

## **The Identity balance during the Syrian uprising: a vehement reconstruction?**

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Arabism, Syrianism and Islamism are the most longstanding and enduring components of the identity balance in Syria. For approximately sixty-five years, the identity balance did not experience any drastic shift. Although it was subjected to various alterations during the first two decades of Syria's history, it enjoyed a relative degree of stability during the Assads' tenure. However, the repercussions of the Syrian uprising have upset this equilibrium, and changed the balance of power among its components. This article sheds some light on the process of the reconstruction of the identity balance that was initiated by the Syrian uprising. The first part of this article gives a historical context to the identity balance in modern Syria, while the second part analyses the shift in this balance during the Syrian uprising. This article focuses on the discourses of the Syrian regime, as well as those of anti- and pro-Assad Syrians. Mainly, the article's assertions are based on fieldwork carried out by the author in Syria during the uprising.

### *The pre-uprising identity balance: balancing the contradictions?*

The creation of present-day Syria was the outcome of a political game played by the world's great powers, a game which culminated in the imposition of political borders onto a heterogeneous community. Therefore, the creation of the Syrian state was accompanied neither by a solid sense of national identity nor a sense of nationhood; instead, it was accompanied by a growth of sectarianism, fragmentation and mutual hatred among Syria's identity groups. In this context, three key identities competed for hegemony. Pan-Arabism (or 'Old Arabism') strove for affiliation with *al-uma al-arabiyya*, the Arab nation; Pan-Syrianism promoted the establishment of Greater Syria, which would include Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine; Finally, Pan-Islamism pursued the association with the Islamic Uma.<sup>1</sup> On entering office in 1971, the former president Hafiz Assad - a master in the art of *realpolitik*- attempted to balance these three identities and to construct a Syrian national identity that would allow them to overlap. In regards to

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch "Modern Syrian Politics" *History Compass* 6/1 2008 pp. 263-285. Also see Moshe Ma'oz "Attempts at creating A political Community in Modern Syria" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 389-404.

‘Old Arabism’, Assad’s policies aimed to manoeuvre it towards what Christopher Phillips (2012) terms the ‘everyday Arab identity’,<sup>2</sup> with which Assad reproduced Arabism as an inclusive supra-national identity that united the various identity groups, while excluding non-Arab Syrians. On the other hand, Assad sought to foster in the population a sense of national association with the Syrian territorial state, while stressing the importance of remaining under the broader umbrella of Arab nationalism. In parallel, relying on soft-power and hard-power approaches, Assad forged an alliance with both the Sunni bourgeoisie and the peasantry in an attempt to emphasise Islam as being the nucleus of Syrian identity. The move enabled, him to include the Kurds as non-Arab Syrians.<sup>3</sup> However, Assad’s state-building formula depended fundamentally on the concept of Alawite *Asabiyya* (‘group feeling’),<sup>4</sup> with which he aimed to forge a coherent elite who commanded high ranking positions in political and military institutions. Notwithstanding the fact that Alawite *Asabiyya* constituted the backbone of the Assad regime, Assad never engaged in any direct Alawite rhetoric. Without doing so publicly, he subtly exploited the Alawite identity and encouraged Alawites to view the regime as being their own. Thereafter, Alawite *Asabiyya* implicitly reinforced sectarian identities over Arab and Syrian identities.<sup>5</sup>

In June 2000, Bashar Assad inherited the presidency. He has followed his father’s footsteps in reproducing Arabism as a supra-state identity, under which Syrians of all religious groups were united by a sense of pride. In fact, the pivotal role of Syria in the so-called ‘resistance axis’ (composed of Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas) seems to have strengthened the Arab identity. The Syrian regime’s rhetoric utilised regional and international events; such as the Anglo-American war on Iraq in 2003, the Hezbollah-Israel war in 2006, and the Israeli war on Gaza in 2008. The regime used these events to simultaneously reproduce Arab identity as a supra-state identity and to reinforce the state identity. This move can be said to have acted on Syrians’ collective sense of pride in their national identity in relation to their Iraqi, Lebanese and Palestinian counterparts. Mahmoud, a 27 year-old Syrian, recalls those days:

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Phillips *Everyday Arab identity: the daily reproduction of the Arab World*, (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Jordi Tejel *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge: 2009), p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> The Tunisian sociologist Ibn Khaldoun defines *Asabiyya* as the group feeling that allows a leader of a particular group to assert his group over others. See Bassam Tibi *Arab Nationalism; Between Islam and Nation State*, (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch ‘Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Middle East’ *Middle East Critique* Vol. 19, No 3, 201-216 (Fall 2010)

