

Introduction	3
The Emergence of the Kassioum Current	5
<i>Letters and Purges: the struggle for inner-party democracy in the Syrian Communist Party..</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>“We are the party, they are the splinter”</i>	<i>7</i>
Pretensions to Reform.....	9
<i>The twilight of reform.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Long-term Strategy or realpolitik?</i>	<i>11</i>
Kassioum and the Politics of the Possible	15
<i>Propagators of dissent</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Party decorum, internal dissent, and mechanisms of control.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Autopsical reflections: “What were we doing back there?”</i>	<i>19</i>
Two Roads for Struggle: The People’s Will Party and the Syrian Revolutionary Youth.....	20
<i>From unlicensed to legal dissidence: toward a politics of reconciliation</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>The second voice of the fugue: the Syrian Revolutionary Youth.....</i>	<i>22</i>
Conclusion	25

The Antinomies of Kassioun:
The History of a Communist Organization in Syria, 1999-2015

Abstract

This paper is concerned with a relatively small Syrian communist organization called Kassioun. It traces the history and evolution of Kassioun from an unlicensed organization (1999-2012) into a legal party (2012-2015), as well as the changing relations between Kassioun and the Syrian regime, on the one hand, and between Kassioun's leadership and its members, on the other. In the first section, I chronicle Kassioun's role in the struggle for inner-party democracy within the Syrian Communist Party – Bakdash between 1999 and 2003, and its emergence as an unlicensed organization following its split from the party in 2003. In the second section, I explore the variable forms and limits of political practice under the newly established Bashar regime in the context of economic liberalization and geopolitical instability, and examine the ways in which Kassioun strategically formulated its political program, couching demands for economic and political reform in nationalist terms, so as to circumvent state repression. In the third section, I demonstrate Kassioun's role as a vehicle for political action and education between 2000 and 2011. I then investigate the discord that arose between the leadership and dissident members of Kassioun as the leadership implemented disciplinary measures against members who carried out 'transgressive' and 'unauthorized' political actions prior to and following the 2011 Syrian Uprising. Finally, in the last section, I broadly delineate Kassioun's transformation into a legal party called the People's Will Party, its incorporation into the state's apparatus, and its participation in international peace processes as the 'internal opposition' following the 2011 mass movement. I further trace contentious defections of Kassioun's members who, as seasoned communist militants, renounced the organization and sought to march a broad leftist movement within the ranks of the opposition under the banners of the Syrian Left Coalition, an umbrella body of young communist and leftist cadres, and the Syrian Revolutionary Youth, a leftist mass organization that was considerably active during the uprising.

Introduction

The malaise of Arab communist parties has long been tied to the formidable ‘national question’, a phenomenon that Benedict Anderson would proclaim to be global.¹ Throughout the 20th century, Arab communists oscillated between a complete suspicion of nationalist aspirations and a complete submergence under nationalist currents. The history of the Arab communist movement’s obliteration by nationalist regimes, or interiorization of nationalist ideological elements, is all too familiar.² After ruling nationalist parties endured a series of failures, however, nationalism fell out of favor in the Arab world, and yet traditional communist parties remained within the boundaries of nationalist rhetoric.³ Syria is a case in point, and the story of the Syrian communist organization Kassioum is bound to such a legacy.

Already in the 1970s, Mahdi ‘Amil, a prominent Marxist theoretician and a member of the Lebanese Communist Party, had employed a double-edged critique of leftist ‘tendencies’ that, in his estimation, failed to grasp the temporality of revolutionary politics in the Arab world. One tendency ‘Amil called *economism* and the other, *voluntarism*. Opposing both hopeful passivity and blind activity, ‘Amil argued for a delineation of levels of analysis in which the inseparable material unity of the economic and the political could nevertheless be disentangled for the sake of analysis. By positing this distinction, ‘Amil sought to disambiguate that which leads to one-sided political standpoints. Economism for ‘Amil designates the failure to grasp the relative autonomy of the political realm—the realm proper of class struggle. Voluntarism, on the other hand, designates the failure to articulate a politics grounded in a materialist understanding of the development of society. These tendencies, ‘Amil opined, contributed to the failure of communists to properly situate themselves within national liberation struggles.⁴

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 2006), 1-4; Walter Z. Laqueur, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957); Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

² Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2005); Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Arab Left* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1976); Laura Feliu and Ferran Izquierdo-Brichs, *Communist Parties in the Middle East: 100 Years of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Tareq Y. Ismael,; Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ahmed Abdallah, *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt: 1923–1973* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1985).

³ One could argue, notwithstanding the transformations that the Left itself had undergone since the heydays of the 1960s and 1970s, that homologous complications and defects underpin the Left’s reaction to the rise of political Islamism, particularly political Shi’ism in the Middle East.

⁴ In his own politico-intellectual context, economism was tied to a historicist, stagist reading of Marx. The ‘orthodox’ variant of this reading saw post-colonial regimes as modernizing agents and perceived the task ahead as that of ameliorating the economic conditions of the working class, setting the stage for the inevitable revolution springing out of the Capital-labor contradiction. The ‘liberal’ variant of this reading shifted from the critique of capitalism—insofar as the Arab world was proclaimed pre-capitalist—to the advocacy for the need of capitalist development. Voluntarism, on the other hand, signified radical, leftist currents—impatient with traditional communist parties, their politics, and their alliances with regressive forces for the sake of national liberation—that advocated instead for an acceleration of militant class struggle. Crucially, for our exposition, both of these tendencies were shaped by the ‘national question’. With the proliferation of post-colonial authoritarian regimes throughout the Arab world, as well as devastating material and moral losses incurred by wars against Israel, the problem of priorities of struggle came to the fore. ‘Amil argued that the emerging ‘progressive regimes’, such as the Ba’ath regime in Syria, failed to advance an ideology subservient to the petit-bourgeois interests that they claimed to represent due to the integration of the emerging ruling elites with

Although ‘Amil waged his critique in a different socio-political reality than ours and his characterizations are certainly in need of reconceptualization today, they nonetheless remain useful for understanding the impasses that confront contemporary emancipatory leftist movements. In the context of party factionalism, meager margins for political engagement under authoritarianism, and geopolitical instability in the region, not only are the tendencies that ‘Amil identified extant in Syria, but their overcoming—through a politics that is neither suspended in realism, nor spinning in idealism—remains out of sight.

The history of the Syrian Left is discontinuous, riddled with short-lived political episodes. From advocating for reforms within the confines of the state’s political bounds to self-effacement through incorporation into the state’s apparatus, and from pursuing radical short-lived political projects despite immanent state violence to suffering exile and political disenchantment, the question of what ought to be done has long beleaguered Syrian communists and leftists. As we shall see in this paper, Kassiou, in many respects, appears as merely a remnant of traditional Arab Marxism. However, the organization’s active role in the arid political landscape of Syria in the 2000s, and its eventual ‘promotion’ from an unlicensed organization to a legal party aligned with geopolitical players in the aftermath of the Syrian Uprising, invites examination and appraisal.

This paper traces the history and transformation of Kassiou, a communist organization in Syria, between 1999 and 2015. In particular, it investigates Kassiou’s political evolution from an unlicensed organization (1999-2012) to a legal party (2012-2015), as well as the changing relations between Kassiou and the Syrian regime on the one hand, and between Kassiou’s leadership and its members on the other. In the first section, I chronicle the emergence of Kassiou and its role in the struggle for party democracy within the Syrian Communist Party. In the second section, I explore the variable forms and limits of political practice under the newly established Bashar regime in the context of economic liberalization and geopolitical instability, and examine the ways in which Kassiou strategically formulated its political program, couching demands for economic and political reform in nationalist terms, so as to circumvent state repression. In the third section, I demonstrate Kassiou’s role as a vehicle for political action and education between 2000 and 2011. I then investigate the discord that arose between the leadership and dissident members of Kassiou as the leadership implemented disciplinary measures against members who carried out ‘transgressive’ and ‘unauthorized’ political actions prior to and following the 2011 Syrian Uprising. Finally, in the last section, I broadly delineate Kassiou’s transformation into a legal party called the People’s Will Party, its incorporation into the state’s apparatus, and its participation in parliamentary elections and international peace processes as the ‘internal opposition’ following the 2011 mass movement. I further trace contentious defections of Kassiou’s members who, as seasoned communist militants, renounced the organization and sought to march a broad leftist

the nascent bourgeoisie. Far from embracing these ‘modernizing’ regimes or simply condemning them for their illiberalism, and against the ultra-leftist temptation of immediate disruptive action, ‘Amil judged the situation as opportune for communists to take lead in the struggle for national liberation now that nationalists have been discredited following their ascendancy to power. For ‘Amil’s two-edged critique of voluntarism and economism, see for instance Mahdi ‘Amil, *Muqadimat Nadhariya l-Dirasat Athar al-Fikr al-Ishtirakiy fi Harakat al-Taharrur al-Watanniy*, Theoretical Prolegomena for the Study of Socialist Thought in Nationalist Liberation Movements (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013), 65-70. For ‘Amil’s diagnosis of the failure of ‘progressive regimes’ and his call on communist parties to surmount nationalist ideology and seize the leadership of national liberation struggles, see Mahdi ‘Amil, *al-Nazariyya fi al-Mumarasa al-Siyasiyya: Bahthun fi Asbab al-Harb al-Ahliyya fi Lubnan* (Theory in Political Practice: An Inquiry into the Causes of the Lebanese Civil War) (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1990), 29-57. For an acute exposition of the general trajectory of ‘Amil’s politico-theoretical work and his rebuttal of ‘liberal’ readings of Marx, see Samer Frangie, “Theorizing from the Periphery: The Intellectual Project of Mahdi ‘Amil,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 3 (2012): 465-482.

movement within the ranks of the opposition under the banners of the Syrian Left Coalition, an umbrella body of young communist and leftist cadres, and the Syrian Revolutionary Youth, a leftist mass organization that was considerably active during the uprising.

