

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SYRIAN LEFT REALITIES

VON AKRAM AL-BUNNI

PREFACE

Syria is one of the countries that have followed the Soviet model and centralized ruling systems in its state-building and in leading the society. This was reflected in the dominant role played by ideology, the guardianship of a leading party, which fully monopolizes the political life and tries to derive its legitimacy from national and pan-Arab rhetoric, and the severity of repression instead of formulating healthy relations with the society based on gaining peoples' trust by guaranteeing their political and economic rights as well as advancing development. It was also reflected in the concentration of wealth, national resources and capital in the hands of a totalitarian authority dependent on a large bureaucratic civil and military mass which monopolizes most of the economic activity, presents itself as the single space for social mobility, controls the various health and educational services, pursues the acquisition of weapons and military technology and builds what could be described as a "police state" which derives its strength from intelligence agencies which interfere in the details of citizens' lives using three methods: violence, ideology and directed media to ensure hegemony over the society, the monopoly of power and wealth, the stifling of the political space and intimidating the opposition.

Privatization, market liberalization and decline in the social role of the state have led to deep political, economic and social crisis reflected in blatant discrimination between citizens, diminishing values of efficiency, integrity, fairness and equality and in the encouragement of family ties and values of favoritism. It has also led to tangible deterioration in the country's living standards, a striking decrease in the size of the middle class and its diminished presence because of the increase in the society's disparities and the widening gap between a large segment of poor people getting poorer and a few rich people getting richer. Some studies have estimated that 66% of Syrians live below the poverty line and that there is a high rate of unemployment reaching about 25% of the labor force, as well as a high population growth rate considered one of the highest worldwide, reaching up to 3.5% per year.¹

The policies of the ruling regime, its disregard of multiculturalism and minority rights, particularly the Kurdish ethnicity, have weakened national feelings and led to the erosion of national unity and social ties between the components of the Syrian society. Instead, factional awareness was fed among people, and this has encouraged them to embrace pre-national, sectarian, tribal, familial and regional affiliations. The so called *family funds*, which support needy persons who belong to one family or the other, especially health needs, have re-emerged in Syria. Moreover, the role of religious centers, such as mosques and churches, has increased and these places became a haven for needy members of different sects. Furthermore, the role of the tribal councils, which provide care for members of the same tribe, became more prominent and so forth. The situation has further deteriorated since the government monopolized the public space and closed off the possibilities of dialogue between those who hold different ideas and programs after realizing the danger of opening up during the short period of openness which coincided with Bashar al-Assad's ascent to power, a phase which was believed to be the "Damascus Spring." All this has led to the weakening of the country's political institutions and trade unions.

TWO YEARS AFTER THE OUTBREAK OF THE POPULAR UPRISING

After more than two years of the popular uprising, the current Syrian political landscape looks divided along two factions: a regime with an illusion that its military option is capable of ending the revolution and

¹ Arab Human Development Report, UNDP, New York, 2012.

an opposition with a political wing living outside the country and a military wing controlling large areas of the country and trying with its available capabilities to administer them. Under these conditions, there are increasing numbers of Syrians who became deprived of their right to live a normal life because of violence, displacement and blockade. It is not surprising that the United Nations admitted that "the Syrian crisis is the biggest challenge we face as humanitarian agencies worldwide." Today (mid-2013), more than half of the Syrians are suffering different forms of destruction; tens of thousands were killed, wounded and mutilated; there are thousands of missing and detained persons; and there are huge numbers of fugitives and internally displaced people who fled to areas witnessing fewer acts of violence or to neighboring countries, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have now become homeless and the large numbers of Syrians who live in abject poverty after losing everything they have and after spending all their savings.²

This tragic situation becomes even worse with the deterioration of social and economic conditions in the country. The ongoing war and the military deployment have had their impact on agriculture and the transport of agricultural products to the markets. The scarcity of raw materials, due to the absence of imports and weak marketing possibilities and export outlets, have led to the collapse of the country's industry. Hundreds of factories were closed or reduced their production and thousands of workers were laid off. The fate of the tourism sector was the worst. Today, its role has completely ceased to exist. There are no new investment opportunities and most of the investment projects that were started before the war were disrupted. The roles of public and private banks in the economy shrank as a result of sanctions and the flight of much capital abroad.³ The shortages of basic commodities and their complete absence in some areas witnessing heated battles as well as the fall in the Syrian pound's purchasing power (the Syrian pound lost 70% of its value⁴) and the collapse of education and health services networks have all led to the deterioration in the living conditions of the people. Moreover, there are many internally displaced people who opted to leave the dangerous areas where they live and go to other villages and towns and those who have chosen to leave the country to seek asylum in neighboring countries.

It is important to note that the Syrian working class has witnessed a transformation in its realities and in its awareness of itself as a class governed by similar social conditions, demands and common goals. The role of this class has also been kept afloat when the so-called *unified labour law* was passed and thus government employees became part of this working class. Political parties, presenting themselves as representatives of the working class, were subjugated and the independence of trade and professional unions was marginalized. This is not to mention the end of the socialist dream with the collapse of the Soviet model.

The challenges facing Syria today are of an exceptional nature. These challenges are not only those related to guaranteeing freedom of opinion and political activism, improving economic development rates and raising wage levels, ensuring citizens' rights and the provision of social safety nets for the needy, but also finding an end to rampant violence, preventing the country from drifting towards grave and prolonged civil war, partition and the establishment of ethnic or sectarian cantons, including the growing role of the infidelization Groups (Takfir Groups), seeking, with external support, to divert the revolution from its goals of building a democratic state for all of its citizens, and protecting against the various interventions of external forces in the Syrian national affairs, especially as the country is becoming an arena for regional conflicts and for the settling of international forces' accounts.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF LEFT IN SYRIA

In an approach to the determinants of the Left and by linking it to its basic meaning as proposed by the French Revolution,⁵ it could be said that the Left expresses forces committed to the interests of the disadvantaged and the poor people in the society, their rights, ambitions and future aspirations. But this defini-

² Report: UNICEF's Humanitarian Action for Children 2012

³ The presence and investment of Syrian capital witnessed a growth in the most important Turkish and Egyptian cities. Lebanon's Central Bank admitted that Syrian deposits during the year 2012 have doubled (Central Bank, Lebanon, 2012-2013).

⁴ The Syrian pound exchange rate for one (1) US dollar increased from 50 pounds / dollar in 2011 to 140 pounds per dollar in May 2013.

⁵ Historically, the term left wing dates back to the French Revolution and the seating arrangements in the French National Assembly. The representatives of the "common people", the Jacobins, the Robespierre, the Cordeliers Clubs, or as known then by the Third Estate name used to sit to the left of the King in the National Assembly which led in 1789 to one of the most important revolutions in history.

tion has its different connotations and multiple interpretations which have given the Syrian Left its versatility and diverse nature.

