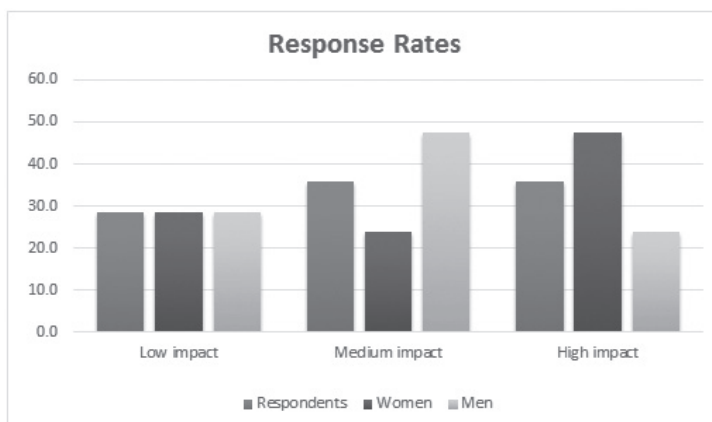
More than half of the male respondents considered the violations by the regime to be of high impact on women's political participation, and a

third of them considered it to be of medium impact. Conversely, women respondents gave more gradual answers, while slightly considering this reason to be of medium impact in comparison to other reasons mentioned in this questionnaire.



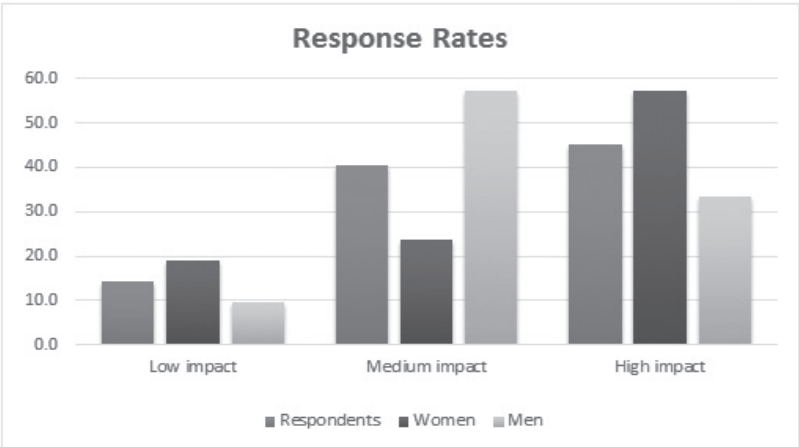
The third reason: The distrust and vilification campaigns targeting the opposition.

Around half of the female respondents viewed that defamation had a negative impact on women's political participation nowadays. Almost the rest of them considered it to be of medium impact. A quarter of the participants viewed it to be of high impact.



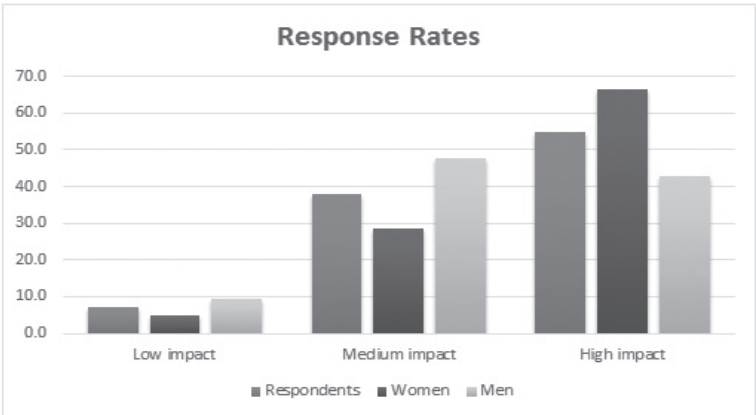
The fourth reason: Women's own abstention from exercising politics.

More than half of the female respondents believed that women's abstention is a major reason for women's departure from political participation. Around a third of the male respondents considered it to be of high impact while more than half of them considered it to be of medium impact.



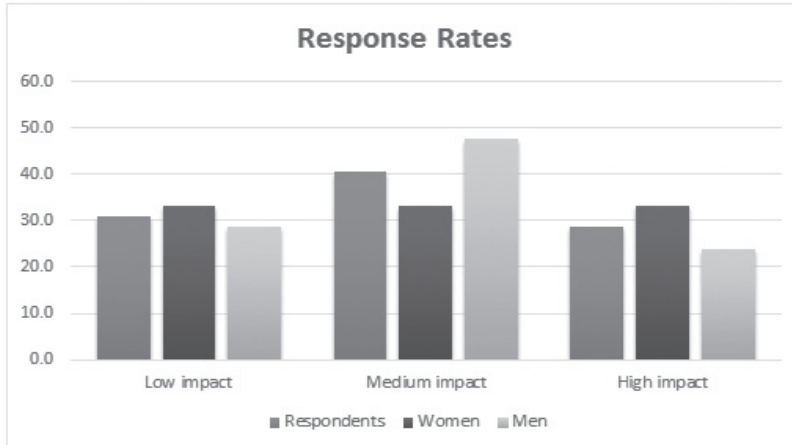
The fifth reason: The miserable performance of the political forces and their undemocratic practices and fragmentation in the face of the savage regime.