Throughout this paper, I draw on primary historical documents of Kassioun, including party letters, speeches, and statements. I also draw liberally on interviews with three individuals: a member of the People's Will Party and a current representative of the Moscow Platform of the High Negotiations Committee, an umbrella body established to represent the various actors of the Syrian opposition; a former writer in Kassioun Newspaper and former member of Friends of Kassioun, an organization for unofficial members of Kassioun; and a former member of Kassioun and founding member of the Syrian Left Coalition and the Syrian Revolutionary Youth.

The Emergence of the Kassioun Current

Letters and Purges: the struggle for inner-party democracy in the Syrian Communist Party

Following the Ninth Party Congress elections of 1999, the Central Committee of the Syrian Communist Party – Bakdash (SCP–Bakdash) received dozens of letters written by enraged members denouncing it for rescinding the results of the elections and instead appointing candidates who were loyal to the leadership. Members accused the leadership of ‘political feudalism’, which has long plagued the history of the Syrian Communist Party. Since 1936, Khaled Bakdash ruled the party, and for nearly 60 years, maintained the position of General Secretary. Following his death in 1995, Bakdash’s widow, Wisal Farha-Bakdash, inherited the title and took his place.⁵ In the aftermath of the Ninth Party Congress, the Central Committee, under Farha-Bakdash’s leadership, launched smear campaigns against critical members and party organizations; intimidated, suspended, and expelled members; and dissolved organizations and sub-committees that seemed to threaten the leadership's authority.⁶ In response, party organizations, sub-committees, and members across Syria firmly demanded that the leadership rectify its violations of the Ninth Congress and proposed concrete resolutions to rehabilitate party democracy. At the time of the dispute, Bashar al-Assad had newly acceded to the presidency on a reformist agenda, triggering social and political mobilization on a national level. The widespread, albeit cautious, optimism of this period impregnated members of the SCP–Bakdash with new attitudes and political sensibilities toward their own party leadership. In one letter, party member Muhammad Taha asks the Central Committee:

If we, as communists, demand the release of democratic freedoms for the people—freedom of speech and the press, the lifting of the martial laws, the protection of the privacy of homes, and the prevention

⁵ Following Wisal Farha-Bakdash’s resignation in 2010, Khaled and Wisal Bakdash’s son, Ammar Bakdash, acceded to the position of General Secretary.

⁶ In the cases of Latakia, Tartus, Hama, and Damascus, elected regional committees were entirely dissolved and replaced with committees wholly appointed by the party leadership. In the newly-elected regional committees of Houran and rural Damascus, the Central Committee dissolved particular committees and joined others together to reach a formal majority in its favor. In the Jazīrah region and Homs, the Central Committee removed certain cadres and members from the election process to secure the outcomes in favor of those loyal to its leadership. “Mādhā Fa‘alet al-Qiyāda al-Hāliyya bi al-Hizib?” (What has the Current Leadership Done to the Party?), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*, September 27, 2003, accessed December 2019, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=10308.

of arbitrary detention—then how dare this leadership prevent these rights from the communists within the party?⁷

Rather than addressing its procedural violations, the Central Committee published a statement on the pages of its newspaper, *Sawt al-Sha'eb (Voice of the People)*, announcing that those who criticized the leadership's decisions were expected to leave the party's ranks and form their own.⁸ It further circulated a series of internal letters warning of a 'deviant bloc', which it accused of conspiring to divide the party, and denounced members critical of its leadership as "Zionist agents funded by the West," a charge routinely employed by the Ba'ath Party to delegitimize its political opponents.⁹

The leadership's reference to a 'deviant bloc' signified *Mantaqiyyat Dimashq*, or the Damascus Regional Committee. Within this committee existed a nucleus of twenty-seven members informally known as the Kassioum Group, which was led by Qadri Jamil, the Secretary of the Damascus Regional Committee and the former son-in-law of Khaled and Wisal Bakdash.¹⁰ Continuing its nation-wide purge campaign, the Central Committee raised the slogan "The party strengthens itself by purifying itself from within!" and consequently expelled 80% of the members of the Damascus Regional Committee.¹¹

Though the leadership's alarmism around an 'internal enemy' was indeed an attempt to justify its imminent acts of repression and maintain its authority, its concern with the Damascus Regional Committee was not without a kernel of truth. At the time, the Kassioum Group, which would later split from the party to advance its own political project in 2003, spearheaded the party struggle against the leadership. Between 2000 and 2003, the group led a campaign to pressure the Central Committee to convene an Extraordinary Congress, wherein party members could voice their concerns, resolve the inner-party dispute, end the series of purges, and renew the party's role in society. To the anxieties of the Central Committee, however, the Extraordinary Congress would also provide members with the opportunity to entirely restructure the party's leadership—in effect giving members the possibility of ridding themselves of the standing Central Committee. As stated in the party's Internal Rules of Procedure, if a congress is realized, elections take place whereby "the

⁷ .Ibid

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Before the split occurred, Jamil, who led the Kassioum Current, separated from Bakdash's daughter. I was told by former members of Kassioum that, at the time of the split, there were speculations that Jamil's initiative to establish a new political organization was symptomatic of a familial-political feud between Jamil and both Wisal Farha-Bakdash and Ammar Bakdash. However, whether or not this struggle was tainted by familial politics is of no direct concern to this investigation. Jamil's political maneuvers alone cannot explain the organization's overall social and political existence. As we shall see, many members considered Kassioum not as an expression of Jamil's particular visions or aspirations, but as a medium for novel political engagement at a time when the prospects of social and political mobilization in Syria were evolving.

¹¹ In addition, the Central Committee restructured the Damascus Regional Committee by appointing 9 out of 11 members to the leadership of the committee and disbanded entire organizations within the committee, including the Organization of Martyr Nasser Issa and the Organization of Martyr Mohuiddin Falyun. "Mādhā Fa'alet al-Qiyāda al-Hāliyya bi al-Hizib?" (What has the Current Leadership Done to the Party?), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*.

[elected] presidency of the Extraordinary Congress is legitimately charged with executive powers over the party.”¹²

Given the Bakdash leadership’s privileged affiliation with the regime, the Kassioum Group anticipated that the Bakdash leadership would refuse to relinquish its powers even if a new leadership was legitimately elected to the presidency. Confronted by this probable outcome, the Kassioum Group sought to broaden its base of support and ground its political existence external to the party by establishing an independent organization, the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists (NCUSC).

“We are the party, they are the splinter”

In tandem with rallying for an Extraordinary Congress, the Kassioum Group strategically mobilized its broad social network of leftists and communists from both within and outside the party under the banner of the NCUSC. The new body declared itself opposed to the phenomenon of factionalism and in support of the Charter of Honor of Syrian Communists, which was published on 15 March 2002 and drafted by Qadri Jamil himself. The charter called upon communists across Syria to “revive the role of communists in carrying out their national, social, and democratic tasks [in the] interest of the people and the working class” and to “return the party to the masses.”¹³

For communists who faced expulsions, the NCUSC offered itself as a “safe home for its legitimate sons after [their respective party factions] alienated them and removed them from their ranks.”¹⁴ The NCUSC proclaimed that the “atmosphere of oppression prevented any contrary opinions” and “deterred the development of democracy within the party.”¹⁵ Hence, the Kassioum Group proposed the NCUSC as an alternative political space for dialogue and debate, “the only ways to preserve unity in light of difference.”¹⁶

Indeed, members who joined the NCUSC found in it the possibility of rehabilitating communist politics in the country. Offering a novel space for communist political renewal, the NCUSC would later draw a wide spectrum of communists and leftists who found in the new organization “a real political life: discussions, authentic press, and ‘struggle’ in the streets.”¹⁷ On 18 October 2002, Jamil and dozens of communist delegates from across Syria met in a private home in Damascus to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Awrāq Mithāq Sharaf al-Shuyu‘iyyīn al-Suriyyīn” (Papers of the Charter of Honor of Syrian Communists), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddīn Archive*, September 26, 2003, accessed December 2019, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=10284.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Muhannad Dleqan, current member of The People’s Will Party and representative of the High Negotiations Committee – Moscow Platform, interview with author, December 30, 2019; “Awrāq Mithāq Sharaf al-Shuyu‘iyyīn al-Suriyyīn” (Papers of the Charter of Honor of Syrian Communists), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddīn Archive*.

¹⁶ “Awrāq Mithāq Sharaf al-Shuyu‘iyyīn al-Suriyyīn” (Papers of the Charter of Honor of Syrian Communists), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddīn Archive*.

