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# 'Syria and the Arab Spring: The Evolution of the Conflict and the Role of the Domestic and External Factors'\*

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## Abstract

The Syrian uprising passed its one year mark with the Ba'th regime still in power. Since the beginning of the uprising, however, peaceful protests have declined and have been replaced by armed struggle. What were the factors that determined the course of events since the start of the uprising and how did these factors push Syria towards a civil war? In this paper, I argue that the uprising that began as a result of legitimate grievances of Syrian workers, peasants, activists and intellectuals was appropriated by more organized opposition forces that had the support of powerful Gulf States such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This turn of events marginalized the domestic opposition who were rendered invisible in Western media, which instead promoted the Muslim Brotherhood backed opposition as the only voice of Syrian opposition. This essay offers an analysis of the Syrian uprising by situating the uprising historically and by moving away from the narrative that has been established by the Western media. Part one situates the uprising in the context of economic liberalization policies of Bashar Assad. Part two explores the role of Syrian opposition forces prior and after the Arab Spring. Part three discusses the role of Western and regional powers and their intentions to shape the outcome of the uprising. I conclude by discussing the broader implications of international powers' responses to the Syrian crisis.

**Keywords:** Syrian Uprising, Arab Spring, Neoliberalism, Islamists, Ba'thism

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## **Suriye ve Arab Baharı: Çatışmanın Gelişimi ve Yerli ve Yabancı Etkenlerin Rolü**

### **Özet**

Baas rejiminin hâlâ iktidardaki yerini korumasıyla birlikte Suriye ayaklanması bir yılı geride bırakmıştır. Ne var ki, ayaklanmanın başlamasından bu yana barışçı gösterilerin sayısında bir düşüş yaşanmış, ve bu gösteriler yerini silahlı mücadeleye bırakmıştır. Ayaklanmanın başlamasından bu yana olayların gelişimini belirleyen etkenler nelerdi? Bu etkenler Suriye'yi bir iç savaşa doğru nasıl itti? Bu çalışmada Suriyeli işçiler, köylüler, eylemciler ve aydınların haklı şikayetlerinin bir sonucu olarak baş gösteren ayaklanmanın, Katar ve Suudi Arabistan gibi güçlü Körfez ülkelerinin desteğini almış olan daha teşkilatlı muhalif güçler tarafından sahiplenildiğini düşünüyorum. Olayların bu beklenmedik yönde gelişimi, Batı medyasında görünmez hâle gelmiş yerel muhalefeti ötekileştirmiş, ve bunun yerine Suriye muhalefetine tek sesi olan Müslüman Kardeşleri desteklemiştir. Bu yazı, ayaklanmayı tarihi açıdan bir sıraya koyarak ve Batı medyası tarafından çizilen tablodan uzaklaşarak bir analiz ortaya koymaktadır. İlk bölümde ayaklanma Beşar Esad'ın ekonomik liberalleşme politikaları kapsamında incelenirken, ikinci kısımda Arap Baharı öncesi ve sonrasında Suriye muhalif güçlerinin rolünü incelemektedir. Üçüncü kısımda ise Batı'nın ve bölgesel güçlerin rolü ile bu güçlerin ayaklanmanın sonuçlarını şekillendirecek yönelimleri tartışılmaktadır. Yazının sonuç bölümünde ise uluslararası güçlerin Suriye krizine yönelik tepkilerinin daha geniş bir çıkarımı ele alınmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suriye Ayaklanması, Arap Baharı, Neoliberalizm, İslamcılar, Baasçılık

## سوريا والربيع العربي : تطورات الصراع

### ودور العوامل المحلية والاجنبية فيها

#### بقلم : انجيلا جوبا

بالرغم من ان نظام البعث السوري لا زال محتفظا بأخذ زمام قيادة البلاد بيده، فان الانتفاضة السورية قد خلفت ورائها عاما كاملا. غير انه يلاحظ ثمة انخفاض في زخم المظاهرات السلمية التي توالى تنظيمها منذ بداية الانتفاضة، لتحل محلها الصراعات المسلحة. فما هي العوامل التي تحدد تطور الاحداث منذ بداية الانتفاضة ولحد الان؟ وكيف دفعت هذه العوامل سوريا نحو حرب اهلية؟ انني ارى ضمن هذه الدراسة ان هذه الانتفاضة كانت نتيجة لما يعاني منه طبقات الشعب من عمال وقرويين ومتقنين وفئات المتظاهرين من مصاعب ومشاكل. والواقع ان هذه الانتفاضة قد تم احتواؤها من قبل قوى معارضة أكثر تنظيما وتحوز على تعضيد دول الخليج القوية مثل قطر والمملكة العربية السعودية. ثم ان تطور الاحداث بهذا الشكل غير المتوقع قد ادى الى استبعاد المعارضة عن الاعلام الغربي وبتنا لا نرى تغطية لها في هذا الاعلام الذي بدأ يساند الاخوان المسلمين الذين أضحوا الصوت الوحيد الذي ينادي بإسقاط المعارضة السورية.

وتعمل هذه الدراسة على وضع تسلسل تاريخي للانتفاضة، بعيدا عن اللوحة التي يرسمها الاعلام الغربي محاولة بذلك الوصول الى تحليل يستند على هذه الحقائق. وبدأ فان البحث يتناول في قسمه الأول دراسة الانتفاضة داخل اطار سياسة توجه بشار الأسد نحو الليبرالية الاقتصادية، ويتناول القسم الثاني دراسة دور قوى المعارضة السورية قبل وبعد احداث الربيع العربي. اما القسم الثالث فانه يتناول بالبحث دور الغرب والقوى الناشطة في المنطقة واتجاهات هذه القوى في مجال توظيف نتائج الانتفاضة. ويورد القسم الأخير دراسة مفصلة عن ردود افعال القوى الدولية حول الأزمة السورية.

الكلمات الدالة : الانتفاضة السورية، الربيع العربي، الليبرالية المعاصرة، الاسلاميون، البعث.

