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1982, 2003, 2011: Turning Points in the Formation of a Syrian Youth

Matthieu Rey

When the United States invaded Iraq in April 2003, it attempted to change an internal political situation by toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, which was supposed to establish democracy. Then, following the plan for a new Middle East promoted by the neo-conservatives (Yetiv 2007, Little 2008), other countries might be reshuffled and, in a few years, the clash of civilizations as described by Samuel Huntington (1996) would be over. This perspective collapsed soon after, as Iraq entered a deep and long internal crisis. Violence, sectarianism, massive waves of refugees and, in return, a deep moral crisis in the United States could be seen between 2003 and 2011. Rather than focusing once again on the Iraqi crisis, a topic which has occasioned some very insightful studies and has scholars' interest back to this country (Allawi 2007, DeFronzo 2010, Haddad 2011, Keegan 2004, Tejel et al. 2013), I will argue in the present chapter that the "Iraqi-American war" of 2003 impacted the whole region, and that its effects on the populations in neighbouring countries need to be studied as elements of the crisis. While researchers have considered refugees and refugee settlements (Dorai 2009), the indirect outcomes of the crisis have been overshadowed by the direct and highly mediatized violence that spread across Iraq. However, this crisis cannot be isolated from the regional stage, nor can its

importance be underestimated; indeed, an “Iraq War generation” emerged from these events. I will attempt to show how the televised destruction of Baghdad and the increase in sectarian violence (as the war made things worse), the image of Saddam as an ordinary man in the face of death, the influx of refugees fleeing Iraq and the everyday interactions with these refugees – the impact of the Iraq War on the neighbouring countries – converged with other important social trends to shape a new age group.

The Syrian situation highlights the crisis’ regional echoes. A generation there developed a new way of looking at the world around it, a view that was shaped by the events it had suffered. Certainly, it is not possible to reduce the social transformation of Syria in the last decade to the social and cultural effects of foreign events. I will argue that a whole set of phenomena led to the emergence of a new group in Syria, which might be called the Iraq War generation. It is this phenomenon that created the underpinnings of the current protest movements in Syria. It has been argued that the so-called Arab spring was produced by youth, leading some Middle Eastern specialists such as Thierry Boissiere (2012) to speak about a ‘new generation’ that emerged from current events. Others have emphasized a ‘lost’ generation (Hosseini 2014). These analyses are relevant to the change introduced by the conflict, but they overlook the pre-existing patterns of Syrian society that made the uprising possible. It is necessary to define the term ‘generation’ in order to clarify its use. The word “generation” refers to a certain mass of population sharing the same age group. But, as Karl Mannheim (1972)

argues, the criterion of age is not sufficient,¹ as such a group is unified by experiencing a common event which frames its perception of the world. Within this general perspective, wars have been highlighted as a useful criterion for understanding generational processes. Jean-François Sirinelli (2008) refined this notion by underlining the limits of Mannheim's conception. Mannheim emphasizes an event as crucial to sparking generational emergence while, to the contrary, Sirinelli (2008) foregrounds the diversity of trajectories of different groups in the same generation. He does not refuse to identify some age groups as generations, but uses them as a key factor to clarify the social changes that occur during a certain period.

Academic studies have linked generations and youth. Focusing on the latter allows many researchers to target the former. It seems obvious that, for some analyses, inquiring about a generation implies tackling the trajectory taken by youth. This approach proves relevant – and I will adopt it – but it is important to clarify its underlying hypothesis. First, it is clear that a generation might designate age groups other than youth. For example, in Syria, generations emerged from the series of wars between Israel and Arab countries. In his memoirs, Bashīr al-`Azmiḥ called his generation the “generation of the defeat,” to remind the public how the dissolution of the United Arab Republic constituted a clear breaking point in the trajectories of the country and its population (al-`Azmiḥ 1991). However, in considering the new order in Syria

¹More generally on the notion of generation and its use in social sciences, see Attias Donfut 1988, 38-43.

from 2000 onwards, the youth seem to be the main group that conducted the uprising in Syria.

Second, while some studies have been undertaken on Arab youth, they have focused on countries other than Syria.² If Syrian studies have seen a renewal since 2000,³ mainly due to better access to fieldwork, mainstream research addresses culture, social life, the religious apparatus, and foreign policy. This research has not paid attention to the youth in Syria as an issue for scholarship. Youth can be defined as a group because it encompasses a certain amount of population, and because actors refer to it in their own narratives (Murphy 2012). However, youth cannot be simplistically defined as a homogeneous group; rather, its diversity reflects the social and economic differences that prevail in a given country (Bourdieu 1984, Gauthier 1999). But if heterogeneity is important in understanding the “youth,” the category of *shabab* still constitutes an interesting reference point, where objective and subjective elements intertwine. *Shabab* appears as a relevant demographic group, and is determined by a social representation according to which people who do not have children belong to this group. The objective criteria are based on the fact that *shabab* are not the head of a family, and therefore have free time. From this point of

²Herrera and Bayat 2010. The two out of thirty-eight chapters in Bonnefoy and Catusse (2013) that concern Syria remain exceptional. On Syrian studies and its shortcomings, see Chiffolleau 2006.