There is the *Soviet inspired left*, guided by the Soviet Union Communist International which has linked the fate of the toilers in Syria with that of the socialist system and the outcome of its struggle against the colonial West. It has struggled to formulate its positions to be in line with those of the Soviet Union, and this has led to many pitfalls challenging its leftist role such as its position with regard to the partition of Palestine, some pan-Arab issues and the requirements of Arab unity. The adoption of the Soviet motion of non-capitalist development and the socialist orientation was the justification given by this non-critical left for the role of the petty bourgeoisie,⁶ and for the ruling Baath Party regime, as a national and anti-imperialist regime. It has ignored the regime's suppression, corruption and the way it has transformed the state into a state capitalism, very distant from the socialist orientation and social justice.

Furthermore, there is the *reformist left*, which was keen on giving priority to the concept of social justice, and it was very hostile to private property. It sanctified social ownership and the guided administration of the economy through state direct intervention. It also focused on the dimensions of the toilers' demands in order to improve their living standards without giving much attention to the nature of the existing political system and the suppression faced by the society.

Additionally, there is the *pan-Arab left*, which has focused on the liberalization of society from external exploitation and on considering imperialism as the basis of the blight. It heavily relied on the Vietnamese experience and the rise in the role of the Palestinian leftist organizations to devote its struggle for supporting resistance as a way of liberating the occupied land. It considered the struggle for Arab unity and Palestinian rights, the essence of the Arab liberation struggle, and that there could be no future for the Arabs and the Syrians before completing this struggle mission.

But when we talk about the left that has emerged after the collapse of the Soviet experience and monitor its reactions, we immediately recall the *Marxist left*, which sees in Marxism – very much associated with the Soviet experience - its most coherent, consistent and scientific intellectual foundation. The left, being the most ideologically affected and disintegrated as a result of the collapse of this experience, has witnessed abandonment and many leftists have left behind the socialist project and adopted an opposite path by embracing the liberal victorious thought. In fact, there were negative implications and repercussions felt when some parties and personalities, previously considered as communists, announced that capitalism and Western democracy are the locomotive of history (such as statements made by party groups and important leaders of the People's Party and the Communist Labor Party also translated as the "Party for Communist Action").

There were also other leftists who remained loyal to their past experience without making any revision or adjustments and considered that what had happened was nothing but implementation mistakes (such as the division in the Communist Party and the Trotskyist group that had in the past strongly criticized the Soviet leadership). There is also the left that has learnt the lessons of the Soviet Union's collapse and its impact on the conditions in our countries (such as the Marxist Left Gathering and the Communist Labor Party).

In other words, the concept of the left has witnessed many changes as it was clear that the defense of the toilers' rights and interests requires a critical review of past experiences. It requires liberating the left from its ideological blindness, pre-determined slogans created by self-desires rather than concrete realities, and the need to activate the role of critique to grasp realities, ideas and concepts. Most importantly, political democracy became a motto of the future leftist project, and it occupied the pilot role it deserves as an entry point to social democracy. It has transcended thoughts associated with any pattern of tyranny, which by force eliminates the richness and vitality of diversity in life and in the course of history.

THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW LEFT IN SYRIA

In light of the foregoing, the political landscape in Syria has witnessed many political discussions and splits. The identity of the Left, with its two Marxist-communist and Pan-Arab factions, was reshaped based

⁶Intellectuals, teachers, technocrats, smallholders of artisans, farmers and small traders.

on its position with regard to the ruling regime as the main criteria. There has been a screening process among those who continued to support the ruling regime without making use of the lessons learnt from the collapse of similar models. These have tended to justify their position with regard to the ruling elite by exaggerating its claims about resistance and confrontation plans with imperialism and by exaggerating memories of its old days when it faced traditional feudal structures and developed a strategy for development and for improving the infrastructure. The other left deepened its opposition to the ruling regime and started to draw a new way which combines the national issue and the democratic issue with its two political and social dimensions. It has given the latter a clear precedence, and it revealed the real nature of the ruling regime as an authoritarian and capitalist regime built on the plundering of the national wealth and the wealth of the traditional feudal economy and capitalists in order to recycle it across the state in a way that serves the regime's interests as a bourgeoisie and bureaucratic authority that has spread capitalism and has enforced it rather than eradicate it.

As a result of these revisions, a new left has emerged, a left that has based its judgments on the negative and unfortunate outcomes of long decades of communist, pan-Arab, and leftist struggle, the clear failure of authorities with petty bourgeoisie orientation in completing the national and pan-Arab tasks, the outcomes of student movements in Europe in 1968, and some of the European communist jurisprudence. This new stream, which is the most important one, has relied on the shortcomings of the Soviet experience and the lessons learnt from its collapse. It started by eliminating the conflict between political democracy and social democracy, and between them and the national and pan-Arab issues by giving priority to the democratic struggle and by denouncing any kind of ideological control of the society, focusing on the support of human rights to enable toilers to participate in the political process and to take decisions related to their livelihoods by themselves. It is the left that has based its struggle on building a state of citizens who enjoy equal rights and duties, regardless of their religion, sect, gender, creed and ethnicity. They believe that this path is indispensable in ending exploitation, oppression, injustice and tyranny and in achieving free and dignified human life for all citizens. It has reached the conclusion that sacrificing political democracy will only produce tyranny, monopoly of power, authoritarianism, corruption and the monopolization of wealth, which only benefit the narrow interests of the corrupt and those who exploit the society. According to this left, these practices would only lead to the weakening of the internal structure and to making it incapable of facing external threats and challenges.

THE DIVERSITY OF LEFT-WING STREAMS IN THE SYRIAN LANDSCAPE

The Syrian scene, in the period that followed the Arab military defeat in 1967 and its repercussions on the Syrian society that has a special sensitivity towards national issues and the Palestinian cause, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the critical revisions that followed it regarding the concept of the left, its role and prospects of development, has witnessed the emergence of diverse leftist streams. These streams emerged before the significant shifts in ideas, concepts, affiliations and lineups associated with positions related to the Syrian Revolution, which started in 2011, and its painful repercussions from which we still suffer today.

