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“Trajectories of Fear in Syria”

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Scholarship on revolutions often traces shifts in institutions, demography, economics, or international alignments. Yet such macro-level analysis leaves us to wonder about the micro-level mechanisms that encourage people to be silent, bring them onto the streets, or sustain rebellions over time. Many conventional models of rebellion treat individuals' preferences as fixed or relegate their inner-states to a "black box." Yet explanations are incomplete without an understanding of micro-foundations. As Daniel Little posits, "The mechanisms through which social causation is mediated turn on the structured circumstances of choice of intentional agents and nothing else."<sup>1</sup> Turning to contentious politics specifically, Timur Kuran adds, "a mass uprising results from multitudes of individual choices to participate in a movement for change. There is no actor named 'the crowd.'"<sup>2</sup>

Models of mobilization that do not explicitly explore persons' internal decision-making process impute them, implicitly.<sup>3</sup> The latter route risks widening the disconnect between how members and close observers of social movements comprehend their participation and the theories that social science puts forth.<sup>4</sup> Toward closing that gap, I seek to take their self-statements seriously not just as evidence to test hypotheses, but also as insight with which to build understanding. his approach takes up Charles Kurzman's query: "What would happen if we not only recognize meaning-making as an important facet of social movement mobilizations, but privilege it as the central feature of such phenomena?"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Little 1998, 203

<sup>2</sup> Kuran, 1991, 16

<sup>3</sup> Kurzman 2004, 329-330

<sup>4</sup> Polletta 1998

<sup>5</sup> Kurzman 2008, 5

I investigate how those who live rebellion make meaning of their experiences, using the case of the Syrian revolt. I have carried gathered personal testimonials from more than 150 displaced Syrians during a total of 3.5 months of ethnographic and field research in Jordan (2012, 2013) and Turkey (2013). My open-ended interviews range from 30-minute one-on-one conversations to group discussions involving several Syrians over hours to in-depth oral histories recorded over days. The transcripts of these encounters produce first-hand narratives about individuals' thoughts, feelings, experiences, and interpretations of events that they lived before, during, and since the start of protest in March 2011.

Across these testimonials, one motif stands out more than any other: fear. I find that individuals' narratives coalesce into a collective narrative, or a "metanarrative,"<sup>6</sup> whose arc emphasizes change in the source, functions, and consequences of political fear. In many Syrians' tellings, four phases of fear mark the chronology of contemporary Syrian history. Before the uprising, fear was a pillar of the coercive authority of the state. Surveillance and repression generated obedience by instilling in citizens a dread of punishment and sense of the futility of resistance. In spring 2011, popular demonstrations generated a new experience of fear as a personal barrier to be confronted and overcome. In mustering a capacity to act despite or through fear, many protestors discovered a sense of self and purpose that had been subjected. Subsequently, as the rebellion militarized and the regime responded with severe and indiscriminate violence, fear emerged as a way of life. Relentless danger of physical death was alternatively terrorizing and normalized as the encompassing context of the everyday. Finally, the protraction of war and, for

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<sup>6</sup> Green 1999, 56

some, flight from the homeland gave rise to new fears of an uncertain future. Personal instability, as well as threats to the cause for which people suffered, produced anxiety and a struggle to counter it with hope.

Examination of the lived experience of political fear offers a window into the micro-foundations of domination and resistance. As one of the most salient characteristics of life in authoritarian Syria, fear is a fulcrum for understanding what the rebellion is for and against, and for gauging what change it has or has not engendered. Furthermore, the study of Syrians' own testimonials about fear shows how the act of narration is both an exercise in meaning making within a revolution and a revolutionary practice itself. When a political authority deliberately uses fear in order to silence its subjects, their talking about that fear – articulating its existence, identifying its sources, describing its workings – is a form of defiance. Narration transforms state power from a force too menacing to be named into something whose very naming renders it identifiable, contestable, and hence potentially conquerable.

This paper explores these themes. The first section outlines a framework of understanding the trajectories of fear accompanying transitions from authoritarian rule to rebellion and war. The next section illustrates the four stages and types of fear using primary testimonials. The final section concludes.

### **Types of Fear**

Corey Robin defines political fear as “a people’s felt apprehension of some harm to their collective well-being ... or the intimidation wielded over men and women by

governments or groups.”<sup>7</sup> Such fear is political, as opposed to personal, because it emanates from society or has consequences for society. Theorists of the psychology of emotions identify other aspects relevant for understanding fear as both a private and public experience. Theodore Kemper understands fear as the incapacity to deal with danger due to “insufficiency of one’s own power” or “excess of another’s power.”<sup>8</sup> Its consequence is a “personal thwarting” that results in subjugation or, when alternatives to subjugation are available, in rebellion.<sup>9</sup> Nico Frijda similarly notes this intertwining of fear with a subjective sense of efficacy. In his words, fear is the emotion of “uncertainty and lack of control” that renders it “of no use to stick your head out in efforts at control.”<sup>10</sup>

Kemper notes that the object of fear is the prospect of an undesirable event or outcome.<sup>11</sup> Might different kinds of anticipated negative outcomes also give rise to different kinds of fear? Syrians’ testimonials suggest how variation in expected perils correspond with variation in both the nature of the uncertainty that they produce and the possibilities for subjugation or resistance in which they result. Since 2011, Syrians have faced or imagined negative penalties ranging from physical pain and death to collective annihilation, material deprivation, homelessness, loss of status, and damage to one’s own sense of self-respect.

Experiences and interpretations of fear in Syria are as numerous and contested as are parties to the conflict. Given the logistical difficulties of accessing all parts of the

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<sup>7</sup> Robin 2004, 2

<sup>8</sup> Kemper 1978, 56; also Barbalet 1998, 157

<sup>9</sup> Kemper 1978, 58

<sup>10</sup> Frijda 1986, 429

<sup>11</sup> Kemper 1978, 168

diverse Syrian regional map, ethno-religious mosaic, and political spectrum, I focus on just one subset of Syrian society: those who have become refugees in neighboring countries since 2011. Recording stories from among this population, I have been surprised by the extent of commonality and complementarity across individual testimonials. Indeed, together they constitute a collective narrative tracing four different experiences of political fear. The flow from one to another follows the trajectory from a durable authoritarian regime through the emergence of dissent and the intensification of violent conflict. In Syria, this trajectory corresponds with the general chronological passage of contemporary history, though it is not strictly unidirectional. Table 1 identifies the different character, functions, and consequences of these fears, as well as their respective relationships to external threat and internal agency.

**Table 1: Experiences of Political Fear Compared**

<b>Stage &amp; Type</b>	<b>Character or function</b>	<b>How produced</b>	<b>Relationship to external threat</b>	<b>Relationship to personal agency</b>
<b>Silencing Fear</b>	Coercive authority of the state	Externally imposed	Adaptation to demonstrated or imagined violence	Encourages submission
<b>Fear as broken barrier</b>	Terrain for personal action and transformation	Internally mobilized	Reaction to exercised force	Encourages defiance
<b>Normalized Terror</b>	Context of everyday life	Behaviorally practiced	Habituation to persistent danger	Encourages steadfastness or flight
<b>Fear of the future</b>	Uncertainty toward future	Contemplated and felt	Response to profound instability	Indeterminate

I examine these four experiences of fear in turn. Silencing fear is a pillar of the coercive authority of the state. Many scholars of authoritarian regimes emphasize its role in discouraging resistance and enabling repressive rule. Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt describe military dictatorships in Latin America as police states in which constant threat of state violence produced “societies of fear” in which “a climate of insecurity, anxiety, and suspense overshadowed all other feelings,” resulting in a sense of collective powerlessness and culture of silence.<sup>12</sup> Manuel Antonio Garretón, differentiates between two types of fear activated and manipulated by these regimes. Fear of the dark room is insecurity before an undifferentiated threat, which one knows exists but does not know its exact nature or when or from where it will be exacted. Fear of the barking dog stems from a danger that is identified, familiar, and known due to remembered experience.<sup>13</sup>

Some individuals directly undergo or observe the demonstrated violence causing the latter type of fear; for most, however, the ambiguous fear of an ever-immanent wrath

<sup>12</sup> Koonings and Kruijt 1999, 16-18

<sup>13</sup> Garretón 1992, 14

is effective in controlling their behavior. On the one hand, the state uses or threatens this violence in ways that are sufficiently targeted to communicate to citizens how they must behave in order to avoid punishment. On the other hand, it wields violence with just enough concealment and arbitrariness to instill a sense of unpredictability, insecurity, and even paranoia. The result is a fear that produces obedience, although obedience does not relieve fear.