¹⁷ Sadek Abdulrahman, former member of Friends of Kassioum and former writer of Kassioum Newspaper, interview with author, January 5, 2020.

establish National Coordination Committees of the NCUSC, which would monitor the charter's implementation and consolidate its base of support.¹⁸

After nearly three years of rallying, members finally convened the Extraordinary Congress independent of the party's leadership in December 2003.¹⁹ With 1,400 members from across Syria participating in the elections of the congress, seven candidates, including Jamil and members of the Kassiou Group, were elected to the Presidency of the Extraordinary Congress and, thus, *formally* represented the new leadership of the Syrian Communist Party.²⁰ At the congress, Jamil proclaimed the NCUSC as a necessary element of the Syrian Communist Party's political regeneration:

The process of uniting Syrian communists has great importance in the course of the restoration of the party's intellectual, political, public, and organizational role. Therefore, we cannot look at our case and our Extraordinary Congress, except in parallel with the process of uniting Syrian communists initiated by the Charter of Honor.²¹

To formalize the merging of the Kassiou Current and the NCUSC, delegates at the congress approved the political program of the NCUSC and resolved to replicate the Leninist party structure of the SCP–Bakdash. In addition, they elected a new leadership composed of members of the Kassiou Group, namely Qadri Jamil, Hamzeh Munzer, Obada Bozo, and Ala' Arafat, who would determine the organization's political line from then on.²² Furthermore, Kassiou Newspaper, which served as the official political organ of the Damascus Regional Committee for nearly 70 years, was transferred from the control of the committee to that of the NCUSC.²³

As predicted, Kassiou could not claim itself as the official party despite being granted leadership through the party's own formal procedure. Unlike the SCP–Bakdash, it lacked membership in the National Progressive Front (NPF), the ruling Ba'ath Party's coalition of legal political parties. Without membership in the NPF, political organizations and parties could not legally operate in Syria. Hence, the SCP–Bakdash maintained official leadership, writing off Kassiou as the splinter, while Kassiou emerged as an unlicensed political organization.

¹⁸ “Taqrīr al-Lajna al-Taḥdīrīyya li al-Mu’tamar al-Istithnā’ī li al-Hizb al-Shuyu’ī al-Surī” (Report of the Preparatory Committee for the Extraordinary Congress of the Syrian Communist Party), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddīn Archive*, January 29, 2004, accessed 2019, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=14224.

¹⁹Ibid .

²⁰ Around this time, organizations and sub-committees across the nation split from the Syrian Communist Party – Bakdash to join the ranks of the Kassiou Current: the Homs Regional Committee split in half; the Damascus Regional Committee and the Tartus Regional Committee nearly split entirely; and the Aleppo Regional Committee and the Jazira Regional Committee followed suit. “Taqrīr al-Lajna al-Taḥdīrīyya li al-Mu’tamar al-Istithnā’ī li al-Hizb al-Shuyu’ī al-Surī” (Report of the Preparatory Committee for the Extraordinary Congress of the Syrian Communist Party), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddīn Archive*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Yamam al-Omari, former member of Kassiou and founding member of the Syrian Left Coalition and the Syrian Revolutionary Youth, interview with author, January 19, 2020.

²³ The National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists is the formal name of the Kassiou Current. As per party tradition, members adopt the title of their newspaper as the organization's primary name. Hence, in this paper, I will refer to the NCUSC as Kassiou.

Pretensions to Reform

The twilight of reform

Kassioun's split from the SCP–Bakdash developed in the midst of the larger political and economic changes already underway in Syria. In 2000, Hafez al-Assad's death and Bashar al-Assad's rise to power under the slogan 'change within the framework of continuity' rallied political activists and groups around the possibility of reform.

From the onset of his transition to power, Bashar al-Assad implemented high level reforms. During the Ba'ath Party's Ninth Regional Congress in 2000, the last of which was held in 1985, he introduced elections for candidate members of the Central Committee and the Regional Command, two of the highest political bodies in the Ba'ath Party.²⁴ The results of the elections revealed a growing influence of reformists, including technocrats and businessmen, within the top ranks of the regime.²⁵ The advances of this reformist current in leading political institutions were part and parcel of the Bashar regime's strategy to accelerate economic liberalization with the prospect of transitioning the economic system from state-planned to market-oriented and facilitating Syria's integration into the global economy.²⁶ Spurred by the regime's own reformist endeavors, various organizations and groups in Syria, including Kassioun and the organizations of the Damascus Spring, the latter being led by a group of intellectuals, advanced their respective political projects only to meet contrasting fates.

The Damascus Spring was not a comprehensive, homogeneous civil movement. In the early 2000s, it signified an 'opening' for political transformation in which groups and individuals reconciled their conflicting convictions and political projects for common democratic demands, among them: civil society activists, businessmen, and political groups from across the spectrum, including communists, nationalists, Kurdish parties, and the long-exiled Muslim Brotherhood. Activists and organizations associated with the Damascus Spring published statements demanding reform and established forums to initiate discussions and debates around political and social issues.

On 27 September 2000, ninety-nine independent intellectuals, lawyers, journalists, writers, and artists tested the limits of Bashar al-Assad's reformism with the publication of the Statement of 99, a political document that called for an end to the State of Emergency, which had been in effect

²⁴ For an overview of the institutions of the Ba'ath Party and their roles, as well as their political transformations following Hafez al-Assad's Corrective Movement and Bashar al-Assad's rise to power, see Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (Zed Books, 2003), 70-78.

²⁵ Newcomers among the reformists took twelve out of twenty-one seats in the Central Committee and sixty-two out of ninety seats in the Regional Command. On the topic of economic restructuring, delegates at the Congress discussed taking China—a one-party system that was restructured from a planned economy to a market economy while still maintaining the power of the state—as an example to be emulated. See Ellen Lust-Okar, "Reform in Syria: Steering Between the Chinese Model and Regime Change," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2006); George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom*; Najib Ghadbian, "Contesting Authoritarianism Opposition Activism under Bashar Al-Asad, 2000–2010," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse University Press, 2015); Robert Rabil, "Baath Party Congress in Damascus: How Much Change in Syria?," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 2, 2005, accessed December 2019, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/baath-party-congress-in-damascus-how-much-change-in-syria.

²⁶ Linda Matar, *The Political Economy of Investment in Syria* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Linda Matar, "Macroeconomic Framework in Pre-Conflict Syria," in *Syria: from National Independence to Proxy War*, ed. Ali Kadri and Linda Matar (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

since 1963, amnesty for political prisoners, and the establishment of a rule of law.²⁷ Though the regime and state-controlled media outlets ignored the statement at first, the regime's response to this act of dissidence months later seemed to indicate a political turn. On 15 November 2000, the regime released 600 political prisoners, of them 380 Muslim Brotherhood activists and, of what remained, mostly communists and leftists, including 22 members of the Communist Labor Party.²⁸ Four days later, on 19 November, Assad commanded the closure of the infamous Mezzeh prison and, on 22 November, pardoned non-political prisoners.²⁹ The regime's concessions gave impetus to the movement, driving organizations of the Damascus Spring to continue speaking openly about the necessity of extensive political change.

For many of those involved in the movement, political freedoms constituted the precondition that would set the coordinates of any future political engagement. Hence, their discourse was largely focused on political, rather than economic, reform in Syria. However, in the context of the regime's economic reformism, a notable strategy waged by the most prominent liberal current of the Damascus Spring was to advance its calls for legal and political reform from the premise that such reforms were required for the success of the regime's own economic endeavors.³⁰ More concretely, it argued that the proper functioning of the free market, modernization, and economic integration necessarily entail far-reaching structural reform.

In January 2001, the Damascus Spring brazenly published a political document called the Statement of 1,000 which, along with the demands of the Statement of 99, criticized the legacy of Ba'athist rule, called for a multi-party system, condemned the influence of patronage networks, and denounced the plunder of national wealth by regime loyalists.³¹ The belief that the regime would inevitably pursue a comprehensive form of 'political liberalization' in tandem with economic liberalization informed the aspirations of the Damascus Spring but proved to be a grave oversight.

In an interview a month following the statement's publication, Assad accused the figures and activists of the Damascus Spring of being agents of foreign embassies and "serving enemies of the country" to "sabotage stability on a national level."³² Though activists of the Damascus Spring attempted to appease the regime by introducing nationalist discourse concerning Arab unity, the "racist Israeli Zionist enemy," and the need for democracy as a "necessary entry-point and the sharpest weapon to win [the] battle [against Israel]," the Bashar regime nonetheless launched its

²⁷ George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*; Established in 1976, the Communist Labor Party (CLP) was a Marxist-Leninist splinter of the Syrian Communist Party. Banned by the Hafez regime since its inception, the CLP endured government raids, arrests, and detentions under both the Hafez and Bashar regimes.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Ghadbian, "Opposition Activism under Bashar Al-Asad," 98.

³¹ George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom*.

³² Abdul Rahman al-Rashed, "Al-Ra'īs Bashar al-Assad Yatahadath 'an Ru'yatihī li al-Mufāwadāt w al-'Alāqa bi Baghdād w Duwal al-Khalij w al-Tawājud al-Surri fi Lubnān w al-Infitāh" (President Bashar Al-Assad Talks about his Vision for Negotiations, the Relationship with Baghdad and the Gulf States, the Syrian presence in Lebanon, and Openness), *Asharq al-Awsat*, February 8, 2001, accessed November 20, 2019, archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=25244.

counteroffensive.³³ Assad explicitly rejected the Damascus Spring’s “Western conception of democracy,” conceiving of elections, the freedom of speech, and the freedom of press to be “merely democratic practices, not democracy in itself,” and insisted that Western democracy could not be applied to the distinctive needs of Syrian society.³⁴ Rather, he argued “[democracy] must follow the complex process of social and economic modernization, and cannot precede it.”³⁵ Assad further declared that the only demands and criticisms that would be tolerated were those of the economic kind, while political demands “risk the stability and security of the nation,” and if advanced, he warned, would be “met with a stern response.”³⁶

By autumn 2002, the regime had arrested, threatened, and intimidated key figures and dissidents of the Damascus Spring, and forcibly closed political forums associated with the movement. Under the State of Emergency legislation, leading figures of the Damascus Spring were imprisoned, tortured, and charged with “spreading false or exaggerated news that could weaken national morale.”³⁷

Kassioun’s characterizations of the Damascus Spring focused exclusively on the liberal tendency in the movement. In Kassioun’s judgment, the ordeal of the Damascus Spring revealed at once the failures of the movement’s liberal project and the limits of the regime’s political tolerance. In the midst of the regime’s campaign of repression, Kassioun maintained its ambivalence—neither condemning the state’s violence, nor attacking the Damascus Spring.³⁸ Later, however, Kassioun assessed the political aspirations of the Damascus Spring as a plain attempt at the “succession of power within the same class in which the dominant distribution of wealth is preserved,” and argued that so long as the Damascus Spring did not object to neoliberalism, it did not provide a genuine socio-political alternative and, in fact, “harmed the democratic movement in the country.”³⁹

Long-term Strategy or realpolitik?