THE SYRIAN COMMUNIST PARTY

The Syrian Communist Party, which was founded in 1924, is one of the oldest left-wing parties in Syria. It participated in the revolution against the French mandate in 1925 and fought the election battle for the first time in 1954. Khalid Bakdash, its secretary general at that time, succeeded in winning a parliamentary seat and the party's popularity and influence increased significantly in years prior to unity with Egypt in 1958. But the party's involvement in the global conflict and its policies which followed the Soviet Union's policies made it face many confusions and pitfalls. Its opposition to the Syrian-Egyptian unification was a reason behind the imprisonment and prosecution of its members and cadres. After that, the party changed its policy, which was based on criticizing the "petty bourgeoisie" parties, because of their swift stances of condemning the bourgeoisie, and it had opted to cooperate with the petty bourgeois parties when the Baath Party ascended to power and initiated agrarian reform and nationalization policies and allied itself with the Soviet Union.⁷ It agreed to participate nominally in what is known as the National Progressive

⁷ The Communist Party, in the beginning of its activism, was in favor of supporting the bourgeoisie to achieve the democratic revolution. The program of the party which was approved by its second conference, held in 1944 and the

Front (NPF) and to adapt its policies to become in line with those of the ruling regime after the Corrective Revolution, referred to as the Syrian Corrective Movement of 1970. It justified this step by adopting the so-called "theory of non-capital evolution" and the "socialist orientation." This led to a severe narrowing of its popular base which further contracted with the transformations and alignments achieved when the Baathists took further steps to ensure workers' rights and free education. This opened the door wide for the disintegration of the Communist Party. The first time this happened was in the year 1972 because of political and program-related conflicts and as a result of real differences in viewpoints⁸ on the party's position with regard to the ruling regime and national and pan-Arab issues. Under these conditions, the party split into two parties, the Khalid Bakdash wing which kept the party's name and Riad al-Turk wing, known as the "Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau)."

Divisions within the communist party have continued ever since then. These divisions took the form of power conflicts, and differences over insignificant issues that have often taken a personal dimension and conflicts over leading positions rather than conflicts over policies. Thus, the Syrian scenery became flooded with a number of ineffective communist parties that have no weight. The most important division took place in 1978, led by Murad Yusuf, who created the Syrian Communist Party Base Organization. In 1983, another division took place, and it was led by Yusuf Faysal who kept the same name of the communist party. The result was a communist party with two wings: the wing of Wisal Farha Bakdash (the widow of Khalid Bakdash, the former secretary general of the party, who led the party after the death of her husband), which issues the "Sawt al-Shaab" (The Voice of the People) newspaper, and Yusuf Faysal wing now led by Haneen Nimr and which issues the al-Nour (The Light) newspaper. The two wings remained members of what is known as the National Progressive Front, together with other pan-Arab leftist parties with similar composition and positions adhering to those of the ruling regime such as the Arab Socialist Union, led by Fayez Ismail, the Unionists Socialists Party, led by Safwan al-Qudsi, the Arab Socialist Movement, led by Abdul Ghani Qannout, the Social Democratic Unionist Party and the Arab Democratic Union. In the year 2005, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, led by Josef Swaid, joined them. The common ground which gathers all these parties is their defense of the ruling system and the justifications they give for its policies. Moreover, none of them have any real or effective presence in the society.⁹

This last division in the Syrian Communist Party became a reality on the organizational level in the year in 1986 when Khaled Bakdash's group held its sixth conference followed by the Yousef al-Faisal which also held its sixth conference. The reasons for the division were nothing more than accusations of loyalty to individuals and worship of leadership made by those who walked out. In the year 1991, Yusuf Faysal Group held its seventh conference, which was meant to unite the party. One of its achievements was reuniting some of the groups that had previously walked out such as the Murad Yusuf Group (the Base Organization), and the Yusuf Nimr Group (the Communist Union), which withdrew from the Communist Party (Political Bureau) after the fifth conference in 1978. After that, the Bakdash wing witnessed a major split in the city of Damascus, and its nucleus was the Qasyoun Group, whose members were successively expelled from the party. This group formed the "the Unity of Syrian Communists" under the leadership of Qadri Jamil.¹⁰ In its statement, the group considered the then leaders of the party as "greedy heirs" and called for abandoning the family mentality and political feudalism which led to the purging of the party cadres.

There is no doubt that the main reason behind the many divisions of the Syrian Communist Party is its inability to play the resistance role a communist or a leftist party is expected to play, and its subordination to the regime's policies. In some instances, the party witnessed unsuccessful attempts by some of its promising cadres to generate a different role to be played by the party based on a clear program which aimed at reducing its subordination to the ruling regime, achieving democratic change, and aspiring to become the real, long - awaited alternative leading party capable of leading the struggle in order to achieve the goals of popular and disadvantaged classes of the society.¹¹

explanatory booklet written by the party's Secretary-General Khalid Bakdash, contained a critical position of these petty bourgeoisie parties such as the Baath party, because they hastily started with the nationalization project and this opened the door for conflict with the bourgeoisie.

⁸ Qadaya al-Khilaf fi al-Hizb al-Shoyouei al-Souri, wa Mulahathat al-Rifaq al-Soviet (Issues of disagreement within the Syrian Communist Party and the Soviet comrades' Notes), Dar Ibn Khaldoun publications, Beirut 1972.

⁹ See the Charter of the "National Progressive Front," Damascus, March 1972.

¹⁰ Politburo member of the Syrian Communist Party and Secretary of Damascus region (Qasyoun) before announcing his defection and the formation of the Union of Communists in Syria.

¹¹ Source: reports and documents of the Syrian Communist Party, Damascus, 1980.

The leftist nature of the Syrian Communist Party, as a defender of the interests of the poor and workers, ceased to exist. With the exception of the Riyad al-Turk wing, those who walked out did not do so to improve the conditions of the poor and the laborers but to further subordinate to the existing ruling system and to support its stances. The timid criticism of some internal flaws related to corruption, the deterioration of the living standards of citizens, and the party's repeated warnings of a growing bureaucratic bourgeoisie which is depleting state resources, and the seriousness of the regime's alliance with the parasitic bourgeoisie¹² did not change the above facts. While stressing these issues, the party continued to overlook the democratic issues, the defense of the Syrian peoples' human rights and the importance of enabling people to participate in determining their affairs; instead, it defended the regime which controls a critical portion of the socially produced surplus and is causing the lower classes to become poorer.

THE KURDISH DEMOCRATIC PARTY

In the same context, the Kurdish political map in Syria witnessed similar developments, frequent divisions from the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPs), the mother party, into numerous parties, most of them of leftist orientation, such as the *Kurdistan Democratic Party*, led by Nasr ed-Din Ibrahim, and another party led by Abdul-Hakim Bashar, the *Kurdish Leftist Party*, the *Kurdish Democratic Unity Party*, the *Azadi Party*, the *Kurdish Democratic Equality Party*, the *Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party* and the *Future Movement*,¹³ led by Mashaal Tammo, who was assassinated in the summer of 2011 because of his radical position on the ruling regime and his blatant support for the Syrian revolution. These parties, most of them Marxist, have similar orientation and there are no important differences in their programs. This explains that the reasons behind the divisions witnessed in their ranks are of a personal as well as organizational nature. All these parties reject the national oppression of the Kurdish people, and they all believe that the state of justice, freedom and equality should be built and that is why they formed two broad alliances, namely, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance and the Kurdish National Front, each composed of six parties with similar names, a result of splits within the same parties. Perhaps it is fair and just to say that the development of the national sense among the Syrian Kurds was never at the expense of their loyalty to their homeland Syria. With the exception of a very few extremists who promote notions of independence and secession, the Kurdish political movement with its various parties, agrees on slogans which emphasize belonging to Syria and call for the lifting of ethnic-based oppression and persecution, the protection of public liberties, justice, equality and strengthening the bonds of Arab-Kurdish brotherhood.¹⁴