³ See for example Pierret 2013, Dupret et al. 2007.

view, they are equivalent to teenagers in that term's earlier meaning.⁴ This representation of youth enlarges the scope of what is meant by a generation. Consequently, I will suggest some insights that help understand how and why a specific generation emerged in Syria and underpinned the ongoing uprising.

In the present chapter, three main events determine the formation of a particular political generation. First, 1982 can be considered as a landmark in Syrian history. Over one month, the Assad regime violently crushed the opposition, killing several thousand of its members. In the aftermath, the public sphere was violently repressed. My hypothesis is that young Syrians in 2011, who cannot remember these events, as they were 5 or younger (if born) in 1982, constitute a new group⁵. They show the importance of these events without having been part of them. Then, the events of 2003– the consequences of the Iraqi invasion – shaped their political identities and social awareness. Finally, in 2011, the uprising paved the way for their individual involvement in politics. Consequently, speaking about “the generation of 2003” means that a group formed by the end of the demographic transition in Syria was gathered together by a common heritage – the outcomes of the 2003 war– which underpinned their political action a decade later.

⁴ The notion of teenagers emerged in the beginning of the contemporary period, and designated young people who were able to leave the home after childhood. It was directly correlated to the invention of the childhood. Egle Becchi, Dominique Julia. – *Histoire de l'enfance*. Tome I : *De l'Antiquité au xviiie siècle*. Tome II : *Du xviiiie siècle à nos jours*. (Paris : Seuil, 1998).

⁵ I selected the interviewed by range of age (born 1977 and 1992) who agreed to answer questions. Interviews were conducted in Damascus mostly, in June 2012. Therefore security conditions explained the selection.

The methodological underpinnings of the present chapter are mainly qualitative, while second-hand quantitative resources highlight the importance of the group under study. This has been made possible by the growing number of surveys conducted by United Nations agencies, which have brought a new picture of the country, cataloguing new trends and drawing a clear panorama of Syrian society.⁶ These analyses provide the background of this study. I also use qualitative approaches in my study, knowing they do not exhaust reality but rather hint to certain points that I think remain either unknown or hastily described. As Everett H. Hughes reminds us (1996), some situations demand other methodological stances. Quantitative approaches presuppose access to statistical tools and categories. In the case of Syria, these tools simply do not exist and the researcher is left with few options. Moreover, some cases require observations and interviews to access actors' significations as personal narratives shed light on the meaning an individual ascribes to events. These are not restricted to facts, but take part in a broader picture. They also provide some insights on aspects which cannot be quantified. I conducted a dozen semi-open interviews with people who were between 20 and 35. They all shared a common experience: they had not witnessed the events in Hama,⁷ and they could be qualified as Bashar al-Assad's generation, as they were teenagers when he came to power in

⁶UNFPA 2008. The first report was issued in 2000 but the enterprise was then blocked, probably for political and security reasons.

⁷ After an uprising of political forces, the Syrian regime led by Hafez al-Assad violently crushed the protests by sending in troops and helicopters. Between 10,000 and 35,000 people died in the repression. Afterwards, the Syrian public sphere was shut down.

2000. But rather than defining them by this event, I will prove that their generation emerged from the seismic shock of 2003. My study works through the socio-political history of Syria and attempts to provide elements for a Middle Eastern sociology.

Demographic importance

How and why can we speak about a generation of people born between 1977 and 1992, people who were 20 to 35 in 2011? Is it possible to define a demographic group, as Emma Murphy discusses for other Arab countries? It is necessary to question the importance of this generation (1977-1992) in relation to other generations.

Fig. 1. Population Growth⁸

Year	Natural Growth rate in Syria	Natural Growth rate in Tunisia	Age group population in Syria ¹	Percentage of this age group in the global population in Syria ¹	Life Expectancy in Syria
1977	3.33	2.53	366,972	4.55	
1978	3.38	2.68			
1979	3.45	2.71			

⁸ I chose Tunisia for three reasons. It exemplifies how Arab countries entered the demographic transition in the late 1970s. It underlines a key element, i.e. the chronological difference between Tunisia and Syria. The turning point in the demographic growth was in the 1990 while in Syria the great bulk of young people went on in the 2000s. Finally, Tunisia launched the uprising.

1980	3.52	2.67	394,961	4.43	65
1981	3.56	2.65			
1982	3.55	2.62	412,069	4.31	
1983	3.48	2.58			64
1984	3.38	1.97			
1985	3.26	2.05	431,631	4.08	
1986	3.16	2.15			
1987	3.08	2.53	438,284	3.88	65.4
1988	3.03	2.22			
1989	2.99	1.28			66.3
1990	2.97	2.43	441,129	3.57	66.1
1992	2.94	1.99	442,066	3.58	
1993	2.87	2.04			
1994	2.76				

1995	2.62		444,251	3.54	
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1: This number is provided each time that official data is available defining the Syrian population.

2: Official data is not available for every year.

The number of children born between 1977 and 1992 was roughly equivalent each year, ranging from 360,000 and 440,000 individuals. Regarding the total population, each group represented between 3.8% and 4.4%. Taken together, they represent 6.7 million inhabitants or 34% of the Syrian population. Therefore, this group constitutes a significant segment of the population: the “youth” of Syria can be considered a *generation*. Certainly, its members are not the same. Some live in cities, others in the countryside; some received a degree, others are illiterate. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, “youth is just a word” (Bourdieu 1984). However, it makes up a significant section of the population. Studying it allows us to understand continuities and change within the population more broadly.