Two thirds of the female respondents believed that the unsatisfactory situation of the opposition had an immensely negative impact on women's political participation, while most of the male respondents were divided between those considering it to be of high impact and those considering it to be of medium impact, with a slight increase favoring the latter view.



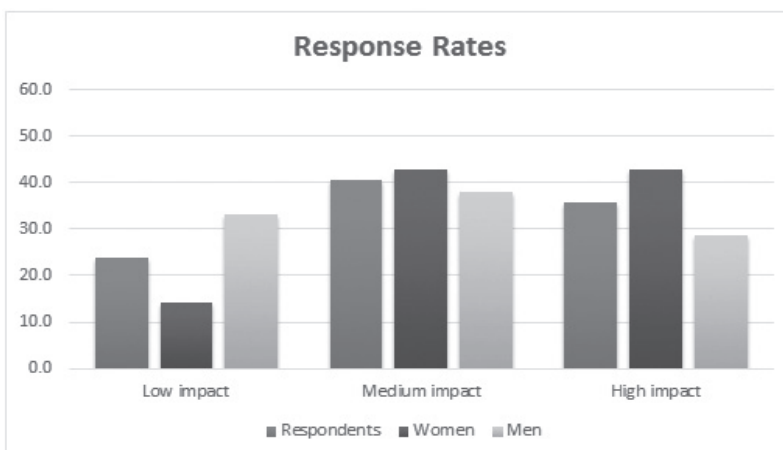
The sixth reason: The lack of experience.

The views expressed by the female respondents were almost equally divided between the three answers. Half of the male respondents, on the other hand, believed that the inexperience has had a medium impact.



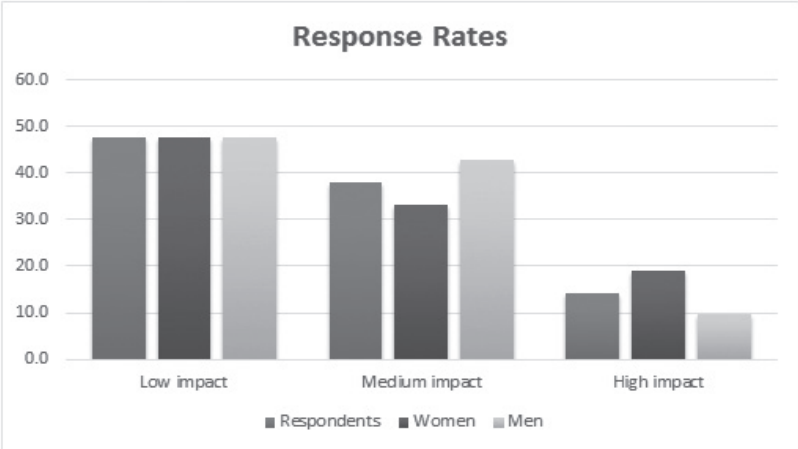
The seventh reason: The absence of women quota.

The majority of the female respondents were equally divided in assessing the impact of the absence of quota for women on women's political participation, as they fluctuated between saying it had a medium impact and saying it had a high impact. The views of the male respondents were almost equally divided between the three answers, with a slight inclination to answering with medium impact.



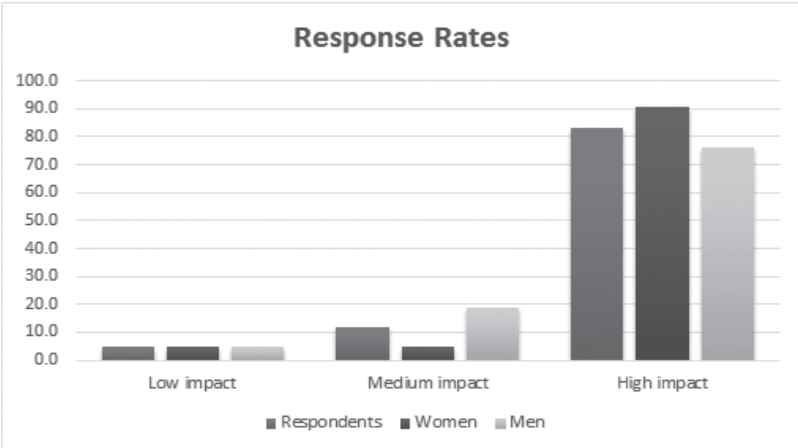
The eighth reason: Sectarian quota.