A primary target of this violence is speech. As Ariel Dorfman described Pinochet's Chile, daily citizens were "hushed and guarded, coding and encrypting each sentence with double and triple entendres ...aware that the slightest slip of the tongue could bring down upon them the full force of the secret police." Terror succeeded in its aim, "to let our imagination conjure up and exaggerate the supremacy of those in power." The result was a country "synonymous with silence."<sup>14</sup> Networks of underground informers compounds the coercive and corrosive policies of formal institutions. As Kanan Makiya says with reference to Saddam Husein's Iraq, "Nothing fragments group solidarity and self-confidence like the gnawing suspicions of having an informer in your midst. Therefore, to the extent that the public polices itself ... it inevitably disintegrates as an entity in its own right."<sup>15</sup>

Similarly in war-torn Guatemala, the uncertainty of loyalties and unpredictability of danger, Linda Green observed that "fear destabilizes social relations by driving a wedge of distrust between family members, neighbors, friends ... No one can be sure who is who."<sup>16</sup> The outcome of this fear was enlistment of all citizens as accomplices in

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<sup>14</sup> Dorfman 2014

<sup>15</sup> Makiya 1998, 63

<sup>16</sup> Green 1999, 55



the production and reproduction of the authoritarian order. Edelberto Torres-Rivas concludes that, in punishing victims, and setting an example those around them, “fear’ seeks at all costs to be apolitical,” and “in the end total silence is imposed fear.”<sup>17</sup>

The counter-weight to the silencing fear upholding coercive authority is fear experienced as a personal barrier to be confronted and overcome. In terms of the truism that fear provokes either fight or flight, silencing fear is the flight into disengagement, while mobilizing fear is the fight for voice. Silencing fear is experienced as a heavy weight imposed from above by state policies and from a social environment corrupted by collaboration. It is the fear that Ryszard Kapuscinski’s describes as the “third figure” always present in the encounter between a citizen and security agents, which serves as the former’s foe and the latter’s ally.<sup>18</sup> Witnessing Iran in 1979, Kapuscinski wrote that revolutions become possible when, sometimes like an instantaneous shock, “the “harassed, terrified man suddenly breaks his terror, stops being afraid ... Man gets rid of fear and feels free.”<sup>19</sup>

This depiction of an individual’s auto-emancipation from fear resonates with an expression heard throughout the Arab world during the 2011 uprisings: *inkasar hajez al-khawf* -- “the barrier of fear was broken.” For most who engage in street protests, fear did not disappear, yet ceased to be the barrier to action it had been. They were able to muster the capacity to act through or despite fear. The process of doing so is liberating to the same measure that the fear that it confronts was oppressive. It might also have been experienced as a kind of personal transformation. To express political voice after denying

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<sup>17</sup> Torres-Rivas 1999, 293

<sup>18</sup> Kapuscinski, 1985, 109-110

<sup>19</sup> Kapuscinski, 1985, 111

it for years – or decades or an entire lifetime – entailed discovery of a self that had been subjugated.

In the context of mass rebellion, individuals break through barriers of fear even though the state may intensify its direct exercise of violence and, paradoxically, perhaps in part because of it. In responding to protests with bullets and other means of police and military force, states transform the fear experienced by citizens from the unidentifiable dread of the dark room to that of the observable barking dog. Torres-Rivas explains that there is no easy rational response to the former,<sup>20</sup> which is why it lends itself to phobias, “distorted perceptions,” and “fantasies of suffering.”<sup>21</sup> The latter, by contrast, lends itself to choice of a rational course of action. Observing the state’s plain, unconcealed violence gave citizens a sense of what they could do to defy or try to circumvent it. Furthermore, in witnessing compatriots killed before their eyes, some concluded that the worst that might befall them was less terrifying than the doom that had previously terrified them. This removed the obstruction that fear had constructed to block the path to agency, voice, and resistance.

Silencing fear and mobilization against fear are two sides of the same coin of subjugation and rebellion. The liberating experience of defying fear may leave individuals profoundly changed in terms of their commitments, capabilities, and worldviews. Nevertheless, such courage is difficult to sustain unflinchingly in the face of mortal threats. Should arbitrary and excessive violence increase and persist, a new kind of fear might thus take root. Unlike silencing fear, the fear stemming from war conditions

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<sup>20</sup> Torres-Rivas 1991, 291.

<sup>21</sup> Koonings and Kruijff 1999, 18

does not stem from political manipulation of the anticipation of unseen punishment as much as overpowering evidence of physical danger.

This fear is simultaneously terrorizing and normalized. On the one hand, the inescapable, uncontrollable threat of death generates petrifying panic in its most visceral, biological manifestations. On the other hand, to the degree that those subjected to such terror must still fulfill basic needs, prolonged subjection to war conditions can become the context of their day-to-day. Scholars have dubbed this duality the “trivialization of horror,”<sup>22</sup> “the banalization of fear,”<sup>23</sup> the “normalization of the abnormal,”<sup>24</sup> or “fear as a way of life.”<sup>25</sup> Green writes that experience of such routinization of fear, sometimes swinging between controlled hysteria and tacit acquiescence,<sup>26</sup> can bring people to live in a chronic state of fear behind a façade of normalcy.<sup>27</sup> Subjected to “permanent cohabitation with death,”<sup>28</sup> individuals either conjure the steadfastness to endure under such conditions or, if possible, flee to safer places.

Even when violence is escaped, its devastating consequences continue. Victims of violence might cope with injury and trauma, death of loved ones, destroyed homes and communities, impoverishment, and the multi-faceted privations of refugee status. These and other torments mark the loss of some aspects of one’s once-stable world, without indicating the new conditions that will replace them. They thereby contribute to a fourth kind of fear: that of an uncertain future. Such fear remains acute as long as collective

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<sup>22</sup> Torres-Rivas 1999, 291

<sup>23</sup> Torres-Rivas 1999, 293

<sup>24</sup> O’Donnell cited in Torres-Rivas 1999, 292

<sup>25</sup> Green 1999

<sup>26</sup> Green 1999, 59

<sup>27</sup> Green 1999, 59- 60

<sup>28</sup> Torres-Rivas 1999, 293

violence continues and individuals are left to speculate about what will become of their nation, state, and the reality they once called home. This object of this fear is harms that are imagined and contemplated more than physically demonstrated. Yet the “dark room” quality of these semi-conjured fears is distinct from those that had aided a coercive political authority. The latter type of fear confirmed the state’s control. The former stems precisely from lack of control on the part of the state or any other party. Fear of an unmoored future can coexist with the mortal fears that characterize normalized terror. Yet they might become dominant to the degree that one is no longer consumed by anxieties about day-to-day survival and instead obtains the physical and mental space to ponder upon what has happened and what lies ahead.

Though these four types of fear may correspond with a sequential historical development, not all societies pass through all of these stages. When they do, not all members of society live every step. Some individuals do not support protest or, if they do, flee the crisis without experiencing the liberating effects of participation. Others may escape before war conditions become normalized. Furthermore, this staged sequence may undergo reversals. The effects of breaking a barrier of fear may be long lasting insofar as those who undergo them pledge “no going back” to a reign of silence. The old regime will have difficulty recreating the deterrent aura of silencing fear once it is shattered. However, new regimes might emerge that generate terrorizing coercive authority anew.

### **Research methodology**

What factors, events, and processes give rise to each of these fears? For insight, I collect and analyze the personal narratives. Personal narratives are a valuable source of

understanding because they uniquely showcase agency, subjectivity, and temporal relations between events.<sup>29</sup> Syria is an ideal case in which to gather narratives, because it has passed through the phases of seemingly stable authoritarianism, revolution, and war in such a dramatically compressed period that the majority of its 23 million citizens have personally lived each situation. As a devastating and complex conflict has no end in sight, they are also coping with a profoundly uncertain future. If these political realities produce different experiences of political fear, Syrians can testify to them.

Due to acutely dangerous conditions inside Syria, citizens who have fled the country offer the most feasible entrée to personal accounts about life there. I thus made two research trips to Jordan in 2012 and 2013 and one to Turkey in 2013. These two countries have together absorbed nearly 50 percent of the 2.5 million Syrians who have become external refugees in neighboring countries.<sup>30</sup> Most Syrians who have fled their homeland cross borders nearest their homes. Fieldwork in two countries thus gave me access to individuals from different regions. At the same time, a measure of fluidity across the Turkish border enabled me to meet many Syrians who were traveling through Turkey, but reside primarily in Syria.

I interviewed more than 150 Syrian refugees. My interviews range from 30-minute one-on-one conversations to group discussions lasting several hours to in-depth oral histories recorded over several hours or days. I identified interviewees with a snowball sampling and used multiple entry points into different social networks. The resulting interviewee pool varied by age, class, region, and rural or urban background.

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<sup>29</sup> Patterson and Monroe 1998; Polletta 1998

<sup>30</sup> Numbers as of March 1, 2013. See United Nations, 2014. These tallies do not include the estimated 6.5 million internally displaced. See, 2014.

However, most were Sunni Muslim Arab and nearly all were opposed to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

I analyze my notes or, in the case of audio-recorded interviews, complete transcripts with an ethnographic sensibility, in the sense of seeking to glean the meaning of behavior to the actors involved.<sup>31</sup> In putting the actual words of displaced Syrians at the center of my research, I push against the common representational practices that Liisa Malkii identifies as rendering refugees speechless. Malkii argues that in seeking to rouse empathy for refugees' universal humanity, humanitarian organizations often privilege pictures of refugees as bodies at the expense of their words as individuals. As an alternative, she calls for "a 'historicizing humanism' that insists on acknowledging not only human suffering but also narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory."<sup>32</sup> The discussion puts these elements at the forefront.