THE COMMUNIST LABOR PARTY

The attempt, which bore the name of the *New Left*, can be traced back to the small Marxist meetings phenomenon. These meetings became frequent in 1979 in conjunction with the growing disputes within the Communist Party and the growing role of the Palestinian resistance and its effects. These meetings witnessed the participation of young cadres who came from the various leftist, pan-Arab and communist parties, and embraced Marxist ideology, starting their journey of research and dialogue in order to provide answers to urgent questions of concern to Syrians which would help in ending the crisis of the absence of a political tool which would represent the working classes. This phenomenon culminated in 1976 in the creation of the so-called League of Communist Action followed by the Communist Labor Party in 1980. Among the leaders of the party were Aslan Abdul Karim,¹⁵ Fateh Jamous,¹⁶ Akram al-Bunni,¹⁷ Muhammad

¹² Non-productive bourgeoisie class which grew on the sidelines of the state economic role and its wealth from corruption and by looting public money. This class began to play a serious role in laying the foundations of the capitalist model.

¹³ A group of Kurdish leftist intellectuals with aspirations of overcoming regulatory and political problems that have defined the aging Kurdish parties.

¹⁴ Based on reports and programs of the Syrian Kurdish parties.

¹⁵ From the city of Salamiyeh. He became Marxist after abandoning his religious background, and he was imprisoned for fifteen years. After his release, he continued his opposition activities through the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society.

¹⁶ From Latakia, he was a member of the Arab Socialist Movement. In the early seventies he joined one of the small Marxist groups at Aleppo University, and he was imprisoned for fifteen years.

¹⁷ From the city of Hama, he was one of the cadres of a big Marxist group formed by those who left the Arab Socialist Movement in the city of Hama and its countryside. He is the secretary general of the National Council of Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change. He was arrested several times.

Miamar,¹⁸ and Abdul Aziz al-Khair.¹⁹ This party was characterized by its leftist ideology and its commitment to a transitional political and strategic program based on the mobilization of popular classes to challenge an authoritarian, bourgeoisie and non-national bureaucracy, and to move towards a socialist revolution which starts with the completion of national and democratic tasks.

But this attempt, which has made a positive impact on the political scene, as attested by various political parties and intellectuals opposing or supporting the regime because of its resistance and vital critical, political and advocacy role, was soon aborted. Many of its members were arrested and prosecuted severely by security forces and the party members were strongly fought by the ruling regime which had launched mass arrests targeting most of its cadres in the 1980's, thus weakening the party and paralyzing its activities. In addition to this campaign by the regime, the party itself was inherently unable to develop its ideology as reflected in the perceptions it had put forward for explaining the realities and the solutions it had given for changing these realities such as the inevitability of the socialist revolution and the call for building the Arab Communist Party to be the tool of Arab national socialism. This shows that the political discourse and ideology of the left was based on Marxist texts and ideologies instead of tangible facts, and this led to abstract perceptions sometimes dictated by desires rather than realities.²⁰

In contrast, the Syrian Communist Party, Riad al-Turk wing, became an opposition party and its outstanding performance in the formation of the National Democratic Gathering, its denunciation of authoritarian violence during the 1980's events, its call to overthrow the regime and introduce radical democratic changes, have had an impact on the party's members who were severely prosecuted by the regime. The General Secretary of the party was imprisoned for 17 years and was only released, together with other members in the beginning of the millennium after an amnesty issued by Bashar al-Assad when he ascended to power. This release was associated with the so-called Damascus Spring climate, under which the party deepened its democratic option and held its sixth conference under this title, abandoning its Communist name and changing it to the People's Democratic Party in Syria. Ever since then, the party has focused on the critical role of democracy in confronting external challenges and dangers, addressing the worsening crisis in the country and building the rule of law and a just society.

With the participation of the People's Democratic Party, the Syrian political map has witnessed the formation of a big leftist bloc from the perspective of the structure of participating leftist parties, and also from the perspectives of programs which have lots in common with the left program with regard to the building of a just state of law, guaranteeing public freedoms and equality and thus paving the way for building a democratic system capable of achieving development, social justice, equal opportunities, consolidating the unity of the country, liberating it from occupation, and promoting options that lead to the advancement of democratic national and Arab unity.²¹ These parties are: the *National Democratic Gathering*, composed of the *Arab Socialist Union*, led by Jamal al-Atassi, which was founded in 1964 by the merger of a number of Syrian political formations with Nasserite ideologies – this party had participated temporarily in the *Progressive National Front* formation but then it withdrew because of disagreement on article 8 of the Syrian Constitution which states that the Baath Party leads the state and society. After taking this decision, the party witnessed another division and a part of its members remained in the Progressive National Front while Jamal al-Atassi's wing became an opposition party and continued to work within the framework of the National Democratic Gathering.

The gathering also included the *Arab Socialist Democratic Baath Party*, which was founded in 1970. The founders added the word "Democratic" to distinguish the party from the rulers in Iraq and Syria. The party was formed by the political cadres who sided with Salah Jadid²² and the former president Nour al-Din al-

¹⁸ From the city Qadmous, he participated in one of the Marxist groups active in Damascus and Misyaf. He was imprisoned for fifteen years, and he participated in the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society.

¹⁹ From the city of Latakia. He left the Democratic Baath Party and joined the Communist Labor Party together with a group of his comrades in the late seventies. He was imprisoned for twelve years and was released in 2005.

²⁰ A booklet entitled "Limatha Rabitat al-Amal al-Shouyouei" (Why Communist Labor Party) issued in 1978, and the booklet entitled al-Barnamej al-Istratigi wa al-Intiqali li Hizb al-Amal al-Shouyouei fi Sourya" (The strategic and transitional program of the Communist Labor Party in Syria), issued in 1978.

²¹ The political program of the National Democratic Gathering in Syria, Damascus, 1979.

²² The left-leaning Assistant Secretary General of the Baath Party. He was considered the country's de facto ruler of Syria. He was arrested after the movement carried out by Hafez al-Assad and remained in prison until he died in 1993.

Atassi²³ in their conflict with Hafez al-Assad.

There is also the *Arab Socialist Movement*, which was formed as a continuation of the pan-Arab approach of Akram al-Hourani,²⁴ a pan-Arab leader from Hama. This movement too underwent many strong ruptures. The remaining members, with their different opinions, were divided into two major groups: the Abdul-Ghani Qannout group²⁵ which allied itself with the ruling regime and joined the Progressive National Front, and the Abdul-Ghani Ayyash group which remained as an opposition group²⁶ and joined the leftist opposition alliance.