Nearly half of the female and male respondents found that the sectarian quota had little to do with weakening women's political participation. The rest of the men considered this to be of medium impact.



The ninth reason: The masculine mentality and the social and religious heritage.

The vast majority of the respondents considered this reason to be of significant impact on the weak participation of women in politics.



If we were to identify the most impactful three indicators, we would find noticeable consensus among all the male and female respondents on the ninth reason: *The masculine mentality and the social and religious heritage.*

The female respondents considered *the miserable performance of the political forces and their undemocratic practices and fragmentation in the face of the barbaric regime* to be the second most impactful reason, followed by *women's own abstention from exercising politics*.

If we were to separate the opinions of the men, we find that *the violations committed by the regime against its dissidents* comes as the second most impactful reason, while *the miserable performance of the political forces* comes as the third. It is worth mentioning that for women *the violations of the regime* came as the sixth most impactful reason, in clear disagreement with the men's evaluation of it.

What was of particular interest to us is that *the distrust and vilification campaigns* came in the fourth position as listed by the female respondents, while the male respondents listed this, alongside *the lack of experience*, in the sixth position. This demonstrates the lack of sensitivity among the male respondents towards these campaigns, which partly explains the lack of clear policies by the political blocs to confront these defamation and vilification campaigns.

Part Three:

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The engagement of women in the political process is considered to be one of the most intense aspects of the conflict, as it constituted a rupture in the hierarchical authoritarian structure upon which the patriarchal society is built. Any political bloc that does not recognize equality between men and women, and does not put forth mechanisms of its attainment, is an oppressive and tyrannical authority.

Generally, political elites who believe in democracy and citizenship seem to have resigned from their progressive role at this juncture of Syria's history. Following the interviews I have conducted, the reality of the undemocratic scene points to the exclusionary and discriminatory condition imposed by certain political forces with regards to women's participation and rights. Inevitably, the scene itself does not encourage women to engage and participate. However, women share part of the responsibility too, since political parties are the fundamental tools for women to exercise politics and to reach leadership and decision-making positions in order to realize radical democratic change.

This research has highlighted the political backstages and kitchens in which political decisions are made among certain political elites. It has also highlighted the process of excluding women from these backstages disregarding their capacities and capabilities in shaping the future of Syria.

The research has uncovered the depth of the discriminatory mentality that typifies women's roles and places them in lower positions, even within civil society organizations. Also, we have observed how strong women are being excluded not only from leadership positions but also from entire political blocs. We have demonstrated how the public rhetoric about women's role is different from the actual practices, and how sectarian and partisan quota that are formed prior to elections and from behind the scenes, in addition to the power rivalry and the absence of autonomous national determination, all contribute to excluding Syrian competencies in general and those of women in particular. Some of the opposition forces were in need to secure international recognition, which is necessary, but they have based their entire legitimacy on that recognition alone, which eventually became the lungs through which they breathe to live. These forces have forgotten that legitimacy cannot be real and strong unless it is derived from a social base, and from independent national will. The observer can identify the amount of manipulation that occurred in this regard. This would not have taken place without the approval of the opposition in the first place, and without its incapability to establish inclusive entities that combine all the dissidents with a clear, democratic position against the authoritarian state-police regime.

The political elites who believe in democratic transition have not played any role in the radical departure from the prevalent political, religious and cultural social authoritarianism. The success of the revolution is not only assessed by overthrowing an authoritarian ruler, but also by constituting a political, social and economic democratic alternative. The leading political elites have been unfortunately mistaken by the belief that, dismantling the general political dictatorship that represses the potential energy of the society is, necessarily and automatically, going to lead to ensuring women's rights. This was a grave mistake. Furthermore, the agreement between leading political forces and religious totalitarianism imposed by the salafist authorities that controlled the liberated areas has led to destructive outcomes that ended up undermining women's role at this momentous stage of Syria's history. We have seen the results through the gradual disappearance of women in local councils, which was not alarming enough, neither to the opposition nor to the donor States that support the councils.

The predominance of patriarchal mentality after a revolution, and the exclusion of revolutionary and politicized women during the formation of new political blocs, or their late symbolic invitations, by no means can establish a democratic political entity. This can only establish entities based on exclusion and oppression of the representation of more than half of society. Political transition is one thing, but the triumph of the revolution of freedom, dignity and equality is another thing altogether. This necessarily requires a political liberatory project and program that seeks to generate cultural, political, and economic change.

One of the major challenges that Syrian political entities face is how to establish democratic parties. All of the slogans of democracy, citizenship and human rights remain mere ink on paper until they are accompanied by practice, behavior and method.