“We [Syrians] were the real beating heart of Arabism, we were more Arabs than the others [in the Arab world]; we helped the Iraqis, Lebanese and the Palestinians who came to Syria, while the rest of the Arabs failed them”.<sup>6</sup>

In parallel to balancing Arabism and Syrianism, Bashar sought to reinforce the Islamic identity by fostering *al-Islam al-mu'tadel* ('moderate Islam'), with which he sought to reconcile the Islamic movements and to advance the *status quo* that his father had crafted with the Sunni factions.<sup>7</sup> To achieve his goals, Bashar deployed several procedures; he gave a free hand to Sufi movements and turned a blind eye to *Qubayssiat*, a group of Sunni women established in Damascus by Munira al-Qubaysi during the 1960s to promote an apolitical Islam focusing on personal piety.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Assad Junior intended to present himself as a good Muslim in the eyes of Sunnis; throughout his presidency, he regularly attended religious ceremonies and, unlike his father, certified the presentation of Sunni symbols in celebration of religious events.<sup>9</sup> Bashar also advanced an economic liberalisation project that unintentionally backfired on the issue of identity and damaged the balance that Hafiz Assad had constructed between the identity groups. In fact, the neo-liberal economic project by Bashar was directed towards the benefit of big cities like Damascus and Aleppo, whilst neglecting the socio-economic conditions of other cities and towns, such as Dera' and Banias. This subsequently widened the socio-economic gaps and demolished the social contract that Hafez Assad had established with Sunni workers, peasants and members of the rural class.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Assad adopted a contradictory approach in which he pitted Islamists against Secularists, and Salafis against Sufis for *realpolitik* gains, all the while depending on the force of Alawite *Asabiyya*. Although Bashar Assad's official speech simultaneously endorsed Syrian nationalism and the broader umbrella of Arabism, Alawite *Asabiyya* was still at the epicenter of the regime.<sup>11</sup> This de-legitimised the identity balance in the eyes of many Sunnis, particularly those from the deprived rural areas.

In this context, the Assads' balancing strategies worked for around four decades. However, the long-term implications of their plans proved to be the nation's

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<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Mahmoud, 21/3/2013, Syria.

<sup>7</sup> Line Khatib *Islamic Revivalism in Syria : The rise and the fall of Ba'athist secularism* (London: Routledge: 2011), p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> Carsten Wieland *Syria: A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*, (Seattle, Cune Press: 2012) p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Khatib *op. cit.*, p. 35

<sup>10</sup> Hinnebusch 2012 *op. cit.* ,

<sup>11</sup> Wieland *op. cit.*, p 74.

downfall, upsetting the identity balance and backfiring on the Assad dynasty and the country itself.

*A breakdown in the identity balance during the uprising?*

Inspired by the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, the Syrian uprising broke out in March 2011. Although the uprising had its roots in a peaceful movement that strove for social justice, it rapidly turned into a vicious struggle for power among myriad groups, for whom identity served as a powerful weapon. One can argue that Arab identity initially played a role in motivating Syrians to take to the streets, since for four months they had been watching their fellow Arabs protesting against rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Yet, the Syrian episode of the Arab Spring seems to swing the identity balance; the Arab identity as a solid supra-national identity is waning at a rate exponential to the growth of Syrian and Islamic identities. Shortly after the eruption of the uprising, the Syrian regime’s discourse emphasised Syria’s betrayal by the Arab states that had supported the rebellion, and portrayed these Arab states as outright enemies. Indeed, the official discourse intensified by the suspension of Syria’s membership in the Arab League in November 2011 was paralleled by the increase of anti-Assad rhetoric in some Arab states, namely Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Consequently, although Syria continued to promote itself as the protector of Arab interests in relation to the Israeli enemy, the discourse employed by the Syrian regime was intended to strengthen Syrian nationalism. The discourse characterised the anti-Assad Arab states as *khawna* (‘traitors’) and as *muta’miriyyin* (‘conspirators’). Furthermore, it labelled the Arab League as the Hebrew League. The regime official discourse also relied heavily on the use of nationalist terminology, such as *souriyyoun* (‘Syrians’), *al-uma al-souriyya* (‘the Syrian nation’), *al-syadda al-souriyya* (‘Syrian sovereignty’) and *al-irada al-souriyya* (‘the Syrian will’). Additionally, myriad state-controlled radio stations such as Ninar FM and Sham FM initiated their news bulletin with phrases like *huna souriyya* (‘this is Syria’) or *‘ashat souriyya* (‘Life for Syria’).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, several promotional video-clips recalling Syrian history were repeatedly broadcast on Syrian State TV Channels. A prime example of such video-clips is entitled *souriyya hikaya la tantahy* (‘Syria, an endless story’)<sup>13</sup> which places an emphasis

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<sup>12</sup> Online versions of these news bulletins are uploaded on Ninar website, available at <http://ninarfm.com/news.php?id=104> accessed on 29/11/13, and Sham FM website, available at <http://www.shamfm.fm/new/Main/Default.php> accessed on 29/11/13.

