

Diwan

Syria in Crisis

The Damascus Spring

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Major Figures

Michel Kilo: journalist and founder of the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society in Syria; active in the production of the Statement of 99 and more particularly the Statement of 1,000; now an independent member of the opposition, having refused to join either the Syrian National Council or the National Coordination Body

Riad Seif: businessman and former member of parliament; established the National Dialogue Forum in 2000, a political discussion salon held in his house; publicly declared himself to be an independent member of the Syrian National Council in July 2012.

Hussein al-Awdat: managing editor of *Akhbar al-Arab* at the time of the Damascus Spring; now a member of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change

Burhan Ghalioun: academic; participant in the intellectual debates in political salons 2000–2001; now president of the Syrian National Council

Suhair al-Atassi: founder of the Jamal al-Atassi Forum, named after her late father who was a veteran opposition figure and which was shut down by the authorities in 2005; now in exile, she is a representative of the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), one of the largest *tansiqiya* (coordination body) networks

Aref Dalila: economist of Alawite descent, active participant in the Damascus Spring and one of the longest-serving prisoners of those arrested after the Damascus Spring in 2001; now involved in the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change

Omar Amiralay: filmmaker

Radwan Ziadeh: lawyer, founder of the Syrian Organization for Transparency; now a member of the Executive Committee of the Syrian National Council

Haitham al-Maleh: lawyer, founder of the Syrian Human Rights Organization; split from the Syrian National Council in March 2012 to form the Syrian Patriotic Group with Kamal al-Labwani and Catherine al-Talli

Kamal al-Labwani: doctor, imprisoned after attending a meeting at Riad Seif’s forum in 2001, and has been imprisoned and released multiple times since. Upon his release in 2011, he joined the Syrian National Council, leaving it in March 2012 to form the Syrian Patriotic Group alongside Haitham al-Maleh and Catherine al-Talli

Anwar al-Bunni: lawyer

Mamoun Al-Homsi: former member of parliament and prisoner of conscience who exercises little influence in the current uprising

Antoun al-Maqdisi: writer

Fawwaz Tillo: engineer, imprisoned for participation in the movement

Habib Salih: writer, imprisoned for participation in the movement

Background

The Damascus Spring was sparked by the death of Hafez al-Assad on June 10, 2000, and the passing of the presidency of his son Bashar al-Assad. The movement was initiated by a number of noted Damascene intellectuals, such as Michel Kilo and Riad Seif, and was characterized by the establishment of informal political forums that were held to encourage the open discussion of political and civil society issues and reforms. These “salons” or *mundadayat*—the most famous of which were Riad Seif’s National Dialogue Forum and Suhair al-Atassi’s Jamal al-Atassi Forum—along with the formation of the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society in Syria demonstrated the popular demand for political and judicial reform.

These demands were formally announced first in the Statement of 99 in September 2000 and then in the Statement of 1,000 the following January. The former was a petition signed by 99 prominent intellectuals demanding “political and intellectual pluralism” under a “rule of law.” The latter statement, signed by 1,000 of Syria’s intelligentsia, was a more insistent demand for a multiparty democracy and the lifting of the 1963 State of Emergency. The movement never called for regime change nor challenged the legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad’s succession to the presidency.

Although these declarations were not officially recognized by the regime, the authorities announced a series of reformist measures in the months following Bashar al-Assad’s succession. Several amnesties were declared, marked most notably by the release of hundreds of political prisoners after the closing of Mezza prison in November 2000. Several human rights organizations reemerged or were established in order to urge the regime to continue its cautious steps toward reform, and the authorities did not counter or prevent the rapid proliferation of civil society organizations as they had previously done. Al-Assad also took some steps toward diversifying authoritarian control in the autumn of 2000 by allowing the six constituent parties of the governing National Progressive Front to open provincial offices and to produce their own newspapers.

However, these minor reforms were soon withdrawn and the opposition movement was crushed in the name of national unity and stability. Riad Seif’s attempt at creating a new political party, the Movement for Social Peace, was quickly stifled, and in February, the political forums were forcibly closed. Seif, Riad al-Turk, Mamoun Al-Homsi, Aref Dalila, and others were arrested and charged with “attempting to change the constitution by illegal means.” By the summer of 2002 a concerted campaign of media discrediting, arrests, threats, regime rebuttals, and promises of economic stability had effectively caused the movement to lose momentum and unity.

Various members of the Damascus Spring were later among the signatories of the 2005 Damascus Declaration and have been active in the uprising. Several, such as Suhair al-Atassi and Riad Seif, spent many of the intervening years in jail. Some, including Michel Kilo, remain independent, while others such as Burhan Ghalioun and Hussein al-Awdat have risen to fame as the prominent members of the Syrian National Council and National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, respectively.

Platform

Political Objectives

- Multiparty democracy with particular emphasis on public freedoms and the lifting of the emergency and martial laws
- Rule of law, recognizing freedom of assembly, press, and speech
- Release of political prisoners
- Granting of economic rights due to all citizens
- Ending the special status of the Baath Party as the “the leading party in society and state”

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