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Syria's Local Coordination Committees: The Dynamo of a Hijacked Revolution

Colophon

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Introduction

Kawa Hassan and Hussein Yaakoub

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, there have been abundant articles and studies on Syrian political factions and figures; but, to date, there has been no systematic study and critical appraisal of the engine of the revolution - the local coordination committees (LCCs). For this reason, Hivos, in collaboration with Syrian stakeholders and regional knowledge initiatives such as Maalouma, has initiated the *Syrian Perspectives Project*. This project aims to dissect the complexity of the conflict in Syria from the view of Syrian researchers who, despite deteriorating security and social conditions, still live and work inside Syria. This study is part of the above mentioned project and has two distinctive added values. First, it critically appraises the LCCs by looking into their emergence, evolution, achievements and the challenges they face; second, it offers an insider perspective, as it is conducted by a young Syrian researcher who resided in Syria while writing this special bulletin. Over the course of 2013, Amr Abu Hamed conducted empirical research in extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances and observed the activities of LCCs and interviewed activists (names withheld).

The LCCs are an outstanding umbrella grassroots trans-sectarian youth network that was established across Syria in an extremely difficult and dangerous context. They managed to organise peaceful demonstrations, they informed the outside world about the atrocities of the regime, document human rights violations, provide humanitarian assistance, convinced and committed local armed groups to sign up to an ethical code of conduct for observing human rights. They also issued statements and a 'political vision paper' about the future Syrian state.

Yet, despite being the dynamo of the revolution, the LCCs face daunting challenges, which will be brought into even sharper focus once the conflict ends. At the time of writing, the LCCs have been considerably weakened due to repression from both the regime and jihadi groups. This being said, they will be crucial to the rebuilding of post-conflict Syria. The future challenges confronting the LCCs include remaining independent and developing a detailed and serious political vision and a new political discourse for future (and current) Syria; a vision and discourse that

tackles not only regime atrocities, but also - or perhaps, more importantly - increasing sectarianism, militarism, the rights of religious and ethnic minorities and how to deal with Islamists.

Simultaneous Triggers, Spontaneous Uprising

The outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 was spontaneous, unexpected and a result of simultaneous triggers. On the one hand, young online activists, inspired by the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, called on the Syrian people to take to the streets. On the other hand, several incidents, which occurred simultaneously and collectively, sparked the revolution.¹ One of these incidents was a demonstration by Souq al-Harika merchants in Damascus, on 17 February 2011, condemning the beating of a citizen by a police officer. The demonstration enticed the Minister of Interior to head to the souk in person to stop the demonstration and appease the demonstrators.² In addition, there were gatherings of young intellectuals and artists, in front of the Libyan and Egyptian embassies in the capital, showing solidarity with the protests in both countries and chanting slogans heard in Arab revolutions across the region, such as 'A leader is a traitor if he attacks/beats his own people'. These protests led to security crackdowns. On one occasion, Syrian security forces and demonstrators clashed outside the Libyan Embassy. Parallel to these events, the rage of the people of Dara'a was fermenting following the arrest and torture of a number of children by Syrian intelligence after they had drawn on the walls of their schools, calling for the overthrow of the regime. There were many other events that took place across Syria but which were never mentioned by the media. These triggers occurred outside the realm of the traditional opposition. This out of the blue and distinctive dimension of the uprising is most obvious if we look at state-society relations prior to the revolution.

Pre-revolution Syria

On the eve of the uprising, Syrians were not allowed to debate public affairs. The Emergency Law imposed since 1963 prohibited the assembly of even limited numbers of people without a

¹The 'Chronology of Syrian protests 2011-2012': ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/.

²www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngddRkMTu1A.

permit issued by the Syrian security authorities. This permit is almost impossible to obtain unless the gathering falls within the vision of the ruling Ba'ath party. Asma' Assad, the First Lady, created a number of civil society organisations, such as the Syria Trust for Development, but these regime-fostered initiatives strengthened authoritarianism by reducing civil society to the person of the First Lady, in the same way as politics has been reduced to the person of the president. The Ba'ath Party remained the 'leading party of state and society,' heading up the so-called 'progressive national front.' This 'front,' comprising the Ba'ath Party and some co-opted traditional parties, was serving as a fig leaf for the outside world by showcasing the diversity of Syrian society.