It is impossible to establish such a project without eliminating political, legal, social, and economic discrimination that faces women, and without the adoption of a discourse and project that condemns gender-based violence and seeks to annihilate this phenomenon. As long as political elites are unaware of the negative effects this phenomenon has on our society, and that more than half of our society is oppressed and paralyzed, we will be unable to elevate Syria and salvage it from the horrible effects of the conflict.

Recommendations

Facing a regime that continues to cling to power with its sole tool of rule being killing, the struggle against the regime of oppression and corruption will be prolonged by influential States. Therefore, this struggle cannot be run by undemocratic and exclusionary structures, discarding all vital potentials of society. The Syrian political experience has proven that forming political coalitions, with little common ground between their blocs, is not the way to forge a progressive and liberatory path that solves our deep-rooted problems.

At this stage, we count on the democratic men and women to critique our short political experience and to establish political parties that have democratic tools and mechanisms and commit to human rights, which requires the following:

For policies

Constituting women/feminist alliances across the parties and political groups that radically oppose authoritarianism and aim to support women's participation in decision-making positions. Without such an alliance, women will remain subject to political oppression by the power breakers between the regime and foreign powers.

For political parties and forces

1. Introducing women's rights to the bylaws, rhetoric and mechanisms of parties.
2. Rendering all the publications of political parties and forces gender-sensitive, and adopting "male and female" phrasing.
3. Supporting women nominees to decision-making positions, after providing them with equal opportunities and treating them as real political partners.
4. Adopting the joint presidency principle in decision-making positions, and adopting quota systems at lower levels of political participation as a temporal measurement that paves the way to a 50% partnership. (Mentioned in Quota section)
5. Involvement of women in political negotiations at a rate of no less than 30%, which also applies to any transitional government, and committees tasked with formulating a constitution, laws and elections, and transitional justice mechanisms, as well as civic peace committees.
6. Collaborating with gender experts and activists in order to spread knowledge about the constitutional, political, legal, and economic obstacles that hinder women's participation in public spaces, especially in the political process, or overrule their lives and deprive them of their liberties and independence in private spaces.
7. The current undemocratic structures of the political parties do not attract women. Therefore, it is necessary to generate channels where doors are open for women to discuss with feminist activists and NGOs the current political scene and the path of democratic change, starting from the party structure itself and developing into true carriers of the progressive project that can elevate new Syria.

8. Allocating equal media airtime for women affiliated with political blocs or parties, such as official spokeswomen or heads of negotiation delegations.
9. Issuing policies to hold accountable any discriminatory practices against women in general, and against female members of political parties and blocs.
10. Politicized women activists are not usually invited to opposition conferences, and these invitations are often merely cosmetic. As such, women's participation in the resulting structures is often too weak. There needs to be just equal representation in these conferences.
11. The partisan quotas in political blocs have led to the gradual disappearance of women, and to their weak presence in the negotiation delegation and decision-making positions. Hence it is crucial to guarantee women's quota away from political polarizations.
12. It is not possible to reconcile the relations with Salafist military groups or those affiliated with al-Qaeda, and the female activists who advocate for human rights and women's rights. It is necessary for the affiliates with the current political structures and those who believe in democracy and citizenship, be them men or women, to adopt a clear, transparent discourse that places human rights and women's rights as basic standards.
13. **Women bureaus/committees within political parties and forces** should not be reduced to discussing women's rights, but they should also be:
 - a. Bases for mobilization and coordination of prevalent partisan methods to empower women;
 - b. Bases of support for female nominees that also work on empowering them and increasing their numbers;
 - c. Centers of communication and networking with women/feminist organizations, inside Syria or in the diaspora;
 - d. Open alliances for men who believe in democracy and in women's rights;

- e. Preparing lists of women who are competitive in political, economic, banking and legal sectors, etc.
- f. Effective communication with local female activists and leaders to gather information about their needs and the challenges they face in order to empower them.

Annexes

Annex #1: List of Names of Participants

Ahmed Assrawi: the secretary general of the Democratic Arab Socialist Union party.

Asma Kaftaro: feminist activist; former supervisor in the Ministry of Awkaf; member of the Women's Advisory Board.

Ilham Muhammad: co-president of the Syrian Democratic Council; leader in the Movement for a Democratic Society.

Alice Mufarrej: politician; feminist activist; member of the opposition's negotiating delegation in Geneva 3.

Habib Issa: Syrian lawyer and politician.

Haseeba Abddulrahman: activist and writer.

Hussein Al-Odat: Syrian writer and journalist.

Khitam Sufi: member of the Women Action Bureau in Syria's Muslim Brotherhood.

Dalsha Ayo: lawyer; politician; former vice president of the Kurdish National Council.

Rustom Mahmoud: writer and researcher.

Riad Darrar: political activist; former mosque preacher.

Rima Fleihan: screenwriter; opposition activist; former member of the opposition's negotiation delegation in Geneva 2.