## Challenges to the Syrian Regime Prior to the Arab Spring

Historically, the Ba'th Party's rise to power in 1963 resulted in a decline of the traditional Sunni merchant and landlord classes as well as the religious *ulema*. The Ba'th Party built its support base in rural areas and among the peasantry, which signified a radical shift in power relations in Syria.<sup>1</sup> The Sunni merchants and their Islamist allies continued to struggle to regain their lost power. Although under Hafiz Al Assad, broad cross sectarian alliances were built in order to establish regime

1 Hanna Batatu *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, (NJ: Princeton, 1999).

stability, the Islamist and Sunni merchants' resistance did not fade away. In fact, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Ba'thist regime faced its biggest challenge by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Hama 1982. Close to 10,000 members of the Brotherhood were killed and the remaining members were variously exiled or imprisoned.<sup>2</sup>

After Hama, the regime pursued a policy of reconciliation and cooptation towards the remaining Islamic groups and their allies. These policies resulted in an increase in the representation of various sects within the state. At the same time, the regime promoted moderate strands of Islam by constructing around 8000 new mosques throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, establishing around two dozen institutes of Islamic higher education and developing some 600 quasi-official religious institutions in all Syrian governorates and cities to replace those that had been used by the Muslim Brotherhood for recruitment.<sup>3</sup> One of the most prominent institutions created by the regime was the Assad Institute for Memorizing the Quran, which had 120 branches in most Syrian cities and governorates, and was initially headed by then-State Mufti Muhammad Kuftaro and the minister of *Awqaf* (Religious Endowments).<sup>4</sup> In the absence of other forms of political liberalization, Islamist groups were the only ones who benefited from this opening of public space by the state. While relations between the state and the opposition remained conciliatory during the 1980s, after the 1990s divisions resurfaced. With the end of the Cold War, and after the loss of its trading partners, Syria was forced to embark on a path of economic liberalization. This marked the beginning of the crisis of the Ba'th Party which in the coming decades was successfully exploited by the Islamist opposition.

Between 2000 and 2011, besides taking advantage of the political opening in society by the state, Islamists also made gains from economic liberalization. For the first time, the Islamic sector which had been kept out of the economy for three decades recaptured a promi-

2 Hama, Homs and Aleppo are the geographic dimension of class power in Syria as all three areas represent the power of urban merchant classes and landlords who strongly opposed the Ba'thist regime and the redistribution of land to the peasantry and their own political exclusion from the state. The exception was the Damascene merchants who sided with the regime during the 1982 Hama uprising.

3 Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: the rise and fall of Ba'thist Secularism*, (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 90.

4 *ibid.*

nent role under the free market model. The accumulation of wealth facilitated the penetration of Islamist ideology, especially the Dewbandi and Salafi strands imported from the Gulf States into the Syrian social fabric. During the past decade, mosques became dynamic centers of political activity and indoctrination. On the other hand, the secular aspects of the Syrian society were being dismantled due to lack of public sector investment while Islamist groups were experiencing a renaissance as apolitical Islamic organizations, charitable associations, Islamic bookstores, institutes and forums have sprung up across the country.<sup>5</sup> By 2009, Syria witnessed the emergence of a marriage between Islam and capitalism which Salwa Ismail called a 'religio-mercantile complex'<sup>6</sup>.

Bashar al-Assad had underestimated the influence of this new variety of Islamist movements and the potential threat they posed to the Ba'thist regime. The regime had not realized that by building more mosques and promoting apolitical Islam, it was indeed contributing to the dismantling of secularism and potentially the collapse of Ba'thism altogether.<sup>7</sup> However, the rise of this particular opposition in Syria has to be understood in the context of a shift towards the free market economy that allowed space for such groups to reach out to workers and peasants as the state's role in redistribution declined.

### The Syrian Opposition Groups after the Arab Spring

The uprising that began in March 2011 was launched by secular groups that included students, activists, intellectuals and leftist political parties who opposed socio-economic policies that had deteriorated the livelihoods of workers and peasants. The opposition's demands included economic, social and political rights and not the overthrow of

5 ibid, p. 146

6 Ismail, Salwa, 'Changing Social Structure, Shifting Alliances and Authoritarianism in Syria' in: Lawson, Fred, (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, (London: Saqi Press, 2009), pp. 13-28.

7 Opposition against the Ba'th regime was not restricted to the Islamic sector. Militant Islamists who had become increasingly important after the invasion of Iraq also opposed the Ba'th regime. Khatib estimated that at least 8,000 Islamist militant fighters with Salafi/Al Qaeda allegiance existed in Syria in 2010. A reflection of the rise of power of Al Qaeda affiliated fighters in Syria was the rise in the number of attacks by militants since 2004. Attacks continued through 2004 until 2008 by militants in Syria. During 1999, 2000, 2006 there were clashes between the Syrian regime and Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami, see Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, pp. 189-190, 194-195. Opposition from secular groups against the regime appeared for a short time between summer of 2000 and fall of 2001. Soon after the regime succeeded in crushing this opposition that has become known as the Damascus Spring.

the regime.<sup>8</sup> However, over the course of the summer of 2011, Islamic opposition groups were formed with the support of external powers. More than a year after the uprising, the only thing that unites the diverse opposition groups is their distrust of the regime. However, when it comes to their goals and proposals for a transition from the on-going conflict, deep divisions characterize these groups. In order to appreciate the nature of these divisions, let us examine the various opposition groups, their demands and their alliances with external forces.

The most powerful and organized opposition group has been the Muslim Brotherhood which is represented through the Syrian National Council (SNC), formed in Turkey in September 2011. The group does not have a strong domestic presence as its members were mostly exiled during the 1980s and after.<sup>9</sup> The group receives support from Qatar, Libya, Tunisia and western nations. Their goal is to overthrow the Ba'thist regime through any means even if it entails military intervention. The group has pushed for sanctions and policies to isolate the Ba'thist regime and its proposals have been received positively by western powers.<sup>10</sup> The group has condemned diplomatic solutions as well as the Kofi Annan Peace Plan.