Democracy, to Kassioun, meant “freedom for the lower classes,” e.g. the right to strike, “rather than the formal freedom of electoral ballots.”⁴⁰ In Kassioun’s own rhetoric, it recognized the “high levels of corruption within the regime and the need for a higher ceiling of freedoms,” but was averse to advancing “democratic liberties in the Western form.”⁴¹ Moving away from ‘liberal ideology’ and opposing the state’s economic trajectory, Kassioun upheld that the road to democracy

³³ Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar Al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

³⁴ George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom*, 49.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ghadbian, “Opposition Activism under Bashar Al-Asad,” 98.

³⁸ Dleqan, interview with author.

³⁹ Dleqan, interview with author; “Al-Liberāliyya al-Iqtsādiyya lan Tajlubu al-Dimuqrātiyya” (Economic Liberalism will not bring Democracy), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*, August 15, 2003, accessed January 2020, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=9261.

⁴⁰ Dleqan, interview with author.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

“did not pass through market forces.”⁴² Rather, democracy could only be realized by marrying economic and political concerns. “Without the eradication of the roots of great plunder, there is no economic reform, and without broad democracy for society, the forces of plunder and corruption cannot be confronted.”⁴³ That Kassioum embraced and seriously considered the question of political reform in its program, drew to its ranks communists and leftists who saw in this inclusion that which “fundamentally differentiated” Kassioum from the other existing communist parties.⁴⁴

Calls for political reforms soon faded, however. In light of the geopolitical context at the time, namely the US’ “war on terror,” the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act,⁴⁵ as well as Israel’s Operation Defensive Shield and the Battle of Jenin, Kassioum couched the demands for economic and political reform in nationalist terms. The organization argued that in order for the regime to solidify national unity, protect sovereign territory, and resist foreign powers, it must swiftly pursue comprehensive reforms, namely reverse its liberal economic policies, crack down on corruption, and rehabilitate social welfare.⁴⁶ However, for Kassioum, the geo-political and national situation itself would “determine the features of the required reform and its given timetable,” and proposed that so long as there is transparency, it would make no difference whether the regime began the reform process by “starting from one point” (namely, reversing neoliberal policies) “to reach other points” (namely, implementing political reform).⁴⁷

Not uncharacteristic of communist organizations in the Arab world, Kassioum’s nationalist position seemed to have undermined its own class-based project. Having acquiesced to the regime’s leadership for the sake of fortifying national unity against foreign aggression, it ultimately expected top-down reform. It positioned itself against “a direction and a class group within the state,” namely the ‘forces of lawful and unlawful corruption’, and conceded the political struggle to a specific camp of ‘patriotic forces’ within the regime’s state apparatuses.⁴⁸ Thus, Kassioum’s political function became a matter of supporting its allies among the ‘patriotic forces’ within the state

⁴² “Al-Liberāliyya al-Iqtsādiyya lan Tajlubu al-Dimuqrātiyya” (Economic Liberalism will not bring Democracy), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*.

⁴³ “Sīyyāsāt al-Islāh... ila Ayn?” (Reform Policy... to Where?), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*, March 3, 2004, accessed January 2020, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=15403.

⁴⁴ Al-Rashed, “Al-Ra’īs Bashar al-Assad Yatahadath ‘an Ru’yatihi li al-Mufāwadāt w al-‘Alāqa bi Baghdād w Duwal al-Khalīj w al-Tawājjud al-Surrī fi Lubnān w al-Infītāh” (President Bashar Al-Assad Talks about his Vision for Negotiations, the Relationship with Baghdad and the Gulf States, the Syrian presence in Lebanon, and Openness).

⁴⁵ The Syria Accountability Act, a US Congress bill that was passed into law, was the legal basis for US sanctions against Syria in 2003. At a time when the US was illegally invading Iraq, the US government sanctioned Syria for allegedly being a “safe haven” for terrorists, developing WMDs and ballistic missile programs, supporting Hezbollah, and “occupying the sovereign territory of Lebanon.” United States, Congress, House, *Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003*, 2003.

⁴⁶ “Al-Liberāliyya al-Iqtsādiyya lan Tajlubu al-Dimuqrātiyya” (Economic Liberalism will not bring Democracy), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*.

⁴⁷ “Sīyyāsāt al-Islāh... ila Ayn?” (Reform Policy... to Where?), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*.

⁴⁸ Kassioum ultimately imagined political struggle as that between ‘patriotic forces’ and ‘forces of lawful and unlawful corruption’ within existing state structures, foremost within state bureaucracy, which “expresses, in substance and truth, the interests of economic centers of power” and “objectively [constitutes] the executive tool for the lobbies of economic influence in both its legal and illegal forms.” See “Al-Makhrāj min Azmat al-Bunā al-Siyyāsiyya al-Surriyya”

apparatus who opposed economic liberalization, and relied on such actors to direct economic change insofar as Kassioum itself remained outside of the state.⁴⁹

Indeed, with the start of the state's neoliberal project, a tension between the 'old and new guards' within the high ranks of the regime emerged.⁵⁰ However, even among the advocates of economic liberalization, there existed a struggle concerning the *form* of a 'social market economy' that the state was to pursue, namely between liberal reformists, who sought a free market minimally regulated by the government, and regime-affiliated businessmen, who sought to maintain the state's full economic jurisdiction in order to safeguard their state-sanctioned assets in the scheme of economic liberalization.⁵¹ Interposing itself in the midst of these struggles, Kassioum soon faced the limits of its bargaining power, as well as that of its 'allies'.

By the Ba'ath Party's Tenth Regional Congress in 2005, the regime officially ratified its strategy to pursue a neoliberal model, as represented by its formal adoption of Syria's Tenth Five Year Plan (2006-2010).⁵² Advised by the IMF and World Bank, the regime advanced economic measures to eliminate subsidies (e.g. fuel, food, and fertilizers), cut pensions, lift price controls, ease regulations on private investment, and pass laws that weakened labor.⁵³ With the implementation of neoliberal reforms, state welfare contracted and low-income citizens plunged into extreme poverty.⁵⁴ The Syrian poor—confronted by decreasing wages, increasing unemployment, rising living costs, and widespread disinvestment in public provisions—endured greater immiseration as social inequalities deepened.⁵⁵ In an effort to curb the repercussions of the state's economic reforms, namely increasing public cynicism in reaction to increasing poverty, Bashar al-Assad delineated early on that "economic reform [was] the main subject of discussion in Syria; within this sphere, there are

(The way out of the Syrian Political Structure Crisis), *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin Archive*, November 20, 2006, accessed January 2020, www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=15403; Dleqan, interview with author.

⁴⁹ Dleqan, interview with author.

⁵⁰ On the one hand, those among 'the old guard' sought to maintain their control over the means of production vis-à-vis the state, believing that economic liberalization would weaken the state apparatus and in turn both their own positions in power and their traditional clientelist interests. On the other hand, other capitalists associated with 'the new guard' of the regime saw privatization as an opportunity for generating new 'networks of privilege' and realizing newly attainable business interests. See Matar, *The Political Economy of Investment in Syria*, 107; Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: the Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵¹ Aurora Sottimano, "Nationalism and Reform under Bashar al-Asad" in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse University Press, 2015), 81; Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?" in *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 95–113, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x.

⁵² "The 10th Regional Congress, Damascus, June 2005," *The Ba'ath Party*, April 4, 2016, accessed 2019, http://www.baath-party.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8376.

⁵³ Samer Abboud, "Locating the 'Social' in the Social Market Economy," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse University Press, 2015), 63.

⁵⁴ Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?"