In addition to the above parties and movements, there was also the *Revolutionary Workers Party*, a political organization with a Marxist ideology, which is led today by Tariq Abu Hassan. This party was formed after the defeat in June 1967 and in response to the inability of communist and pan-Arab parties to come up with a revolutionary program. It is a continuation of the political and intellectual opinions and interpretations of the two intellectuals: Elias Murqus²⁷ and Yassin al-Hafez²⁸ who were critical of the Communist Party because it did not stress issues related to democracy, modernity, Arab unity and the Palestinian cause. This party too joined the *National Democratic Gathering* since its inception in 1979.

COMMITTEES FOR THE REVIVAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Along with these political leftist movements, and within the framework of the Damascus Spring climate and the relative freedoms witnessed by the country when Bashar al-Assad ascended to power, the *Committees for the Revival of Civil Society* emerged with the turn of the millennium. These committees were initiated by the educated elite who were members of the different left-wing parties, such as Michel Kilo, Abdul Razzaq Eid and Hussein Awadat. They were characterized by their democratic identity and their ability to take initiatives aimed at activating the participation of democratic and national figures and their objective discourse aimed at releasing tensions and encouraging reform and change. With the passage of time, these committees became the safe space for all citizens.

This has led to building a threshold of trust between the political forces whose relations were characterized by alienation and estrangement and helped in breaking the ice between Arab and Kurdish activists. Thus, the committees became qualified to play a major role in uniting the leftists in Syria and in the issuance of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change in 2005. The declaration was signed by the *National Democratic Gathering, the Democratic Kurdish Alliance, the Democratic Kurdish Front, the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, the Assyrian Democratic Organization*²⁹, *the Communist Labor Party, the Syrian Society for Human Rights*³⁰ and independent figures.

DAMASCUS DECLARATION

The Damascus Declaration, is the first of its kind to be issued by opposition parties operating in Syria. Its first national council was held in late 2007 under the chairmanship of Fidaa Hourani and her deputies Ab-

²³ He was the President of the Republic, but he was arrested when Hafez al-Assad seized power. After twenty-two years of imprisonment, he was released after the deterioration in his health conditions. He died in 1992, just a few months after his release.

The head of the Arab Socialist Movement which split in 1971 from Abdul-Ghani Qannout, a retired officer in the city of Hama. He died in the year 2010.

²⁴ One of the founders of the Arab Socialist Party, which merged with the Baath Party and formed the Arab Socialist Baath Party. He was the Vice President of the Republic at the time of unity with Egypt but left the party and its ideology and reshaped the Arab Socialist Movement. He stayed in exile until he died in Amman, Jordan, in 1996.

²⁵ The secretary general of the Arab Socialist Movement in Hama city. He continued to support the ruling regime until he died in 2001.

²⁶ The head of the Arab Socialist Movement, which split from Abdul-Ghani Qannout group. He was a sacked officer from Hama city, and he died in 2010.

²⁷ He was a prominent Marxist thinker. He withdrew from the Communist Party because of disagreements over the issue of nationalism and party organizational life. He wrote and translated many books and he contributed to the formation of the Arab Revolutionary Workers Party. He died in 1991.

²⁸ A Syrian thinker and one of the most important Arab Marxist theorists. He contributed to the critique of Communist and Marxist left parties and founded the Arab Revolutionary Workers Party. He died in 1978.

²⁹ A left-wing nationalist organization that defends the rights of the Assyrian minority in Syria. It participated in the work of the opposition and in the struggle against the tyrant authority.

³⁰ An organization specialized in monitoring human rights violations in Syria. It has remarkable activities in monitoring arrests, acts of torture and the conditions of prisoners. It is headed by Haytham al-Maleh, an experienced lawyer from Damascus.

del-Hamid Darwish and Abdul al-Khair and the two secretaries Ahmad Tomeh and Akram al-Bunni. A statement was issued after the meeting calling for an end of the authoritarian rule that has lasted for decades, the unity of opposition in order to be able to gradually, peacefully and safely accomplish the national democratic change, the building of a democratic civil state, improving the living conditions of toilers, while protecting their interests, liberating the occupied land, supporting the Palestinian struggle and confronting external challenges.

A new executive leadership was elected and was composed of Riad al-Turk, Riad Seif and others. In a wave of arrests, most of the leaders were detained and the Arab Socialist Union and the Communist Labor Party withdrew from the declaration. The declared reason for their withdrawal could be explained partly by what they have considered as a transformation towards a political democracy at the expense of democratic, national and social issues. The undeclared reason, could be that they were anticipating that their own leaders and cadres would become targets of arrests. In fact, the Damascus Declaration was considered, as many would say, a qualitative and important step in the context of the development of left-wing opposition work, ideas and political and organizational performance³¹.

In the context of its activities with the Damascus Declaration, the Communist Labor Party participated in the formation of a leftist bloc in the year 2007 under the name of the *Marxist Left Gathering*.³² Some of the Syrian Communist Party members, under the leadership of Muhammad Rasas,³³ who left the Riad al-Turk group, joined the gathering. In addition, the bloc was joined by the Kurdish Left Party, and the Communist Syrians, the Democratic Marxist Gathering in Syria, as well as a number of Marxists. The bloc issued a foundational document in which it announced its bias to the working class and its opposition to the imperialist projects and imperialist aggressive wars, its resistance to tyranny and exploitation in all their forms and its struggle against ethnic, religious, sectarian and national discrimination among citizens. It also called on communists and Marxists, regardless of their positions, to rise and re-occupy their position as conscious resistance leaders and to work together to accomplish the democratic transformation with national perspectives and tools. It issued a newspaper under the "Tareeq al-Yasar" (*The Path of the Left*) name.

THE POPULAR UPRISING AND LEFT-WING PARTIES IN SYRIA

The Syrian Left map started to change radically with the start of the revolution on 15 March 2011. The popular movement (*Hirak*), with its presence and activities, has put leftist political parties and personalities under a test, examined the clarity of their democratic choices and deepened their commitment to the interests of the people and their rights. It re-sorted them in a sharp manner into two categories: those who are still unable to bring about an epistemological break with the past and liberate themselves from the ideological mobilization and those who began to be convinced that the so-called "revolutionary legitimacy" is behind the justification of violence and repression, and that ideological slogans, which call for fighting conspiracies and threats hatched by colonial circles, are nothing more than a Trojan horse used by the extremely "national and pan-Arab regimes" to cover their monopolization of power, corruption and the privileges they give to themselves.

The popular uprising has re-categorized and resorted all left-wing parties acting in Syria according to their position with regard to the ruling regime. The official communist parties continued to support the regime and participated in the promotion and simulation of the official conspiracy theory propaganda and that the revolution in the country is driven by conspirators and infiltrators who have a foreign agenda. The position of this left, is based on the fact that it has been confronted with a broad "colonial" anti-regime alliance composed of the most important imperialist and anti-reform countries which are listed among its enemies.

