The Islamists Are Coming

Who They Really Are

Robin Wright, Editor

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CHAPTER 8

Syria: Old-Timers and Newcomers

Thomas Pierret

After years of repression, Islamist political groups reemerged in 2011 as Syria faced the most tumultuous political juncture since its independence from France in 1946. In 2011, Syria's political landscape began to be redefined by both old-timers and newcomers.

The Muslim Brotherhood was still the grandfather of Islamist politics in 2012, even though it was largely a movement of exiles bereft of any organized presence inside Syria since its failed uprising in the early 1980s. Apart from a handful of radical groups, the Brotherhood historically had few competitors on its end of the political spectrum. It played a prominent role in creating a new opposition coalition abroad after Syria's uprising began in March 2011. It was also the most influential force within the new Syrian National Council established in Istanbul in August 2011.

But the Brotherhood will not be the only Islamist movement to vie for votes in a free and fair election. It might not even be the best-placed movement to capture the support of Islamist-oriented Syrians. In December 2011, twelve members of the Syrian National Council announced the creation of the Syrian National Movement, or al Tayyar al Watani al Suri. The council vowed, like the Brotherhood, to pursue the "aims of Islam." Whether or not the council evolves into a serious rival to the Brotherhood, the newcomers embody all the challenges that the long-dominant Islamist movement will have to face in the future. The challenges are not so much ideological, since the Syrian Brotherhood boasts a long tradition of pragmatism, but instead relate to questions of age and social ties inside Syria. Most of the movement's leaders are in their forties or fifties, a generation significantly younger than their counterparts in the Brotherhood, who were already in command when the movement left Syria thirty years ago.

The Brotherhood was also largely cut off from Syrian society during those three decades, whereas many members of the movement were still based in Syria. In other words, although the Brotherhood certainly had assets—long experience in political activism, tight organization, and extensive international networks—it also had obvious handicaps, compared to the Brotherhood's new competitors.

THE BEGINNING

The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was officially established after the withdrawal of the French colonial army from Syria in 1946. It was not a centralized movement but a national federation of preexisting local Islamic associations. The associations had been created during the previous decade by young clerics and intellectuals such as the founding superintendent, or *muraqib*, Mustafa al Sibai, a nonconformist Azharite, and Muhammad al Mubarak, an alumnus of the University of Paris. (The head of the Syrian Brotherhood is called *superintendent* because he theoretically is under the authority of the *guide*, who is the leader of the Egyptian mother organization.)

The early Syrian Brotherhood had no well-defined ideology. Its general goals were to defend Islamic norms and values against the rise of secular political forces, particularly in the realm of law. The Brotherhood also displayed striking flexibility and pragmatism from the start, however. In 1950, it lobbied for a constitutional provision that declared Islam to be "the religion of the state," but the Brotherhood eventually rallied to the majority and voted instead for a constitution stating only that the president had to be a Muslim.

The Syrian Brotherhood also adopted ideas fashionable at the time, such as Arab nationalism and socialism. In 1949, Brotherhood members ran for elections under the name Socialist Islamic Front. Ten years later, Mustafa al Sibai published his seminal work, *The Socialism of Islam*. More conservative Islamists criticized this embrace of an "imported" ideology.

Between 1949 and 1963, Syria gyrated between parliamentary and military rule because of political coups and instability. The Brotherhood, which had little influence within the military compared to its secular rivals, was committed to restoring parliamentary rule. It also enjoyed decent relations with the bourgeois nationalist parties that dominated the political landscape during Syria's so-called liberal age. Brotherhood members held ministerial positions in 1949 and 1961. In 1954, they were entrusted to establish the Faculty of Sharia at the state-run University of Damascus.

Unlike the early Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian branch was not a mass movement at that time. In 1961, it won its highest electoral victory with only 8.7 percent of parliamentary seats. It was actually a rather elitist organization with followers who were typically educated members of the traditional Sunni urban middle class and the sons of religious scholars, merchants, or craftsmen. It had a limited presence in rural areas. And it inevitably suffered from the political rise of the peasantry under the aegis of the Baath Party in the 1960s.