## **Fear in Syria**

### *I. Silencing fear*

In 1970, General Hafez al-Assad seized power within the Baath Party regime established by a coup seven years earlier. Over the next three decades, he established a durable authoritarian regime based on a well-organized ruling party, complex bureaucracy, large public sector, stabilized economy, sectarian loyalists, and cross-sectarian alliances.<sup>33</sup> When a foreboding security apparatus did not forestall opposition, regime violence did. The Muslim Brotherhood fought the regime with armed attacks

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<sup>31</sup> Schatz, 2009, 5

<sup>32</sup> Malkii, 2009, 115

<sup>33</sup> Hinnebusch 1990

from the late 1970s and in 1982 launched an insurrection in the city of Hama. Assad responded with a scorched earth assault that flattened the city and left an unconfirmed number of thousands dead. A generation of Syrians was warned of how the regime would respond to challenges.

In 2000, al-Assad died and his son Bashar assumed power. Many Syrians cheered the young, Western-educated ophthalmologist and believed his pledge to bring reform. In an opening known as the “Damascus Spring,” many citizens engaged in debate, civil society spearheaded new groups and forums, and intellectuals signed unprecedented petitions demanding change.<sup>34</sup> Radwan Ziadeh explained that activists’ central challenge was their compatriots’ sense of fear. “My goal throughout was to help whittle away at the wall of fear that kept the Syrian people from rising up in demand of their rights,” he wrote.<sup>35</sup> Within months, the government cracked down on oppositionists. Meanwhile, its neo-liberal reforms heightened corruption, inequality, and poverty.<sup>36</sup> Government mismanagement of responses to a severe drought further exacerbated discontent in the countryside.<sup>37</sup> Though Bashar retained significant personal popularity, many Syrians’ found their lives only worsen under his rule.

After three decades of authoritarian rule, many Syrian citizens longed for greater freedom, civil protections, and rule of law. Yet most were too fearful to voice those demands publicly. Citizens’ fear of expressing criticism varied by class, level of politicization, place of residence, and other social characteristics. But it affected most people to some degree. “They planted (fear) in us and taught us fear ever since we were

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<sup>34</sup> George 2003; Perthes 2004; Ziadeh 2011

<sup>35</sup> Ziadeh 2012

<sup>36</sup> Perthes 2004

<sup>37</sup> International Crisis Group 2011a

kids,” a man from Daraa explained. “There is a policy of repression, do not oppose the ruler. Be careful, the wall has ears and it can hear you.”<sup>38</sup> A lawyer agreed, “A single security officer could control an entire area of 20,000 people holding only a notebook, because if he records your name in it, it’s all over for you.”<sup>39</sup> Reporters were anxious about crossing the ever shifting redlines defining permissible speech.<sup>40</sup> “No feeling overpowers Syrian journalists more powerfully than does fear,” a writer asserted in an exposé titled *Book on Fear*.<sup>41</sup> Another citizen elaborated that fear of imprisonment was the greatest terror:

We don’t have a government. We have a mafia. And if you speak out against this, it’s off with you to *Bayt Khaltu* [your aunt’s house]. ‘Take you to your aunt’s house’ is an expression. It means to take someone to prison. It means, forget about this person. He’ll be tortured, disappeared. You’ll never hear from him again.<sup>42</sup>

Omnipresent photographs and statues of the Assad presidents served as physical reminders of the watching eyes of the state, should citizens forget. Similarly marking the landscape were branch offices of security forces and the ruling party. A university student from Aleppo said:

The headquarters of the Baath Party is so frightening. You get scared just walking by it. It’s like a house of ghosts. Outside there are armed guards. But the windows are closed and you have no idea what is going on inside. If you lose your ID and go to a police station, you’ll be hit a hundred of times. The guard at the door will hit you and yell at you, ‘Why did you lose your ID?’ And he’ll send you to another office and then another, and each person will slap you. If you get arrested, they’ll take you

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with E.K. from Golani Displaced Persons Camp, Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 18, 2012

<sup>39</sup> Interview with G.M. from Daraa; Marj al-Hamam, Jordan, October 2, 2012

<sup>40</sup> Taylor 2007

<sup>41</sup> Baba 2005, 7

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Z.H. from Daraa; Irbid, Jordan, October 13, 2012



to a dark place and you'll go underground. They use so many different types of torture. The regime is so cruel, it leaves you wanting to die.<sup>43</sup>

In these instances, a major source of fear was the imprecise perils waiting behind closed doors or in unidentified dungeons. Similarly imprecise yet terrorizing, undercover spies and informants infused everyday social interactions with a nebulous distrust.<sup>44</sup> “You can see this fear in the eyes of every Syrian citizen,” a filmmaker said. “Every citizen had this fear of the other.”<sup>45</sup> A young man from Homs joked, “My father and brothers and sisters and I might be sitting and talking about Bashar and politics. And then each of us would glance at the other, [*as if to think*] ‘Don’t turn out to be security!’ By God, it’s just like George Orwell’s *1984*.”<sup>46</sup>

These circumstances convinced most people to submit to the status quo. No less, they contracted many individuals’ very sense that an alternative was possible, and hence their felt need to fight for one. “A Syrian citizen is a number. Dreaming is not permitted,”<sup>47</sup> one citizen explained. For many citizens, fear and submission were internalized in their very sense of self and way of being in the world. For some, the engrained disposition to silence became a second nature that they carried with them even after they left the homeland. A Syrian who spent most of his life abroad described:

When you meet somebody coming out of Syria for the first time, you start to hear the same sentences. That everything is okay inside Syria, Syria is a great country, the economy is doing great ... It’ll take him like six months, up to one year, to become a normal human being. To say what he thinks, what he feels ... Then they might start ... whispering. They won’t speak

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with C.A. from Aleppo; Gaziantep, Turkey, September 30, 2013

<sup>44</sup> Middle East Report 2011b

<sup>45</sup> BBC 2012

<sup>46</sup> Interview with O.D. from Homs; Amman, Jordan, September 20, 2012

<sup>47</sup> Interview with F.R. from Hama; Amman, Jordan, September 20, 2012

loudly. That is too scary. After all that time, even outside Syria you feel that someone is listening, someone is recording.<sup>48</sup>

This fear was not absolute or monolithic. As Lisa Wedeen shows, political critique in comedies, cartoons, films, jokes, and other forms of expression served as sites for not only a permitted letting off of steam, but also meaningful political contestation. Yet even as these transgressions indicated disbelief in official narratives, fear discouraged direct political engagement and criticism of the regime rarely went outside circles of inter-personal trust and private homes.<sup>49</sup>

Silencing fear buttressed the Assad-led security state for four decades. However, the kingdom's foundation of silencing fear proved more vulnerable than supposed.

## *II. Fear as broken barrier*

Every Syrian I met said they were inspired, if not elated, about the uprisings that forced authoritarian presidents to step down in Tunisia and Egypt in January and February 2011. Nonetheless, many outside observers and Syrians themselves judged that Syrians were too afraid to engage in dissent and thus Syria would remain a “kingdom of silence” immune from the region's revolutionary tide.<sup>50</sup> To their surprise, a nationwide popular uprising was in full swing within two months of the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. How did millions of Syrians “break the barrier” of silencing fear? “An indispensable part of the study of fear,” Juan Corradi, Patricia Weiss Fagen,

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with F.R. from Damascus suburbs; Amman, Jordan, October 16, 2012

<sup>49</sup> Wedeen 1999, 87-88

<sup>50</sup> Abdulhamid 2011; Bröning 2011; Al Hendi 2012; Starr 2012, 5; Ismail 2011, 540

and Manuel Antonio Garretón observe, “is examining the processes whereby the sense of inevitability is conquered.”<sup>51</sup>

Guided by Syrians’ testimonials, I examine these processes in two parts. The first traced the sequence of events that marked the shift from silencing fear to general emboldening at the macro-level. The second scrutinizes mechanisms that drove this shift at the micro-level, focusing on the paradoxical effect of repression in impelling individuals to muster a personal capacity to act through or despite fear.

### Gradual emboldening

The general arc of Syrians’ emboldening was a progression by which initially tentative acts of dissent gradually helped individuals muster courage in increasingly bolder ways. In the aftermath of the Tunisian revolt, observers noted Syrians daring to broach political topics, and some refusing to supply bribes to officials as usual.<sup>52</sup> Activists held small demonstrations in solidarity with the Egyptian and Libyan revolts, but they were quickly repressed.<sup>53</sup> Calls for protests circulated on social media but failed to take off.<sup>54</sup> A spontaneous demonstration erupted after police beat a shop owner in Damascus’s al-Hamidiyah Market.<sup>55</sup> On March 15<sup>th</sup>, activists used social media to call for protests under the slogan “Day of Dignity.” Several other localities witnessed demonstrations or would-be demonstrations, but security personnel overwhelmed

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<sup>51</sup> Corradi, Fagen, and Garretón 1992, 8

<sup>52</sup> International Crisis Group 2011a, 8-10

<sup>53</sup> Counterfire 2011; Human Rights Watch 2011a

<sup>54</sup> Sands 2011

<sup>55</sup> Williams 2011

protestors and arrested dozens.<sup>56</sup> The following day in the capital, a peaceful demonstration outside the Interior Ministry calling for detainees' release was forcibly suppressed.<sup>57</sup>

These events convinced some oppositionists that mass rebellion was impossible.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, some who participated in these early protests became emboldened and committed to continue.<sup>59</sup> An activist in high school at the time recalls how events unfolded in Daraa, on Syria's southern periphery:

We had tried to have a demonstration on March 15<sup>th</sup>, but the security forces were there and ready. We'd spread the word very secretly. A large crowd showed up, but each person came individually. People came, saw the security forces, and left immediately. They didn't even stop.