Comparing the Tunisian and the Syrian natural growth rates, several points need to be underlined. First, both countries witnessed a decline in death rates, which became non-significant. Life expectancy is equivalent in both countries, around 65 years. As well, in the Syrian case, the high birth rate mostly explains the number of children born in the same year. Syria remained at

the second stage of demographic transition, where high growth is noticed. However, this process seems to end beginning in the mid-nineties. Consequently, Syrian youth is somehow exceptional both in comparison to other national situations and in comparison to other Syrian generations. It is numerically larger than previous and the future generations, and it can be considered as a demographic peak in Syria.

Understanding this specific demographic history requires looking at political decision-making. As Onn Winckler clarifies (Winckler 1999), most Arab countries long favoured high birth rates in their legislation. This was the case in Syria. After independence, the general project was to increase the population (which was 2.9 million in 1946), in order to become more important in the region. This was directly associated with the national defence project against Israeli forces. Moreover, growth was considered as a proof of development – which it was. During the four first decades of Syrian history, governments improved education and sanitary conditions. This led to a general growth of the population during the next decade due to a sharp decrease in mortality rates. This did not impact demographic behaviour, as most families, who lived mainly in rural areas, continued to have more than five children.

Contrary to other Arab countries, policies in favour of a high birth rate were not changed before 1986. Comparing Tunisia and Syria clearly indicates the discrepancy between the two nations' birth trends. As Youssef Courbage pointed out (1994), while most Arab countries

started to undermine the birth rate in the late 1970s, the Syrian authorities kept promoting it in order to generate a general population growth. Three main factors explain this policy: (1) Syria was still at war with Israel and needed to mobilize new soldiers; (2) Baathist ideology promoted the renaissance of the Arab nation, which supposed a general growth of the population; and (3) it seemed difficult for the authorities to promote certain pieces of legislation which attempt to curb the birth rate while they were facing a major uprising by the Muslim brotherhood. In 1986, several reforms were initiated in order to restore global levels of economic stability (Kienle 1994). Demographic approaches shifted towards limiting the number of births, now considered a burden rather than an opportunity. This policy impacted behaviour at the beginning of the 1990s, and the birth rate started to decrease. Consequently, the generation under study here belongs to the peak of demographic growth in Syria.⁹

This generation shared a common background, which led it to become aware of the political situation in a particular manner. First of all, this generation followed other highly symbolic ones. The first generation who built the country took power in the late 1930s, fighting the French mandate. Shukrī al-Quwwālī, the first president, was born in 1891 and represented

⁹This is not to presume the outcomes of current events, nor a possible adjustment after the civil war, but simply to state that those who were between 20 and 35 in 2011 belong to the most numerous generation in Syria.

the generation of notables. As Philip Khoury and Patrick Seale highlight (Khoury 1987; Seale 2010), this generation slowly moved away from the Ottoman pattern to behave as a single Syrian entity. They implemented constitutionalist ideas in order to build a new political order in Syria. They remained in power from the 1930s to the 1960s. During the 1960s, they were progressively ousted from power as new generations emerged and claimed their right to take part in the political decision-making process. A high level of instability characterised Syria during the 1950s and 1960s, which led to a shift in the generations governing Syria. Hafez al-Assad and the inner circle who came to power at the end of this process won the support of the old classes at the beginning of the 1970s, and managed to establish their government in the country for almost forty years (Batatu 1999). If Hafez al-Assad symbolised the new Baathist regime after 1971, he did not rule alone but through collegiums of trusted people. All shared the same characteristics of age, economic and social background, and level of education. This second generation came together by confronting the previous one and consequently defined itself in competition with the previous one which, in its vocabulary, had become corrupted. Its reign ended at the beginning of 2000, when Hafez al-Assad died and his son was nominated, and then elected, president. The old guard was progressively moved aside. Consequently, the generation which emerged in 2011 may be seen as the third one in Syrian national history.

The general political background of the generation under survey was established during the 1980s. When the oldest of the group (born in 1977) were 10, Syria moved towards a highly

personalised system of power guided by Hafez al-Assad. Previous attempts to remove him from power failed. After a long and growing movement of protests between 1976 and 1982 the opposition shifted towards Islamic and jihadist approaches. The disorganization of the protests and their radicalisation led to the crackdown during the Hama episode. This event exemplified the long-term process of establishing a harsh regime. This was stabilised in the mid-1980s after the “succession” crisis. When Hafez al-Assad had a heart attack, his brother Rifa`at al-Assad, head of security, led a failed coup attempt in Damascus. He was forced to leave the country (ibid.). A new political order emerged, which remained unchallenged until the late 1990s. As Lisa Weeden (1999, 27-30) argues, this system was not totalitarian but rather an authoritarian regime in which the population had to behave “as if” it believed in the ruler and his message, while preventing themselves from taking part in political activities. The youth were educated in this context, which many described as one of stagnation and repression. They were well aware of the cult of personality, as they had to take an oath every day in school. During the 1990s, the youth grew up in a very tense context, in which it inherited from the previous generation the internalisation of the “normality” of the regime. As I will mention later, intergenerational memory failed, and the long fight of the late 1970s was forgotten. This was mainly due to the educational and coercive systems established in the country.