<sup>13</sup> An online version of this video is uploaded on YouTube, see *Sourriyya hykaya la tantahi* (‘Syria: an endless story’), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH6VJ2s6mco> , accessed on 29/11/13, and also see see

on national symbols, particularly the Syria's flag and historical landmarks. Moreover, during the uprising, several songs were produced and broadcast in the State Media, all of which stressed Syrian nationalism and did not mention any features of Arabist ideology. One example is a song named *Souriyya al-majd* ('Syria; the glory'), a brief extract of which runs:

"We are your sons Syria, our fathers and grandfathers [are Syrians], we sacrifice our blood for your soil Syria [...] Syria; the glory".<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, the video clip of this song - which was played continually on State TV Channels and circulated among Syrians on social media - explicitly indicates the change in the identity balance; it shows an umbrella on the colours of the Syrian flag, in the middle of which an Arabic word reads: 'Syrian'. Beneath this umbrella, a piece of script reads: 'Arab; Kurd; Druze; Christian; Sunni; Alawite; Ismaili; Shiite; Assyrian and Syriac'.<sup>15</sup> A second example is of a song by the prominent Syrian singer Mayada al-Hinnawi, entitled *ya sham* ('Oh Damascus'). Explicitly, its lyrics and video-clip promote Syrian religious identities, as they focus on Islamic and Christian symbolic elements (churches and the cross; mosques and the Quran) alongside Syrian landmarks and images from folklore. There is not even a vague hint of anything surrounding the Arab identity. In this context, Syrian State TV launched a campaign dubbed *tarykhuna* ('our history'), and a quiz programme entitled *souriyya; tarykh w hadarah* ('Syria; a history and civilisation'). Both of these emphasise Syria's modern history, national symbols and figures.<sup>16</sup>

Paralleling this rhetoric of the regime, the discourse operating at the grassroots level expresses resentment towards the anti-Assad Arab states. This is indicated by many slogans that were chanted during pro-Assad rallies. Two examples are *yly ma bysaf amu qatariyya* ('you are a son of a Qatari if you do not clap'), and *ya Arab ya khawana* ('oh you Arabs, you are traitors').<sup>17</sup> These slogans were sung by cheerful pro-Assad protesters while waving the Syrian flag and raising pictures of Assad. When asked why he is against his fellow Arabs, one of these protesters yelled;

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*Sourriyya hykaya la tantahi* ('Syria: an endless story'), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eStVy8mOaSo>, accessed on 29/11/2013.

<sup>14</sup> An online version of this son is uploaded on YouTube, see *Souriyya al-majd* ('Syria: the glory'), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIE5--HSgwo> accessed on 29/11/2013.

<sup>15</sup> See appendix 1

<sup>16</sup> See the Syrian State TV websites on <http://www.rtv.gov.sy/> and <http://www.rtv.gov.sy/index.php?d=100342>

<sup>17</sup> Fieldwork, Syria, February 2012.

“Those traitors [referring to the anti-Assad Arab states] who we once dubbed as ‘sister states’, stabbed Syrians on the back; but we [Syrians] shall prevail” .<sup>18</sup>

Although cliques of the political opposition (represented by the Syrian National Council and later by the Syrian National Coalition) and the military factions (represented by the Free Syrian Army and some Syrian Islamist militias) allied with certain Arab States - particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia – the discourse of anti-Assad Syrians on the ground slammed Arab states for their failure to help Syrian rebels in ousting the Assad regime. Hence, these anti-Assad Syrians seemed to associate themselves less with the Arab identity; for them, the Arab states did not provide an adequate level of support. An anti-Assad Syrian summarised this perspective:

“Arab states are seeking to achieve *realpolitik* ends at the cost of our blood. They support particular factions [in Syria] that would serve their agendas, and they aim to prolong the conflict for their own ends. *Al-uma al-Arabiya* (‘the Arab nation’) failed us, and is watching the slaughter of Syrians” .<sup>19</sup>