BANISHED

After the 1963 Baath Party coup, the Brotherhood faced a hostile, radically secularist regime. The movement was banned, and hundreds of its members

went into exile. Among them was Isam al Attar, who succeeded Sibai as superintendent after Sibai's death in 1964. The Brotherhood operated as a semiclandestine group until the early 1980s, when it was basically eliminated inside the country.

Baathist repression also spawned frictions, which were based on regional ties that undermined the Brotherhood's unity. In the early 1970s, Attar—who had fled to Germany from his base in Damascus—was challenged by the Aleppo branch, largely because of the strength of rival regional identities. The Aleppo wing was led by Abd al Fattah Abu Ghudda, a religious scholar who was recognized by the Egyptian mother organization as the legitimate superintendent.

Prolonged military rule forced the Brotherhood to develop a new strategy. It began proselytizing systematically among the long-neglected Syrian grassroots through a network of informal study circles. By the 1970s, it was able to take advantage of the Islamic revival that swept the Muslim world and recruited a growing number of educated young people.

The Brotherhood also took advantage of a small opening shortly after President Hafez al Assad seized power in a bloodless coup in 1970. Assad allowed conservative candidates backed by the Brotherhood to run for office and to win seats both on local councils and, to a lesser extent, in parliament.

But old tensions reemerged in the late 1970s as the Assad regime grew increasingly unpopular. The Brotherhood also elected a new superintendent, Adnan Sa'd al Din, from the hardline faction in the central city of Hama. Syria's main Islamist group decided it was no longer willing to work within a system of "liberalized authoritarianism." It joined secular parties in boycotting the 1977 elections.

ARMED STRUGGLE

The confrontation eventually degenerated into armed struggle. Young Brotherhood activists had initially taken up arms in Hama in 1964, but they were easily suppressed by the regime and subsequently disavowed by their own leadership. The radical cell was led by Said Hawwa, a Sharia graduate who later became a prominent Brotherhood ideologue, and Marwan Hadid, an engineer who eventually split from the organization as a result of its passivity.

After Hadid's death in prison, his followers formed the Fighting Vanguard, or al Tali'a al Muqatila, and launched a campaign to assassinate state officials. In 1979, its massacre of dozens of Alawite cadets in the Artillery School of Aleppo plunged the country into turmoil. Popular uprisings erupted in the northern cities as large numbers of young people joined the Fighting Vanguard.

During the early months of the uprising, the Brotherhood initially negotiated with the regime, even securing the release of hundreds of its followers

in early 1980s. But the regime launched a bloody crackdown as popular protests escalated. In June 1980, military units, led by President Assad's brother Rifaat, executed some 1,000 Islamists detained in a Palmyra prison to retaliate for a failed assassination attempt against the president. The regime then passed Law 49, which made membership in the Brotherhood a capital offense.

The Brotherhood's attacks against the regime were far less effective than attacks by the Fighting Vanguard, which continued to carry out most of the assassinations and bombings. The Brotherhood had more influence outside Syria in generating media and political attention. Its propaganda sometimes had sectarian, anti-Alawite overtones, but its political objectives were unchanged. Its 1980 political program defined the ideal political system as a combination of liberal institutions and Islamic laws.

The denouement in the Islamist uprising played out in Hama, Syria's third-largest city, in February 1982. The Assad regime responded by crushing the armed insurgency with heavy artillery bombardment and mass killings. The death toll was estimated at between 10,000 and 25,000. By the mid-1980s, both the Brotherhood and the Fighting Vanguard networks were completely destroyed. The Vanguard ceased to exist, whereas the Brotherhood remained active in exile even though it was riven by splits between its Aleppo and Hama factions between 1986 and 1992.