So there was no demonstration. We decided that we needed to try again, so we chose March 18<sup>th</sup>. This time we decided to have the demonstration in a neighborhood where everybody knows everybody else and the houses are very close together. There's not much security force presence there. We decided to do it after Friday prayers in the mosque, because this is where you get the largest group of people gathered together.<sup>60</sup>

These preparations coincided with other emboldening developments in Daraa.<sup>61</sup> According to several sources, a female doctor was arrested after expressing on the phone her wish for an uprising in Syria.<sup>62</sup> Later, anti-regime graffiti appeared on the wall of a local school. Security forces arrested some 15 children and perhaps others, as well.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Abouzeid 2011; International Crisis Group 2011a, 10

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch 2011b

<sup>58</sup> New York Times 2011; also see Al Hendi 2012

<sup>59</sup> International Crisis Group 2011a, 8

<sup>60</sup> Interview with L.M. from Daraa, Amman Jordan, August 17, 2013

<sup>61</sup> There is agreement on the general contours of these events in Daraa. See BBC 2011a; Al-Jazeera 2012a; McEvers 2012; Fahim and Saad 2013

<sup>62</sup> Interview with T.A. from Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012; also see Leenders 2012, 420-421

<sup>63</sup> McEvers 2012; Fahim and Saad 2013

Relatives beseeched local officials for the children's release and the provincial police chief, a cousin of the president, dismissed them with a vulgar insult.<sup>64</sup>

The next day was March 18<sup>th</sup>. After prayers at the small Hamza wa Abbas Mosque, one rose to his feet and shouted "*Allahu Akbar!* God is great!" Several joined the signal to protest and a small group began marching toward the larger al-Omari Mosque, chanting "God is great," "Freedom," and other slogans. An activist described the scene:

We expected that people would sympathize with us, but we were surprised that it only took one minute for everyone to know what was going on when they saw us marching. People joined us and started chanting. People came from everywhere, from houses, from the streets, from other mosques.<sup>65</sup>

Within two hours, a crowd of several hundred faced off with a security deployment that fired tear gas and bullets, leaving two protestors dead.<sup>66</sup> The funeral the following day became an even larger demonstration,<sup>67</sup> and demonstrations on subsequent days gave rise to more funerals.<sup>68</sup> Aspirations for political change aside, bloodshed became an independent motivator for protest. "The people of Daraa might have gone home and tried to find another solution if the regime hadn't fired on the demonstrators," a participant recalled. "People wanted to know who killed them and why."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with D.L. from Daraa; Amman Jordan, October 9, 2012; also see International Crisis Group 2011a, 13-15; International Crisis Group 2011b, 5-6

<sup>65</sup> Interview with D.L. from Daraa; Amman Jordan, October 9, 2012

<sup>66</sup> Al-Jazeera 2012a

<sup>67</sup> Al-Jazeera 2012a; BBC 2011a

<sup>68</sup> Al-Jazeera. 2011b; Human Rights Watch 2011c

<sup>69</sup> Interview with D.L. from Daraa; Amman Jordan, October 9, 2012

A government delegation sought to calm the situation, but by then popular demands had escalated beyond what the regime would accommodate.<sup>70</sup> Authorities released the children, but they had signs of torture. According to a witness, they also released some, but not all, of the protestors detained in prior demonstrations:

You can't even imagine how the situation exploded in Daraa ... The young men were hysterical. [They said] "Are you taking us for fools?" ... I saw the young men. They came out in large numbers and began to throw rocks at the police. It was like a powder keg exploded.<sup>71</sup>

Protestors began a sit-in at al-Omari Mosque. Security forces stormed it just before sunrise, killing at least six and desecrating the holy site.<sup>72</sup> People from the surrounding countryside marched toward the capital. "People were not thinking of change or even of reforms," one villager recalled. "Their goal was to save the city of Daraa from a potential massacre similar to Hama."<sup>73</sup> Security forces opened fire,<sup>74</sup> spreading outrage to new communities in a formula that one Daraawee deemed worthy of a book titled, *How to Spark a Revolution in One Week*. "This is how the revolution exploded in the entire Governorate," he explained. "The government sent dead to every village. The funerals began. And imagine: each funeral is a demonstration."<sup>75</sup>

Protestors recorded many of these events with their mobile phones, producing videos that made their way online and to satellite news channels.<sup>76</sup> That Friday, just one week after the first mass protest in Daraa, tens of thousands demonstrated in towns

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with T.A. from Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012; Leenders 2012, 421

<sup>71</sup> Interview with T.A. from Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012

<sup>72</sup> Associated Press 2011

<sup>73</sup> Interview with I.M. from Daraa Governorate, Irbid, Jordan, September 17, 2012

<sup>74</sup> BBC 2011b

<sup>75</sup> Interview with T.A. from Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012

<sup>76</sup> International Crisis Group 2011a, 10

throughout the country.<sup>77</sup> As protests continued and spread during the weeks that followed, protestors increasingly took up the chant made famous in Egypt: “The people want to overthrow the regime.”

### Mechanisms

This progression of events reveals the gradual shift away from silencing fear at the macro-level. At the micro-level, several distinct yet mutually reinforcing mechanisms propelled a new experience of fear as a barrier to be broken. The Syrians with whom I spoke insisted that one of the most important impetuses to this change was regime repression. Their testimonials speak to the famously inconclusive debate about how repression affects dissent.<sup>78</sup> In particular, it can help us shift from the search for covering laws toward the development of nuanced, qualified understandings of protestors’ decision-making.<sup>79</sup>

#### 1. Indignation

When I asked one man what he believed broke the barrier of fear in Syria, he responded with a single word: “Blood.” Many citizens regarded the regime’s use of violence as excessive, arbitrary, and unjust. A man from Homs described one of countless incidents that were perceived as wanton killing. “During the second week, the security

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<sup>77</sup> Abouzeid 2011; Slackman 2011; Sterling 2012

<sup>78</sup> See Davenport 2007

<sup>79</sup> Lichbach 1987; Francisco 1995; Francisco 1996; Tilly 2005; Lichbach 2005

forces followed the protesters by car and ran over that young man,” he said. “They killed him on purpose. After that, the people refused to remain silent.”<sup>80</sup>

In the parlance of social movement theory, such acts were “moral shocks.”<sup>81</sup> His wife added that, as incising, were regime acts that appeared intended to humiliate:

When the revolution started, the young people were insulted in the streets. This is the only thing that stopped people from surrendering. They (*regime forces and militias*) put up Bashar’s picture and said, “Prostrate to your god, Bashar.” Why do you provoke people by saying this? It’s unacceptable.<sup>82</sup>

Another man from Homs insisted that the regime’s violence gave its struggle with the street an existential character that encouraged new participants to join and redoubled their determination:

Whenever we would come out in protests, they would hit us with bullets. If I go today, they shoot us. Next Friday, my brother comes with. My father comes with. My cousin comes with. So-and-so comes with me. My friend comes with me. You know? It became like a challenge and confrontation. What kind of a challenge? To be or not to be. It became a matter of life. We either exist or we don’t. That’s it.<sup>83</sup>

## 2. Funerals and collective action

Apart from its impact in mobilizing outrage, the shedding of blood became a focal point that aided coordination. While a problem by definition, collective action is especially difficult in authoritarian settings due to severe restrictions on communication, pervasive worries about informants, and societal distrust cultivated by a security state. Given the prohibition on gatherings, many Syrians were apprehensive about joining a

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with A.G. from Homs; Irbid, September 27, 2012

<sup>81</sup> Jasper 1997, 106; also see Gamson 1992, 32; Ullmann-Margalit and Sunstein 2001, 339, 344; Pearlman 2013

<sup>82</sup> Interview with U.G. from Homs; Irbid, September 27, 2012

<sup>83</sup> Interview with F.H. from Homs; Zarqa, Jordan, September 24, 2012



large crowd. This fear might be overridden, however, by the social custom and obligation of participating in a funeral, particularly for one whose life was taken prematurely and unjustly. “Thousands of people participate in a normal funeral,” a man from rural Daraa remarked. “But when it’s a funeral for a martyr, the entire city will participate.”<sup>84</sup>

Funerals became crucial sites of and vehicles for political dissent.<sup>85</sup> A doctor from Homs recalled a critical juncture in his city’s revolutionary trajectory:<sup>86</sup>

H.D.: On April 16th, there was a sit-in vigil in in the Bab Assiba’ neighborhood. An officer came to clear the protest, but people didn’t respond. He took out his gun and started shooting, and 17 men were martyred.

The next day was a funeral for those who’d been killed. All of Homs was there; thousands and thousands of people attended. As people left the cemetery, the crowd started to march to Clock Tower Square in the center of town and declared a sit-in.

*W.P.: How did the sit-in begin? Was it organized?*

H.D.: It just happened. No one organized anything. It was a spontaneous reaction. There was so much anger. The barrier of fear broke. People wanted to react, so they started shouting: ‘To the square! To the square! To the square!’

