The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation[1]

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The uprisings that are sweeping through the Arab world have brought to the fore challenges that emerge in processes of political-community-making. Integral to these challenges are questions of political peoplehood, which interrogate the narratives and histories of the nation.[2] In the Syrian case, these questions point to the constraints on collective action and feelings of trepidation towards the political changes that could occur once the existing regime falls. In this essay, I discuss the 'fear of sectarianism' as a factor shaping how the protest movement is constituted, as well as the modes of action pursued by participants and leaders of the Syrian uprising. This factor, I argue, has played an important role in crystallising a certain vision of the political community while, at the same time, informing a re-imagining of the nation.

The Syrian Uprising in Brief

In the Syrian uprising, the question of the nation is not being posed within the frame of nationalism and nationalist politics, understood as a quest for a nation-state that gives an expression to a hitherto stateless national community. Rather, the uprising is giving rise to imaginings of the nation that constitute a 'form of politics' in which seemingly settled questions of peoplehood, identity, and national community are revisited. In their quest to institute radical changes in the forms of government and rule, activists and supporters of the uprising, including the intellectuals and artists who have contributed to the symbolic and cognitive labour of protest, have had to address questions about who Syrians are as a people and what kind of national political community they are working towards. Their efforts to grapple with these questions take the form of discussions, declarations, and statements. These efforts also emerge through the performances of the uprising. This essay is a preliminary inquiry into the imaginings and performances of the nation seen in the Syrian uprising, discussed in relation to the set of historical exigencies, and contextual social and political determinants that have shaped it.

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A background note on the Syrian uprising is in order here.[3] It began with a number of seemingly disparate acts and events in early 2011 that coalesced into a broad national movement for freedom and for bringing an end to the rule of security services – and, thereby, shaking up a key pillar of the al-Asad regime. The immediate context for the uprising is that of the spectacular events of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. For the young activists and opponents of the Syrian regime who, in February 2011, used Facebook to circulate a call for a 'day of anger', the regional events represented a historic moment of opportunity for radical change in Syria. Early calls for revolution, however, were met with only a modest response, in the form of small-scale actions of public dissent organised as expressions of solidarity with the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. The uprising was sparked, spontaneously, in the southern city of Dar'a when a group of children was arrested for writing graffiti on their school wall, calling for the fall of the regime. The detention and brutal treatment of these children by the security forces ignited the anger of the city's residents, who then took to the streets in protest. Similar incidents took place in Douma in rural Damascus, and these followed the same trajectory as the Dar'a events. In time, the protests spread from these localities to others nearby, as well as to towns and cities in governorates further away. The security tactics used to quash the protests included violent crackdowns on public demonstrations, arrests, imprisonment, and torture in custody, but were met with further resistance. The extent to which the protests widened is indicated by news reports, which put the number of participants at over four million by the fifteenth week of protest. Thus, the challenge to the regime moved from local acts of confrontation with representatives of the regime to a nationwide uprising against the regime as a whole.

The core demands of the uprising had by then become the release of all political detainees, the removal of the state of emergency, and the opening of the political arena through constitutional changes that would terminate the monopoly of the Ba'th Party in the institutions of government (i.e., removal of Article 8 of the Constitution and the introduction of a new Political Parties Law).[4] As violence against the demonstrators persisted, the desired radical transformation came to be expressed in the slogan heard in other uprisings elsewhere in the region: 'The people want to bring down the regime.' The uprising, which is referred to as a 'revolution' by Syrian activists and opposition leaders, has gained an increasing number of adherents, with some large cities like Hama and Homs recording mass protests on a daily basis during the months of June and July 2011. Yet, after five months of protest and unprecedented levels of popular mobilisation, the uprising has yet to result in a concrete change in the form of government. The vast mobilisation of people and the breaking down of the wall of fear that had previously inhibited collective action are achievements of this popular protest movement. However, participation in Syria's two largest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, has been limited, and the engagement of religious minority groups in the uprising has been uncertain. It is not possible to examine all the factors that have inhibited such sectors of the population from joining the uprising; the issue of sectarianism, however, presents itself as a significant if not determining one. In a sense, the question of sectarianism has interrogated the identities of both those

participating in the uprising, as well as those who have stood on the sidelines or have actively opposed it.