It is not my purpose here to describe the general framework of the Syrian regime. Several polices competed one against another to control the public sphere, while the inner circle around

Hafez al-Assad was balancing the influence of each services. Therefore, no forms of expression were permitted apart from governmentally tolerated ones. This “informal system” (Zisser 2000, Kienle 1992) was effective at curbing all independent voices. During the 1980s, the generation under study grew up in Soviet-inspired educational institutions. Two main characteristics of these can be emphasized. First, they remained heavily organised and controlled by the Baath party and its agencies. One interviewee said, looking back on the shift away from this mode

It was a great change. We did not have to wear the uniform anymore. Previously, we were, as school kids, members of the *futuwa*. Have you heard about this institution? Like the army... (Interviewee A)

Uniforms, anthems, and oaths were used as tools to reinforce the regime and to create a new and homogenised generation. History was a highly sensitive subject in school, as its mission was to raise awareness among the new generation about the corruption of the past and its consequences, as well as colonial encroachment (Freitag 1999). Programs and books were severely controlled to avoid any kind of undesirable presentation of the past. Most of contemporary history was silenced, and when it was spoken about the curriculum focused solely on the Arab struggle rather than on overall Syrian history. Then, during the 1980s, educational institutions were affected by a deep crisis produced by economic shortages:

Between 1991 and 1994, we left for Libya. My father found a position in Tripoli.

The financial situation in Syria was very harsh. As a university professor, he was earning no more than 500 LS. (...) (Interviewee B)

These shortages damaged the educational system which, for many Syrians, became synonymous with a useless and corrupt regime (Huitfeldt and Kabbani 2007). They undermined the transmission of knowledge, and created the potential for a counter-discourse as these youth were becoming teenagers. The destruction of educational institutions created a vacuum in the official version of contemporary history, which was filled by alternative narratives when they became available. Were the changes introduced later by Bashar al-Assad relevant for the group studied? His reforms were formulated at the beginning of 2000 and implemented in 2005-2008, while the generation was exiting educational institutions. They could not have impacted the curriculum used by children born between 1977 and 1995.

Transmission of knowledge and experimentation took place in arenas other than public ones. The family and the neighbourhood seem more relevant to understand their processes of socialization. As Asef Bayat notes (Bayat 2010, 7-9), cities – from which most of the interviewees came – allow some room for liberty without control by families. This generation, the most urbanised in Syrian history (more than 55%), represented in this matter a shift

compared to previous ones in terms of the decrease of social control on their activities. Since the public sphere was controlled, free education and discussions were sheltered in the family:

My father explained to me a lot of things about his studies during the sixties. In his school, there were Muslim Brethren, the left, Nasserists, and rich people or rightist guys... at the university, Muslim Brethren and socialists were the most active of them... During this period, it was not possible to be neutral in the political conflict.

(Interviewee B)

During the 50s, it was the golden age. There were Bakdash, Azm, Khuri... It was the only time of freedom in this country, as my father explains to me. (Interviewee

C)

My brother had some difficulties getting access to Lebanese newspapers in the 90s. Therefore, he had the news only ten days later. It was by this process that we heard about the events in 1991... Do you understand? It was very different from 2003.

(Interviewee D)

Each answer pointed out the importance of family connections. The father – in both cases these figures belonged to the opposition to the Baathist regime – or the brother played a key role in the promotion of political awareness. But these private talks did not aim to mobilise the youth into political activities and parties. They were rather a private transmission. As studies of

European countries have pointed out, political awareness does not emerge from the same mechanisms in the 2000s as it did in the 1960s. Family context seems very important in framing the world's perception of youth, and here the Syrian case is no different. Retreat from the public sphere – highly scrutinized – led the family to become the new arena in which youth had access to other voices. At the same time, this does not imply that the family as a social institution was not criticized. A global shift had affected social institutions such as the family (Hasso 2011).¹⁰

On the one hand, some interviewees highlighted their problem with the familial environment:

Family, it's a failed institution (*mu'assassa fashila*). In the whole world, it is important but problems come with it... and "forever," what does that mean?

(Interviewee E)

I don't like the family much. It's a support, but as an institution, it is problematic (...). It gives much too power to somebody, like a king over his subjects. There is something of an arbitrary system (*istibdad*). (Interview EEJ)

¹⁰This is of course not exclusive to Syria.

Most of the interviewees pointed out how social dynamics reinforce the parents' social power.

They articulated clear criticism against the standard or model that prevails in the Arab world, in which they – as kids, teenagers and young adults – had to obey without any reciprocal obligation.

But at the same time, they pinpointed how family remains their first support:

Family, it is eternal relations, it is my priority. My family was always an example of solidarity and harmony. (Interviewee F)

In everyday life, I can't imagine to live without my family. Relations are very strong. If someone is sad, we're all... If I can do anything for them, I will do it.