... People were ready to explode. And the explosion occurred. People heard the call and came out from their houses. They were ready. (*There was a sense*): This is an opportunity that we should not lose. This is our square and we should stay here until the regime falls.

So people gathered in the Square and set up tents and ate and drank. They chanted and delivered speeches. Night came and people decided to sleep there.

I was at home in bed. At 2:30 am I woke up because I thought there was heavy rain. I went to the window and realized it was bullets. Security forces were storming the Square. Shooting lasted for at least an hour...

By the next morning, the square had been hosed down and all traces of the crime removed. Only bullet holes on the buildings remained. This was the turning point in Homs. After that, people felt that there was

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with M.A. from Jiza, village near Daraa, September 17, 2012

<sup>85</sup> On the protest function of funerals, see Price, 1991, 199-202; Rasler 1996

<sup>86</sup> Human Rights Watch 2011d, 16-17; New York Times 2011b; Al-Jazeera 2011

no going back. If (*before, the chances of*) no return was 50 percent, it had now become 150 percent. For certain, there was no way of going back.<sup>87</sup>

As funerals became political gatherings, authorities targeted them for repression and arrested or shot at participants in mourning processions. A man from Idlib province said:

If someone died, I have a right, as a neighbor, to pay my respects to the family and try to console their grief and say ‘May God have mercy on him, God willing, God will be kind to his soul, and such.’ I should go out with them in the funeral. But, I swear to God, they kill those who go out in the procession.<sup>88</sup>

Killing of those who mourned the dead added another layer of outrage to that spurred by death in the first place.

### 3. Moral compulsion

Regime violence also aided an overcoming of fear by impelling a kind of inner dialogue about their most important moral commitments. It forced people to look within and ask: what is the worst outcome that might befall me if I defy the state? For what causes, relationships, and identities am I willing to risk or accept that fate?

It was easier to evade this introspective examination before the cycle of protest and repression began. Under the Southern Cone military reign of terror, Corradi, Fagen, and Garretón write, “Each person seems to be facing the Sartrean dilemma of having to choose whether to be a hero or a traitor.”<sup>89</sup> Such a dilemma arguably remains muted, however, as long as the “overwhelming majority of citizens ... failed to react.”<sup>90</sup> As more

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with D.H. from Homs, Amman, Jordan, August 26, 2013

<sup>88</sup> Interview with I.F. from Idlib Governorate; Reyhanila, Turkey, September 20, 2013

<sup>89</sup> Corradi, Fagen, and Garretón 1992, 18

<sup>90</sup> Torres-Rivas, 1999, 293

choose the path of defiance, however, others might feel newly compelled to decide whether or not to do likewise. An introspective conversation about ethical obligations thus intensified to the extent that people witnessed, or even learned about, those who were beaten, arrested, injured, or killed for the sake of the revolt. Many people forced to wrestle with the question of how they could sit on the sidelines while others made enormous sacrifices for a cause they too believed to be just.

A mother from Daraa explained: “The barrier of fear began to break when they started to kill people. You would think, ‘I’m not better than those people who got killed.’ When you see people get killed right in front of you, you’re no longer afraid.”<sup>91</sup> A physician from Hama described his experience in nearly identical terms: “If one person dies, you ask, am I better than him? No I’m not, so I’ll go out, too. You can’t understand what it is like to see people killed until you experience it. Only then can you really understand the effect it has on you.”<sup>92</sup> A father from a village near Latakia said the same. “You see someone who died. And you say to yourself, ‘I’m not better than that person who died. He died for Syria. I’m not any better than him.’”<sup>93</sup> A young man from Daraya in the Damascus suburbs concurred, “Those who got beat up are not better than I am. He is sacrificing for me and for others. Why should I be afraid? If he is going to sacrifice, I need to sacrifice. He needs to feel my presence. Yet a fourth citizen concurred:

When the first person got killed in the demonstrations, people started to say to themselves: ‘The question now is whether to enter into a battle.’ It’s not a simple choice. It’s a big change. They think, ‘the people in my society and my village have decided to fight in this battle and may end up dying. Is it fair for them to die and for me to stay alive?’<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with U.D. from Daraa; Ramtha, Jordan, October 6, 2012

<sup>92</sup> Interview with T.J. from Hama; Irbid, Jordan, October 11, 2012

<sup>93</sup> Interview with U.V., from Salma; Antakya, Turkey, September 7, 2013

<sup>94</sup> Interview with J.I. from Damascus suburbs; Amman, Jordan, October 20, 2012

#### 4. Social norms and identities

The impetus to defy repression carried an aspect of universal ethics, yet they were also enmeshed with social expectations about honor, duty, and other culturally inflected norms. In the understanding of many men, gender roles played a prominent role. A protestor from Daraa explained:

Some people were afraid. But when they saw other people standing up, they'd think, 'What? Is he a man and I'm not a man?' When someone saw another person being brave, getting up, and saying, 'Allahu Akbar!' He'd think, 'What's the difference between him and me? Is he a man and I'm not a man? No! I'm a man, too. I'll join, as well!' That is when the barrier of fear broke.<sup>95</sup>

He contends that the same dynamic helped spread protest to other towns. He continued, "In Homs they would say, 'In Daraa they are men, and are we not men?' When the people of Latakia went out, it was the same."<sup>96</sup>

Such concerns about masculinity might be even stronger when men observed women acting despite fear. Another man from Daraa explained:

I have friends who were well off and successful in society. They were worried about their interests. When they saw women out marching, they would watch. Within an hour they would be out with the people, too. They would say, 'If women go out, why shouldn't I go out?' And with that, they crossed the line of fear. They broke it.<sup>97</sup>

These processes were not unique to rural, perhaps more conservative and "tribal" southern Syria. Daraa.<sup>98</sup> The participant in the March 15 demonstration in Damascus's al-Hamidiyah Market describes a similar effect there:

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with T.A. from Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012

<sup>96</sup> Interview with T.A. from Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 16, 2012

<sup>97</sup> Interview with I.M. from Daraa Governorate; Irbid, Jordan, September 17, 2012

<sup>98</sup> On kin-based social structure in Daraa, see Leenders 2012

There was a girl who began saying, “God, Syria, and freedom only,” with a loud voice. No one joined her. To be honest, I was scared. Everyone was watching. But Syrians always feel affected by the courage of a woman. A woman is not braver than me, so right away I will join. And I began shouting: “God, freedom, and Syria only!” My voice got louder and louder.<sup>99</sup>

Similar dynamics were unleashed by interactions that tested other norms, such as when the less privileged or able-bodied took action while the more fortunate waited on the sidelines. Another citizen recalls a story he heard from a community near Muadamiya:

A man was paralyzed as a result of being tortured in prison. He was arrested in the beginning of the revolution and released after two months. The first thing he told his family was that he wanted to be in the first demonstration against the regime. When the people of his village saw him participating in the demonstration in his wheelchair, they said, ‘We can’t stay in our home when this paralyzed man is out supporting the revolution.’ That gave the people power. It showed them an example: the regime can’t do more than that.<sup>100</sup>

In these and other examples, the cycle of protest and repression tapped into social norms and expectations. It challenged individuals to confront their fears of regime violence lest they endure even worse harm to their reputations and sense of identity and self-respect.

##### 5. Reassessment of the rationality of protest

Early repression also helped some confront fear by impelling a change in their appraisal of the costs and benefits of dissent. A young man in Daraa believed that a shift became apparent after the first mass demonstration:

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with N.H. from Daraya; Gaziantep, Turkey, October 4, 2013

<sup>100</sup> Interview with J.I. from Damascus suburbs; Amman, Jordan, October 20, 2012

Everyone agreed that the regime was criminal. They were just scared to go out. We're not like other countries, where there are always having demonstrations against anything they don't like. So when this opportunity emerged, were we going to waste it? If we lost it, we would not get it back in our lifetimes. And anyway, the security forces were going to kill everyone who had gone out (*the previous day*). We knew that if we went backwards, everyone was going to die. So there was no going back. We started down a path with no return.<sup>101</sup>

Indiscriminate repression, as well as collective punishment of entire localities, had a similar effect in helping people break through fear. A man from outside Latakia explained:

Our village is against the regime. So anyone from the village or with any relationship to the village is wanted by the regime automatically. The regime says that you are a traitor, regardless of whether you participated in demonstrations or not. So why not participate? You might as well go out.<sup>102</sup>

## 6. Deterrence upended

Some Syrians' described their break through of fear in terms that recalled a transition from the proverbial fear of a dark room to that of a barking dog, followed by a realization that the dog was not as menacing as assumed. Before the start of mass protest, most citizens submitted to regime power due to their dread of anticipated punishment more than their bearing witness to actual punishment. This was not articulated, nor perhaps fully understood, by either those in power or their subjects. When security forces made violence apparent rather than real, however, they shattered the logic of its terror. A high-ranking army defector from Palmyra explained the change by invoking the saying '*asaa al-'az tanhiz hiz* – "the powerful man should shake his stick only slightly." He elaborated:

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with C.J. from Daraa; Irbid, Jordan, August 25, 2013

<sup>102</sup> Interview with U.V., from Salma; Antakya, Turkey, September 7, 2013

Why do all the nuclear powers fear that Iran may get nuclear weapons? Because then they won't be able to attack it. They call this deterrence. If I have these weapons, you will be afraid of me and you won't attack me. . In the same way, if you have an army and intelligence services, you can use them to cause fear, but don't actually have to use them. If you use them, they may lose their awe. And this is what broke the barrier of fear. They used what they had."<sup>103</sup>

A younger defector seconded this point of view. "It's like a person in jail who smokes a cigarette," he added. "What can anyone do to him? He is already in jail."<sup>104</sup> Another defected officer concurred, "The regime and its ruthlessness brought citizens to the point of saying 'We have nothing left.' It used airplanes and artillery ... It unleashed bullets and threw acid. But we did not die. So what was left? That was it."<sup>105</sup>

#### Effects: "No going back"

Initial protests and the regime's violent response to them impelled emotional, social, moral, and cognitive processes that fundamentally changed the character of the fear that had governed life in authoritarian Syria. For many individuals the experience of political fear transformed from a force coercing subordination to a terrain for personal discovery and agency.