In what follows, I begin with a discussion of the constraints and challenges that the fear of sectarianism represents for the uprising. I then examine the performances and imaginings of the nation expressed in the acts of protest and in the struggles surrounding these acts. Finally, I address issues relating to the differentiated character of the subjectivities and collectivities imagining and performing the nation.

Collective Action and the Politics of Sectarianism

In the month or so immediately prior to the eruption of the uprising in Syria, my interviews with Syrian intellectuals and youth activists would invariably turn to the question of whether Syria would follow in the footsteps of Tunisia and Egypt. This would invite reflections on the structural differences between Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt, and would raise less tangible yet palpable concerns having to do with an 'insider's' knowledge and intuition that comes from lived experience – something as much visceral as it is reasoned. For my interlocutors, the sectarian dimension in the formula of rule (as described in more detail below), as well as a particular historical memory of political violence involving the regime and its opponents, were considered as important variables in any reflection on the possible frames governing praxis and contentious action in Syria. In such reflections, what was inevitably being pointed to is the Alawi identity of those in control of the army and security services, and the memories of the bloody conflicts of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which are recalled and cast in a manner which emphasises their sectarian dimension. For many, memories of these conflicts, which culminated in the 1982 Hama massacre where up to thirty thousand residents in the city of Hama were killed in the regime's offensive to uproot an armed Islamist insurrection, inform relations and interactions between the regime and citizens as well as among citizens.[5]

Furthermore, in the interviews, it was often contended that fear of sectarianism and of the regime's instrumentalisation of sectarian affiliations inhibited collective action and opposition. The fundamental fear, here, is that Syria's diverse religious groups (i.e., Sunnis, Alawis, Ismailis, Druzes, and Christians), and ethnic groups (e.g., Arab, Kurd, Turcoman, Assyrian, and Circassian) would retrench to positions based on narrow communal identities.[6] This thinking anticipates a possible scenario wherein a challenge to the regime could metamorphose into a sectarian conflict, which would pit the majority Sunnis against other religious groups, in particular the Alawis. This projected realignment of societal forces along sectarian lines is based on the view that the regime is seen by many Syrians as the rule of a minority group, namely the Alawis, and that any challenge to its survival would inevitably carry with it the risk of a sectarian breakdown. The anticipation of a breakdown projects a fear of acts of retribution by Sunnis directed against Alawis who are perceived to be the regime's main supporters and defenders. Within this perspective, the political sectarianism of the regime coexists with a dormant or hidden societal sectarianism. Though references to an individual's affiliation to a

particular sect were pushed out of public discourse, regime politics of 'divide and rule' is thought to have perpetuated social antagonisms and resentment along sectarian and ethnic lines. In patterns of sociability and everyday interaction, divisions among diverse communities are expressed in subtle as well as explicit ways, for example in stereotypes and exclusion. However, these practices and patterns are anchored in socio-economic divisions (see Ismail 2009). The regime pursued complex and seemingly contradictory policies, cultivating the favour of the Sunni religious establishment, informally co-opting confessional groups, and publicly espousing secularism. At the same time, it deployed and relied on sectarian ties to ensure the loyalty of the coercive apparatuses by recruiting their personnel primarily from the Alawi community. Owing to these underlying tensions, it was feared that conflict with the regime would necessarily result in sectarian strife.

The spectre of sectarian conflict in Syria became more tangible following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the gradual outbreak of sectarian strife there. Violence and the general deterioration of relations between different religious groups in that country have been held up by some as an inevitable scenario for Syria if the firm grip of the regime is loosened. Parallels are drawn between the Syrian regime and its fallen Iraqi counterpart, and surface similarities in the religious and ethnic composition of the national populations are emphasised to further evoke the scenario of breakdown in Syria.

My objective in highlighting the issue of sectarianism in thinking about the uprising in Syria is to draw attention to how the fear of sectarian breakdown, stoked by the regime, has shaped the protest movement and invited the actors to engage in a re-envisioning of the Syrian nation.