The SNC has pursued its goals through international forums (e.g. Friends of Syria conferences in Tunisia, Turkey and France) as well as through its close ties with Qatar. Inside Syria, it has adopted a militaristic approach by allying with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), although the latter maintains differences with the SNC. The FSA's headquarters is based in Turkey and it receives arms and money from Gulf States and Libya and trained militants from Tunisia.<sup>11</sup> The association of FSA with various armed groups inside Syria has led Haytham Manna, the spokesperson of the domestic secular opposition, to declare FSA as a

8 Many noted that the scale of protests in Syria in the early 2011 was much smaller in comparison to Egypt and Tunisia, given that most of those who called for mass protests were making such calls from outside of Syria and often through social networking sites such as facebook, see *The New York Times*, 'Day of Rage' for Syrians Fails to Draw Protestors', February 4, 2011 and Bassel Oudat, 'Pre-emptive strike', *Al Ahran Weekly*, February 10-16, 2011, Special Edition, Issue No. 1034.

9 In 2006, the Muslim Brotherhood joined forces with former Syrian vice president Abdel al Halim Khaddam to form the National Salvation Front. Khaddam enjoys close ties with Saudi Arabia and with the Harriri family in Lebanon.

10 Interestingly, in 2010, the Syrian Brother's previous Superintendent had argued that in order to overthrow the regime, they will educate and mobilize the Syrian people and in international forums work towards raising the international blockade on the Syrian regime (Khatib, 2011:180).

11 Zvi Bar'el, 'Syria rebels pull out of embattled Homs Stronghold', *Haaretz*, January 3, 2012.

loose umbrella for a diverse range of armed groups with no centralized authority and yet with the potential to contribute towards a long lasting civil war.<sup>12</sup>

Opposition to the regime has also been waged by militant Islamists. Over the past year, sufficient evidence has emerged indicating that Al-Qaeda fighters as well as militants from Jordan, Lebanon, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Libya are engaged in fighting the regime and targeting the state's infrastructure.<sup>13</sup> Earlier in 2012, the Al Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri called on its fighters to fight against the Bashar regime. The official Syrian News Agency (SANA) has shown Tunisian militants, who were captured by Syrian security forces.<sup>14</sup> There is increasingly more evidence of al-Qaeda militants making their way towards Syria.<sup>15</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum has been the secular, domestic opposition that has pursued peaceful change through dialogue and has remained opposed to military intervention. The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) consists of thirteen left leaning parties (including Kurdish parties) which bring together workers, peasants, intellectuals, activists and students. The group, despite having a strong presence inside Syria, lacks the resources required to mobilize themselves into an effective political player. Beside this weakness, the NCC has faced numerous other challenges which have resulted in tarnishing the credibility of the NCC and marginalizing it in the eyes of the global public. For instance, through its media wing, Aljazeera, Qatar engaged in a systematic campaign against the NCC in order to present the SNC as the only valid opposition.<sup>16</sup> This smear campaign of Qatar and Saudi Arabia against the NCC succeeded in that the latter group has been completely marginalized in western me-

12 See Human Rights Watch report condemning the Syrian armed opposition groups for crimes against civilians including kidnapping, executions and forced confessions, Human Rights Watch, March 20, 2012; see also The Independent, June 1, 2012 on executions of workers at the hands of armed members of the opposition.

13 See articles 'Lebanese fighter trains new generation of jihadis for Syria', by Nicholas Blanford, *Gulfnews*, June 2, 2012; 'Lebanese join the Free Syrian Army's struggle', by Nicholas Blanford, *The Daily Star*, May 30, 2012.

14 Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 'Tunisian Terrorists Confess to Entering Syria via Turkey with Coordination between So-Called Free Army and Al-Qaeda', May 21, 2012.

15 See articles by Patrick Cockburn, 'Long War Looms: Syria after the Massacre', *Counter Punch*, May 28, 2012; 'Why war is marching on the road to Damascus', *Counter Punch*, June 3, 2012.

16 Ali Hashem, 'The Arab Spring has shaken Arab TV's credibility', *The Guardian*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/apr/03/arab-spring-arab-tv-credibility>



dia and very little is known about them or what they have done over the past year. As Khodor pointed out, “The NCC rejected devious coordination with international powers as was done with Iraq or Libya, in the belief that foreign intervention threatens the collapse of the entire nation. We should then rightfully ask why the Syrian uprising is being exclusively represented by the SNC”<sup>17</sup>. In interviews and debates, the NCC spokesperson, Haytham Manna has warned against an externally propped up opposition as a replacement for the Ba’th regime, as this would only intensify existing sectarian divides and guarantee a civil war.<sup>18</sup>

So far, deep divisions have characterized the relationship between different factions of the opposition. While the SNC favours armed struggle against the regime and supports the FSA, the NCC is vehemently opposed to armed solutions and instead prefers a diplomatic and political solution by engaging with the regime. However, given the resources and international support that the SNC enjoys, the NCC and its demands have been sidelined. The international support for the SNC aside, domestic and external opposition groups have expressed their suspicion of the Muslim Brotherhood dominated SNC, seeing it as anti-democratic and unrepresentative of all Syrian opposition groups. According to an FSA spokesperson, “the Muslim Brothers’ ascent through the SNC would be a blatant and unlawful usurpation of power, in a land where, [...] they would have no chance of winning a popular election.”<sup>19</sup> Similar concerns were raised by a Lebanese journalist in an article published on February 28, 2012. He wrote,

The vast majority of the SNC’s members belong to the economic and political right, in addition to including various religious fundamentalists. That strange alliance – which is suspiciously sponsored by the US, welcomed by Turkey and well-received by Qatar and countries subservient to the island nation – raises questions about the legitimacy of the SNC and its peculiar role in the future of Syria. “What guarantees has

17 Salameh Khodor, ‘The reality of Syria’s opposition’, *Egypt Independent*, February 28, 2012, translated by Dina Zafer.