(Interviewee G)

A shift took place in this generation. While young Syrians keep in mind their familial genealogy and some social aspects of its importance, they emphasize privacy above the public role of the family. The inner circle – parents and brothers and sisters – seems more important than other family connections, even if they have some connection to different branches of their families. The family has become a private institution which provides support and understanding, while at the same time its social mechanisms need to be criticised. These different aspects clarify the youth's background and primary socialisation. Does the family's inner circle constitute a homogenous place of political education? This is not easy to answer: it seems that the political involvements of their parents – who had often been imprisoned – meant the second generation was raised in a

context of political awareness. On many occasions, however, it is hard to conclude that a lack of concern or a precise political position can be explained by the parents' attitude towards politics.

Institutions of “secondary socialisation” (Dubar 1998, Gauthier and Guillaume 1999) also played a role in framing the world for this generation. It seems clear that for all the interviewees, schools and universities did not meet their demands in terms of training in knowledge and skills. “Absence of dialogue,” “nullity,” “waste of time” or “corrupted institution” were common responses. These institutions' functional significance was clearly criticised. However, personal trajectories – which reflect a general trend in Syria – prove that most of the interviewees obtained degrees in university. The global scholarly level had improved and universities and schools had become an important arena of socialisation.

I refused to continue in Pharmacy. I preferred French literature. There, I met a lot of young guys who shared the same point of view on current issues. We were discussing a lot, particularly our artistic projects. In my opinion, art and freedom come together. I can decide so I am free. (Interview D)

We were following the news with some friends at the university. When Baghdad fell, we went to demonstrate on the campus. We were angry and shocked... We

gathered with friends and students... Of course it was not allowed but they let us do it. (interviewee H)

The university was where groups of closely connected people first met. Shared activities and discussion were the two main means of forming informal groups. Kastrinou Theodoropoulou (2012) highlights as well how financial issues affected this process: paying for rent or basic commodities led some of students to organise “tontine” – informal financial groups of brokers and credit – to face the difficulties of day-to-day student life. The role of these informal groups in Syria should not be underestimated. They have constituted an important arena for introducing people to one another, and one of the nuclei of the civil movement in 2011. As was the case with the family, youth hijacked the social meaning of an institution that they viewed as an inefficient tool. A second institution which sociologists have investigated is work, which continues to be a life goal for this generation. Job scarcity deeply affects the youth’s trajectory, and if the global situation during the 2000s was definitively better than the economic context that prevailed in the 1980s and 90s, the job market was unable to match the new generation’s growing demand. It has been estimated that a third of this generation was unemployed.¹¹ This caused disturbances, as marriage is often linked to young adults’ ability to buy an apartment. The age of marriage has

¹¹It is very hard to properly estimate unemployment in Syria, as surveys remain highly controlled by the authorities, who refused to recognize the full extent of the crisis (see Lahcen 2011).

increased for men, after a decrease during the 1990s (Balanche 2006). When young people have the opportunity to work, they ascribe it a high value:

It is a priority. It gives us our achievement in life. (Interviewee G)

It is important. Contrary to university where we don't learn anything, we can create in work, invent new things. (Interviewee H)

The job environment is conceived of as a space for freedom and change. It provides financial support and independence from the family's control. Moving away from the home gives young people some time away from family obligations. It permits young people to have leisure and funds for non-essential matters. Institutions of secondary socialisation allow the young generation to frame its speech and to extend its abilities in private life. They create the conditions for a new space and time between childhood and adulthood, and therefore permit the emergence of youth as a category. If these new processes are not so different from other contexts – they constitute the Syrian path towards the emergence of youth – their implications seem quite distinct. This became obvious in 2011 when this generation rose against the regime. As mentioned above, the political change was part of a broader dynamic that undermined social control and the social order. Nevertheless, pointing out the social conditions of change does not amount to providing insightful analysis on the conditions of political awareness. It is necessary

to focus on this generation's political trajectory in order to understand which events were most important.

Several strata can be studied as key components of historical consciousness. Is the past idealized as a golden age? Was there a particular event that impacted the youth? Did this generation experience particular circumstances such as wars, upheavals or natural disasters? If so, did members of this group constitute core actors in those movements? I will argue that for this generation, a peripheral event deeply changed their view of the world and current affairs. First of all, how did this generation look at Syrian history? Did they see any glorious periods? It had been quite common to see teenagers reciting classical poems and songs. They have adopted a long-term history as part of their patrimony. But they do not refer to it while acting in daily life, nor when they framed their involvement in social life or political activities. And they gave little attention to contemporary history:

In 1946... Was it independence? You should know better than me? (Interviewee G)

In 1946 there was something with Palestine I guess, maybe a war between Israel and Palestine... (Interviewee D)

In 1946, it was the moment when Sultan Atrash¹² made an alliance with Jordan. He was not yet in favour of Syria and that created some problems. (Interviewee F)

The first two answers clearly indicate the disconnection between an event – the independence of Syria in 1946, which is celebrated every 17th April – and social memory (Halbwachs 1994). Young people did not particularly note this date, but they think about it as one of the elements of the official narrative. In many aspects, the official narrative seems like a strange history without links with their own life. They disregard part of the official discourse as vain propaganda.¹³

The third answer points out another element. The interviewee comes from Suweida, the hometown of Sultan Atrash and capital of the Druze region. He mentioned a local event rather than a national one, and focused on local history. A clear tension between unity and division animates Syrian history and society. Town and village neighbourhoods remain very important, as most events are reframed through local understanding. While questions focus on the first event

¹² Born in 1879, near Suwayda, Sultan Atrash headed the Druze uprising against the French which turned into a Syrian upheaval in 1925. He had to flow in exile on Jordan. He went back after World War II and pursued some political activities. He is recognised today as a great leader of the Syrian independence movement.