⁵⁵ Katsuri Sen, "The Political Economy of Public Health in Syria: Some Global and Regional Considerations," in *Syria: from National Independence to Proxy War*, ed. Ali Kadri and Linda Matar (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 188.

no limits,” a conciliatory gesture that mimicked that of his father's during the economic crisis of the mid-1980s.⁵⁶⁵⁷

Under this narrowly defined sphere of permitted criticism, Kassioum organized political gatherings and protests against economic liberalization. The organization published investigative exposés in its newspaper, laying bare the social impact of the state's neoliberal policies and rampant corruption within the government. The orientation of Kassioum's economic criticisms implicated individuals at the fore of the state's economic project and opposed both the United States and US-led international financial institutions, i.e. the IMF and World Bank. Notably, Kassioum targeted particular figures representing the emerging class of capitalists, namely the former Deputy Prime Minister of Economic Affairs and the architect of Syria's Tenth Five Year Plan, Abdullah Dardari. However, it refrained from directing its criticisms toward notorious capitalists within the leadership and the close circles of the regime, foremost Rami Makhoul, Bashar al-Assad's maternal cousin and the ultimate beneficiary of privatization in Syria. For Kassioum, this was a tactical choice: “We fabricated a target—Abdallah Dardari—and started shooting. But we knew very well that he represented a current and not merely himself.”⁵⁸

In truth, Kassioum's political actions did not pose a serious threat to the legitimacy of prominent figures in the regime's leadership or close circles. Indeed, it is difficult to overlook that the regime's leadership found Kassioum's targets advantageous to its own public image and the interests of the Assad–Makhoul family clan. Targets such as Abdullah Dardari provided the regime with scapegoats for public cynicism, obscuring its central role in decision-making and its social responsibility in the face of increasing immiseration. After all, despite the tensions existing among the old and new guards, the regime remained the “sole patron of all economic parties” involved.⁵⁹

Whether Kassioum's ‘tactics’ contributed at all to influencing the general trajectory of economic reforms, or whether they unwittingly served to undermine Dardari's technocratic proposal to the benefit of capitalist giants of the likes of Makhoul is unclear. Nevertheless, in the last analysis, it appears that Kassioum's tactics had backfired, with Dardari eventually deposed and Makhoul profiting off of his ever-growing share in the Syrian economy.⁶⁰ Kassioum's orthodoxy may have

⁵⁶ Al-Rashed, “Al-Ra'īs Bashar al-Assad Yatahadath ‘an Ru'yatihī li al-Mufāwadāt w al-‘Alāqa bi Baghdād w Duwal al-Khalīj w al-Tawājjud al-Surrī fi Lubnān w al-Infitāh” (President Bashar Al-Assad Talks about his Vision for Negotiations, the Relationship with Baghdad and the Gulf States, the Syrian presence in Lebanon, and Openness).

⁵⁷ During the economic crisis of the mid-1980s, Hafez al-Assad remedially permitted debate within the boundaries of economic and functional domains, e.g. around specific economic policies and the inefficiencies of bureaucracy, respectively. Furthering the state's efforts to appease classes disenfranchised by the state's economic liberalization, Hafez al-Assad appointed Bashar al-Assad—who returned to Damascus from London following the death of his brother Bassel al-Assad in 1994—to head a bureau for handling complaints and appeals of citizens and lead the government's anti-corruption campaign. Alan George, *Neither Bread nor Freedom*.

⁵⁸ Dleqan, interview with author.

⁵⁹ Sottimano, “Nationalism and Reform under Bashar al-Asad,” 83.

⁶⁰ Dardari's attempt to establish a “competitive economy based on free competition and equal competition” was a far-fetched ambition given Syria's political system. Rather, the regime's model of a ‘social market economy’ endowed regime-affiliated capitalists with opportunities to acquire enormous wealth. Makhoul alone was reported to have made \$20 million from his monopoly of free trade zones and telecommunication businesses in Syria in 2001, and by 2011 was reported to have controlled 60% of Syria's economy through his expansive network of monopolies and investments, from mobile phone services and duty free markets to real estate and private banking. Deborah Amon, “Syrian Official Pushes for Economic Reform,” *NPR*, August 2, 2005, accessed May 2019, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4782684; Lisa Saigol, “Assad Cousin Accused of Favouring Family,” *Financial Times*, April 21, 2011, accessed April 2019, www.ft.com/content/e29a73f8-6b78-11e0-a53e-00144feab49a.

shielded it from state persecution, but it may have likewise served the more obscene version of the economic reforms it sought to reverse.

Be that as it may, in its struggle against proponents of economic liberalization, Kassioum received great attention from committed communists and leftists who joined the organization. These new members found in Kassioum the possibility for political engagement and socio-economic change. As a newly established communist organization that identified itself as oppositional and yet was largely spared of the state repression to which other organizations were subjected, Kassioum lent Syrian communists and leftists an alternative space for political education and organizing. As we shall see in the next section, however, this corridor of political action had impacts beyond what either the regime would have permitted or the leadership of Kassioum could have envisioned.

Kassioum and the Politics of the Possible

Kassioum served as a gateway for Syrian leftists and communists who sought to enter, or re-enter, the political field in Syria. With regional committees across the country, Kassioum offered its members a rigorous political education, opportunities for independent journalistic work, and a space for political action, namely protests, sit-ins, and political events. Prospective members could join Kassioum as ‘supporters’ or ‘activists’. Its supporters were part of Friends of Kassioum, a daughter organization that granted them opportunities to write for Kassioum Newspaper and to participate in political actions and gatherings without holding an official membership. For supporters to become activists, candidates were required to attend lectures on Marxist texts, philosophy, and economics; graduate from Kassioum party-schools; and demonstrate their commitment to the organization by amassing newspaper subscriptions, attending political meetings and events, and consistently paying membership dues.

For the considerable political freedoms it offered its members, Kassioum attracted a wide spectrum of people to its ranks. Among these members were those formerly affiliated with the Communist Labor Party (CLP), a Marxist-Leninist splinter from the SCP that was subjected to widespread repression by the regime in the 1980s due to its radical vision to overthrow the regime. The CLP, which was to the left of Kassioum, briefly re-emerged on the political scene in the early 2000s but were deterred by the regime’s campaign of repression.⁶¹ At the time, anti-regime communists were confronted with the choice of either joining the likes of the CLP and definitively facing political persecution, or joining the more moderate Kassioum and enjoying a space for political action, thinking, writing, and gathering without the risk of imprisonment.⁶² With the demise of the Damascus Spring and the political impotence of radical opposition organizations such as the CLP, young Syrians witnessed the full force of authoritarianism despite the Bashar regime’s performative gestures of change. As one former member of Friends of Kassioum puts it, “all that emerged was crushed, except for Kassioum.”⁶³ Under such circumstances, Kassioum appeared as a viable political alternative.

⁶¹ Abdulrahman, interview with author.

⁶² Sadek Abdulrahman, “Mā al-Ladhī Kunnā Naf’aluhu Hunāk” (What Were We Doing Back There?), *al-Jumhuriya*, December 16, 2017, accessed March 2020, www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/35311.

⁶³ Abdulrahman, interview with author, January 5, 2020.

Propagators of dissent

Kassioun's public existence and political initiative are best represented by Kassioun Newspaper, the organization's official political organ. As a subscription-based newspaper that was relatively widespread, it was an essential outlet for the circulation of the organization's political analyses and concerns. For members, Kassioun Newspaper was a fundamental arena for political engagement. Journalists and other writers were at the forefront of the organization's publication, developing Kassioun's subversive literature and substantiating the organization's demands for economic reform while carefully navigating state censors since 2000. Writers pressured the organization's leadership to expand the ambit of criticism as they experimented with how far they could push the limits of permissible critique without provoking the state.

Exploiting this relative autonomy, writers of Kassioun Newspaper masterfully crafted discourse that linked the economic crisis to the socio-political struggle in Syria, and indeed often did so without inciting the state's counter-offensive.⁶⁴ However, despite their discretion and self-censorship, they would at times be subjected to irregular security checks and reviews. When an article was flagged as problematic, state security forces would interrogate the editor-in-chief, managing editor, or journalist; temporarily shut down the newspaper's printer; or tamper with its distribution under the pretext that the newspaper was unlicensed.⁶⁵ Kassioun's leadership, led by Jamil, would explain such moments as "the result of a power struggle within the Syrian regime," between its allies among the old guard, on the one hand, and the proponents of economic liberalization, on the other.

Among those interrogated was Jihad Asa'ad Muhammad. Heading the newspaper as managing editor for five years and as editor-in-chief for an additional five years, Muhammad, a prominent and prolific writer himself, would face numerous bouts of interrogations and investigations for articles he authored or authorized for publication. Journalists and writers, such as Muhammad, were instrumental in producing the subversive political discourse that came to characterize the organization as oppositional. In fact, by the 2011 uprising, Muhammad's column was the only space in the paper that articulated a critical position on the mass movement.⁶⁶

Like its newspaper, Kassioun's protests also offered members a political opportunity to extend beyond demands typically tolerated by the regime. Throughout the 2000s and in the context of increased foreign aggression in the region, Kassioun organized weekly protests to advocate its

⁶⁴ Journalists in Kassioun Newspaper have written articles on various pertinent socio-economic issues, including, but not limited to, the state's failures to alleviate increasing unemployment and poverty as a result of its neoliberal project; labor law violations in state ministries; the deepening urban-rural divide following liberalization; the socio-political effects of the state's removal of price controls; unbridled state corruption; and criticisms of government officials, such as provincial governors, regarding their political leadership and privileges.

⁶⁵ Abdulrahman, "Mā al-Ladhī Kunnā Naf'aluhu Hunāk" (What Were We Doing Back There?).