18 According to Manna, inside Syria support for armed resistance remains as low as 15 percent while the remaining 85 percent of the population supports a peaceful transition to a democratic Syria and not the violent path pursued in Iraq or Libya, see Interview with Haytham Manna on France24, January 31, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmSxKvkYeWE&feature=related>

19 Mohamed Elmeshad, ‘Syrian Brothers everywhere but Syria’, *Egypt Independent*, February 29, 2012.

the SNC given to the major Western powers that other elements of the opposition have failed to provide?"<sup>20</sup>

Sharing the concerns of Shia and Christian religious minorities, the NCC too is fearful of an Islamist takeover of Syrian society if the predominantly Sunni SNC is brought to power. Similarly, dissident Kurds who tend to see themselves as Sunni Muslims cannot find a common ground for agreement with the SNC as they do not trust Turkey which has sponsored the SNC.<sup>21</sup>

### International and Regional Powers

After the toppling of Libya's Gaddafi, Western powers assumed they could pursue a similar policy in Syria.<sup>22</sup> Thus, two UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions were put forward (October 2011 and February 2012) calling for a no fly zone and potentially arming the opposition. These resolutions were defeated by Russia and China who argued that the UNSC was being used by the West as a conduit for regime change. They proposed that a political solution was the best option for Syria. However, despite the defeat of the UNSC resolutions, western powers (US, UK, France, Germany) have been pushing for regime change through the arming of the Syrian opposition, albeit without openly admitting it.

The policy of regime change in Syria is not a recent development. For a long time, the US has intended to contain Iran. Getting rid of a pro-Iranian regime in Syria will get the US one step closer to its goal.<sup>23</sup> The 2011 and 2012 responses of the US to the Syrian uprising echo the very same concerns of ultimately defeating the Iranian state. This explains why the US and its allies have not pursued diplomatic means

20 Salameh Khodor, 'The reality of Syria's opposition'.

21 On Kurdish politics in Syria see Christian Sinclair and Sirwan Kajjo, 'The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria', *MERIP*, August 31, 2012. In June 2012, in an attempt to unite the various opposition groups, Abdelbaset Sieda, a Kurd from Uppsala, Sweden, was elected as the new president of the SNC, replacing the Syrian-French intellectual Burhan Ghalioun.

22 Deborah Sherwood, 'Syria will be bloodiest yet', *Daily Star*, 1 January, 2012.

23 Writing in 2007, Hersh pointed out that the Gulf States and the US's policy to contain Iran included four elements: to ensure Israel's security, to reduce the links between Hamas and Iran, with the help of US, to establish a Sunni coalition in the region to counter the Shiite ascendancy, and finally, the Saudis and the US would provide funds and logistical aid to weaken the Assad regime in Syria. Hersh's piece lays out the complex and intricate ties forged between the Saudis and powerful Sunni groups in Lebanon against Syria. See Seymour M. Hersh, 'Annals of National Security: The Redirection', *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2007.

of resolving the Syrian crisis but rather have pursued the path of sanctions and diplomatic isolation of the regime, both of which have so far been counterproductive in bringing the conflict to an end.

Interestingly, the US has not openly called for regime change but has stated that it would do everything to weaken the regime so that will crumble on its own. The adopted position by the US and the West was clarified by Jeffrey Feltman, assistant secretary of the state for Near East Affairs on March 1, 2012: “the United States is working with its allies to reach a ‘tipping point’ whereby the regime falls, and a new government representative of all Syrian society takes over”.<sup>24</sup> However, this policy of indirect intervention and regime change is not widely supported within the American State as Republicans and neoconservatives have called for military intervention in Syria. These voices were echoed by Sens. Joe Lieberman and John McCain, the latter being the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.<sup>25</sup> Equally notable, a letter drafted by 50 neo-cons, dated February 17, 2012, was sent to Obama making a case for regime change in Syria. The signatories included Syrian dissidents living and working in the US alongside Republicans and neo-cons such as Carl Rove, Paul Bremer, and William Kristol, all of whom called for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>26</sup> To this end, support for the Syrian opposition has been mobilized through the Foundation for the Defence of Democracies whose fellows regularly contribute pieces to major English language newspapers demanding military intervention in Syria.

Beside these efforts against the Syrian regime, reports have surfaced about the presence of western special operation forces inside Syria, engaged in different capacities with the militant opposition members, including training the opposition fighters, as was the case in Libya. DEBKA *file*, an Israeli military website based in Jerusalem has revealed that the US, France, UK, Turkey, Italy have been supporting the Syrian opposition through provision of military expertise, weapons and means

24 Barbara Starr and Jamie Crawford, ‘U.S sees ‘no fracturing’ of al-Assad regime’, *CNN*, March 1, 2012 Feltman has recently assumed a new role within the UN which entails negotiations with various Lebanese political groups, which appears controversial as it may entail destabilizing Lebanon in order to secure American policy of containing Iran. See Vijay Prashad, ‘The Elevation of Jeffrey Feltman’, *Counter Punch*, May 25-27, 2012.

25 Chris McGreal, ‘John McCain says US should be ‘ashamed’ of inaction over Syria conflict’, *The Guardian*, June 6, 2012.

26 Josh Rogin, ‘Conservatives call on Obama to intervene in Syria’, *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2012.

of communication.<sup>27</sup> In February, over a hundred French troops were captured in Homs forcing France to re-establish diplomatic ties with Syria.<sup>28</sup> Recently, another report unveiled the presence of 12,000 NATO soldiers engaged in operation 'Eager Lion 2012' an irregular war game in neighboring Jordan.<sup>29</sup> All of this point to a covert form of regime change that has been adopted by western powers as support for open military action in Syria among western public remains weak.