This sentiment is reflected by a popular slogan that was frequently chanted during anti-Assad rallies: *w ya Arab khazltuna* (‘oh Arab, you let us down’). Moreover, a popular motto, paradoxically displayed by both anti- and pro-Assad Syrians, runs: *souriyya, ‘nabkkykiyy aw nabky aurobatuna ‘laty wallat* (‘oh Syria, shall we cry over you or shall we cry over our Arabism that has faded away?’).<sup>20</sup> Additionally, many cartoons and graphic novels criticizing Arabist ideology were circulated among Syrians in the online community. One eloquent example is of a comic that shows a man in a traditional Arab costume watching Arab Idol (a popular Arabic music competition) on television while turning his back to the news of violence in Syria being broadcast on a television behind him.<sup>21</sup> A similar one mocks the prominent poem by Sati` al-Husri, the father of Arabist ideology. The original version of the poem says: ‘Arab countries are my motherland, from Damascus to Baghdad, from Najd (in Saudi Arabia) to Yemen, and from Egypt to Tetouan (in Morocco)’. Sarcastically, the comic shows Smurfs saying: “they exiled us from Syria, they marginalised us in Lebanon, they froze us to death in Jordan, they

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<sup>18</sup> Author’s interview with anonymous pro-Assad protester, Syria, 26/2/ 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous anti-Assad, Syria 5/9/2013.

<sup>20</sup> See *souriyya, ‘nabkkykiyy aw nabky aurobatuna ‘laty wallat* (‘oh Syria, shall we cry over you or shall we cry over our Arabism that has faded away?’), Syrian Revolutions forums, *Website* available at <http://www.syria2011.net/t58543-topic> accessed on 29/11/13. Also see appendix 2.

<sup>21</sup> See appendix 3

besieged us in Iraq, they humiliated us in Egypt, and they did not welcome us in the Gulf! So now let all of us sing: ‘Arab countries how low are you!’ ”.<sup>22</sup>

Thereafter, the discourse used by various anti-Assad groups, particularly the secular ones, aimed to strengthen Syrian nationalism by emphasising national symbols such as the Syrian map and the Syrian (revolutionary) flag, while neglecting any association with the Arab identity. Indeed, the Syrian map on the revolutionary flag’s colours was the main symbol for many anti-Assad groups.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, several civil movements, charitable networks and communication instruments adopted national names like *Souriyyatna* (‘our Syria’); a weekly magazine, *Souriyya al-majd* (‘Syria the glory’); a television station, *Souriyyat ‘abr al-houdud* (Syrian [females] across the borders’); a charitable network,<sup>24</sup> and the Free Syrian youth Coalition; a political movement.<sup>25</sup> In parallel, activists operating on the ground usually voiced their support for Syrian nationalism. One traditional example is the slogan, *al-sh’b al-souriyy wahid* (‘Syrian people are one’), which was among the first slogans to be chanted by rebels on the ground. Another articulate example is a banner that was raised during an anti-Assad rally in the suburbs of Damascus in April 2012. This banner displayed a message that read: *eza kuna massehiyyyn fa-munzu akthar mn 2000 ‘am, eza kuna muslmiyyyn fa-munzu akthar men 1400 ‘am, wa lakiyyinna souriyyyn munzu akthar men 10000 ‘am* (‘if we are Christians, we have been Christians for more than 2000 years; if we are Muslims, we have been Muslims for more than 1400 years, but we have been Syrians for more than 10,000 years’)<sup>26</sup>.

,Running in parallel to this discourse that emphasises the Syrian identity is the rise of Islamic identity; in particular, the Sunni identity. Undoubtedly, since the beginning of the uprising, Sunni identity has been struggling for empowerment and has been attempting to assert itself over Arab nationalism and Syrian nationalism. However, one cannot view the Sunni identity as denoting a monolithic identity,

<sup>22</sup> See Bilad al-‘urb ma `awtakiyy’ (‘Arab countries; how low are you’), Syrian Revolution Forums Website, available at <http://www.syria2011.net/t64348-topic> accessed on 29/11/2013. Also see appendix 4.

<sup>23</sup> See appendix 5 and 6.

<sup>24</sup> See the Facebook page for Syrians without borders available at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-Souriat-Among-Boards/454284438014333> accessed on 29/11/2013.