⁶⁶ In 2011, Muhammad, along with dozens of Kassioun members, would lead an internal struggle in Kassioun in support of the uprising and against the leadership's ambivalent position, which we will later examine in detail. Some of these members were expelled by the leadership, while others independently defected from the organization. Following his defection in late 2011, Muhammad continued to independently publish critical works about the mass movement that spanned genres, from fictional stories to political analyses. He aimed to situate the uprising and its associated trends in larger contexts, such as the regime's authoritarian, neoliberal agenda; the urban-rural divide; and sectarianism. For his critical writings and political involvement, Muhammad was detained by security forces on 10 August 2013 and remains imprisoned to this day. For an in-depth profile of Muhammad and his expansive body of work, see Budour Hassan, "Jihad Asaad Muhammad: La Voce Degli 'Ultimi,'" *SiriaLibano*, September 29, 2013, accessed February 2020, www.sirialibano.com/siria-2/i-dannati-della-terra.html; Abdulrahman, interview with author.

national, political, and economic lines, disseminate its newspaper, and expand its social base.⁶⁷ Protest banners, bearing the main titles of the newspaper's articles, galvanized the public around the organization's main socio-political and economic concerns. Binding nationalist rhetoric and economic criticism under banners that read "The major corruptive forces are pathways for external enemies" and "No to liberal economy," Kassiouun would gather hundreds of protesters and, at times, more than a thousand. Notably, Kassiouun did not tout the Ba'ath Party's official rhetoric in its protests, nor did it require protesters to perform tributes to the ruling party.⁶⁸

On certain occasions, protesting members would incorporate political demands, e.g. for the release of political prisoners or for the end of the State of Emergency, alongside chants against capitalism and imperialism.⁶⁹ These episodes would result in violent confrontations between protesters and security forces, leading to the dispersal of the protests and to brief interrogations and arrests. Kassiouun's leadership explained such hostile encounters as symptoms of an inner-regime struggle, which ultimately provided members with the sense that they were indeed building a genuine, independent political movement. "There were investigations or arrests that would at times last for days. The confrontations with the security forces led us to believe that we were surveilled *because we were an opposition.*"⁷⁰

For members and supporters who upheld a commitment to Marxism, anti-capitalism, and the liberation of Palestine, alongside a critique of nationalist authoritarian regimes, Kassiouun was an exceptional political organization. "Kassiouun was very fitting for the youth who were antagonistic toward the regime, but took greater issue with imperialism, capitalism, America, and Israel. It provided a space for political activity without raising portraits of Bashar al-Assad."⁷¹ Kassiouun's appearance as an independent opposition movement was in large part due to the critical discourse produced and propagated by its journalists in the newspaper and its members at protests. However, as Kassiouun's members sought to transgress the boundaries of their tacit, state-sanctioned political privileges, whether in journalistic work or political action, its leadership sought a controlled environment to remain in good standing with the regime.

Party decorum, internal dissent, and mechanisms of control

Kassiouun's leadership expected a strict decorum from its members. The organization regularly implemented disciplinary procedures against members who engaged in what the leadership considered 'transgressive or unauthorized' activities. When members deviated from the expected form of conduct, the leadership would indefinitely suspend members, transfer them to politically inactive organizations, or prohibit them from participating in political actions and meetings.⁷² And yet, the leadership appropriated the defiant acts of its members to signal the organization's oppositional and radical political project. In one instance, a member of Kassiouun, who went by the nickname Abu Janti, burned an American flag at the US Embassy during a protest in 2002.⁷³ Though this

⁶⁷ Muhannad Dleqan, "'An Dawr 'al-Yasār' fī al-Azma al-Suriyya" (On the Role of the 'Left' in the Syrian Crisis), *Kana'an Online*, June 27, 2018, accessed March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nav9zX>.

⁶⁸ Abdulrahman, "Mā al-Ladhī Kunnā Naḥ'aluhu Hunāk" (What Were We Doing Back There?).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Abdulrahman, interview with author.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Al-Omari, interview with author.

⁷³ Dleqan, interview with author.

particular act is referenced as a credential of the organization's militancy, the leadership of Kassioum in fact ousted the member from the organization for violating party protocol.⁷⁴

For members keen on testing the regime's permissiveness, the leadership's disciplinarian approach led to irreconcilable conflict. The leadership's attitude toward dissident members, such as Abu Janti, spurred waves of defections and even roused suspicions among defected members regarding possible coordination between the leadership of Kassioum and the security forces of the regime.⁷⁵ However, deterred by the peril of forming political organizations without the consent of the regime, defected members did not publicize their defections, nor did they seek to forge new political organizations. "If members announced their defections, it meant that either they were accepted under the regime's rule as a new political bloc, or they were considered illegal and, thus, vulnerable to the regime's ruthless repression."⁷⁶

And yet, by 2005, a bloc of ousted or defected members of Kassioum found a budding political environment in the Damascene neighborhood of Sarouja, a popular marketplace that was gentrified into an area of cheap motels and coffeeshops. This area spontaneously became a meeting place for foreign and Syrian university students, as well as former party-affiliated Syrians, such as ex-members of Kassioum and other existing communist parties, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), and the civil activists of the Damascus Spring.⁷⁷ In the social context of Sarouja, former Kassioum members participated in discreet and informal political discussions with young people from a variety of political backgrounds, much to the disapproval of Kassioum's leadership. In a sententious polemic, Kassioum denounced the 'Sarouja phenomenon' as "a cocktail of pseudo-intellectuals" who represented "social and moral degradation," among them Syrians looking for Schengen passports, young men who "claim revolutionary enthusiasm yet are busy with the latest fashion trends," and young women who "think about women's freedom without understanding a single word of what is said."⁷⁸ For ousted and defected members, on the other hand, Sarouja served as a meeting place where unaffiliated individuals of diverse backgrounds, concerns, and convictions forged social connections and interacted outside the framework of official institutions. Ultimately, the political significance of the 'Sarouja phenomenon' would appear in 2011. For politically minded Syrians, the social links they forged in Sarouja, which spanned various districts in Damascus, from Modamiyyet al-Sham and Darayya to Yarmouk and al-Ghouta, formed the basis for activist networks during the uprising.

As we will see, 2011 marked a transformation in how members measured the leadership's disciplinary tactics. Indeed, since 2000, certain controls were expected to be in place for the benefit of the unlicensed organization as a whole; after all, its very existence was at the mercy of the regime. However, the popular uprising redefined the parameters of political possibility in Syria. For years, Kassioum warned of an impending "social explosion" resulting from the state's neoliberal project.⁷⁹ Thus, for Kassioum's members, witnessing the seismic event that was the 2011 uprising made joining the mass protests nonnegotiable. It was during this time that the antagonisms

⁷⁴ Al-Omari, interview with author.

⁷⁵ Abdulrahman, "Mā al-Ladhī Kunnā Naf' aluhu Hunāk" (What Were We Doing Back There?).

⁷⁶ Al-Omari, interview with author.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ "'Ashyā' lā Tahdoth illā fī Sāruja" (Things that Only Happen in Sarouja), *Kassioum Newspaper*, June 2, 2009, accessed January 2020, <https://kassioum.org/more-categories/art-and-culture/item/55381-29141>; Al-Omari, interview with author.

⁷⁹ Dleqan, interview with author.

between Kassiou'n's members and the leadership culminated, as the leadership either suspended or informally expelled those among its members who participated in the movement. At the same time, however, the leadership claimed its members comprised "dozens of martyrs and hundreds of detainees" from the popular movement, including Jihad Asa'ad Muhammad who defected from the organization in late 2011.⁸⁰ To this day, in fact, Kassiou'n does not officially acknowledge any defections or expulsions that have occurred since its establishment.

One telling incident of the growing discord between a number of members and the leadership occurred at the beginning of 2011. When popular protests erupted in Egypt and Libya, young Syrians from Sarouja and individual members of Kassiou'n planned sit-ins and demonstrations in solidarity with the Egyptian and Libyan people in front of each country's embassy, both of which are located in areas heavily monitored by Syrian intelligence and state security services. Kassiou'n did not officially participate in these actions; instead, the leadership of Kassiou'n sent loyal members to scout the protest and report on the 'social and political circles' involved.⁸¹ When members of Kassiou'n were coincidentally discovered at the demonstration, the leadership pursued punitive disciplinary measures:

I was suspended from my cell because I did not notify the leadership about my participation in the protest. My cell's activity diminished. They removed me and my whole cell—which was composed of five people—from the most effective organization, the Youth Organization, to the 'elderly' Rukneddine Organization. We went from organizing demonstrations and events to joining an organization that was made up mostly of communist families whose activities consisted of picnic outings.⁸²

With the advent of the Syrian Uprising, Kassiou'n's leadership was unable to regulate the activities of its members who, having been trained in organizational tactics for years, were eager to join the mass movement. More-so, it failed to offer an alternative function for the organization within the emergent movement, instead resigning itself to a politics of reconciliation. For members facing "a clear road for struggle against the regime," the organization's political strategy—which was justified as an effort to guard its political margin for a decade—failed to reconfigure itself so as to reflect a radical, transformative project in the context of mass rebellion.⁸³

Autopsical reflections: "What were we doing back there?"

In a retrospective article written in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising, Sadek Abdulrahman, a former writer of Kassiou'n Newspaper and member of Friends of Kassiou'n, asks, "What were we doing back there?" Acknowledging there is no definitive answer to the question, Abdulrahman, as well as former members of Kassiou'n interviewed in the piece, reflect on the merits and failures of their past experiences in Kassiou'n in light of the organization's political trajectory since 2011. Their auto-critiques oscillate between a complete rejection of Kassiou'n's political project on the one hand, and a more moderate assessment of Kassiou'n's political function on the other. They condemned the organization as a veneer for Qadri Jamil's political opportunism and suspected collusion between the leadership and the security forces. Yet, at the same time, they acknowledged that Kassiou'n alleviated the seemingly insurmountable political impasses of their time. To them,

⁸⁰ Anne Barnard, "Syrian Officials Sound a Conciliatory Note Toward the Opposition," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2013, accessed 2019, www.nytimes.com/2013/10/07/world/middleeast/syrian-officials-sound-a-conciliatory-note-toward-the-opposition.html; Dleqan, interview with author.

⁸¹ Al-Omari, interview with author.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Abdulrahman, interview with author.

the organization provided a valuable political environment that granted members a political community and opportunities to acquire effective tactics for organized, collective action.⁸⁴

These discordant reflections sharply express the antinomic character of the organization's *modus operandi*. Inventing a political space, Kassioum at once sanctioned and delimited dissent. Kassioum's 'politics of the possible' neither expressed the outlook of its dissident members, nor for that matter, the contours of what could in fact be realized as evidenced by the actions of its very members. In the shadows of Kassioum, members demystified the absoluteness of state control by revealing the ambiguities constitutive of the regime's authoritarian 'rule by force' and exploited such ambiguities through transgressive actions that constantly negotiated the regime's terms of permission. As we shall see in the next section, the variant vision of what was imperative and politically viable was realized and put to the test in the wake of the 2011 uprising, an event that amplified the muted political aspirations of many Kassioum members. Likewise, the content of the leadership's own pretensions to change manifested not in the streets, but in legal processes.