The Gulf States too have assumed an important role in determining the outcome of revolts in the region in the context of the Arab Spring. They share with the US and Britain the common goal of neutralizing Iran as a potential nuclear power that could shift the 'balance of power' against the Sunni ruled states of the Gulf. The alliance between NATO and the Gulf States was put to the test during the Libyan military intervention that removed Gaddafi from power and put in power a Qatar and US supported group. This was the intended goal in Syria for the major powers including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, both of whom also had other interests in Syria which included billions of dollars of investment in Syria's property sector through Islamist capitalist groups. Both regional powers have long wanted to depose the secular regime of the Ba'th and turn Syria into a reliable future ally.<sup>30</sup> Thus, when the uprising began in Syria, Qatar was the first Gulf state to close its embassy in Syria in July 2011. Throughout the first year of the uprising, the Emir of Qatar called to arm the Syrian opposition and promoted the idea of a possible Arab military intervention in Syria.<sup>31</sup> As the uprising turned into an open conflict, Qatar directed its foreign policy through Aljazeera Arabic, a media outlet which serves an important role in shaping public

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- 27 DEBKAfile, 'US, France, UK, Turkey, Italy prepare for military intervention in Syria', Exclusive Report, February 23, 2012; DEBKAfile, 'Obama secretly approves top-of-the-line anti-tank arms for Syrian rebels', May 22, 2012.
- 28 Ahram Online, '18 French Officers and 100 paratroopers captured in Homs, a Lebanese MP claims', March 2, 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/35858/World/Region/-French-officers-and%E2%80%93paratroopers-captured-in-Hom.aspx> (accessed March 20, 2012).
- 29 Middle East Online, 'Major war games on Syria border 'have nothing to do' with Syria', *Middle East Online*, May 15, 2012, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=52271> (accessed June 1, 2012).
- 30 See Patrick Seale's articles: 'The View from Riyadh', February 14, 2012, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=50642>; 'Deciphering the Qatar Enigma', February 28, 2012, <http://www.agenceglobal.com/article.asp?id=2741>
- 31 Steinberg, Guido, 'Qatar and the Arab Spring: Support for Islamists and New Anti-Syrian Policy', *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, February 2012.

opinion in the Arab world. The network's coverage of Syrian uprising was criticized by voices from the Arab world who accused it of fabricating stories, staging fake government attack scenes and explosions in order to provide material for western media with the wider goal of discrediting the Syrian regime.<sup>32</sup> There are wider implications of how Aljazeera has portrayed the uprising in Syria. Aljazeera serves as the main source of news in the Arab world and most of the figures, stories and updates that western media relies on, get channelled through Aljazeera.

If the SNC is organized in any way, it is through facilitating and providing information for Western media outlets.<sup>33</sup> Rana Khazbak shows how Syrian revolutionaries based in Cairo play an important role in the flow of information from Syria and through Aljazeera network to the western audiences.<sup>34</sup> Hundreds of Syrian activists (mostly expats who have lived in Egypt for a long time) 'are banding together ..., staging protests, collecting and distributing donations, pressuring the Arab league and Egyptian authorities to deport the Syrian ambassador, and sharing information from inside Syria with international media outlets'.<sup>35</sup> The videos and statistics that major English language daily newspapers rely on are vetted by the Higher Revolutionary Council, the activist wing of the Syrian National Council based in Cairo. According to Khazbak, "The media committee follows Syria's news, sorts out and compiles videos of protests and regime violations and then sends them out to international and local news outlets as well as human rights organizations. 'We are the bridge between Syria and the rest of the world,'

32 Peter Lee, 'In Syria, al Jazeera's Credibility implodes', *Counter Punch*, March 5, 2012. Ahmed Ibrahim who has been in charge of the channel's Syria coverage is the brother of Anas al Abdeh, a leading member of the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC). He allegedly stopped using his family name to avoid drawing attention to the connection.

33 Controlling the flow of information is an important aspect of fighting a war against the Ba'th regime, as western diplomats have recently pointed out and therefore 'truth' becomes that which is politically convenient and serves the interests of forces that control the information coming out Syria and have an interest in regime change, ( see Jon Williams, 'Reporting conflict in Syria', June 7, 2012, *BBC*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2012/06/reporting\\_conflict\\_in\\_syria.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2012/06/reporting_conflict_in_syria.html) (accessed June 15, 2012).

34 There are three main Syrian revolutionary groups based in Cairo: the Muslim Brotherhood dominated Syrian Revolution Association in Egypt (SRAE), the politically moderate Dignity movement led by opposition leader Moatez Shaqlab, and the Syrian Freedom Youth, which mainly constitutes Syrian youth and university students without specific political affiliations.' They all share in a common goal: the fall of the regime (Rana Khazbak, 'Syria's revolution finds a temporary home in Cairo', *Egypt Independent*, February 14, 2012).

35 *ibid.*

[rightly claims the group.] 'They also document names and calculate the numbers of martyrs'".<sup>36</sup> Not only is this flow of information controlled by the SNC and facilitated by its regional supporter Qatar, pro-SNC views have also shaped the debate through regular intervention by sympathetic voices that are based in the US and the UK.<sup>37</sup>

Saudi Arabia in its turn has engaged in a similar campaign against the Assad regime through its London based network, Al-Arabia, which has offered a platform for fundamentalist clerics who have painted the Assad regime as non Muslim and the Alawites as heretics who should be deposed. During the 'Friends of Syria' conference, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al Faisal stated that arming the opposition would be 'an excellent idea'.<sup>38</sup>

36 *ibid.*

37 Surprisingly, despite the small number of authors who write in support of the Syrian opposition, their position has become the dominant position shaping the debate and viewpoints globally. Some of the names that often appear include: Ammar AbdulHamid, Reem Allaf (2011, 2012), Nadim Shehadi (2011), Ali Al Bayanouni (2011a,b), and Radwan Ziadeh (2012). Ammar AbdulHamid, a member of the SNC based at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies, has been speaking internationally as the voice of the Syrian uprising. He has visited Kosovo to learn about insurgency training and has got the backing of Republicans and neoconservatives in the US (Associated Press, 'Syrian Opposition Activists ask Kosovo for advice', April 26, 2012). Abdulhamid was photographed with George W. Bush in a foreign policy cable titled 'Bush: The Authoritarian Regimes of the Arab World Will Fall' (by Josh Rogin, *Foreign Policy*, May 16, 2012). Abdulhamid is also one of fifty six signatories of a letter sent to Obama by neoconservatives demanding military intervention in Syria. Some of the other prominent signatories included Carl Rove, Paul Bremer and William Kristol, all of whom played an important role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Rogin, 2012).