The Uprising: Imagining and Performing *Suriyya*

The terms of rule of Bashar al-Asad's regime, inherited and preserved from Hafez al-Asad's regime, are relevant for understanding some of the dynamics at play in the current confrontation between, on one hand, the regime and its supporters and, on the other, the participants in the protest movement and uprising. As Lisa Wedeen (1999) demonstrates, public rhetoric and the cult of the leader were key mechanisms of government and control during the rule of Hafez al-Asad. Regime rhetoric set the parameters of public discourse around regime claims to the role of leadership of the Arab nation and 'the front of resistance and steadfastness'. Further, the entirety of political life in Syria revolved around the person of the 'eternal leader', namely Hafez al-Asad. Although, upon assuming power, Bashar al-Asad seemed cognizant of the need for reform, the regime continued to deploy the old mechanisms of rule. Significantly, there has been an attempt to revive the cult of the leader as a strategy of rule, with the son now taking the mantle of his father. This is evidenced by the extensive political iconography populating the public space and in the spinning anew of the mythologies upon which the regime rests. In the present context, the production of the cult has picked up pace as rallies of support for the president proliferate, campaigns of loyalty are launched and events designed to invite public displays of love and allegiance to the president

become regular occurrences. In these regime-sponsored performances, loyalty to the person of the president is constructed as an act of patriotism.

The slippage in signification between leader and nation – equating the leader with the Syrian or Arab nation – as manifested and underlain in the making of *Suriyya al-Asad* (or 'Asad's Syria') that began with Hafez al-Asad is replayed in the current uprising.[7] Slogans such as 'God, Syria, Bashar and that's all' ('*Allah, Suriyya, Bashar wi bas*') chanted at regime support rallies crudely effect a relation of identity between the president and the nation. The equating of nation and leader is also effected through an endless visual twinning and merging of the national flag and the image of the president. In addition to staged spectacles of allegiance and support, the regime has sought to frame the opposition protests in particular terms, suggesting sectarian manipulation by foreign actors casting the protesters as infiltrators, saboteurs, or armed gangs, and associating them with plots and conspiracies by a host of named and unnamed enemies. Accusing the protesters of betraying the nation or of failing in their patriotism is aimed at stripping protesters of any right of dissent.

The protest movement can therefore be viewed as a contestation of the idea of the Syrian nation as the possession of the 'eternal leader' and of the monopoly of rule that is nominally given to the Ba'th Party but has come to rest in the hands of a ruling clique supported by a group of beneficiaries. Contesting the regime aims to reclaim the nation from the ruler – an unmaking of *Suriyya al-Asad*. In its attempt to articulate a vision of the desired political community, the protest movement and national uprising has engaged in a re-imagining of the nation. Much of this re-imagining has been expressed through symbolic production and practices of protest. In this section, I take a closer look at the symbolism and practices of protest in the uprising to elucidate the terms of re-imagining and performing the nation.

The oppositional performance of nationhood through conventional symbols of the nation (e.g., the flag) is undertaken in contest with the officially-sponsored spectacles of patriotism. Thus, the production and hoisting of extraordinarily large flags are found in both the uprising protests and the rallies in support of the regime. For the former, the flag is freed from its association with the president, while, in the latter, this association is reaffirmed (e.g., in the superimposition of the president's photo on flags waved by supporters). The protesters' removal of regime iconography from the public space has become an important ritual of dissociating the nation from the ruling family. The tearing down of photographs of the president, the destruction of statues of Hafez al-Asad, and other demolition of the symbols of *Suriyya al-Asad* have come to signify acts of liberation and repossession of the nation.

The objectives of the uprising are focused on issues of political rights and civil liberties, and are not formulated in relation to the rights of groups defined in ethnic or religious terms. Rather, they refer to the rights of the Syrian people without distinction. The movement therefore works within the existing boundaries of the nation-state, seeking to establish a form of representative government and partici-patory politics. As such, it does not question some of the attributes of the nation that were acquired with Syrian independence in 1946, namely the territorial

boundaries of the state and the internationally accorded sovereignty of that state. In other words, there are no contests over territory and sovereignty involved in the national claims being made. Rather, the re-imagining of the nation is an imperative of envisioning a political community different from the one that has been nurtured by the current regime.