Two Roads for Struggle: The People's Will Party and the Syrian Revolutionary Youth

When protests first erupted in the impoverished, rural city of Dara'a, Kassioum Newspaper published three issues in support of the spontaneous popular movement.⁸⁵ As protesters flooded the streets across Syria only to be faced by the bullets of military and security forces and plain-clothed *shabeeha* (state-sponsored militias), Kassioum demanded that the regime adopt immediate reforms, terminate neoliberal policies, and cancel the State of Emergency.⁸⁶ But by its fourth issue, around five weeks into the uprising, it recanted its diagnosis of the situation and instead endorsed the regime's rhetoric of "conspiracy and armed groups," upholding the narrative that 'extremist elements' infiltrated the ranks of the protesters.⁸⁷

By the time Kassioum shifted its position, the situation on the ground had intensified. As protesters endured bloodshed and detainments, their demands for reform took a revolutionary turn. Though cries for the downfall of the regime echoed across the country, Qadri Jamil rejected the demand, considering it "impractical, unrealistic, and useless." He instead advocated for a "complete change in the regime...under the leadership of the President."⁸⁸

In reaction to Kassioum's official political line on the uprising, a bloc of members began to distance themselves from the organization and the newspaper. The rift between the leadership of Kassioum and its members took the shape of an inner-party struggle between two camps: one led by members such as Jihad Asa'ad Muhammad, who found it imperative to transform Kassioum's role in society and join the mass movement, and the other led by the leadership, which advocated restraint and political prudence.⁸⁹ The Palestinian Marxist and intellectual Salameh Kaileh, who would later mentor former Kassioum members in establishing the Syrian Left Coalition and the

⁸⁴ Abdulrahman, "Mā al-Ladhī Kunnā Naf' aluhu Hunāk" (What Were We Doing Back There?).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Abdulrahman, interview with author.

⁸⁷ Abdulrahman, "Mā al-Ladhī Kunnā Naf' aluhu Hunāk" (What Were We Doing Back There?).

⁸⁸ Nour Malas and Bill Spindle, "Spurned Offer Raises Syria Tensions," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2012, accessed June 28, 2020, www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203718504577178180215303526.

⁸⁹ Abdulrahman, "Mā al-Ladhī Kunnā Naf' aluhu Hunāk" (What Were We Doing Back There?).

Syrian Revolutionary Youth, voiced growing cynicism over Kassiou'n's ambivalence: "The National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists is a party that continued to [both] oppose and support the regime without taking a decisive stance until it recently decided to participate in the government."⁹⁰ For Kassiou'n's leadership and a number of its members, the 2011 uprising was the event that most sharply represented a categorical divergence of political commitments within the organization.

From unlicensed to legal dissidence: toward a politics of reconciliation

In July 2011, Kassiou'n established the Popular Front for Change and Liberation (PFCL) with the unlicensed SSNP–al-Intifada, a splinter group of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), to represent the 'internal opposition'.⁹¹ That same month, the regime passed a political parties law that permitted the formation of parties. Seizing the opportunity, Kassiou'n held its Ninth Extraordinary Congress in December 2011 and resolved to register the unlicensed organization as an official party, the People's Will Party. Within months, Jamil was chosen as the only representative of the 'internal opposition' to participate in the unmonitored constitutional referendum. This referendum led to the nominal establishment of a 'multi-party system' and soon, newly formed parties, with the permission of the Ba'ath Party, were qualified to participate in the parliamentary elections.⁹²

During the May parliamentary elections of that year, Jamil ran as a candidate representing the PFCL and won a seat. Jamil, along with other new party candidates, criticized the lack of transparency and the disadvantages of new parties in the Ba'ath-dominated elections. Nonetheless, he proclaimed that in the next elections he sought "to make the current majority into a minority."⁹³ Once the new government was formed in June 2012, Jamil was appointed the Minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection and, in an ironic twist, the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, the former position of Abdullah Dardari—the man Jamil furthered his own political career by criticizing. Less than a year later, however, during a live television interview in 2013, Jamil was surprised to be informed that he was fired from his position for meeting with Robert Ford, the U.S. Ambassador to Syria, to prepare a proposed peace conference in Geneva.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Salameh Kaileh, "On the Role of the Syrian Left in the Syrian Revolution," *Rosa Luxemburg Foundation*, www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/sonst_publicationen/The_Left_and_the_Arab_Revolutions_english.pdf. Here and elsewhere, I have stylistically modified the translation of Kaileh's text as I saw fit.

⁹¹ "The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (al-Intifada)," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, <https://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48565>.

⁹² "Referendum on Syria's New Constitution," *Reuters*, February 25, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-constitution/factbox-referendum-on-syrias-new-constitution-idUSTRE81O0BT20120225.

⁹³ Michael Pizzi, "Syrian Deputy PM Says Peace Talks Set for November," *Al Jazeera America*, October 13, 2013, accessed January 2020, america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/17/syrian-peace-talksinnovember.html; Barnard, "Syrian Officials Sound a Conciliatory Note Toward the Opposition."

⁹⁴ The Wall Street Journal additionally reports: "The official state news agency SANA said Mr. Jamil was fired for conducting meetings "outside the homeland without coordination with the government and overstepping institutional norms and the state's overall structure." It added that he was absent from government without consent at a time when he is most needed to help deal with the country's economic crisis." See Sam Dagher, "Syrian Official Fired After Talks With U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2013, accessed June 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304655104579165593075437858>.

Though the People's Will Party's endeavor to change the system 'from within' proved incapable of reviving moribund politics under authoritarianism, its close relationship to Russia advantageously fortified its position in international political processes for Syria.⁹⁵ Since his dismissal as deputy prime minister, Jamil, alongside high-ranking members of the People's Will Party, have continued to engage in peace talks and today lead the Moscow Platform of the Syrian High Negotiations Committee, an umbrella body composed of political organizations and parties formed in 2015. The influential relationship between Russia and the Moscow Platform—and, by extension, the People's Will Party—has played to the party's advantage. "The Moscow Platform has very strong ties to Russia and Iran, so there is no possibility for the [regime's] unjustified suppression of us. This does not mean the regime does not harass us...but it cannot finish us."⁹⁶

While the People's Will Party was politically oriented to enter into politics through the legal frameworks of the regime and international reconciliation efforts, its former members, having defected during the beginning stages of the uprising, took up a different project.

The second voice of the fugue: the Syrian Revolutionary Youth

Driven by the struggle against the leadership's position on the uprising, three members of Kassiou's Youth Organization made the collective decision to defect from Kassiou and establish their own organization. These young Syrians, the oldest of which was twenty-three, were counseled by an older generation of communists, among them leading intellectual figures, such as the late Palestinian Marxist Salameh Kaileh, and former members of Kassiou who defected from the organization in the early to mid-2000s. These guiding figures instructed the youth to strategize and rally the largest possible bloc of members to their camp before defecting. "I left [Kassiou] four months into the uprising. We had already agreed upon what we wanted to form outside of the organization, and the time was ripe."⁹⁷ Soon after defecting, the young communists, alongside four of their unaffiliated comrades, established the original cell of the Syrian Left Coalition (SLC), an umbrella body of young communist and leftist cadres.

The members of the SLC, which included Jihad Asa'ad Muhammad, understood that in a spontaneous movement such as the Syrian Uprising, it was imperative to put forth specific demands that made coherent the "real demands of the popular classes."⁹⁸ In its first party document, entitled "Our Tasks in the Current Revolution," the SLC analyzed the prevailing economic system in Syria over the past decade and its impact on the popular masses, arguing that the uprising itself was a result of the country's economic crisis.⁹⁹ The SLC put forth a program that called for

the achievement of a productive Syrian economy capable of absorbing unemployment and new labor entering the market each year; a decent living for workers; the right to work; unemployment benefits equal to the national minimum wage; free and scientifically based education; free healthcare and social

⁹⁵ Jamil's relationship with Russia can be traced back to his father, Jamil Pasha, a wealthy businessman and an agent of Techno-Export, the official Soviet export agency. Jamil himself is fluent in Russian and studied Economics at Moscow State University. "Who's Who: Qadri Jamil, Syria's Deputy PM," *The Syrian Observer*, June 10, 2013, accessed November 2019, syrianobserver.com/EN/whos/35495/whos_who_qadri_jamil_syrias_deputy_pm.html.

⁹⁶ Dleqan, interview with author.

⁹⁷ Al-Omari, interview with author.

⁹⁸ Kaileh, "On the Role of the Syrian Left."

⁹⁹ Ibid.

insurance; adequate housing; and the equitable distribution of economic development in different regions and provinces of the nation.¹⁰⁰

In addition, the newborn coalition sought to re-draft the Syrian constitution to set the basis for a more equal and secular society in order to realize, *inter alia*, the freedom of the press and media; the freedom of association; the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers; gender equality; popular supervision of political and economic state activities; and an end to sexual, sectarian, class, and national discrimination.¹⁰¹ It also emphasized that its struggle in the uprising and its demands for a new society were part and parcel of the struggle against imperialism and capitalism. The SLC argued that Syria could only fortify its national independence against imperialist powers by rehabilitating and advancing its national productive industries and agriculture. “There is no independence within the confines of economic dependence, which is engendered by neoliberal policies.”¹⁰² It further advanced that only by breaking with capitalism and imperialism could the “rentier-mafia-based economy” be overcome.¹⁰³ In this vision, the SLC also sought to build revolutionary forces against Israel and for the liberation of Palestine and the Golan Heights.