38 Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, 'Syrian rebels get influx of arms with Gulf Neighbors' money, U.S coordination', *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2012. After the first months of the uprising, the Syrian Communist Party warned that the militarization of the conflict, far from helping them reach their legitimate demands, has instead turned the conflict into a regional rivalry between external forces who rely on the Syrian National Council to press ahead with their goals of weakening Iran and bringing regime change in Syria (The Syrian Communist Party, May 2011, Monthly Review Zine, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/scp310511.html> (accessed December 6th, 2011). The same concerns were echoed by the International Crisis Group (ICG) almost a year later. The ICG report summed up the situation in the following words: "Faced with mounting casualties and a political deadlock, outside actors at best have been inefficient, at worst have poured oil on fire. Many have chosen to view the crisis primarily through the prism of its regional strategic stakes—who win and who loses in the event of the regime's collapse—and have done nothing to advance prospects for a negotiated transition" (International Crisis Group, 'Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria', Middle East Briefing No. 32, Damascus/Brussels, 5 March, 2012). The ICG warns of a proxy war that could spill into Lebanon and destabilize the fragile peace in that country. See also Michael Peel and Abigail Fielding-Smith, 'Qatar backs arming Syrian Rebels', *Financial Times*, February 27, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/24db27d0-6169-11e1-8a8e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1xmCkFOQN> (accessed February 28, 2012). Also see Martin Chulov and Matthew Weaver, 'Saudi Arabia backs arming Syrian opposition', *The Guardian*, February 25, 2012; Vela, Justin, 'Exclusive: Arab states arm rebels as UN talks of Syrian civil war', *The Independent*, June 13, 2012.

Turkey's position vis-à-vis the Ba'th regime has become more hostile as the conflict has intensified.<sup>39</sup> Turkey has been closely involved in propping up the Syrian opposition by setting up the headquarters of the Free Syrian Army in Turkey and by convening various meetings and gatherings of the opposition members in Turkey.<sup>40</sup> It also hosted the second 'Friends of Syria Conference' which considered arming the rebels. Over the course of one year of conflict in Syria, Turkey's position has gotten closer to those of the Gulf States, especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia.<sup>41</sup> Expressing a more assertive position by Turkey, the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu reacted to civilian deaths in Syria in the following terms: "The collective massacres in Syria and the bloodshed cannot continue like this".<sup>42</sup>

### Establishing a Dominant Narrative

The dominant narrative established with the support of the west and Gulf States has resulted in a total marginalization of a critical analysis of the Syrian uprising.<sup>43</sup> For instance, the report of the Arab League Observer Mission (December 2011-January 2012) which was critical of both sides of the conflict was completely ignored by western media. However, it is important to highlight some of the points made in the report in order to establish a more credible narrative than the simplistic, one sided story coming from western media outlets. The Arab League

39 Turkey has assumed a similar role in Syria as the one that was assumed by Pakistan vis-à-vis Afghanistan in the 1980s, in the sense that it has become a base for the Syrian opposition, has provided home for Syrian refugees and has become a transmission belt for transfer of weapons to the FSA. Turkey however, has to be cautious about the coming decades and how the intensification of the conflict and instability in Syria could spill over into its own border as happened in the case of Pakistan. Hakura captures the position of Turkey in the following excerpt: "Turkey is undoubtedly in a precarious and unenviable spot at the mercy of unpredictable and deteriorating regional circumstances. It is not in control of events but is being controlled by events. What the ultimate outcome will be is anyone's guess" (Hakura, February 12, 2012).

40 France 24, 'Syrian dissidents convene in Turkey to discuss regime change', Agence France-Presse, 1 June 2011, <http://www.france24.com/en/20110531-syria-middle-east-opposition-groups-turkey-assad-revolution-arab-spring> (accessed January 4, 2012); Zeina Karam, "Syrian dissident colonel takes refuge in Turkey", *The Guardian*, Associated Press (Beirut), October 5, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9880236> (accessed October 15, 2011); Liam Stack, 'In Slap at Syria, Turkey Shelters Anti-Assad Fighters', *The New York Times*, October 27, 2011 (accessed January 2, 2012).

41 Michael Weiss, 'Syrian rebels say Turkey is arming and training them', *The Telegraph*, May 22, 2012.

42 The Jerusalem Post, 'Syria on the Brink', November 16, 2011.

43 Lundgren-Jorum articulated the establishing of a dominant discourse in terms of 'framing', which as she rightly pointed out could be a conscious way of shaping public opinion in favour of a particular group, see Emma Lundgren-Jorum, 'Discourse of a Revolution: Framing the Syrian Uprising', *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Volume 3, No. 2, January 2012, pp. 9-39.



Report stated that in contrast to the accounts of the Syrian opposition and western media, in Homs and Daraa armed groups were in fact committing acts of violence against government forces, which corroborated the Syrian government's accounts that armed groups had targeted and destroyed public infrastructure, silos and bridges.<sup>44</sup> The observers noted that armed groups were using sophisticated weapons including armour-piercing projectiles against soldiers, indicating that western arms and weaponry had found their way to rebels in 2011. In Idlib and Hama, the Observer Mission reported that armed groups targeted a civilian bus killing eight persons and injuring women and children.<sup>45</sup> Armed opposition groups were also held responsible for the bombing of a train carrying diesel oil and the blowing up of a fuel pipeline. The Mission also reported that many parties made false reports of government attacks in various locations which after Mission visited and found untrue.<sup>46</sup>

What becomes clear from the Arab League Mission, which was on numerous occasions obstructed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, is that the Syrian opposition is aware of the power of media and the importance of the story that comes out of Syria.<sup>47</sup> Shaping global public opinion constitutes a major part of the struggle between the opposition and the Syrian regime.<sup>48</sup> Accuracy of information has been compromised

44 See the news in the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 'Armed Group attacks oil pipeline in Deir Ezzor', May 30, 2012; Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 'Terrorists Attack central Bank, Police Patrol with RPG Rounds', May 1, 2012; Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 'Authorities Storm Den of Terrorists in Nawa in Daraa, Foil Attempt to Blow up al-Najih Bridge on Damascus-Daraa Highway', March 26, 2012.