Zuhair Salem: director of the Arab Middle East Center; director of Community League of Syrian Women.

Salam Kawakibi: political science researcher.

Sameer Saifan: Syrian economist.

Samir Nashar: general secretary of Damascus Declaration; a member of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Suheir Atassi: member of the National Coalition.

Sawan Zakzak: politician and feminist; member of the Women's Advisory Board.

Abdul Basit Sida: former president of the Syrian National Council; member of the National Coalition.

Aladeen Al-Zaiat: executive manager of the Syrian Civil Alliance (Tamas).

Ali Sadreddine Al-Bayanouni: former leader of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood.

Grenada Al-Jundi: translator; former political prisoner.

Ghaida Al-Odat: feminist and activist.

Fayez Sara: Syria writer and journalist; former member of the political committee of National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Fardous Albahra: activist and politician; member of the Association of Syrian Women; former member of the Syrian Communist Party – Political Bureau.

Kifah Ali Deeb: activist; senior member of the exile branch of the National Coordination Committee.

Majd Sharbaji: general manager of Basamat for Development organization.

Magdalene Hassan: lawyer; member of the Communist Labor Party; a member of the Women's Advisory Board.

Marah Bukai: president of the Syrian Republic Party.

Marwan Habash: former minister.

Maakal Oday: independent politician.

Muna Ghanem: former vice president of Building the Syrian State Movement; member of the Women's Advisory Board.

Munir Darwish: political activist and researcher.

Munir Shahoud: former academic, independent opposition activist,

Monira Hwaijeh: political activist; member of the Women's Advisory Board.

Mayya Al-Rahbi: doctor; feminist activist.

Nabil Marzouk: Syrian economic researcher.

Nasser Al-Hariri: former secretary general of the Syrian National Council.

Naghm Al Ghadri: former vice president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Nicola Alzahr.

Noura Al-Amir: former vice president of the National Coalition; member of the general committee of the National Coalition.

Hadi Albahra: former president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces; head of the opposition's negotiation delegation in Geneva 2.

Haytham Khouri: member of the general secretariat of the Republic Party.

Yousif Abdalki: politician; artist.

The names of the female responders to the questions related to the female consultation delegate to the opposition's delegate in Geneva 3 (arranged alphabetically):

- Samira Moubayed: academic and researcher.
- Soad Khibiyeh: political activist; journalist; researcher.
- Sima Nassar: legal researcher in the Euro-Mediterranean Network for Human Rights; director of Urnammu Institution.
- Maryam Jalabi: politician and feminist; director of the National Coalition office in the UN.

Annex #2: Research Questions

The Syrian Feminist Lobby- investigating women's political participation- 2015-2016

The relation between the opposition political forces and women's political participation and presenting their issues

1. Women had a prominent role in the uprising, how do you explain the recent withdrawal of activists from activity within political forces and parties?
2. How do you evaluate the efficient role of women in civil society organizations? And is it partly due to the general desire of working away from politics, or is it political activity in the guise of civil society?
3. Did political forces make any effort to attract female activist to engage in political action? And in your opinion, what is required of these forces to do in order to attract them?
4. How do you evaluate the functional role of female politicians in decision-making centers inside current forces, and was their role effective? And if yes, how and when was it effective?
5. What are the factors and practices that pushed away qualified individuals within political forces in general, and qualified women in particular?
6. How do you evaluate the assignment of women as deputy general director or deputy coordinator as part of a quota policy, in some political forces, seeing as on one hand it allowed women the opportunity to reach decision-making centers, on the other hand it blocked them from presidency or general secretariat?
7. Quota are suggested as temporary positive discrimination to promote women's' political participation, and a means of overcoming decades of marginalization that they were subject to,

and the many obstacles in the way of their political contribution; what do you think?

8. Political forces have condemned human rights violations and war crimes, and talked about Geneva Conventions and their protocols, and about many Security Council resolutions. Why do you think they did not condemn sexual abuse that was targeted at women and girls as a weapon of war, and why did they not demand that the international community find mechanisms to stop it based on Security Council resolution no. 1325 and all relevant resolutions?
9. In your opinion, why didn't the political opposition's treatment of women differ from that of authoritarian regimes? Were they both satisfied with a symbolic political participation of women?
10. Do you think that women are sidelined from the political scene or did they sideline themselves, and why?
11. Give grades from 1-9 (1 being least effective- 9 being most effective) to the reasons that have led to the fragile political participation of women currently:
 - a. The international betrayal of the Syrian people and of their revolutionary aspirations to democracy.
 - b. The violations committed by the regime against its dissidents: oppression, detention... etc.
 - c. The distrust and vilification campaigns targeting the opposition.
 - d. Women's own abstention from exercising politics.
 - e. The miserable performance of the political forces and their undemocratic practices and fragmentation in the face of the savage regime.
 - f. The lack of experience.
 - g. The absence of women quota.
 - h. Sectarian quota.
 - i. The masculine mentality and the social and religious heritage.