POPULAR FRONT FOR CHANGE AND LIBERATION IN SYRIA

There are those who tried to ride the revolutionary wave, either as an expression of their opportunistic

³¹ The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change issued on 16/10/2005, and the National Council's statement, issued on 4/12/2007.

³² The statement issued on the formation of the Marxist Gathering in Syria, 20/4/2007.

³³ One of the Syrian Communist Party cadres, he was imprisoned for fifteen years. He disagreed with Riad al-Turk over organizational and policy-related issues, especially on the interpretation of the relation between nationalism and democracy. He left the party before its Sixth Congress and formed the Syrian Communist Party - Politburo.

stances or because they wanted to save what can be saved and ease the throes of change, by calling for the unification of the national front, supporting a regime implementing serious reforms which meet the popular movement's demands. An example of this group is the *Popular Front for Change and Liberation in Syria*, which was established in July 2011. The front gathers the National Committee of the Syrian Communists, headed by Qadri Jamil and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party – the Intifada, Ali Haydar wing,³⁴ as well as a group of independent personalities. The founders of the front called for comprehensive and radical reforms in Syria to maintain national unity and to face all forms of external pressure and interference. They said that they want their front to be the starting point for the formation of a broad popular gathering, which provides the necessary conditions for protecting the country and to move towards Syria of the future on the path accomplishing the aspired change and liberation. They also stressed the importance of drafting a new constitution which prohibits discrimination, emphasizes full citizenship rights, ends emergency laws, which limit the rights of citizens to express their opinion, stresses the principle of peaceful transfer of power, including equitable redistribution of wealth for the benefit of the poor and disadvantaged on the basis of a new economic model completely different from the devastating and imposed liberal model. The founders called for a comprehensive developmental plan which provides balanced development of all the Syrian national territory, especially in rural areas, and which provide employment opportunities and infrastructure development³⁵. Two of the front leaders are today participating in the Syrian government: Qadri Jamil is the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs and Ali al-Haydar occupies the post of Minister for National Reconciliation.

THE NATIONAL COORDINATION COMMITTEE FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change Forces inside and outside Syria³⁶ is formed of a number of independent personalities, committees, and Syrian leftist parties such as the *Democratic Arab Socialist Union*, led by Hasan Abdul-Atheem, who became the leader of the party after the death of its founder Jamal al-Atassi; the *Communist Labor Party*, led by Abdul-Aziz Khair, who was arrested in Autumn last year, immediately after his return from a visit to China and his fate remains unknown; the *Socialist Arab Democratic Baath Party*, represented by Yousef Salman, who criticized the authoritarian and custodial methods of the regime; the Marxist Left Gathering, represented by Muhammad Sayed Rasas; the *Together for a Free and Democratic Syria Movement*, represented by Munther Khaddam; the Kurdish Leftist Party; the Democratic Union Party and the *Kurdish Democratic Union Party* in Syria, led by Saleh Muslim who was among the cadres of the Kurdistan Labour Party.

In contrast, leftist forces, members of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change, particularly the People's Democratic Party led by Riad al-Turk, tended to participate in declaring the Syrian National Council and later on the National Coalition of the Revolution Forces and the Syrian Opposition as steps on the road to uniting the Syrian opposition and to enable it to carry out its political role.

THE KURDISH NATIONAL COUNCIL

Kurdish parties in Syria, after the start of the revolution and under the pressure of the Kurdish and Arab popular movement, started to unite and formed the Kurdish National Council in the al-Qamishli city in October 2011,³⁷ in a manner similar to the unification of Syrian opposition and the formation of the Syrian National Council. Ten parties participated in the Kurdish council as well as some youth revolutionary coordinators and some cultural and social actors. A final statement was issued expressing the council's vision of the future of Syria. The statement stressed the necessity for building the democratic state, social justice and equality, the importance of finding a solution to the Kurdish problem based on the right to self-determination within the framework of the unity of the state, and the adoption of political decentralization

³⁴ The leader of the party defected from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in early 2000. His group was named the Intifada and his political views were close to those of the political opposition. He opposes authoritarian tyranny and exploitation.

³⁵ See the founding statement of the Popular Front for Change and Liberation in Syria issued on 9/7/2011.

³⁶ The declaration on the formation of the National Coordination Committee on 6/10/2011 under the slogans of "No to violence, no to sectarianism, no to outside interference." The committee stressed its support for the peaceful revolution, the adoption of the demands of the popular movement, the overthrow of the regime with all of its symbols and building a democratic system.

³⁷ The declaration of the Kurdish National Council, October 2011.

in administering the state's affairs. At a later stage, the council was further expanded when four Kurdish parties and a group of the revolutionary coordinators joined in. In April 2012, the council held its first ordinary session and produced its transitory political program progress to achieve the greatest possible understanding among other opposition forces. Syria's *Kurdish Democratic Union Party*, which is close to the *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK), led by Saleh Muslim, and which is a member of the National Coordination Body, did not join the council.

OTHER POLITICAL LEFT-ORIENTED GROUPS

In addition to the above mentioned forces, a number of left-oriented political groups have emerged to support the Syrian revolution and correct its path. The main groups are:

First: The Coalition of Syrian Left

The coalition was created by leftist groups and individuals participating in the uprising with the aim of coordinating their activities and developing the *hīrak*. It has issued a document in which it said that the reason why many sectors of the popular classes went to the streets is to demand change because looting perpetrated by new and old businessmen has reached a limit which has made a big sector of these classes poor. It has led to high unemployment rates and created huge imbalances in the living standards of the popular classes because of low wages and the high cost of living that followed the completion of economic openness and market liberalization. The coalition believes that the nature of the authoritarian regime, formed five decades ago and the tight grip of its security services, combined with the absence of institutions and law, have formed the umbrella which allowed organized and dreadful looting of the efforts of popular classes. Neo-liberalism, according to the coalition, was able to govern the society without any resistance because of the collapse of the opposition movement due to the cruelty of tyranny, and its internal crises.

The statement went on to say that the participants in the coalition are defending the interests of the popular classes and that they seek for these popular classes to become the ruling class. It further stressed that participants want to create a modern state, solve the deep economic, education and health crises and those deep rooted in the authoritarian state structure. According to the statement, these aims can be achieved through the drafting of a constitution which guarantees freedom, separates between powers and between state and religion, protects trade unions' freedoms, provides for popular control over the state activities, offers a civil law for personal status and guarantees equal roles for men and women. The statement stressed the importance of building a productive economy capable of addressing unemployment problems, acknowledging the right to work, maintaining a balance between wages and prices, and orienting economic development to reach all areas in Syria. The document also emphasizes the importance of liberating the occupied territories and Palestine, and full independence from imperialism and the capitalist model. It further stressed the importance of bonding with all Arab revolutions in order to revitalize a new revolutionary and a libertarian project in the Arab world which stems from independence and aims at unity, development and modernity, with the aim of realizing socialism.³⁸ The coalition is composed of Syrians who are activist members of the revolutionary movement. It is difficult to identify the members of this coalition or to reveal their names, but among them are Slameh Kaileh and Jalal Nawfal, who were both arrested but were recently released.