45 Over the course of the year, it appears that armed groups of the opposition have adopted a new strategy of discrediting the Assad regime and that is through inflicting atrocities against the civilians which are then portrayed to western audiences as acts of the regime. The recent massacre in Houla, although automatically seen as the act of the Assad regime, has recently been concluded as the act of rebels against pro-regime families, see Rosenthal, John 'Report: Rebels Responsible for Houla Massacre', *National Review Online*, June 9, 2012, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/302261/report-rebels-responsible-houla-massacre-john-rosenthal#.8216;John&#8217>

46 See The Report of the Arab League Observer Mission, January 2012; Saul Landau, 'End the Hypocrisy: The Syrian Dilemma', *Counter Punch*, February 21, 2012. The Arab League Mission called for the withdrawal of military and security forces from all Syrian cities and the release of tens of thousands of political detainees and of those arrested during the demonstrations. It also called for the launch of dialogue with the country's opposition. All of these proposals have been retained in the Annan Plan for Syria.

47 Arab League Report highlighted the divisions within the League and the intension of League members such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar to use the observer mission in their own interest. In fact, despite the recommendation of the observers' report to extend the mission, the League decided not to extend the mission.

48 See for instance Dowel, Ben, 'Syrian rebels tried to get me killed, says Channel 4 correspondent', *The Guardian*, June 8, 2012.



when it comes to reporting of deaths and injuries as these play an important role in how western audiences react. There are two existing organizations that record civilian deaths in Syria: the Syrian Network for Human Rights and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The single source of information that reports deaths is the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an organization based in London that has been surrounded by controversy. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, run by Rami Abdul Rahman has been accused of receiving funds from US and UK and has been linked to the opposition. It is this organization that is often cited as the source of information from Syria by Western media. The Observatory is also linked to The Movement for Justice and Development, a Syrian opposition political party that is modelled after the Turkish Justice and Development Party. It is no surprise that the Observatory may engage in inflating numbers of casualties in order to undermine the Ba'th regime.<sup>49</sup> Levesque highlights the significance of accuracy of information in a conflict situation as that in Syria:

The reliance of the mainstream media on information emanating from anonymous groups provides a biased understanding of the Syrian protests, which in turn supports the broader objective of destabilizing the Syrian regime. When information from unknown sources pertaining to the death toll is published either by a mainstream media or a recognized human rights group, it is invariably picked up and considered as "factual evidence" by other news sources or think tanks, without further verification.<sup>50</sup>

According to United Nations, however, by December 2011, 7,500 civilians and 2,000 soldiers had been killed, which presents the situation more of a war, than a campaign of the regime against the unarmed opposition.<sup>51</sup> For 2,000 armed soldiers to be killed in the first year of the uprising, a significant degree of armaments would have to be in possession of the opposition.<sup>52</sup> A more objective look at the number of casualties on both sides produces a different picture of the conflict

49 The consequence of bad or simply false media feed could be quite damaging to the reputation of an organization. See for instance, Black, Ian and Weaver, Matthew, 'Syria attacks 'media fabrications' by showing 'beheaded' woman alive on TV', *The Guardian* (London), October 5, 2011.

50 Julie Levesque, 'Media lies used to provide a pretext for another 'Humanitarian War': Protest in Syria: Who counts the Dead?' *Global Research*, November 25, 2011.

51 Zvi, Bar'el, 'Syria rebels pull out of embattled Homs Stronghold', *Haaretz*, January 3, 2012.

52 See Saul Landau, 'End the Hypocrisy: The Syrian Dilemma', *Counter Punch*, February 21, 2012. For a typical narrative that western mainstream media produces in order to promote military intervention rather than encourage a diplomatic and political solution to conflicts, see also Diana Johnstone, 'Road to Damascus...and on to Armageddon?', *Counter Punch*, February 13, 2012.

which resembles more a conflict shaped and orchestrated by different sides as opposed to an unbalanced and unequal use of force by the state against a civilian, peaceful population.

The media has also downplayed the role of extremist Islamist militant groups who share affinity with Salafists and Al-Qaeda and western powers' reliance on these militants to destabilize Syria. When the regime claimed that it was faced with a challenge by these groups, western powers and western media claimed that the regime was using the same excuses that Mubarak for instance had used in order to put down the initial protests. However, by late 2011 and early 2012, news emerged that foreign fighters were captured by the Syrian regime.<sup>53</sup> A final factor that needs to be taken into consideration in understanding the Syrian uprising is the significant level of public support for the regime, which has surprisingly increased further since the start of the uprising. Despite growing socioeconomic problems that have affected the lives of many in the country, Syrians have expressed their support for the regime through their votes in the February 26, 2012 Referendum on a new constitution and then in the parliamentary elections of May 2012.<sup>54</sup> Earlier in January 2012, YouGov Siraj poll, conducted by Qatar showed that 55 per cent of Syrians supported the regime and wanted Assad to remain in power.<sup>55</sup> Ignoring this level of support for the regime and instead recognizing the external opposition as the only legitimate voice of Syrians is equated to taking sides in a conflict. This in itself will ensure that once the regime is toppled, a civil war with no end will follow.

A diplomatic course of action out of the Syrian crisis has been promoted by Russia, China and the former UN Secretary General, Kofi

53 DEBKAfile, 'US, France, UK, Turkey, Italy prepare for military intervention in Syria', Exclusive Report, February 23, 2012.

54 Kristian Boysen, 'A new Syrian leadership?', *Egypt Independent*, February 19, 2012. The Syrian regime has also reversed some of the neoliberal policies that had affected peasants and workers, see SANA, January 1, 2012.