As a gathering of leftists, the SLC led actions, such as distributing leaflets in Damascus, during the first few months of the uprising.¹⁰⁴ Its most notable contribution was perhaps its bi-weekly newspaper called *al-Yasari (The Leftist)*, which was developed in Salameh Kaileh’s home.¹⁰⁵ The newspaper published political texts and analyses on central questions confronting the mass movement, such as foreign intervention and arming the uprising. By the fifth issue of *al-Yasari*, Kaileh was detained by state security forces, which briefly interrupted publication. Nonetheless, the SLC continued to build its base of support and soon attracted members from the broad left, such as left-leaning civil activists and nationalists. At this time, two camps emerged, one in support of preserving the coalition’s Marxist ideological character and the other in support of creating a broad leftist front united by common demands in the mass movement.¹⁰⁶

The Syrian Revolutionary Youth (SRY) was borne out of this struggle. Later nicknamed the “locomotive of the revolution in Rukneddine,” the SRY was established as a mass organization of the SLC.¹⁰⁷ Though mainly based in Damascus, the SRY established committees across various provinces in Syria, e.g. Homs, Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, Suwayda, etc. For nearly seven months, the SRY operated in secret, discreetly distributing leaflets in neighborhoods and participating in political actions with other political groups.¹⁰⁸

During its very first protest in the neighborhood of al-Midan in Damascus, the SRY raised a banner against foreign intervention, condemning political trends among the opposition that demanded the United Nations Security Council to implement Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which authorizes the UN to launch military operations “for the maintenance of international peace and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.; “Al-Shabāb al-Surī al-Thā’er” (The Syrian Revolutionary Youth), *Jaredatona*, April 13, 2013, 10–11.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Omari, interview with author.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.; Abdulrahman, interview with author. The relationship between the SRY and the SLC was on two levels, practical and intellectual. On the practical level, the SRY collaborated with the SLC to coordinate political actions and develop measures that would mitigate the risk of state violence. On the intellectual level, the SRY’s political line was inspired by the literature and statements of the SLC.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

security.”¹⁰⁹ The SRY particularly criticized the Syrian National Coalition—the official representation of the Syrian opposition in exile—for their interventionist policies, accusing it of political opportunism and condemning it for betraying the Syrian people’s pursuit of self-determination. In response, the Rukneddine Coordination Committee, an opposition organization, published a statement on its Facebook page denouncing the SRY as wholly unrepresentative of the popular movement.¹¹⁰ Indeed, many other opposition groups followed suit, renouncing the SRY on the basis of its political program. Among them were Islamist elements within the uprising that attacked the organization’s secular political project and mixed-gender protests.

Throughout its existence, the SRY would continue to face hostility from both those involved in the broader mass movement and the regime. However, through its diverse political engagement, the organization organically built extensive bases of support, forging social links at universities and neighborhoods, as well as among internally displaced populations and youth activist groups. The SRY particularly attracted youth who were newly politicized in the burgeoning atmosphere of the uprising and who, for the first time in their lives, were involved in political practice.¹¹¹

Despite vehemently condemning their own involvement in Kassiou, the founding members of the SRY maintained the Leninist organizational structure and transferred organizational tactics they learned during their time in Kassiou to inexperienced members of the SRY.¹¹² More so, driven by a context of crisis, state violence, and mass rebellion, the SRY invented their own tactics to preserve the secrecy of their actions, protect their identities, and maintain the organization’s security, such as safely disposing of internal documents, espousing pseudonyms, and using burner phone lines.¹¹³ During their protests, the SRY appointed various cadres to actively monitor the surrounding areas, institute measures that would ensure the anonymity of those present, and develop alternative plans of action in the case of security raids. “[Our organizational form] protected us [from detainment] for at least two years. We were often accused of [working undercover as] part of Qadri Jamil’s folks, which was why we were not being arrested. In truth, however, we weren’t arrested simply because we had a secure mode of operation.”¹¹⁴

Unlike most opposition organizations of the mass movement, the SRY endeavored to maintain its political and financial independence. For instance, it relied predominantly on membership donations and dues to finance the organization. Though this permitted the SRY to determine its own political aspirations, it also led to significant financial struggles that eventually contributed to its demise.

When demonstrations waned and the country headed toward full armed struggle, the members of the SRY undertook relief-oriented and defensive tasks. The members of the SRY organization in Rukneddine systematically and comprehensively provided alternative forms of relief to the district. “We had a complete map of our region in Rukneddine, dividing it into four zones and determining which areas could be used for refuge in the case of bombardments. We safeguarded warehouses; created committees on media, legal, and humanitarian fronts; planned food and medical

¹⁰⁹“ Chapter VII,” *United Nations*, accessed March 2020, www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii/index.html.

¹¹⁰ Al-Omari, interview with author.

¹¹¹ Abdulrahman, interview with author.

¹¹² Al-Omari, interview with author; The ‘Leninist’ organizational structure was strictly at the level of structure, as the SRY was established as a mass organization with broad leftist politics.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

inventories; and completed workshops for first aid assistance.”¹¹⁵ Further, the SRY created committees to intervene in sectarian conflicts between neighborhoods of different ethnicities and sects, and to prevent armed groups from entering into civilian areas.

As the organization advanced its activities and expanded its bases of support, security surveillance intensified. The regime particularly targeted those in the organization with substantial political experience, leaving its more inexperienced members vulnerable. By 2015, as the organization faced severe violence and repression, with most of its founding members and dozens of its rank and file arrested, tortured, killed, or forced into exile, the SRY carried out its last action.

The SRY set itself an ambitious task of overcoming, in the words of Fadi Bardawil, “the impossible choice between national sovereignty under a tyrant and a hope for democracy brought about by foreign occupation.”¹¹⁶ While Kassioun resigned itself to a ‘realpolitik’ form of reconciliation, disarmed by its tired, old survivalist politics, the SRY offered a double-edged critique of imperialism and authoritarianism and attempted to effectuate disciplined, collective political action borne out of a commitment to a politics of emancipation. In the mass movement, the SRY positioned itself between the destruction of the original state of affairs and the creation of a coherent program that offered the vision of a new society. For the SRY, the unprecedented eruption of the mass uprising, and what followed, sundered the existing status quo and, with it, any possibility for its return. In its fidelity to a politics of emancipation, the organization put forward a comprehensive political program that embodied universalist aspirations, while nevertheless recognizing that a complete and radical transformation of the roots of society was far from reach. As materialists, members of the SRY upheld universally radical ideals while grappling with the particularities of the evolving situation. Eventually, the unfolding of violent state repression, sectarian strife, Islamic fundamentalism, foreign intervention, and proxy wars jeopardized popular demands at the heart of the movement and the organization’s very existence. In the end, it was Kassioun that would outlive both the uprising and the SRY, but, in contrast to the SRY, Kassioun failed to infuse its political program with a theory of crisis and practice. Offering neither tools for the destruction of the ruling system, nor for the invention of an alternative to the existing conditions in the context of mass rebellion, Kassioun detained its politics to the confines of reconciliation and abandoned its members and the Syrian masses to their long-endured history of political despair.

Conclusion

In the judgement of its opponents, Kassioun was opportunistic, tailoring its demands to suit the regime insofar as it could preserve its own political existence. But in its own judgment, Kassioun considered its political engagement a masterful command of the politics of the possible. The fact remains, however, whether opportunist or realist, Kassioun confined its political program to the horizon set by the Ba‘ath Party, orienting its political, economic, and national positions based on its estimations of what the regime would tolerate. With the advent of the Syrian Uprising, it was difficult for the organization to reinvent its gradualist outlook of reform to meet the sprouting aspirations of the masses. Instead, it renewed its realpolitik strategy of the early 2000s, resigning itself to a politics of reconciliation which merely roused suspicion among the masses. In the last analysis, Kassioun appears to have inherited the same antinomy that defined and undermined Arab Marxism, mutating the struggle against imperialism from a material principle that seeks to identify a complex mesh of political sites, in which the structural dependency to the imperialist metropole

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*, 85.

always already overdetermines the political strategy of communists, to a constitutive principle that accounts for the organization's whole *modus operandi*, in which politics *tout court* is identified with the struggle against imperialism, while attributing the latter exclusively to Western powers. With the demise of both 'orthodox' and 'liberal' readings of Marx, Kassiou'n's political imagination appears to have contorted into a form of *reversed* historicism bereft of the future proper and of mass political initiative, a longing for a return to the socio-economic reality of the 1960s, a belated homage to the early Ba'ath Party.

In examining Kassiou'n, it was necessary to outline the stories of two organizations, rather than one. Kassiou'n's hopeful passivity appears as the polar opposite of the spontaneity of the Syrian Revolutionary Youth. The Syrian Revolutionary Youth's militant, yet sober political initiative expressed the extent to which leftist organizations in Syria could penetrate the social strata and self-determine a political role that could withstand, however fleetingly, the compounding contingencies of the Syrian conflict. Moreover, despite the organization's swift demise, the Syrian Revolutionary Youth unveiled the stagnating principles by which organizations like Kassiou'n, self-proclaimed as anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, navigate in times of crisis. The experience of the Syrian Revolutionary Youth is a testament not so much of the futility of grand projects, but of the necessity of reinventing emancipatory politics capable of navigating an increasingly **interconnected, post-industrial, uprising-riven, and Capital-mediated globe**.