<sup>25</sup> See the Facebook page for Syrian Free youth Coalition, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1/158179811016976> , accessed on 29/11/13

<sup>26</sup> See appendix 7.

since the reproduction of different versions of the Sunni identity, from the moderate to the radical (Sufi, Salafi and Salafi-Jihadi identities, respectively) is a crucial feature of the Syrian uprising. Nevertheless, all of these trends are battling for a hegemonic place at the cost of the diminution of Arabism and Syrianism. In fact, the escalation of violence and the domination of Islamist militias interact with the intimate involvement of members of the Sunni bloc (such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey) and the members of the ‘Shiite axis’ (Hezbollah, Iran and the Maliki government of Iraq). As a result, this led to the uprising being characterised as a Shiite versus Sunni holy war. This consequently allowed the Islamic identity to prevail over national and supra-national ones. Many slogans indicated this sectarian polarization, which resulted in the reinforcement of Sunni identity. A popular anti-Shiite slogan is: *la iran w la hezbollah bidna muslym ykhaf allah*, (‘neither Iran nor Hezbollah, we want a Muslim who fears God’). Another widespread motto is: *ya allah ma ‘lna ghiyyrak ya allah* (‘we have nobody but you God’). A final example is of a banner that was held during anti-Assad protests, and which was also circulated widely on the online community. It shows writing in Arabic that reads *ya Arab* (‘oh Arab’), whilst a pencil is erasing the letter ‘yn of the word ‘Arab’ and changing the meaning of the word to *rab*, meaning God.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Based on the above account, it can be asserted that, after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, the power balance between Arabism, Syrianism and Islamism shifted rapidly. Each of these identities is vying for empowerment and hegemonic control. On the one hand, ‘everyday Arabism’ is declining due to the ‘everyday’ reproduction of State and Islamic identities. On the other hand, Syrian national identity is being reproduced as an inclusive identity for the secular and non-Muslim Syrians, while the Islamic identity flourishes as the dominant identity amongst the majority of anti-Assad Sunnis. Which of these identities has the necessary power to redress the balance? The outcome is yet to be seen.

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<sup>27</sup> See appendix 8



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Nina Radio Station <http://ninarfm.com/news.php?id=104>

Sham FM Radio Station <http://www.shamfm.fm/new/Main/Default.php>

*souriyya, 'nabkkykiyy aw nabky aurobatuna 'laty wallat* ('oh Syria, shall we cry over you or shall we cry over our Arabism that has faded away?'), Syrian Revolutions forums, Website available at <http://www.syria2011.net/t58543-topic> accessed on 29/11/13

## **YouTube:**

*Souriyya al-majd* ('Syria: the glory'), available at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIE5--HSgwo>

*Sourriyya hykaya la tantahi* ('Syria: an endless story'), available at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eStVy8mOaSo>

*Sourriyya hykaya la tantahi* ('Syria: an endless story'), available at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH6VJ2s6mco>

Syrian State TV websites on <http://www.rtv.gov.sy/> and  
<http://www.rtv.gov.sy/index.php?d=100342>

## **Facebook**

Syrian Free youth Coalition, available at:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1/158179811016976>

Syrians without borders available at:

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## Appendix 1

Source: *Souriyya al-majd* ('Syria: the glory'), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIE5--HSgwo>



## Appendix 2

*souriyya, 'nabkkykiyy aw nabky aurobatuna 'laty wallat* ('oh Syria, shall we cry over you or shall we cry over our Arabism that has faded away?'), Syrian Revolutions forums, *Website* available at <http://www.syria2011.net/t58543-topic> accessed on 29/11/13



### Appendix 3

Source: this picture was circulated on social media and was published in many revolutionary Facebook pages such as Use it, available at <https://www.facebook.com/wlakuseit>



## Appendix 4

This picture was circulated widely on social media and was published in many Facebook pages, such as Damascus News Network available at <https://www.facebook.com/D.T.N.N.0>



## Appendix 5

This picture was circulated widely on social media and was produced by the Multimedia team of the Syrian Revolution. The writing in Arabic reads: 'we will destroy Syria's restriction, Syria's fate is determined by its sons'. See the Facebook Page for this team on <https://www.facebook.com/syria.multimedia>



## Appendix 6

This picture was circulated widely on social media and was produced by ‘Shadows for Syria’ civil movement. See the Facebook page of this movement on <https://www.facebook.com/Spectrums.for.Syria>

The writing in the middle of this map reads ‘My mother’, while the writing beneath the map reads ‘whatever we differ, Syria gather us because a mother will gather..and Syria is the mother for all’.





## Appendix 7

This picture was posted by several Facebook pages such as that of *Nabed*; a civil movement, the page is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/nabd.shabab.syria>

The writing reads 'if we are Christians, we have been Christians for more than 2000 years; if we are Muslims, we have been Muslims for more than 1400 years, but we have been Syrians for more than 10,000 years'.



## Appendix 8

This picture was circulated on the social media and was published in various anti-Assad Facebook pages such as the 'Syrian Revolution against Bashar Assad', available at <https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution>