Within political forces

12. During your practice of political activity, how did members of parties and political blocs perceive women's nominations to decision-making positions and their participation among official delegates? And did you witness harassment of female politicians among political forces or doubt their capabilities of political work? Mention any positive or negative events with analysis of reasons!
13. Will women's limited rate of participation in political forces affect their rights in the future?
14. Normally, before forming any political alliances, a few people come together to deliberate among themselves in the first stage, and women are usually excluded from these consultations and are invited later for the agreement. Why and how do you explain that?
15. In the absence of political will, some opposition forces continued to assign typical roles to women (aid, education, humanitarian issues... etc.) and ministerial portfolios that are stereotypical as well, as the interim government has done during two consecutive governments. In your opinion, what are the strong means of pressuring these forces to develop their performance and reevaluate the roles of women?
16. What are, in your opinion, the difficulties that women face within political forces they belong to or belonged to at a previous stage?
17. When there is political will, women's issues are placed on the party's' agenda; the Democratic Union Party is an example, whether we agree with its policies or not (joint presidency, a 40% quotas, women's issues are incorporated into the party's literature, etc.);, how do you explain the gains Kurdish women have achieved among society?
18. Supporters of women's rights confirm the existence of a clause in the constitution which dictates that Islamic jurisprudence is a key source of legislation that unleashes the hands of legislators to put the most discriminative laws against women, like personal status laws and penalty codes, and contradicts with the sought after democratic state and the state of equal citizenship. How can we, in a future Syria, convince Islamists and whoever compromises with them among seculars about the value of women's rights as free beings with full

qualification and rights, and to make Syria a state that abides by and respects international human rights law?

19. The effect of "Syrian sisters" in the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood, and recently six women were elected to the Brotherhood's council in 2014, and two of them were assigned in the top hierarchy of the organization, but the Society did not nominate a lady to the National Coalition for the Revolution and Opposition Forces, and no name was prominent in the general political scene. Why do you think that is the case?

Negotiations

20. Women demanded to sit on the negotiation table with a ratio of 30% during the Geneva 2 negotiations, so that they wouldn't lose their rights, or even that they be rendered terms of negotiation. What do you think about their demands and do you support them?
21. How do you pressure political forces so that women contribute to their delegation during negotiations?

The questions that were directed at the members of the Women's Advisory Board to the opposition delegation in Geneva 3

22. What are the standards and expertise on which members of Advisory Board members were selected? And were these standards abided by in your opinion or succumbed to some polarizations?
23. What are the types of consultations and papers that the Board presented to the negotiation delegation? And how was communication between them regarding information, the influence of their papers at the negotiation table, official visits and their numbers? Were visits of the negotiation delegation to the Board confined to the women in the opposition delegation?
24. Did the work outcomes and papers of the Advisory Board compensate for the poor women representation in the negotiation delegation? If yes, please explain, and if no please mention the challenges you have faced?
25. Why did a few Board members withdraw and to what did they object? And do you consider those factors hindrances to the sought-out results in the Board's work and its sustainability?

Annex #3: Letter by Female Members of the National Coalition to Increase Women's Representation

Expanding female representation in the national coalition for the forces of revolution and opposition to a ratio no less than 30%

14 July

Vision:

Building a civil multicultural democratic society in Syria that guarantees full participation of and complete equality of Syrian women, in all rights and responsibilities. A society that guarantees equal civil rights to all Syrians without discrimination based on gender, religion, denomination, race, political beliefs, or social orientation.

Goal:

Another goal is the complete and fair participation of women inside the Syrian Coalition and its delegates, bodies, bureaus, and especially at decision-making levels. This is a fundamental component of building a democratic multicultural civil society in Syria. And it is achieved through expanding the Syrian Coalition and increasing the number of female members by 30%.

Results:

1. Ending the policy of exclusion of a group that constitutes half of society.
2. Promoting democratic practices - including within the Coalition, which is the primary demand of the Syrian uprising.
3. Working on bridging the gap between the Coalition and the Syrian people through a strong fortified relationship with immigrants, refugees and the exiled, which would consolidate the Coalition's position and increases its popularity as an effective political representative.
4. Better credibility in front of other nations and the State sponsors of the Syrian Revolution.

Implementation mechanism:

1. Considering at least 30% of membership for women inside the Coalition as a main article of the Coalition's bylaw.
2. The article is inserted upon the amendment that is supposed to be presented to the Coalition's general assembly on July 6th-8th 2014.
3. Publicized voting on full expansion with all its articles and implementation mechanisms before conducting the election of the Political and Directorial Committees.