Second: Together for a Free and Democratic Syria Movement

This movement was declared by a number of left-wing Syrian intellectuals as a civil commission under establishment. The founding statement said that the movement is biased to the Syrian people and it supports the peaceful protest movement in Syria. In its activities, the movement is guided by the principles of supporting the peaceful struggle of the people for freedom, democracy and the building of a civil state, and exposing violent approaches and resisting all of their forms and sources. It is committed to the strengthening of national unity and resisting all forms of sectarian incitement. It is also committed to the promotion of national values and it stands against any external interference and hegemony policies. It is also committed to the promotion of a culture of diversity and acceptance of others and the dissemination and promotion of

³⁸ Statement announcing the birth of the Coalition of Syrian Left, Damascus, March 2011.

human rights culture, citizenship principles and their foundation.³⁹

Third: Building the Syrian State Stream

Emphasizing the importance of "adopting the objectives of the popular Intifada", this movement was announced by left-wing Syrian opposition figures in September 2011. According to the vision of its founders, the movement aims at building a democratic civil state capable of enabling Syrians, especially the young people, to be effectively engaged in the political and public life of their country. Its founding statement indicates that it is a new political movement trying to build a democratic civil state capable, in partnership with all forces and social groups, of achieving social justice where all Syrians will be winners, regardless of their political or cultural differences⁴⁰. This should be accomplished by focusing on democracy, good governance, facing key challenges of sustainable development, especially poverty, advocating the adoption of economic democracy and social justice in the production and distribution of national income, focusing on the marginalized groups of the society and ensuring fair distribution of developmental projects among all areas of the country.

Fourth: The Syrian Democratic Platform

The platform is a civil democratic political forum founded in Cairo in February 2012. It is open to all individuals, groups and forces engaged in the Syrian revolution, and it considers itself as an interaction and communication bridge between the revolutionary forces. It aims at mobilizing and uniting the efforts of the different forces regardless of their backgrounds. It also provides field and political insights and suggestions in order to develop the revolution and help it accomplish its freedom, dignity and social justice tasks. It contributes to drawing the map of the transitional period and Syria's future.⁴¹

Among the aims of the platform is empowering people politically and culturally to overthrow the regime and dismantle its structures and promoting democratic values, principles and practices. It does not perceive itself as another formation to be added to the existing forces and forums but rather one of the tributaries of the revolution. It has sought to become a political bloc and held a meeting in Cairo in April 2013 to establish what is known as the faction or the *Syrian Democratic Coalition*. Among its leaders are Michel Kilo, Samir Aita and Fayez Sara.

Fifth: The Citizenship Stream

The stream was formed in February 2011 by left-wing intellectual elites, who experienced in previous stages the political work of left-wing parties and were prosecuted and arrested. It aims at supporting the revolution, adopting the democratic and civil state project and protecting the unity of Syria's land and people against any ethnic, sectarian or regional divides and in a way which ensures the continuation of political and ideological civilized dialogue worthy of enlightened Syrians.⁴² The stream also calls for supporting the legitimate natural-born rights of national and ethnic minorities. It is one of the forces actively working to prevent the revolution from falling into the pitfalls of extremism and sectarianism. Most activists of this stream are active in Syria with the exception of a very few individuals who, under condition of repression, were forced to continue their activism outside Syria.

Sixth: The Democratic Left Gathering in Syria⁴³

The Gathering was founded by a group of Syrian intellectuals and economists with left-leaning ideas. It issued its own vision on the Syrian political situation as well as the revolutionary course, focusing on two axes: political freedoms necessary to activate the role of people and their participation, and social justice and improving the living conditions of the poor popular classes. *The Gathering* tends to reject violence and calls for peaceful transformation.

³⁹ Statement announcing the birth of the "Together Movement", Damascus, June 2011.

⁴⁰ The founding document of the Building the Syrian State Stream issued in Damascus, September 2011.

⁴¹ The founding statement of the Syrian Democratic Platform, Cairo on 18/2/2012.

⁴² A statement introducing the identity of the Citizenship Stream, March, 2011.

⁴³. The statement of the Democratic Left Gathering in Syria, April, 2012.

Seventh: The Syrian Left Alliance⁴⁴

The Alliance was announced as a project in December 2012 by the Democratic Left Gathering, the Watan Coalition Movement and the Syrian Communists Coordinators – a group of communist youth who have chosen to work in the field to support the revolution and correct its path. Among the aims of the gathering is to re-build the state so as to emerge as a developed, civil, modern and democratic state based on pluralism, secularism, and the principles of citizenship. It also aims at guaranteeing social justice, balanced development and popular supervision of the state's political and economic activities. The gathering pays special attention to the interests and rights of young people, stresses the importance of gender equality and the passing of a civil personal status law.

Eighth: The Coalition of the Revolutionary Left in Syria

A Trotskyist group which defines itself as a left-wing and Marxist revolutionary group in Syria. The Coalition adopts the transitional program of the revolutionary left in Syria, and it works, through its engagement in the popular revolution, on the reunification of the revolutionary Marxist left⁴⁵ through its involvement in the ongoing popular revolution. Its political discourse contains immediate transitory tasks such as the overthrow of the regime, the formation of a provisional revolutionary government to work on the dismantling of the state security structures, and it calls for electing a founding assembly on the basis of proportional representation to draft a constitution for a civil, democratic and pluralistic state.

Ninth: Syrian Civil Youths Pulse Gathering

The gathering was established in July 2011 initiated by youth elites with left-wing background or members of left-wing parties. It calls for supporting the revolution, establishing peaceful coexistence between the different components of society and uniting the Syrian society. On the other hand, it stresses the importance of liberating the occupied Syrian land.⁴⁶ The work mechanism of the Gathering is based on the principles of democracy, pluralism and citizenship as means to bring Syria out of its current totalitarian system in a way which protects the internal front from external threats, such as the occupation of the Golan Heights and from internal threats such as pre-civil society tribal, ethnic and sectarian allegiances.