This transformation was the crux of revolution. In their first street protest, demonstrators in Daraa reportedly chanted, "No more fear!"<sup>106</sup> This call was part declaration, part plea for the present, and part hope for the future. What was remarkable is how quickly many Syrians would regard that lofty goal as being accomplished. Just one week after the first mass demonstration in Daraa, hundreds of thousands protested

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<sup>103</sup> Interview with A.D. from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan, August 22, 2013

<sup>104</sup> Interview with H.T. from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan, August 22, 2013

<sup>105</sup> Interview with S.D. from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan, August 24, 2013

<sup>106</sup> *National* 2011

across the country under the banner “Friday of Dignity.” “I know this place will never be the same,” novelist Samar Yazbek wrote that day. “Fear no longer seems as automatic as breathing.”<sup>107</sup>

In the weeks and months that followed, other Syrians would pen similar observations. “The Syrian revolution changed fundamental givens,” veteran oppositionist Haytham Manna‘ reflected. “It politicized hundreds of thousands of people ... No dictator in the world can govern over these people. It is over.”<sup>108</sup> “No matter what happens now ... Syria is already irreversibly, fundamentally changed,” an anonymous journalist asserted. “Syrians have found their voice, and they will not surrender again into silence.”<sup>109</sup> Another writer agreed, “We used to fear the regime, but there is no place for fear now.”<sup>110</sup> And another: “Every drop of blood, every tear, every chant, every video, every tweet, every word, is the sound of another chain irreversibly breaking, one by one ... They are the sounds of our selves breaking free.”<sup>111</sup>

Countless others would express the same sentiment. In “breaking the barrier of fear,” many Syrian citizens discovered in themselves a daring that they did not know that they possessed. Once they experienced it, many pledged that there was “no going back” to the norm of silencing fear. In this sense, some dissidents concluded, “The regime is gone” and that the only remaining question was “How do we get rid of it?”<sup>112</sup>

### *III. Normalized Terror*

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<sup>107</sup> Yazbek 2011, 5

<sup>108</sup> Haddad 2012

<sup>109</sup> Slate 2012

<sup>110</sup> Miller 2011

<sup>111</sup> Hanano 2011b

<sup>112</sup> Al-Zubaidi 2012



Yet the regime would not be gotten rid of so easily. Regime forces shot and killed protesters and bystanders, arrested and tortured tens of thousands, and launched large-scale military assaults during which it enforced curfews with snipers, cut electricity and water supplies, and carried out summary executions, theft, and arson.<sup>113</sup> Independent human rights investigations judged regime actions to constitute crimes against humanity.<sup>114</sup>

The uprising remained overwhelmingly nonviolent through summer 2011.<sup>115</sup> Gradually, residents took up rocks and rifles, primarily to defend communities and prevent security forces from reaching demonstrators,<sup>116</sup> but also to kill informants or pro-regime vigilantes.<sup>117</sup> Joined by waves of army defectors, they began carrying out offensive operations under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The regime likewise escalated from its declared pursuit of a “security solution” in mid-summer 2011 to a “military solution” in early 2012.<sup>118</sup> Its use of weaponry intensified from infantry and armor to use of artillery, airpower, cluster bombs, and missiles against restive communities.<sup>119</sup> Massacres were documented in some places and a scorched earth policy of “rampant destruction,” in others.<sup>120</sup> Oppositionists increasingly came to support armed resistance as the only strategy against state intransigence.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Human Rights Watch 2012, 624-629

<sup>114</sup> Amnesty International 2011; Human Rights Watch 2011d; United Nations 2011

<sup>115</sup> International Crisis Group 2011b, 8

<sup>116</sup> Al-Jazeera 2012b

<sup>117</sup> International Crisis Group 2012a, 3

<sup>118</sup> Al-Ahram Weekly 2012

<sup>119</sup> Hokayem 2013, 57

<sup>120</sup> International Crisis Group 2012b, i

<sup>121</sup> International Crisis Group 2012c, 1

The al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front announced its formation in January 2012. This and other Salafi groups, many of them powered by foreign fighters, used superior funding and weapons to expand their presence on the ground.<sup>122</sup> By summer 2013, armed rebels pushed regime forces from large swaths of territory in the north and west, gaining control of some 60-70 percent of the country.<sup>123</sup> In some of these towns, the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) seized control, offering basic services to residents but also imposed brutal punishments.<sup>124</sup> Some citizens succumbed out of exhaustion, hunger, or terror. Others dared to protest what they viewed as a new form of tyranny.

These conditions of war ushered in a shift in the experience of political fear: relentless danger of death that was alternatively terrorizing and normalized. My Syrian interlocutors described life under shelling and aerial bombardment as one of utter fright. They continually invoked and repeated the single word *ru'ab* – terror. They described how families would crouch together in their homes during nighttime bombing raids, aware that an explosive strike at any time. Hours would pass in this state of helplessness and uncertainty as they listened to the blasts outside and wondered where they had occurred or would recur next.

In my interviews, it was women who discussed this fear most frankly. They frequently described it in visceral, sensory terms, especially emphasizing the element of sound. Women from a family from rural Idlib commented:

Mother: The first time we heard the sounds of planes and shelling, we women were so afraid that we cried. It was so terrifying, you'd continue hearing it in your head even when it wasn't there anymore. I still hear it in my head now (*here in Turkey*).

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<sup>122</sup> International Crisis Group 2012c, 2

<sup>123</sup> New York Times 2013; International Crisis Group 2013

<sup>124</sup> Birke 2013

Daughter-in-law: Until now, when I hear the sound of a plane I get so scared that I have to go to the bathroom! There is no person alive who wouldn't be afraid of such sounds.

Daughter: I was in the hospital giving birth to my son, and I needed to have surgery. I was (*on the operating table*) and heard the planes overhead. My fear of shelling was more powerful than the pain from the surgery.<sup>125</sup>

My interviewees insisted that there were two terrors that they feared even more than the prospect of death by bombs or bullets. The first was arrest. From the start of the uprising, investigators accused the regime of torturing detainees “on an industrial scale,” aimed less at extracting information than at terrifying communities when mutilated bodies were returned home.<sup>126</sup> Among the Syrians I met, there was a universal sense that being killed by explosives was more merciful than being killed slowly through the torture and starvation that they held as synonymous with imprisonment. As a man from Daraa expressed it, “Most of the Syrian people are praying to God to die instead of being arrested by the regime. I pray to God, saying, ‘Please let them kill me instead of taking me alive.’”<sup>127</sup>

The second terror greater than death was fear for the safety of one's family. Most people I met had no doubts that the regime actively manipulated these fears. A father from rural Daraa said:

The regime was terrorizing us by saying, ‘We will not kill only you if we catch you. We will kill your entire family.’ I hear that, in some countries, the government arrests only the (*accused*) person himself. They don't

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<sup>125</sup> Conversation with women from Idlib countryside; Antakya, Turkey, September 2, 2013

<sup>126</sup> Miller 2011

<sup>127</sup> Interview with T.A., from Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 18, 2012

arrest his brother, for example, or his mother or his sister. Here, the regime arrests the entire family, or attacks the entire neighborhood.<sup>128</sup>

An FSA officer explained how he and his colleagues anticipated retribution against families, and planned their work accordingly:

The regime aimed understood that people were ready to die. So it tried to get at them in another way, by taking out revenge on their families ... Cases of rape were numerous, especially among the leading figures of the opposition. Fear was not that the individual (*who is resisting*) would be hurt. Fear was for the family. So, before executing any plan, we started calculating. We thought it through; if the regime is going to reach an area, who is considered symbols of the opposition? We would try to get their whole family out.<sup>129</sup>

In these and other ways, violence was terrorizing. Yet terror was also normalized in several ways. First, Syrians claimed that the possibility of being killed became the backdrop of day-to-day life. A man from the Golani Displaced Persons' Camp expressed it this way:

We are all martyrs-in-the-making or martyrdom projects – *mashrua'* *shaeed*. There is a saying we have followed in our revolution that says, 'Whoever demonstrates is a martyr-in-the-making, and whoever holds him is a martyr, and whoever washes him is a martyr, and whoever cries for him is a martyr and whoever buries him is a martyr.'<sup>130</sup>

Indeed, prospects for violent death became so routine that it was "normal" causes of death that became exceptional. A man from Idlib remarked, "It has been so long time since I heard that someone died from natural causes." His friend concurred, "If somebody died, it must have been from a bomb, or a bullet, or shrapnel, or a rocket."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Interview with M.A. from Jiza, village near Daraa; Irbid, Jordan, September 17, 2012

<sup>129</sup> Interview with S.D. from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan, August 24, 2013

<sup>130</sup> Interview with E.K. from Golani Displaced Persons Camp, Daraa; Amman, Jordan, September 18, 2012

<sup>131</sup> Interview with I.F. and F.T., from Idlib countryside; Reyhanila, Turkey, September 20, 2013

Second, awareness of death and violent means of death produced new kinds of knowledge. A common way people expressed this referenced the ways that even children obtained familiarity with the weapons of war. “All kids can differentiate between the (*sounds of*) different missiles and rockets,” a mother from Aleppo said. “Even my 3-year-old can.”<sup>132</sup>

Third, the schedule of repression became integrated into the rhythm of life. A woman from Latakia explained that, in the early days of demonstrations, security forces and loyalist militias would raid houses every Thursday and Friday. Family in the neighborhood would thus relocate to stay with relatives elsewhere on those days.<sup>133</sup> A physician from Homs described how his work revolved around the weekly cycle of demonstrations:

Most massacres occurred after Friday prayers. It was certain that some people were going to die and some were going to get hurt. This was absolutely certain, but people still went out to participate in demonstrations anyway.