¹³This was confirmed by answers about 1963 and 1971. Moreover, the first decade of the Baath party's regime is not well known.

that comes to the interviewee's mind, most answers point out locality as one of the main aspects of their memories:

The most important event I remember... When we came back in Syria. I remember when we were back to our neighbourhood. We were living with my family in two different buildings. I had always known these places. It was like a dream to be back. (Interviewee B)

Can you tell me something about your family?

In my town, we can see many different people. It was a crossroad between Bedouin and urban people. (Interviewee J)

The interviewees ascribed a high emotional value to their place of birth and life. It may be assumed that the neighbourhood is one of the key units in defining and framing individual understandings. From this point of view, if sectarian division exists in Syria, sectarian oppositions and divisions seem less relevant than geographic ones. This process has roots in the long-term history of Syria. As `Alī al-Wardī (2005) clarifies for the Iraqi case, the neighbourhood was a very important unit of urban life and it is possible to argue, following Michel Seurat's analyses (1985), that *assabiya* can emerge from local life in a neighbourhood. It may also carry sectarian characteristics, as in Damascus or Homs where Alawite, Christian and Sunni neighbourhoods stand side by side, but the formal unit remains the neighbourhood rather

than sectarian belonging. Local identities filter the news and lead to a specific framing of the world. This largely explains why the election of Bashar al-Assad in 2000 has not been remembered as a keyevent.

Many analyses identify the so-called Damascus spring between 2000 and 2005 as one of the main causes behindthe currently ongoing events (for example, see Lesch 2012). Some argue that the protests had already started during that period. In that case, one would expect it to be well-remembered by the young population. Two questions focused on this event, and their answers are relevant:

Damascus spring... I don't see what you are talking about... do you mean the Syrian spring? (Interviewee G)

In 2001, there was a new president. He was the son so everything was normal (...) I was not aware of the beginning of the Damascus spring in 2011. I became involved and interested during the summer. (Interviewee I)¹⁴

I remember 2000. Was it the moment when Basel [al-Assad] died? No sorry, that should be earlier... In all cases, the Damascus spring was for me an aborted experience. There was maybe something but nothing clear. People from another

¹⁴ This interviewee confused the Damascus spring in 2001 – a series of conferences, meeting and debates which called for the removalof the emergency law – and the Syrian spring in 2011 – a peaceful uprising.

time put forward some requests but we [the youth] were not concerned.

(Interviewee D)

Damascus spring? No idea, I was living in Homs. (Interviewee C)

I became aware of the political processes during the Damascus spring. They arrested X; previously, we met him every day and talked to him. One day, they came and caught him. There were at least a hundred *mukhabarat* [intelligence services] men. (Interviewee B)

Two kinds of answers were collected. Most interviewees did not ascribe any importance to these events for two main reasons. First, from their point of view, they concerned another generation and dealt with issues without any practical and immediate meaning. Second, for others, it was a process that occurred in the capital and to which the other inhabitants of Syria were not bound. Third, for many different reasons, mainly the longevity of Hafez al-Assad's rule and its normalization for the youth, as mentioned above, the transition between the two presidents did not raise hopes as it did for older Syrians. The generation under survey was too young to realize what this process meant and how processes could follow different paths. Somehow, the arrival of the new president and the protests which resulted from it did not impact the youth.

The last answer is different from the others. It shows that some of the interviewees witnessed the events as unusual in ordinary life. As the sociology of mobilisation argues (Traïni 2009), it created a moral shock for the protagonists, who suddenly faced the arbitrary violence of the regime. This was not new at the beginning of the 2000s, since most activists from the Muslim Brotherhood and opposition groups were remembered in memoirs and testimonies (Benkorich 2012, Khalifé 2007) as people who had entered the opposition after witnessing violent events and seeing people arrested. However, this raising of awareness did not lead the whole population to rise against the system; therefore, the concept of moral shock is sufficient to explain some mobilisation but remains one cause among others. Several other aspects can be underlined. Rather than pretending that one reason explains the process, it is necessary to put forward a multi-causal model. From this point of view, the Damascus Spring involved the interplay of three dynamics. First, the events took place in privacy, and could be interpreted as an intrusion, the invasion of a personal environment. Second, violence broke down the normal way of doing politics. Third, most witnesses belonged to families committed to politics, and in some cases these families had members in jail. The events consequently took place in a chain of events, and added to older stories. But it is not possible to see the Damascus Spring as the only event which triggered political awareness.

When the Iraqi war broke out in 2003, the youth had been impacted by long-term changes such as the decrease of social control or the economic changes in the country. Certainly, the reforms introduced by the new president Bashar al-Assad exemplified some changes, like the appearance of the Internet in the country (Zisser 2000), although it remained marginal. In this context, the war created a deep crisis. Studies point out how it shook the regime, while the neoconservative administration justified the possibility of overthrowing a regime in order to promote their vision of a new Middle East. Their attempts on Syria finally failed and at the end of the 2000s relations improved. However, this political stance overshadowed some important outcomes of the crisis. Formal relations between Iraq and Syria have been well-documented and studied. But informal links and ordinary relations have also occasioned some clear and insightful analyses. Since 1991 and the embargo on Iraq, smuggling networks passed through Syria:

We were aware of Iraqi affairs. Trucks went from Homs to Iraq almost every week.