As noted, it is not only regime rhetoric and propaganda that interrogate the identity of the protesters, but also particular historical narratives and memories. In response to this interrogation, dissidents and activists have been called upon to narrate a story of peoplehood. The narrative can be gleaned from the slogans of the uprising and the practices of protests, both of which are enactments of peoplehood and performances of the nation. Slogans and banners of protests were the first public announcements of identity, declaring who the participants were. As in Egypt, the protesters in Syria sought to constitute themselves as 'the people', but in more pronounced national terms as 'the Syrian people' (*al-Sha'b al-Suri*). Slogans have asserted the idea of the unity of the Syrian people (e.g., 'the Syrian people are one') and a sense of solidarity and/or shared experience (e.g., 'the Syrian people will not be humiliated'). While some slogans emphasise the unity of the people, others acknowledge diversity within this unity as, for example, in 'Not Sunni and not Alawi, we want freedom' ('*la Sunniyya wa la Alawiyya*, *badna huriyya*'), and thereby attempt to dissociate their action from narrow sectarian interests or representations. Since its inception, the movement has explicitly rejected sectarianism, and developed a discourse that interpellates 'Syrians' of all backgrounds and religious affiliation (the phrase used in this interpellation is '*Suriyya bijami' atyafiha wa taw'ifha*', meaning 'Syria in all its shades and sects'). At stake in these interpellations is '*Suriyya*', the nation and, by extension, its people. In songs of resistance that interpellate *al-sha'b al-suri* (the Syrian people), *al-suriyyin* (the Syrians), and *al-suri* (the Syrian), the subject is constituted as a fighter for the freedom of the nation.

The activists in the protest movement have sought to refute the accusation of sectarianism and what they view as regime attempts to stoke sectarian conflicts. For example, according to activists and local observers, in the coastal city of Jableh, regime supporters spread rumours among neighbouring Alawi and Sunni communities that members of the other sect were planning attacks on them. To counter this challenge, activists maintained open channels of communication among the various communities, and mediated potential disputes to avert escalation. In some incidents of violence, they organised meetings attended by representatives of each side and arrived at common positions. An illustrative case is the common understanding reached between the activists in the Homs Quarters Union (a federation of coordinating committees of the quarters of Homs) and the representatives of predominately Alawi quarters in the city regarding two incidents of violence that appeared to have a sectarian character. According to this understanding, the violence was instigated by regime-affiliated gangs and aimed to unleash a spiral of retribution among the neighbouring communities. A statement by the Homs Quarters Union indicates that the two communities, though differing in their political position from the regime, reject such tactics and denounce violence.[8] Similar episodes have been reported for Jableh and other cities and point to the

continued vigilance on the part of the activists to preserve the peaceful character of the uprising and to guard against descent into sectarian violence.

The continuous and sustained acts of protest are in some sense performances of the nation as a referential order that stands above communal identities. An important element of the performance has been the calling to and summoning of the nation in the various acts of protest throughout the country. This summoning has been expressed in slogans that affirm solidarity with parts of the country that experienced army sieges and violence by the security services. Thus, the residents of one town or city in a particular region of the country organised protests to show their solidarity with people protesting in other regions and being subjected to violent punishment as a result. In these demonstrations, people of one locale speak directly to those in other parts, reassuring them of their willingness to sacrifice their lives for them. For example, in the town of Daraya in rural Damascus, one banner read 'O Dar'awi [resident of Dar'a] your blood is my blood and your burden is my burden' ('*Damak howa dami; hamak howa hami ya Dar'awi*'). Such expressions of solidarity also take the form of chants at public rallies and marches, as in the slogan 'we are with you until death, oh Hama' which was repeated in cities and towns countrywide following the 'liberation of Hama' and the threat of a military assault in June and July 2011. In the same vein, demonstrators in one locale carry banners naming as their own the martyrs of other regions, cities, or towns (e.g., 'The martyrs of Banyas are the martyrs of Qamishli').

The performing of peoplehood and nationhood through vocal callings to the nation is given particularly dramatic expression in the performances of '*arada*. The '*arada* is a traditional genre of singing performed at weddings and other celebrations but was also an element of demonstrations at national protests in the 1920s, during the time of the Great Syrian Revolt. It has become a central component of opposition rallies and demonstrations in the current uprising. In style, it involves the enunciation of phrases and questions by a lead singer followed by the repetition of phrases or of answers to the questions by the audience. This exchange between singer and participants is accompanied by rhythmic clapping and changes in tempo building towards dramatic crescendos. At demonstrations, the '*arada* unfolds as a collective performance of common awareness and shared sensibilities about agreed purpose and unity, conveying messages to fellow protesters elsewhere, to other Syrians, and to the regime. Many of the performances are recorded and uploaded to the Internet, giving the messages worldwide exposure. The songs commonly include lyrics addressing members of the nation residing in other regions and localities. One of these songs, entitled '*Ya Watana Ya Ghali*' ('O Our Dear Nation'), conjures the geography of the uprising, naming the places where it began and its trajectory of expansion.[9] In the tradition of '*arada*, the named places are objects of praise, admiration, and pride. The named localities are all partners in the struggle against the regime, and they are all identified with Syria's quest for freedom as captured in the protesters' refrain '*Suriyya bada huriyya*' ('Syria wants freedom'). The protesters conjure the places in their chants, declaring their love and promising to come to their succour and aid.