The hospital was some distance from my home. To go there, I had to head out two or three hours before prayers. We would go to the hospital and wait. This was every Friday, every Friday, every Friday.

The demonstration would begin and, a little while later, a pick-up truck would arrive at the hospital loaded with people. Like sheep, injured and dead, one on top of the other. We’d get them in the hospital and fill up all the hospital beds immediately. And then we’d line people up on the floor in order to examine them.

We could not let people remain in the hospital, because the security agents were going to come. They’d arrest the injured people and arrest those who were treating them. For this reason, we provided wounded people with necessary first aid and then immediately sent them back to their homes.

During the week, we used to prepare pseudonyms, which we’d use, for our patients the following week. We had to use fake names for them

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<sup>132</sup> Interview with A.A., from Aleppo; Antakya, Turkey, September, 2013

<sup>133</sup> Interview with W.A. from Latakia; Amman, Jordan, September 20, 2012

because we had to notify the security forces of the names of our patients. So we'd use the names of dead people. That's how we worked.<sup>134</sup>

A fourth sign of the normalization of fear was the incorporation of violence into geography. As towns became battlefields, few spaces remained unaffected by death. A man from Palmyra mentioned an example invoked frequently:

People were not able to reach cemeteries, so they buried bodies wherever they could. Parks became cemeteries. People's backyards became cemeteries. Someday the land will talk about all those who are buried in it.<sup>135</sup>

An FSA fighter from Idlib described how zones of warfare and quotidian affairs existed adjacently in his town. People adapted as if to streets closed due to construction:

Here is one street in town. We block it with stones from both sides. On the other street over there, people are shopping or going a walk as if nothing was happening. You find people doing their own business: smoking water pipes, drinking coffee, talking, and so on. And at the same time, is shelling in ongoing. And over there, tanks and mortars are firing. But people just avoid that street.<sup>136</sup>

Fifth, normalized terror was apparent in an immunity, professed or real, to the shock of violence. A young man from the Idlib countryside describes this evolution from terror to near indifference:

In the beginning, people were so afraid by the sound of explosions. Then it became totally normal. In the summer, it was hot, and they had no electricity. What could they do? They went out on the roof, even though there was shelling and this exposed them. But it became normal.<sup>137</sup>

The FSA fighter from Idlib expressed similar sentiments:

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with D.H., from Homs; Amman, Jordan, August 26, 2013

<sup>135</sup> Interview with I.M., from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan, August 21, 2013

<sup>136</sup> Interview with F.T., from Idlib countryside; Reyhanila, Turkey, September 20, 2013

<sup>137</sup> Interview with I.E., from Idlib countryside; Antakya, Turkey, September 2, 2013

In the beginning, one or two people would get killed. Then twenty. Then fifty. Then it became normal. If we lost fifty people, (*we thought*), thank God, it's only fifty!

I remember last year, they shelled the market area on the holiday marking the end of Ramadan. People left the market. A half an hour later, everyone returned and went back to buying and selling things. There was shelling, but it became normal. Fear ended a long time ago.

I can't sleep if there are no sounds of bombs or bullets. Something's missing. For example, (*inside Syria*) we were staying on the front lines. When heavy shooting starts, we won't even bother to call the guys to ask 'Hey, what's going on? Why is there all that shooting?' Because it is something we are used to.

Whether terror was petrifying or normalized, most Syrians I met identified the regime's military operations as the major source of their fear of violence. Nevertheless, this regime use of violence did not buttress the coercive authority of the state and as had repression in decades past. Before the uprising, the threat of violence, manipulated with greater discrimination, encouraged people to submit to the dictates of power. For many Syrians, however, regime violence applied after the uprising began was too indiscriminate to command obedience. On the one hand, the excessive character of this violence undermined the regime's legitimacy. "In our eyes, the regime collapsed immediately with the first bullet that it shot at the demonstrators," a fighter asserted.<sup>138</sup> On the other hand, the unselecting application of violence convinced many that there would be no prospect of amnesty for the revolution's supporters. If you were going to be targeted regardless, why not fight?

An activist who could have relocated outside Syria, but chose not to, shrugged that one either accepted the potential of dying at anytime or fled the country. The majority of my interlocutors had chosen the latter path and were recalling their experiences in Syria before doing so. Their descriptions were likely colored by the

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<sup>138</sup> Interview with I.F. from Idlib Governorate; Reyhanila, Turkey, September 20, 2013

distance of memory and the act of recounting memories to a foreign researcher. They may have been exaggerating danger to justify, to themselves or to me, their having left the country. Nevertheless, the descriptions of normalized terror from those who had spent one-two years in exile were nearly indistinguishable from new refugee or from residents temporarily visiting outside Syria. They likewise echoed with descriptions from residents of Syria cited in published materials. Where refugees may have differed most from those who remained resident in Syria was in a distinct layer of fear that was more contemplated and felt than imminently physical.

#### *IV. Fear of the future*

As of this writing, war in Syria has left more than 130,000 dead, one-third of the population displaced, and more than 9 million in need of urgent humanitarian aid. It has put in question the state's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national cohesion. The toll of this devastation, with no end in sight, has generated a new kind of fear: fear of a profoundly uncertain future. For Syrians I met in Jordan and Turkey, this fear carried several dimensions, both collective and personal.

One strand of fear was expressed by people who actively participated in the revolution, often at great risk, only to find themselves feeling great apprehension about where it was headed. For some, fear for the fate of the uprising began with its militarization. An activist leader explained:

The revolution started in a very beautiful way. It was a great model that could teach the world. There was great perseverance from the people against the bullets to keep it peaceful. The thing that changed was that



people were forced to pick up arms. ... If the revolution had ended in the first 6 months, it would have been better. We would not be scared now.<sup>139</sup>

A young man who had been active in demonstrations lamented that militarization had eclipsed a clear function for those who had pioneered protest. “There is no longer a role for revolutionaries,” he observed. “Now there is only armed struggle or relief work.”<sup>140</sup>

Others who championed the revolution feared that its greatest achievements were being lost. A man from Raqqa observed:

What we fear now is this phase of moving into the unknown. I fear people losing their sense of helping each other. Some people are so desperate and hungry, that they’re closing in on themselves, focusing on what they can get for their own families. That is against the solidarity that we had at the start of the revolution. We need to get back the idea that we are united – that the Syrian people are one hand.<sup>141</sup>

Another very widespread source of trepidation was the rise of Jihadist groups and how they would affect Syria’s future. An activist from Amouda expressed a common view:

I went out, I was arrested, I worked, I demonstrated .... And then ISIS comes or some other group comes, and little by little they Islamicize the revolution. They steer it in the wrong direction. That creates fear. You did all these things for the revolution, and you see that things are only getting worse ... Fear of the regime was broken. But then there started to be fear of the revolution itself.<sup>142</sup>

A similarly widespread fear stemmed from what was seen as the interjection of foreign agendas into what began as an authentically Syrian struggle. The single greatest problem of the revolution, I heard repeatedly, was *al-mal as-siyasi* – political money. Rival external patrons backed different factions within the opposition and channeled

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with B.J. from Swaida; Amman, Jordan, October 7, 2012

<sup>140</sup> Interview with R.M. from Damascus; Amman Jordan, August 16, 2013

<sup>141</sup> Interview with A.R., from Raqqa; Gaziantep, Turkey, October 4, 2013

<sup>142</sup> Interview with S.G. from Amouda; Gaziantep, Turkey, October 5, 2013

funds and arms to hundreds of disparate rebel battalions. This competition fueled power struggles and undermined the revolution as a whole. An FSA officer summarized the situation:

The crux of the problem is that every country is supporting a different party in Syria. Many countries have interests in Syria, and they are all woven together like threads in a carpet. Qatar and Turkey support the Muslim Brotherhood and want them to take over in Syria. Saudi Arabia does not want the Muslim Brotherhood. The Gulf countries are terrified of Iran. Israel is worried about the Golan. We don't know where this leading. All we know is that we're everyone else's battlefield.