In addition to the above mentioned leftist groups, it is worth mentioning that there is another leftist gathering for Syrians living outside Syria. This gathering held its meeting in Brussels in March 2013, under the name of **"The First Forum of the Syrian Marxist Left in Europe."** It introduced itself as a revolutionary left party taking part in the revolution against the dictatorial regime and its symbols and institutions. It said that it is biased to the popular classes of the society and to its marginalized groups and that it adopts firm stances against sectarianism and the mistakes of armed groups. It also refuses all forms of imperial, reactionary and regional interventions of countries allied to the regime or from those who claim to be friendly to the Syrian people. It also acknowledges the national legitimate rights of the Kurdish people and all other ethnic components. In addition, it stresses the importance of protecting the right to freedom of expression and belief, full citizenship rights, and the creation of a secular state based on strict separation between religion and the state. This group also believes in the importance of gender equality, protection of children's rights, the liberation of the Golan, providing support to the Palestinian people in their fair struggle against occupation and Zionism, as well as supporting the people all over the world in their struggle against imperialist domination over their territories and wealth.⁴⁷

In the same context, the **"Watan Coalition"** (The Nation Coalition) is another left-wing group in terms of its structure and tasks. It is composed of intellectual and leftist revolutionary elites. It proposes to unite the forces of popular classes in order to overthrow the dictatorial regime and build a democratic and civil state and a society of justice and equality. The founding statement of the coalition was signed in February 2012, by fourteen civil and political forces with leftist orientation such as *Together for Free and Democratic Syria Movement, the Citizenship Movement, the Coalition of Syrian Left, Vision for Change Movement, the*

⁴⁴ Draft document of the Syrian Left Alliance, December, 2012

⁴⁵ The transitional program of the Revolutionary Left in Syria, Damascus, 2012..

⁴⁶ The founding statement of the Syrian Civil Youths Pulse Gathering, 5/7/2011.

⁴⁷ Final founding statement of the First Forum of the Syrian Marxist Left in Europe , March 2013.

Revolutionary Left in Syria, the Syrian Revolution Support Committee, the National Initiative of Jabal al-Arab, the Democratic National Action Committee in Jaramana, the al-Tareeq (Road) Gathering, the Dream Group, the Civilian Enlightenment Movement, the National Bloc in Syria, the National Gathering and the Communist Cadres in Jabal al-Arab (a group composed of individuals and blocs that have deserted their traditional Communist parties and the historical Left Bloc in Jabal al-Arab mountain because they found out that they oppose their party's vision which adopts the viewpoints of the regime).

The *Watan Coalition* has gathered all those who share the same political opinions. It rejects violence and believes in the necessity of overthrowing the regime as an essential step towards building a new Syria.⁴⁸ What is unique about this coalition is that it is formed of people from the different areas of Syria, as well as the intensity of the participation of sectarian minorities, its emphasis on civil issues and tasks of interest for popular and deprived classes, its respect for the rights of ethnic minorities within the framework of national unity, its emphasis on the liberation the Golan and its support of the Palestinian people in their struggle for self-determination.

Finally, it should be noted that these leftist forces in Syria differ in the size of their presence and activities. However, under the current situation, it is hard to accurately assess their actual contributions and roles because they all work under very difficult security conditions, and it is dangerous, or almost impossible, to know the real names of their leaders and the scope of their cadres' involvement in the popular movement. However, the majority of these forces are trustworthy and credible.

CHALLENGES FACING THE SYRIAN LEFT

To conclude, it is important to admit that the Syrian Left forces, which have suffered during the last decades from different forms of persecution, have partially contributed to the outbreak of the revolution either by creating political and cultural awareness, or by generating a revolutionary spirit among the people. It is also important to admit that all of these parties share a common vision and common tasks, mainly ending autocratic rule and replacing it with a democratic model through the building of a modern civil state governed by a new constitution which guarantees pluralism, human rights, minority rights and peaceful transfer of power – a state built on social justice principles. Thus, these forces should agree on common stances with regard to the on-going conflict and on a political solution, and they should reject any exclusionary and aggressive discourse as well as any external interventions.

We should also acknowledge that leftist forces are still scattered and incapable of reaching out and gaining the trust of popular classes, the driving force of change and the force that has deep interests in seeing this change happen. This is because of subjective as well as objective reasons including the success of the autocratic rule in creating a big gap between people and politics - a gap that cannot be rapidly filled -, the difficulty of working with people because of the rise in violence, the increase in external interventions and internal sectarian divisions, the growing influence of extremist Islamic groups, the absence of mutual confidence and trust between leftist groups because of the weak awareness, the different experiences and environments, the negative impact of underground work and painful prison experiences.

We can still be optimistic because many people believe that the Left in Syria has a promising future. The Left, emerging from the popular revolution, with leftist roots and backgrounds, has demands consistent with the new left themes. This optimism is further enhanced by the growing interest among young people in public affairs and in leftist ideologies and because the oppressive and authoritarian nature of the ruling regime has become clear. Moreover, the crisis and shortfalls of the traditional left-wing parties, such as the *Syrian Communist Party*, have also become clear.

THE NEED FOR A COMMON LEFTIST VISION AND IDENTITY

Regardless of the influence of left-wing parties on the popular movement and the size of their current role, there is an urgent need to develop a common vision that could establish a common left-wing identity, which supports democratic change, empowers the revolution politically and culturally, corrects its course and assists it in avoiding the pitfalls of violence and extremism. This vision should be capable of answering

⁴⁸ See the founding statement of the Watan Coalition, 13 February, 2012.

the pressing questions posed by the realities on the ground, and it should be based on the toilers' rights and interests. It should be a vision capable of establishing a comprehensive political and economic program which responds to the needs of the marginalized sectors of the society. A vision based on building the state on principles of citizenship, non-discrimination between people regardless of their religious, sectarian or ethnic origin or gender, equality and social justice and a state capable of completing national tasks, including the liberation of occupied Syrian territories, supporting the struggle of the Palestinian people and fighting the challenges of globalization. The starting point of this project is the creation of a climate of trust between all movements and individuals committed to the values and guidelines of the leftist ideology in order to initiate an open dialogue with the aim of unifying programs and mechanisms, or at least unifying leftist parties' discourse and the rhythm of their political practices.

It is high time for the leftist forces to live up to their responsibilities and to take the initiative, close their ranks and overcome the pitfalls of hesitation and competition, inspired by petty politics, which is impeding their work. The current situation in the country needs the joint efforts and roles of all left-wing parties so as to be able to capture the moment and take the political lead. The Left needs to clearly prove that it is the most loyal party to the values of freedom, justice and equality, and the most dedicated party capable of shouldering the historical responsibility. It should prove that it is capable of opposing authoritarian violence and monopolization of power methods, fighting against sectarian divisions and all forms of intolerance and extremism, struggling against the attempts aimed at dividing the country and dragging it into civil war or making it a space for settling regional and international conflicts.

Akram al-Bunni is a writer and a political activist born in Hama, Syria. He was imprisoned for long periods of time, reaching 20 years because of his political stances. In 2007, he was arrested and imprisoned for two and a half years because he took part in the Damascus Declaration for National and Democratic Change. He was released in the summer of 2010.