In the invocation of the geography of the uprising, there is an element of remapping the nation. Indeed, these invocations produce new mental maps of

the country in which the sites of protest – cities, towns, villages – become the significant points of demarcation. This is accompanied by a graphic (re)mapping in the documentation of the weekly, Friday protests produced by activists and uploaded to Internet sites.[10] Additional spatial inscriptions are made on Google Maps of Syria wherein cities and towns located on the maps are linked to YouTube-uploaded video recordings of the protests taking place in them.

It is apparent that in the organisational work of the protest movement, traditional solidarities and particularistic relations – local, regional, tribal, for example – play a role in practices of mobilisation and the identity frames deployed in the uprising. These sit in some degree of tension alongside relations of solidarity based on broad political principles and objectives. Thus, on one hand, the uprising aims at the promotion of a civic identity and a conception of citizenship tied to equal rights and obligations. This, as noted, has entailed a re-imagining of the nation in terms that transcend narrow communal and religious identification. On the other hand, existing bases of association and engagement are not wholly discarded and, indeed, constitute important resources of the uprising.

This reveals tensions in the uprising between the conception of the nation as an inclusive and participatory political community and the need to incorporate and mobilise distinct, communally-based practices and relations into the struggle. These tensions can be seen, at least in part, as the product of the regime's incorporation strategy, which, over the years, has undermined the development of associational life on a national basis. Specifically, under Hafez al-Asad, the regime nurtured a type of relationship with societal forces that approximated 'communal corporatism' (see Ayubi 1995), whereby heads of clans and tribes in rural areas were encouraged to build constituencies and to mediate these constituencies' relations with the state apparatus.[11] Similar lines of contact were maintained on the basis of religious affiliation. Bashar al-Asad continued to rely on these forms of political civility in interaction between the regime and societal forces, especially at periods of crisis. Tensions between different types of political civility are embedded in this particular history.[12] They should not be seen, however, as simply pitting an idea of a modern nation-state against particularistic communities, but instead as an entry point into the constitution of the national community as a political community that is shaped by a particular history, formed and reformed in struggle with ruling elites and the 'national' states that they command.

We should also note the interplay between the local and the national in the emergent bodies steering the demonstrations and harmonising activities and modes of action. The localised character of the protest movement at inception has increasingly acquired a national-level orientation and structure through the establishment of the Local Coordination Committees of Syria (LCCS) (*lijan al-tansiq al-mahaliyya fi Suriyya*) and the Syrian Revolution Coordination Union (SRCU). The LCCS and SRCU brought together committees (called collectively *tansiqiyyat*) that had formed at the neighbourhood level in cities and towns throughout the country. These committees took charge of planning and organising events within their communities. The work of the LCCS and SRCU goes beyond local mobilisation and includes coordinating activities in various locales, drafting slogans, naming the Fridays of protest, issuing declarations, and so on. The tasks

involved in coordination are carried out by local leaders and activists who consult with each other via Internet chats and email. To a large extent, the LCCS and SRCU operate in virtual space and do not have clearly visible or known public leaders. However, many local committee activists in the LCCS and SRCU work within networks that have emerged at the neighbourhood level and establish relay points with the coordinators. The neighbourhood experience is fed back into the plans and strategies adopted by the LCCS and SRCU. Local committees at the neighbourhood level set out programmes of activities in response to conditions on the ground. They also issue declarations and statements relating directly to local concerns. As such, there is a significant degree of decentralisation in the uprising.