There was some business to do. And in 2002, when the two countries became closer, it became even easier than before. (Interviewee I)

This testimony sheds light on the different connections between localities across the two countries' borders. When the war started, followed by an insurgency against the American occupation, these networks increased Syrians' sensibility towards the Iraqi population. Some mechanisms fuelled the departure of sections of Syrian fighters to Iraq, to fight against the

“colonial” power. Although many of these people turned out to be jihadists or Islamists, most reports clarified that their primary motives remained more nationalistic than religious. On the ground they became radicalized and came closer to al-Qaeda affiliated groups. A great bulk of these newcomers on the Iraqi stage came from the regions of the Hawran and Euphrates rivers¹⁵. When they tried to return after the mid-2000s, they were arrested by the political police, and labelled as terrorists by their former recruiters. This does not mean that they had not taken part in such operations, but it shows a process which turned ordinary Syrians into jihadist prisoners. This was the first and the most well-known consequence on the Syrian population of the events in Iraq.

Further outcomes can be noticed and analysed. Two events received great concern from the young Syrians interviewed: the fall of Baghdad in 2003, and the execution of Saddam Hussein. These two events are not always separated in the narrative:

The War in Iraq, it was the first time I became aware of world issues. This came through my collaboration with Palestinian refugees and the Taneq camp issue. I had many conversations. It was the moment when words such as freedom and dangers received a concrete meaning (...). Through discussions with Iraqi refugees, these words received a new meaning. It was not anymore a “bomb” or an “explosion.” I could understand through their stories what happened, how it was. I

¹⁵Interviews with Wladimir Glasman, Paris, April 2012.

discovered the reality of the event. We [Syrians] saw people from inside. It was not just a show on television. (...) I remember when Baghdad fell. At the beginning, it was a surprise: how quickly it all happened. It took only an hour to conquer the city. (...) When they caught Saddam... It was a shock. There was a gap between “the Great guy” and “the prisoner he was” (...) Moreover, his execution took place during the festivities [ʿaid al-kabir] (...) he was just an ordinary man. He might have been any ordinary guy. At the end, he was just a guy. (Interviewee D)

The Fall of Baghdad, it was terrible. I got the impression that the world crumbled, that the Americans would be here [Syria] the next day and that everything would be upside down.

What is the first event that you remember?

Nothing before the revolution [in March 2011]

What can you tell me about the Damascus spring?

Nothing, as I told you, before the uprising [*intifada*] nothing was important.

And about the war in Iraq?

Yes! I clearly remember it! I keep a clear memory of this war. If something could happen there, it might occur everywhere. If they did it in Iraq, they would do it everywhere. Iraq was the first Arab country (...) I don't speak about its system, it's different. Iraq had a high standard of living, high level of education (...) In the 90s, we talked a lot about Iraq. We developed strong ties with Iraq during the embargo. From the human point of view (*min al-nahia al-insaniyya*) we felt the oppression (*zulm*). (Interview I)

These different answers highlight three points about Iraq. First, these events can be qualified as a social trauma which greatly affected significant segments of the populations without any direct ties between them. The different images they presented refer to the end of the world, the collapse of ordinary life, or destruction and chaos. They showed violent death as something ordinary rather than exceptional. Violent confrontation has to receive further investigation, as it can generate new perceptions on the world: it breaks the sense of the future as an already known path. What would have been unthinkable – brutal death – suddenly emerged as a potentiality. A second set of feelings emerges from the two events. Globally, this underscores a shift toward Arab affairs. These were not understood through the Arab nationalist lens, as had been the case in the previous decades. Interviewees rather looked at the events through the

spectrum of a humanitarian crisis. This confirms Caroline Donati's (2009) insightful remarks about the Palestinian situation: Arab people were no longer a single political unit, but they were perceived as belonging to particular one (Iraqi, Palestinian, etc.); as people, their suffering sparked strong feelings of solidarity and attempts to help. Third, the political signification of the events raises two contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, the Iraqi system was denounced as oppressive and brutal; although the American invasion and its consequences seemed to have created a more violent situation. The regime's collapse was seen as an offence and a surprise. On the other hand, the quick overthrow proved how weak Saddam Hussein's rule had become. Moreover, his execution showed him as an ordinary man: it was possible to bring one of the most powerful and brutal dictators to a common death. Processes of desecration and disenchantment overthrew the old-fashioned idols. None of the regimes and their rulers were eternal or invincible. This change deeply affected a generation that had been raised on the idea that the chief of the nation would normally be ruling the country forever.