Selection mechanism:

The special membership committee related to the female expansion consisted of Coalition members, plus two other members of the elected membership committee in the Coalition. And personalities are nominated according to the following:

1. Submission of a survey to female personalities interested in political activity with consideration for specialty diversification (political, legal, cultural, media, etc.) and through the survey, their desire of joining the coalition is conveyed. Then this data is presented to the specialized delegate to review the names.
2. Determining standards through which the best nominees are selected (political history, revolutionary work, resumes, partisan membership, organizations... etc.)
3. Choosing the female list to fill expansion seats.
4. Voting over female nominee membership among the special committee tasked with the female expansion.

Assigning a consultant to the Coalition to guarantee women's participation in decision-making and all aspects, delegate, bodies, and activities (political, social and economic), and also preparation for the transitional period and what comes after.

Annex #4: Founding Document of the Women's Advisory Board

The founding document for the Women's Advisory Board:

1) The group's objective:

The participation of Syrian women and **the guarantee of their effective political representation** in decision-making centers, and ensuring real cooperation in all stages of negotiation, transition, and extruding committees and delegations, which includes the committee to draft the constitution in accordance with Security Council resolutions 1325-1820-1888-1889-1960-1206-2122.

2) Relation with the High Negotiations Committee:

The Board: An advisory entity to the High Negotiations Committee: Is currently coordinating with it regarding issues and its female members contribute as experts at negotiation-related matters from a feminist perspective, and the delegate's work evolves later in the transitional period.

3) Work procedures

Organizational structure:

1. The general Advisory Board consists of experienced women from opposition who work on negotiation cases according to their specialty and expertise. Mechanisms of membership to the general Advisory Board are determined in clause 6 in this document.
2. The general Advisory Board elects an executive bureau (7-9 ladies) whose task is to lead the general Advisory Board during each round of the negotiations.
3. The executive office selects a representative committee at the High Negotiations Committee. Excluded from representative committee elections are female members of the High Negotiations Committee and the negotiating delegation.

Work mechanisms:

1. Periodic meetings of the general Advisory Board by available means (at least half +1)
2. Periodic meeting of the executive bureau by available means, and according to necessity.
3. Representatives of the Advisory Board to be present in the same location where the Committee holds its meetings
4. Attendance of representatives of the Advisory Board as consultants during the Committee's meetings.
5. The executive bureau and representatives are responsible for keeping all members informed on all courses of events and developments.
6. Committing to writing minutes of periodic meetings and sharing them with all members.
7. Taking internal decisions within the Board through deliberation and council. Representation or the occupation of any position (Board coordinator, media spokeswoman, secretariat, etc.) through internal elections within the Board.

Functions:

1. Women advisors participate in all aspects of negotiation, through assigned consultation committees.
2. The Board presents its consultation through documented papers that cover all aspects and cases of negotiation.
3. Putting forth plans and strategies and presenting position estimation papers.
4. Preparing documented periodic reports plus statistics attached to the information and documents.
5. The Board plays a consensual role and works towards converging perspectives.

4) Work teams:

1. Administrative team and secretariat
2. Media coordination team

5) Decision-making mechanisms:

1. All decisions related to the general Advisory board are taken by majority (half +1)
2. All decisions related to the executive bureau are taken by majority (half +1)
3. The executive bureau has the authority to make urgent decisions when necessary.

6) Membership determination mechanisms:

- A. The Women's Advisory Board consists of ladies who attended negotiation rounds of 2016 in Geneva, with taking these points into consideration:
 - The member's acceptance of all clauses in the founding document of the Board.
 - The member's specialty matches one of the negotiation files and the practical added value of her membership.
- B. Any new membership to the Board is achieved through recommendation by two of its members and the approval of the majority.

Annex #5: Evaluative Letter from the WAC to the HNC

An evaluative letter sent to the High Negotiation Committee in the agreed on protocols on April 16th, 2016 to which there was not a reply.

Ladies and gentlemen of the High Negotiation Committee,

We are a group of ladies participating in the Women's Advisory Board. We would like first to praise the brave step the High Committee has taken in announcing the Women's Advisory Board, which came, according to the formation announcement: **"the dire need for Syrian women's participation in activities within the HNC and its negotiating team, which would elevate the Committee in regards to representativeness and expertise."** This has had an agreeable impact on all, including us who have decided to engage in this experience, and to assist with whatever capabilities and expertise we believe to be necessary to provide in the right place and time, from our position in the opposition, and for the sake of pushing the negotiation process ahead, and through collaboration with you and the teams you formed for this purpose.

Proceeding from our belief in the honesty of your purpose, and through our direct participation, we deem it essential to present to you our evaluation of this experience that the Board underwent during the first two rounds of negotiation, for consideration, and to prevent the error of external evaluations that could potentially lead to purposeless issues and disputes.