55 Jonathan Steele, 'Most Syrians back President Assad, but you'd never know from western media', *The Guardian*, January 17, 2012; Saul Landau, 'End the Hypocrisy'. The poll was 'ignored' by almost all western media outlets whose governments demanded Assad to resign. The poll also showed the majority wanted free elections and more rights. Although the poll was conveniently ignored by almost all media outlets, it shows that Assad has not lost all his legitimacy and still has relatively stable backing in the country. This also explains why the Ba'th regime has not already collapsed as did the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.

Annan through his six point Peace Plan.<sup>56</sup> Two members of the BRICS on the UN Security council have exercised their veto powers in order to convey their opposition to Libya style military intervention and regime change. Russia and China have demanded all sides to stop the armed conflict and instead pursue peaceful negotiations.<sup>57</sup> The proposals of these powers were included in Kofi Annan's Plan for Syria. Despite the offhand dismissal of the Annan Plan by all western powers, it appears that it indeed resulted in a radical decline of casualties after taking effect in April 2012, according to statistics compiled by Human Rights activists.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The conflict in Syria has lasted for over a year. The Ba'th regime continues to enjoy considerable support inside and outside Syria. The external opposition has continued to forge links with external powers in order to enact regime change through military involvement. In all of this, civilians, workers and peasants have been the biggest losers as their initial calls for democratic reforms has been completely overshadowed by a conflict that increasingly resembles a proxy war involving regional and global powers.<sup>59</sup>

The call for a military intervention to bring about regime change remains contested both among Syrians and Arabs and the larger global public given the dubious nature of information flow from Syria. It continues to be difficult to discern who commits violence when both the opposition and the regime blame one another.

56 Russia and China alongside India, Brazil and South Africa (known as BRICS) have condemned military intervention against Syria. Annan's six-point plan involved a ceasefire, humanitarian and media access, the release of prisoners and a Syrian-led political process for transition to a democratic future. See the UN Security Council SC/10609 for details of the six points Plan. Rama Lakshmi, 'BRICS summit: Emerging economies condemn military threat against Iran and Syria', *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2012; Escobar, Pepe, 'Syria and those 'disgusting' BRICS', *AsiaTimes*, February 7, 2012, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/NB07Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/NB07Ak02.html) (accessed March, 10, 2012).

57 Diana Johnstone, February 13, 2012.

58 Enders, David, 'Syrian military casualties rose in May while death toll overall dropped', *McClatchy Newspapers*, June 2, 2012, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/06/01/150925/civilian-deaths-down-army-casualties.html> (accessed June 9, 2012). However, Enders reported that the month of May was the bloodiest month for the Syrian soldiers who had been killed at the hands of the opposition fighters, indicating that the opposition is now in possession of lethal weapons.

59 Patrick Seale, 'The Syrian Crisis and the New Cold War', February 7, 2012, <http://www.agence-global.com/article.asp?id=2730> During the months of May and June of 2012, the conflict has intensified resulting in the death of large number of civilians. While the immediate reaction of western nations and media outlets was a condemnation of the Ba'th regime, it is now claimed that the massacres may very well be the result of tribal conflicts which may only intensify if a military intervention occurs (Dejevsky, Mary, 'The Euro crisis will look like a walk in the park if Syria explodes', *The Independent*, June 8, 2012).

While global and regional powers debate military intervention, the socio-economic problems affecting the lives of Syrian population has deteriorated over the past year. Unemployment which was already high has continued to rise as economic activities in conflict zones have halted.<sup>60</sup> In the rest of the economy, imports have fallen creating serious shortages of food and essential goods as western imposed sanctions have taken effect.<sup>61</sup> Syrian government income has declined due to lack of economic activity and taxes. Foreign reserves are depleting while the deficit is expected to reach 17 percent of the GDP this year, with tax revenues expected to be half of what it was in 2011.<sup>62</sup>

Demanding the fall of the regime rather than a negotiated political solution can only worsen the conflict resulting in increased number of civilian deaths and mass destruction of infrastructure. Furthermore, a future democratic society will have a very slim chance of being built after the heightened hostilities along sectarian lines. So far pursuing regime change has undermined the domestic call for democratic reform while empowering an external opposition that has its own agenda for taking over the state and yet does not enjoy popularity among Syrians. The conflict has become progressively more violent involving militias on both sides. The absence of a genuine diplomatic push has left the situation to be decided through arms, which has been facilitated by all major world powers. The displacement of millions of Syrians both inside Syria and outside in Lebanon and Turkey will further intensifying poverty and long term insecurities for a population that had suffered economic problems for over a decade. If the conflict is further militarized, Syria will be engulfed in a protracted civil war that may resemble Afghanistan of the 1990s.<sup>63</sup>

60 Thousands of factories in conflict zones such as Hama and Homs have closed down while banks have kept their doors shut as international embargo's impact takes effect (Abu Nasr, 2012).

61 Many scholars have pointed out that just as in the case of sanctions on Iraq, sanctions on Syria will have deeply adverse effect on the ordinary civilians and the poor. Sanctions are also seen as a major impediment for democratic transformation in the event that the Ba'th regime collapses, see Joshua Landis, 'Activists worry that sanctions May undermine chances for future democracy', *SyriaComment*, May 23, 2012; Yazigi, 2012; Abu-Nasr, Donna, 'Syrian Heart Patients set to feel Economy's Squeeze', *Bloomberg*, May 17, 2012).

62 Despite these pressures on the government, the Ba'th regime has reversed some of the neoliberal policies that it had implemented over the course of the 2000s in order to regain the regime's popularity among working people (Abu-Nasr, 2012).

63 On June 9th, in a Guardian piece, Lina Khatib pointed out how the Syrian crisis has reopened the old conflicts in Syria, putting in danger the fragile peace that has held in Lebanon in the recent years ( Lina Khatib, 'The Crisis in Syria is reopening Lebanon's old war divisions', *The Guardian*, June 9, 2012). See also As'ad AbuKhalil, 'Lebanese Hostages in Syria', *Al Akhbar*, June 8, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/blogs/angry-corner/lebanese-hostages-syria> (accessed June 10, 2012).

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