Why did these events impact the youth to this extent? First of all, this was a result of the revolutionary change brought by satellite channels. For the very first time, news was streamed continuously, and events could be followed on a day to day basis without the filter of official propaganda. Unlike the war of 1991, which was not really covered by the Syrian press – the events were silenced, as Syria took part in the international coalition, and the case was presented as a struggle against a traitor to the Arab cause – the war of 2003 was highly scrutinized by

Syrians and the authorities allowed information to spread throughout the country. From their point of view, it gave proof of imperialist aggression against the Arab nation; but they underestimated the outcomes. Awareness arose at first from the news and its images, but this was not the only factor in the sensitivity that the events created. Progressively, between 2003 and 2008, Syria welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing sectarian violence in Iraq. The exact number remains controversial, but the phenomenon represented a clear social event, as thousands of inhabitants came to live in the suburbs. A dual process took place in the city. As prices increased heavily in the 2000s, mostly in real estate, a large bulk of the middle class moved to new suburbs in the large cities. Jaramana, next to Damascus, exemplified this. These locations were also the places where Iraqis had found shelter (Chatelard and Dorai 2011). Daily exchanges and shared experiences took place. Moreover, the Iraqi refugee issue led to some change in Syrian charity networks, which started to collaborate with new foreign NGOs to support this population. This clearly indicates that the arrival of Iraqis shed new light on the crisis, and that each Syrian community could identify some common points with the discourse on Iraq. This was particularly true for Christian communities, which were traumatized by their arrival, seeing it as the revelation of the extermination of the Christians in the Middle East. The same events were refracted into different interpretations among the different groups. For Christians it resonated as a disaster, for Sunnis as a massive humanitarian crisis, etc. The twin processes – satellite television and the flow of refugees – deeply undermined Syrians' shared

views, especially among the youth. To some extent, we might wonder how this process could be compared to the Nakba in 1948.¹⁶ In both cases, the displaced people revealed a crisis which led soon afterwards to turmoil. But this assertion would need to be explored in more detail. The main result was the emergence of a new generation marked by the massive flow of refugees.

Echoing Jean-François Sirinelli's argument (2008), it would be simplistic to sum up this generation's trajectory by pointing to the upheaval in 2011. Several factors came into play, and they led to several different paths. However, it is true this generation made up the bulk of the actors in 2011 and thereafter. On both sides, which can be qualified generally as "regime" and "opposition," groups of young people gathered in protests and then later on in armed groups.¹⁷ Their awareness could be traced directly to the Iraqi crisis. The events there proved that some changes can occur even if a regime seems irremovable and brutal. They also led this generation to confront general destruction and massive death. They certainly created a dual reaction. On the

¹⁶ In 1948, more than 80,000 Arabs from Palestine reached Syria, mainly to Damascus where they gathered in a new area – the Yarmuk camp. Their arrival was highly commented in the press and shocked Syrians, as it materialised Arab defeat and failure.

¹⁷ While this article was being written (October 2014), fighters in Syria were mostly Syrian. On the opposition side, the number of foreign fighters has slowly increased since the end of 2012, to reach 10 to 30,000 (depending on sources). The number of Syrian in the opposition forces has been estimated as between 90,000 to 120,000 at the end of summer 2014. On the regime side, the size of the Syrian troops is hard to estimate, but probably 150,000 to 200,000, while foreign fighters (from Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen etc.) are estimated at between 30,000 to 60,000 at the beginning of the summer 2014.

one hand they increased fear of sectarianism and division, which fuelled inaction for some Syrians and discourses of national harmony for others (such as the revolutionary slogan, “Syria, one, the Syrian people are one”). On the other hand, they broke down the imaginary boundaries – what the French historian Lucien Febvre (1942) qualifies as “outillage mental” or mental tools – which prevented the youth from thinking about the exceptionality of the regime. They undermined its ‘normality’ and created a space of opportunity. I will not conclude that the Iraq war alone triggered the uprising in 2011. Nevertheless, it contributed to the political awareness of a new generation. This generation had already been affected by several social processes which changed its social position. The convergence of the political crisis and social dynamics sparked the upheaval in 2011.

The ongoing events in Syria shed light on this country and its society, which previously had not been subject to much clear insight. Political phenomena and foreign policy were the two main topics of mainstream research, even if a new generation of scholars pointed out new subjects. These questions were linked to the social changes which affected the different classes and communities of Syria. The present chapter attempts to shed light on one of these constituencies, the youth, and more precisely on how young people in Syria became a generation during the 2000s. This group is particularly important as it has been the mass force in the present conflict, but also because it represents a third of the population. This generation – defined as a demographic group – was the most numerous population in Syrian history and it remained so for

a decade. It was affected by certain very important social dynamics. Out of these trends, including among others urbanisation, population growth, and a rise in the level of education, a process of individualization resulted. Social controls were undermined and new social spaces and time were available for these youth to build their environment. Certainly, new technologies contributed to extending and strengthening these new worlds by creating connection where there had been discontinuities. **But, the decrease of social control could afford to create the social opportunity for the emergence of a youth.** Turmoil in the region, mainly the Iraq war, impacted this generation's path. They became aware of the humanitarian crisis and its outcomes; they faced the possibility of changing a political regime wellknown for its sustainability and its brutality. The turmoil shook the mental and social boundaries of the core of the Syrian population. In several aspects, it opened the road to the uprising. Certainly, the events since 2011 have reframed this generation's way of thinking and its practices. They have exacerbated its divisions, its social and confessional profiles, and its different opportunities in life. However, the Iraqi war provided the decisive step in the generation's emergence and formation.

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