An abbreviated evaluation of the Advisory Board's activity:

We noted many reservations against the Women's Advisory Board, the most significant of which are:

1. The Board's lack of any administrative organization, which can be built upon for immediate and future work.
2. The absence of work mechanisms for the Board, and the lack of interaction with other negotiation teams (negotiator 1-2 and

the consultant) which were established by the High Negotiations Committee, despite discussions of joining action committees (negotiation cases), where each is selected to be in a committee that suits her capacity and expertise, although that was not achieved at all.

3. The Women's Advisory Board had no role in the first and second rounds of negotiation, as the Board had not received any negotiation-related work documents.
4. Despite some ladies presenting their perspectives as experts in their fields, to members of delegation and committees, their comments were not taken into serious consideration.
5. The treatment of consultants lacked professionalism and undermined respect for each member and her stature, which created the sentiment of marginalization and negativity and a lack of respect among most participants.
6. The presence of the ladies was exclusive to the media side (and the role of the female victim, and not ladies with experience) with preferring that they be quiet and not express their opinion, despite its importance. It is definitely necessary to present sacrificing Syrian women when expressing the Syrian tragedy, but turning experienced ladies into this role, was very disappointing and is recorded as a negative point against both the Board and the High Committee, which is supposed to be informed of all Board activity and coordinate with it.
7. There was focus on the exterior, and the sectarian background to each of the female participants, before taking interest in their experience, and in a way that was offensive to everyone, especially when that happened in front of the media.
8. Despite our belief in the importance of women's support for women, at any place and time, the purpose of participation of the Advisory Board in the negotiations was to present expertise, as some members of the Board were considered vital and they were members at the High Committee and the negotiating delegation at the same time, which means blocking the path of real participation

of women, and giving the impression that the formation of the Board was only a media show.

9. There was complete refusal from the High Negotiations Committee to keep in direct contact with the Board.
10. Participants were informed on the last day that they will not participate in future rounds, without putting surrogate mechanisms to participate remotely, and that means the discontinuation of efforts and not benefiting from the accumulative experience of the participants, and contradicting the main idea of forming the Board (which is forming a surrogate female team that presents experience and contributes in decision-making) in accordance to what conforms with the importance of the required work from the Board and not as ostensible invitations.

To guarantee real activation of the Board's role so that it does not remain a formality, we suggest the following points:

1. We demand activating the UN resolution of the obligation that female participation be no less than 30%, and we confirm our refusal of the High Negotiations Committee to lower women's participation to 25% during negotiation processes, which was not nearly met either, because women are half of society and they endure what men do, and their role is no less important than men's in relation to Syria now and in the future.
2. Clearly organizing a work mechanism with the High Committee, where women's participation does not depend on improvisational decisions but are organized as per the Advisory Board's founding document, which is supposed to be endorsed by the High Negotiations Committee.
3. Consultant women participate in all aspects of negotiation, through designated consulting committees and the direct participation in all that occurs.
4. Making internal decisions in the Board by deliberation and counsel, and representation or occupation of any position (Board coordinator,

media spokeswoman, secretariat) depends on internal elections within the Board.

5. The Women's Advisory Board is considered a genuine part of the negotiation procedure and the negotiating team, as is the case with the first and second delegations and the consulting delegate, and they have the same rights and responsibilities.

We still trust that work credibility exists within the High Negotiation Committee, and the matter does not exceed disorganization and confusion at the purpose of forming the Board, and hope that it will be overcome as quickly as possible, so that the opposition's commitment towards Syrian people and the UN is actualized, by including women and activating their role in the negotiation process with what complements the standards of success for any political transition in Syria.

We note that we do not consider our presence within this Board a privilege, but a grave responsibility and a duty dictated by our Syrian belonging.

Awaiting your response to our suggestions with thanks in advance.

Together, Syria is stronger, with its men and women.

Special thanks

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In the Core or on the Margin: Syrian Women's Political Participation

This research tackles the issue of political participation of Syrian women, since the beginning of the revolution in March 2011 until the conclusion of this book's writing at the end of 2016. It aims to shed light on the backstage of Syrian political elites that have shaped policies and excluded women from closed decision-making circles. It also aims to unveil the gravity of the discriminatory mentality towards women and towards their political participation in certain political environments, which have spearheaded the political struggle against the regime and presented themselves as a democratic alternative.

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, drawing on interviews conducted with more than forty-five members Syrian political and civil society activists, as well as sixty-nine secondary interviews addressing partial research questions.

The first section of the research discusses the political participation of women during the revolution and its nascent representative structures. The second section highlights the reasons behind undermining Syrian women's participation in the Syrian political backstage, which is explained along four main axes: Democracy, Stereotypes, Quota, and Violence (legal violence, political violence, and sexual violence). The third section provides recommendations to rectify the imbalance resulting from women's limited participation.