As I conducted interviews only in Jordan and Turkey, I cannot fully discern how Syrians who continue to live inside Syria experience these or other fears. It is possible that those who face urgent threats to their physical survival do not enjoy the psychological space needed to ponder what might come next. Fears of an uncertain future might therefore be particularly salient among those who have escaped conditions of war and become refugees.

Other fears might be particular to refugees, as well. One is the fear of permanent exile. A young mother from Homs articulated:

When I think about the future, I feel that maybe we'll never get back to Syria. We keep saying that we'll go back, we'll go back. But I'm losing hope. Everyday we hope we'll get some piece of good news, but it never comes. So there are days when you just feel like giving up. Like you should just try to put down roots and get some stability here. And then you see these pictures on TV and you feel that you should go back. But then you think, no, that would be even worse. You just try to keep hope.<sup>143</sup>

An exiled activist described a fear of losing her own identity. Though this personal alienation was exacerbated by physical alienation from the homeland, its source was the tragedy befalling the country as a whole:

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Y.H. from Homs; Amman, Jordan, August 22, 2013

One day I was visiting a doctor. She asked me to relax because I was very tense. I realized at that moment that I'd forgotten how people relax.

I believe all the Syrians who have been forced to leave Syria are like us; we can't find ourselves. Myself, as a person, I forget her features. This person who is talking to you now is interacting with what is happening in Syria. It's like I'm watching what is happening from behind glass. I can't feel my surroundings, because my feelings are still in Syria.

Most Syrians are suffering the same feeling. I believe we all need psychological support. Because we're tired, and we can't bear any more blood. We're afraid, we're afraid for Syria. We're scared about the long term. Where will we end up? Where is the country heading?<sup>144</sup>

The questions driving this sense of fear – what would become of oneself and one's society in a context of incomprehensible violence – were existential in scope. The difficulty of sustaining such fears triggered other psychological coping mechanisms. For one young activist from Damascus, the result was replacement of fear with a kind of numb disengagement:

First there was fear (*of the regime*), then there was terror (*of violence*), and then the next stage is apathy ... Life and death becomes the same. There is no distinction between the two, and you just don't care anymore. That's where we are now, and where I am personally.<sup>145</sup>

Others spoke of fear plunging into hopelessness. An FSA officer under death warrant by both the Assad regime and ISIS repeated the word *ya'as* – despair, again and again in the course of our interview. Still, he insisted that surrender was not an option:

Currently, the people are in real danger. The situation is horrible. Things are going in the direction of anarchy. If there is not a decisive change soon, there is going to be total chaos in this country ...

Personally, I have reached a point of despair ... Most of the calls I get on my telephone are from people asking for help. Syrians desperate for aid of one kind or another. What can I tell them? Many times, I don't even answer the phone. There is nothing I can do for them ...

To be totally honest, there are times when I wish I could forget everything. There are times when I just want to take my wife and kids and go somewhere and just raise my family.

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<sup>144</sup> Interview with B.J. from Swaida; Amman, Jordan, October 7, 2012

<sup>145</sup> Interview with R.M. from Damascus; Amman Jordan, August 16, 2013

Has Syria has become nothing more than horse-trading for anyone with an agenda? Just a killing field for other countries?

We don't know where this leading. But the revolution will not give up. That is impossible. There is no way that we can co-exist with the regime. I'm supposed to return to Syrian and say that Bashar al-Assad is my president? Impossible.<sup>146</sup>

A 21-year-old FSA fighter, recovering from an amputation in a hospital in Jordan, expressed similar thoughts:

What has happened to people, what has happened inside us ... We've lost everything and forgotten everything. You lose the fact that you used to be a person.

If we could be sure that we would succeed in the end, then I would have no regrets. But without that, I don't know.

I think back to the beginning ... what we lived that days can never be repeated. It is impossible to feel that again. We felt like we were doing the greatest thing in the entire world.

We know that freedom has a price. Democracy has a price. But maybe we paid a price that is higher than freedom and higher than democracy. There is always a price for freedom. But not this much.<sup>147</sup>

## Looking ahead

An exchange on Facebook between two twenty-somethings last November captured, with pride, sadness, and dark humor, the tremendous changes in political fear that Syrians have experienced in just three years:

Post: The most import and beautiful thing about the revolution was that people rid themselves of fear and the words, 'Whisper, the walls have ears.' People saw that nothing is impossible, and they liberated themselves from the terror that Hafez's regime cultivated for 40 years, and that Bashar then inherited. The most difficult thing today is that the thinking and old fear has returned, except that it is fear of another party, not the regime.

Comment: Yeah, that's true. But there are no more walls left, anyway. Everything's gone.

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with D.Y. from Damascus; Antakya, Turkey, September 21, 2013

<sup>147</sup> Interview with L.M. from Daraa, Amman Jordan, August 17, 2013

Their words reveal a trajectory from silencing terror planted from above, to an overcoming of fear powered from within, to an adaptation to unremitting violence, to a sense of trepidation about an uncertain future. These four stages mirror the forward chronological flow of recent history in Syria, yet also indicate the potential for reversal. In the exchange above, the first commenter's dismay about a new party generating old is a reference to Jihadist extremists and the apprehension that its rule might be at least as despotic as that of Assad. Amnesty International's report on ISIS abuses, tellingly titled *Rule of Fear*, detailed both ISIS's arbitrary and brutal punishments and their muzzling effect upon citizens.<sup>148</sup>

If the silencing fear that ISIS inflicted upon civilians resembled that imposed by the Assad regime, then the prospects that Syrians might confront, overcome, and transform that fear are likewise be parallel. In January 2014 I met an activist from rural Idlib during his speaking tour in the United States. I told him that I was researching how Syrians "broke the barrier of fear," assuming that it was evident that I referred to fear of the regime. Unhesitatingly, he asked, "You mean fear of ISIS, right?" The immediate reaction illustrated how much had changed, and not changed for civilians in northern Syria where regime forces no longer had a presence on the ground. The activist, a bold critic of ISIS, narrowly survived an assassination attempt just a few weeks later.<sup>149</sup> Other Syrians would also defy ISIS, sometimes using banners, chants, and protest methods that mirrored those that they had used to protest Assad. In doing so, they would undergo a similar process of mustering courage to work through or despite fear.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup>Amnesty International 2013, 5; also see Traub 2013; Amos 2014; CNN 2014;

<sup>149</sup>BuzzFeed 2014; Huffington Post 2014

<sup>150</sup>Syria Untold 2013; Al-Khatieb 2014; Weiss 2013; Hassan 2014

This exploratory, interpretive analysis of the lived experience of the Syrian rebellion and war illustrates how political fear is not a single phenomenon but a force whose character and functions differ. Different experiences of political fear manifest different relationships both to external threats and to the internal mobilization or thwarting of personal agency. Scrutiny of individuals' understanding of their own encounters with these fears offers a window into the individual-level processes by which regimes endure despite widespread belief in their illegitimacy, rebellions gain momentum notwithstanding severe repression, populations habituate themselves to horror, and collectives confront profound instability. It sheds light on the thoughts, feelings, and decision-making that undergird dramatic shifts in social and political structures, as well as the individual behaviors that give such structures seeming or real stability. Continued study of these themes will continue to deepen our understanding of the links between the micro- and macro-politics of domination and resistance.<sup>151</sup> It will also highlight what they mean for real people who live them.

In the Syrian context, talking about political fear is not only an exercise in explaining the revolution. It is also a revolutionary act, in and of itself. In describing their experiences, Syrians refuse to engage in the collective silence that aided authoritarian rule for decades and could sustain new forms of authoritarianism in the future. To the degree that they continue to talk about fear and other experiences of politics, Syrians thus engage in redefining the character of state-society relations and the nature of political authority in Syria. The study of personal testimonials thus offers us understanding of how and why people participate in revolution, and a chance to witness participation in action.

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<sup>151</sup> Corradi, Fagen, and Garretón 1992, 4

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August 21, 2013: W.D. from Damascus; Amman, Jordan

August 22, 2013: A.D. from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan

August 22, 2013: H.T. from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan

August 22, 2013: Y.H. from Homs; Amman, Jordan

August 24, 2013: S.D. from Palmyra; Amman, Jordan

August 25, 2013: C.J. from Daraa; Irbid, Jordan

August 26, 2013: D.H. from Homs; Amman, Jordan

September 2, 2013: I.E. from Idlib countryside; Antakya, Turkey

September 2, 2013: Women from Idlib countryside; Antakya, Turkey

September 7, 2013: L.V. from Latakia countryside; Antakya, Turkey

September 7, 2013: U.V. from Salma; Antakya, Turkey

September 9, 2013: A.A. from Aleppo; Antakya, Turkey

September 20, 2013: F.T. from Idlib countryside; Reyhanila, Turkey

September 20, 2013: I.F. from Idlib Governorate; Reyhanila, Turkey

September 21, 2013: D.Y. from Damascus; Antakya, Turkey

September 30, 2013: C.A. from Aleppo; Gaziantep, Turkey

October 4, 2013: A.R. from Raqqa; Gaziantep, Turkey

October 4, 2013: N.H. from Daraya; Gaziantep, Turkey

October 5, 2013: S.G. from Amouda; Gaziantep, Turkey

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