IN EXILE

With no prospects of toppling the regime, the Brotherhood's main concern was retaining political relevance. In 1985, it agreed to meet Syrian security officials in Germany, but the talks ended in failure. In 1995, former Superintendent Abu Ghudda was allowed to visit Syria, but his request to meet with President Assad was ignored. More promising discussions were held in 1999, but they ended abruptly after the assassination in Aleppo of the go-between, Amin Yakan, a prominent former Brotherhood member.

During the same period, the Islamist group established parallel ties with the secular opposition. In 1982, it joined with the pro-Iraq wing of the Baath Party to form the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria. The coalition lasted for a decade before disintegrating. The Brotherhood did not try again to unify the opposition until the presidential succession—when Hafez al Assad died and was replaced as president by his son Bashar al Assad in 2000—revived hopes for political reforms in Syria.

In 2001, two years after a Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement forced it to move its headquarters from Amman to London, the Brotherhood published the *National Honor Pact*. The document formally rejected the use of violence and called for dialogue among all Syrian political forces. The next year, the Brotherhood organized a National Dialogue conference in London, although neither the regime nor other opposition groups expressed serious interest in attending.

The Brotherhood began to be taken more seriously by interlocutors after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which at least initially also left Syria feeling more vulnerable. The group sent positive signals to the regime, including a call by Superintendent Ali Sadr al Din al Bayanuni for a comprehensive national reconciliation. Indirect contacts between the Brotherhood and the Assad regime resumed through foreign Islamists over the next few months.

In 2004, United Nations Resolution 1559 increased international pressure on Damascus by calling for withdrawal of all Syrian forces from Lebanon. The Brotherhood, in turn, became more assertive. Three months later, it released the Political Project for Future Syria, its first detailed political program since 1980. The new project called for a regime that would be "republican and democratic" with liberal institutions but also "Islamic" because its constitution would make Islam the "religion of the state" and laws would be "gradually Islamized."

THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION

The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 dramatically affected Syria too. Lebanese protests forced Syria to withdraw its army after a twenty-nine-year occupation.

The shifting political tide allowed the Brotherhood to make spectacular inroads in rapprochement with secular opposition groups. It agreed to join the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change, a broad alliance of political forces launched in October 2005. Joining forces with mainstream secular activists such as Michel Kilo was a major achievement for a movement demonized by state propaganda and feared by secular groups for the previous quarter-century. In 2005, the Brotherhood's truce with the regime also collapsed when President Assad refused to follow through on promised political reforms.

But the Brotherhood also soon miscalculated its position. In March 2006, Bayanuni and former Syrian Vice President Abd al Halim Khaddam, who had just defected, announced the creation of the National Salvation Front. This was an odd move for the Brotherhood. It forced a de facto break with members of the Damascus Declaration.

Khaddam was also far from being the right horse to back, despite his former position. He was perceived in Syria as one of the regime's most corrupt figures. He had been marginalized for several years, leaving him little leverage inside the state apparatus. By the time the Front was created, the regime had also survived the most difficult phase of the Lebanese crisis. The Front emerged too late to capitalize on the political drama.

In 2009, the Brotherhood broke from the Front after the Gaza war between Israel and Hamas. It also announced a unilateral truce with the Assad regime, after which Damascus signaled it was ready to resume talks. The regime did not, however, follow through by lifting Law 49, which carried the death penalty for membership in the Brotherhood.

LEADERSHIP CHANGE

The setback led to a major leadership change. In 2010, the Aleppo faction lost out to the Hama faction in the Brotherhood's internal elections. Bayanuni, who finished his third and final term, was replaced by Riyad Shuqfe as the new superintendent. Shuqfe, who had led the Brotherhood's military unit in the early 1980s, was considered a hardliner. He opposed the group's unilateral truce; he was about to ask the Consultative Council to renounce the truce when uprisings erupted in Tunisia and Egypt.

After Syrian protesters launched their own uprising in March 2011, the exiled Brotherhood leadership had little influence over the situation on the ground. But the Brotherhood did play a leading role in assembling the opposition abroad to establish the Syrian National Council in August 2011.