At the same time, the LCCS and SRCU have set the general framework for unifying political objectives, ethics and principles, and an orienting vision. These have been outlined in various documents such as in the 'Declaration against Sectarianism' and the 'Vision for the Future' issued by the LCCS.[13] The LCCS and SRCU can thus be seen as guiding organisations for the 'nationalisation of politics' and the integration of local-level political concerns into the national frame. The nationalisation of politics is not, however, necessarily or solely the work of a centralised structure. In the Syrian case, activist cells engaged in cultural production at the local level have contributed to national campaigns promoting the ideas and goals of the uprising. For example, the localities have contributed to the national imagining through songs, satirical writings, and narratives of resistance. The coalescence of the local and the national takes place around acts of resistance. For example, the humour of the Homsis (residents of Homs) and their feats of defiance have acquired legendary status and have become objects of admiration and pride among regime opponents throughout Syria. In other words, the localities become integrated into the national imaginings through the narrative of acts of resistance.

The social geography of the protests points to another dimension of the uprising – a dimension that arises out of social antagonisms surrounding regional distinctions and divisions, rural and urban development, and class relations. Geographically, the protests are spread throughout the territory of the Syrian state. At the same time, there are particular regional inflections and rural–urban dynamics at play. For example, in the southern governorate of Dar'a, where the large protests began, local grievances were certainly important in shaping the response of the residents when children of the city were detained by security forces for scribbling anti-regime graffiti on a school wall. Indeed, there were simmering antagonisms towards the regime and its local representatives – Atef Najib, head of security for the governorate (and a cousin of the president), as well as Faisal Kalthum, the governor – resulting from arbitrary policies governing land sales and corrupt practices in the issuance of construction licences and permits. The economic hardship was compounded by drought conditions in the region and throughout the country, beginning in the early 2000s and worsening since 2006.[14] Thus, many local variables came into play as motivations for protest.

Such local variables could be enumerated for all of the other regions and for the specific cities and towns that have joined the uprising. Undoubtedly, a fuller political economy analysis of the uprising may then lead to the conclusion that protests are primarily expressive of class antagonism rather than being a national

movement engaged in the making of a national political community and a re-nationalisation of politics. The socio-economic factors in the protests position the protesters against the continued alliance between the regime and the social forces that have benefited from the policies favouring monopoly and oligopoly. Indeed, certain slogans and chants in the demonstrations underscore this opposition. In the *'arada* song '*Yallah Irhal Ya Bashar*' ('Depart oh Bashar'),[15] three regime figures are mentioned by name as 'thieves' responsible for the expropriation of the people's resources.[16] Additionally, the somewhat limited participation of Damascus and the near absence of protest in Aleppo during the first few months of the uprising have been interpreted in class terms and motivated a boycott campaign against named businesses allied with the regime who expressly supported it in its confrontation with the protesters.[17]

If a clear or even hazy class identity can be ascribed to the protesters, does it mean that the uprising can only be properly understood in class terms? Implicit in the question is an assumption that 'classes' and 'the people' represent distinctive if not mutually exclusive types of political agents. The assumption, however, overstates the exclusivity of the categories. The protest movement is not a class movement to the exclusion of a movement of the people constituted in national terms (i.e., 'Syrians' or 'the Syrian people'). Indeed, the incorporation of nation-making performances into the struggle does not equate with 'the people' becoming the prevalent or overriding subjectivity. Rather, collective actors and actions emerge out of complex social settings in which class, gender, and other parameters of identity and affiliation interact, intersect, and structure action. Imaginings of the nation and of the self as a national subject are inflected with content derived from an actor's social location and political sociability. Class interests, on their own, do not explain the patterns of mobilisation in the uprising (i.e., the absence of some class forces and the involvement of others). Rather, I suggest that different imaginings of Syria, which are certainly linked to social location and political sociability, are played out in the multiple positions that different collectivities have assumed in the uprising.

In conclusion, the Syrian uprising presents itself not only as a protest movement for social and political change, but also as an exercise of political-community-making that entails a re-imagining of the nation, in practices and discourse, in terms that counter and undo the regime's practices of government and rule. Performances of the uprising conjure the nation and its people and enact their unity and solidarity. Norms of non-violence and anti-sectarianism orienting practices of protest are informed by historical memories of earlier confrontations with the regime, and guide a vision of an inclusive national community. In this respect, the acts of protest have unfolded as enactments of the imagined nation freed and recovered from the rule of the al-Asad family.