With about one-quarter of the council seats, the Brotherhood holds the largest representation. Yet in a sign of the newcomers' clout, the Brotherhood only holds about one-half of the total number of Islamist seats within the council. In early 2012, the rest were in the hands of recently exiled clerics and, more important, the recently founded movements.

OTHER GROUPS

Apart from radical groups, such as the Fighting Vanguard or shadowy Salafi networks, the Syrian Brotherhood historically had one main Islamist challenger—the Islamic Liberation Party, or Hizb al Tahrir al Islami. The underground cultlike but nonviolent organization was created in Palestine in 1953. It promoted the immediate restoration of the caliphate and rejected any participation in existing political systems. Its members are estimated to number only in the hundreds. They have reportedly participated in the present uprising, but are not represented on the Syrian National Council.

But more pragmatic competitors have emerged in recent years. The Movement for Justice and Development (MJD), or Harakat al Adala wal Bina, was founded in London in 2006 by geologist Anas al Abda and economist Osama al Munajjid (who left the MJD in 2010). It was created a few weeks after the formation of the National Salvation Front; it effectively replaced the Brotherhood as the Islamist branch of the Damascus Declaration.

The MJD distinguishes itself from the Brotherhood by promoting a post-Islamist identity. The name of the movement and its ideology are both inspired by the ruling Turkish Justice and Development Party. Its program calls for a constitution that declares Syria a country of "Islamic civilization and culture," but it makes no reference to the concept of an Islamic state or to implementation of Sharia. Moreover, the "people's will" is presented as the only source of laws. The MJD is represented on the Syrian National Council.

The Syrian National Movement is not a formal party but an umbrella for five different groups: liberal Islamists, members of mosque-based educa-

tional groups, Salafis, secular liberals based in the West, and left-wing secularists based in Syria. The common ground is acceptance of the "Islamic reference," or *al marja'iyya al Islamiyya*, whether as a source of legislation for Islamists or as the cultural and civilizational identity of Syria for secularists.

The Syrian National Movement emphasizes that it is not a group of exiles with few ties to Syrian society—unlike the Brotherhood and the MJD. Two-thirds of the thirty-five founding members still live in Syria, but those who sit on the Syrian National Council left the country in 2011. Its president is Imad al Din al Rashid, the former vice dean of the Faculty of Sharia of Damascus University. He did not go into exile until the spring of 2011.

Other Islamic-oriented activists have joined the National Action Group, or Majmu'at al Amal al Watani. It has representation on the Syrian National Council. Outside the council, Luay al Zobi, a Salafi who is based in Lebanon, has given interviews in which he presents himself as the head of a so far mysterious movement called the Believers Participate, or Al Mu'minun Yusharikun.

KEY POSITIONS

The ideology of the Syrian Brotherhood has changed relatively little since 1946, reflecting that its ideology was relatively flexible and pragmatic from the start.

Islam and Democracy

In its 2004 program, the Brotherhood stated clearly that it had not given up the goal of establishing an "Islamic state" through the "gradual Islamization of laws." But it called its ideal state "civilian" and not theocratic. Indeed, it said that the government should be formed by and be accountable to a parliament that is renewed regularly through multiparty elections. At the same time, the Brotherhood's political program also sought to give an undefined role to unelected "specialists" in the elaboration of laws, which could provide a basis for involving religious scholars in the legislative process.

Women's Rights

On personal status law, the Brotherhood is not willing to fundamentally challenge the Sharia-based legal framework in Syria. On social and political rights, the 2004 document stated that "it is not forbidden for a woman to become a judge, an administrator, or a minister." The group encourages women to dress "modestly" without specifying if the dress code should be enforced by the state.

Religious Minorities

The Brotherhood does not seek to change Syria's existing personal status law for Christians, which grants them significant autonomy. In terms of political rights, the Brotherhood cites statements made by founder Mustafa al Sibai in front of the Syrian parliament in 1950. "Citizens are equal in terms of rights," he said. "None should be prevented from occupying the highest positions in the state because of his religion, gender, or language." Brotherhood officials have stated on several occasions that they would be ready to accept the election of an Alawite or a Christian as head of the state.

Ethnic Minorities

The issue of ethnic minorities is theoretically less problematic than that of religious minorities, because the largest share of Syrian ethnic minorities (Kurds, Turkmens, and Circassians) are Sunni Muslims. But some opposition Kurds have complained about the group's insistence on the Arab identity of Syria and opposition to Kurdish self-determination.

The United States and the West

The Brotherhood is not fundamentally hostile to the West, partly because much of its leadership is based in Western countries and partly because it opposes a regime that has traditionally had tense relations with the West. Its 2004 political program even called the West "the free world." But the Brotherhood has criticized the U.S. invasion of Iraq and America's "unlimited" support for Israel.

Israel

The Brotherhood does not officially recognize Israel. Its program seeks to "counter the Zionist project in its different aspects"—a position unlikely to change before an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. The group has also traditionally supported Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement that also emerged from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. There have been some tensions between the two groups since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011.

THE OTHER GROUPS' POSITIONS

The other Syrian Islamist movements have not released detailed political programs. The main difference between the MJD and the Brotherhood is

that the newer MJD does not call for either an Islamic state or the Islamization of laws. The MJD defines the "people's will" as the only source of legislation. Its positions on women and minorities are thus likely to be even more flexible. Since its foundation, the MJD has been highly proactive in establishing ties with Western governments.

The Syrian National Movement is ideologically heterogeneous; it does not propose a unified vision of social and political issues. Nevertheless, it stresses the importance of equal citizenship for all Syrians in the framework of the "Islamic reference," which is broadly defined as a civilizational and cultural identity.

After the uprising began in 2011, the Brotherhood and the MJD favored creation of a no-fly zone, possibly enforced by Western air forces. But the Syrian National Movement has strongly resisted foreign military involvement in order to maintain Syria's independence. It has instead advocated logistical support for the Free Syrian Army.

THE FUTURE

In a postrevolutionary Syria, Islamists would necessarily be faced with difficult choices, particularly on legislation. The Brotherhood and some members of the newer Syrian National Movement favor the Islamization of laws in principle. But actually pushing for Islamic law could endanger their partnerships with secular and non-Sunni Muslim political forces as well as with the West.

But the Islamist movements may face far tougher hurdles first. A new government may have to reconstruct a state seriously damaged by the uprising. The current opposition, especially the exiles, would have to build a popular base almost from scratch—particularly among the Local Coordination Committees and the Free Syrian Army brigades that have carried out the uprising.

On economic issues, the Brotherhood's strong pro-market approach may pit it against the demands of the working class and peasants, who have provided the sheer bulk of demonstrators since March 2011.

The post-Assad Islamist scene is also likely to be fragmented. The Brotherhood and the MJD would probably have to compete or ally with groups more grounded inside Syria, such as the Syrian National Movement, or other Islamic forces that are locally rooted but are not politically organized at the moment, such as the *ulema* (religious scholars), the Sufi brotherhoods, the Salafis, or the Islamic Liberation Party.

Islamists would also face serious dilemmas on foreign policy. They would generally want to balance good relations with the West, in order to get economic support, with a nationalist agenda opposing Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights and the Palestinian Occupied Territories. Severing ties with Iran and Hezbollah might be a less painful choice, given the widespread popular resentment of the Assad regime's two foremost supporters.

In the near future, the question of the Islamists' ideological influence on legislation, women's rights, minority rights, and foreign policy options will almost certainly be secondary to more crucial issues, including existential issues regarding whether Syria can survive as a unified country.

Thomas Pierret is a lecturer in contemporary Islam at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of Baas et Islam en Syrie *(2011); the English version, titled* Religion and State in Syria*, will be published by Cambridge University Press. His blog in French is http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/Thomas%20Pierret.*