Notes

[1] This paper draws on a six-month period of fieldwork conducted in Syria between December 2010 and May 2011, involving interviews as well as informal discussions with youth activists participating in the uprising, and with dissident intellectuals and writers. The

fieldwork was conducted within the framework of a broader project on the political economy of economic liberalisation and cultural transformations in Syria and Egypt. The project is supported by an ESRC research grant (Res.062-23-2283). I thank Jonas Skovrup Christensen fro his assistance with some references. I an grateful to the activists in amascus for their assistance and friendship. They must remain anonymous at this time.

2 I am using the term 'political peoplehood' in the sense suggested by Rogers M. Smith (2003) to refer to groups and communities constituted as political peoples through activities and practices as well as symbolic relationships. These establish, maintain, or transform the terms of community membership and belonging in a binding manner that transcends their other associations and affiliations. The character of political peoplehood will depend on the kinds of practices and norms pursued in the making of the community and in establishing binding ties. It also depends on the bases of the identity claims of the members, and the conditions of belonging and membership.

3 For a more detailed account of the events of the uprising, see International Crisis Group (2011).

4 For a sense of the progression of the demands, see the Statement of the Dar'a Tribes on 19 March, available at: http://ar.soparo.com/index.php?option=com_content&view= article&id=17960:2011-03-19-20-38-06&catid=37:2008-05-23-23-59-47&Itemid=129; Dar'a Ulama Declaration of 11 April, available at: http://www.facebook.com/topic. php?uid=156038387783948&topic=166; Vision of the Local Coordinating Committees for the Future of Syria, 11 June 2011, available at: http://www.lccsyria.org/lccsys-political-vision/vision-of-the-local-coordination-committees-lcc-for-a-political-solution-in-syria.

5 Memories of the violent events of that period are polyvalent, presenting diverse accounts, some of which attribute sectarian motivations to either or both of the conflicting parties.

6 An inquiry into the positioning of minority ethnic groups, and in particular the Kurdish community, in the uprising is beyond the scope of this essay. It should be noted, however, that Kurdish participation brings additional dynamics to the political field relating to group–regime relations, historical terms of integration into the Syrian nation-state, and the community's institutional and cultural frames of political engagement.

7 Some of the mechanics involved in making *Suriyya al-Asad* are well captured in Omar Amiralay's documentary titled *Deluge in the Country of the Ba'th* (2003).

8 Available at: http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=229869337053235&set=a. 211582485548587.58850.211578702215632&type=1&theater.

9 Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvgy7jRu42I&feature=related.

10 See, e.g., map of Friday Azadi. Available at: http://www.facebook.com/#!/photo.php? fbid=224265850933892&set=a.221856221174855.74557.217848338242310&type=1& theater.

11 See Chatty (2010) on regime relations with the heads of clans and tribes.

12 On my use of the term 'political civility' see Ismail (2011). For a broader discussion of the term 'political civility', see the contributions in 'Political Civility in the Middle East', special issue, *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 5 (2011).

13 For the texts of these statements, see the Local Coordinating Committees website, available at: http://www.lccsyria.org/lccsys-political-vision/vision-of-the-local-coordination-committees-lcc-for-a-political-solution-in-syria, and http://www.lccsyria. org/923.

14 Drought conditions were most severe in the Eastern region governorates of Riqqa, Deir al-Zor, and al-Hasaka, and led to the forced movement of an estimated three hundred thousand residents to rural Damascus, Dar'a, and Homs.

15 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM_7rlDvcpM&feature=player_embedded.

[16] It is believed that the writer of this song is Ibrahim Qashoush, who also sang at nightly protests. Qashoush was reportedly murdered by regime-affiliated thugs for writing and performing this song. See Shadid (2011).

[17] A closer reading of the large protests in Damascus's suburbs and in the governorate of rural Damascus points to the importance of the spatial and demographic transformation of the city and its rural hinterland over the last four decades as factors shaping the patterns of protest and mobilisation. In this respect, demonstrations have tended to be concentrated in rural Damascus towns such as Daraya, Douma, and Haresta (whose populations comprise the original rural inhabitants alongside Damascenes who originate from old neighbourhoods of Damascus), in city suburbs like Qaboun and Barzeh (where rural migrants from other governorates have settled), and in old city quarters like Midan and Rukn al-Din.

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