Context, Concept, Emergence and Evolution

This context defined the emergence and evolution of LCCs, as well as of many other peaceful opposition groups. The LCCs, an umbrella organisation comprising 70 committees, are local youth formations that emerged to coordinate local civic activism in different Syrian governorates. They compensated for the absence of civil society organisations. The committees were mainly engaged in organising demonstrations and media activities. The LCCs cadre are highly educated and globalized male and female youth, which constituted a break with the profile of the traditional opposition. They are revolutionary volunteers from different backgrounds and most of them are non-ideological.³ They are internet savvy with excellent experience in employing social media for civic activism. This has enabled many of these activists to become field correspondents for foreign satellite TV channels and alternative media centres and networks.⁴

Over time, they connected to each other and developed into multi-network and multifunctional entities. Unlike the traditional opposition, which adopts methods such as issuing lengthy statements, the LCCs are practical and pragmatic, keeping pace with the speed of social protests and adapting quickly to the ever-

changing modern world. They design and write banners and slogans and determine places for demonstrations. They report on protests and document human rights violations, communicating them to outside world; they provide field hospitals and assist the wounded. In addition, they are engaged in advocacy and awareness-raising among local populations. Thus, it can be argued that the LCCs constitute an efficient organisational structure in a chaotic context. For instance, when police and security forces withdrew from the city of Hamah in preparation for its military invasion in 2011, the city was left for more than two weeks without a single traffic officer. At this stage, the LCCs showed their capacity for running the city and organising mass demonstrations that, according to the organisers, attracted millions of people. Among the opposition groups, the LCCs activists are the most arrested and most prosecuted. The regime considers them to be the dynamo of the revolution, hence its determination to convict and kill them. However, the youth's experience in digital security and the protection they received from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were able to frustrate to some extent the regime's efforts.

The working modality of LCCs seems to be experimental, based on trial and error and quick learning. It is no coincidence that their methods are related to the pattern of rapid and instantaneous street activism. Experience is cumulative and productive in a manner that is inherent to necessity. If, initially, the Coordination Committees tended towards digital activism, later, necessity pushed them in the direction of increasing coordination with opposition parties. Thus, apart from the LCCs, we witnessed the appearance of other organisations such as the Union of the Coordination Committees of the Syrian Revolution and the General Commission of the Syrian Revolution.

As mentioned, the LCCs are considered the first revolutionary groups to emerge after the start of the Syrian uprising⁵. Omar Edelbi, one of the founders and spokesperson for LCCs, sums up the establishment of the committees as follows:

'The LCCs started from a group of activists, journalists, legal experts and politicians. They were already human rights activists in some opposition parties

³ Omar Kosh, 'Ahzab wa Tachkilat Al Mouarada Al Suriya', Aal-Quds Center for Political Studies, December 2011.

⁴ Assi Abi Najm, 'Al Tansikiyat: Mawloud min Taht al Ard' 19 September 2011: www.al-akhbar.com/node/22408.

⁵ www.lccsyria.org.

and left their parties due to their wretched situation. From the start, this small group established the so-called media centre. Its task was only to relay the news. We used to exchange news on our profiles on Facebook. Therefore, an idea was born to gather this information together and produce one common piece of news that is distributed by everybody. Hence, initially, the idea was to have our voices heard outside. After a short period of time, we increased in number. We were dozens and we were across Syria. So, we decided to establish a Coordination Committee in every area. Out of these Coordination Committees, we developed the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). It was the first revolutionary body with a clear structure, organised action and field work. In addition to our media work, We were preparing slogans and banners and organising demonstrations and organising the requirements of demonstrations, whether on the technical level or the level of banners and slogans, in addition to our media work'.⁶

Given the tight media control by regime, the initial idea behind the establishment of LCCs was the need to inform the outside world about developments on the ground. Hence, in the initial stages of the revolution the focus was more on media activism than field activism. The LCCs were established as decentralised structures that coordinate with each other via internet. Meetings take place almost daily via Skype to exchange news, determine standpoints and coordinate activities on the ground.

The first committee was founded in the city of Daraya. With the increase in the number of Coordination Committees, the LCCs emerged as an umbrella organisation to coordinate the work and to provide the committees with a political platform inside the opposition. Prominent LCC activists include Omar Edelbi, Razan Zaytounah and Suheir al-Atasi, but there are several important field activists whose names remain confidential.

Compared to other revolutionary groups, the LCCs stand out as being more secular and more

accurate in documenting human rights violations and covering the news of the revolution. Indeed, some international media and think tanks used figures provided by LCCs.

Structure of LCCs

The LCCs do not have a clear and distinguished institutional form. We cannot talk about leadership and hierarchy in terms of their structure since most of the Syrian opposition is still new and Syria lacks a stable environment that allows clear and organised political work. The LCCs action on the ground is, moreover, absolutely confidential and field-based. The names of field activists remain confidential for safety reasons. They are represented in the media and politics by LCC spokespersons abroad. The LCCs declared organisational structure is composed of an executive committee, a media office and a relief office. The executive office is in charge of political activities, the media office relays and documents news, while the relief office is tasked with humanitarian aid on the ground. Both the media and relief offices cooperate with the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria and provide it with information and figures on human rights violations. In addition, the LCCs have a membership office for groups wanting to establish an LCC-affiliated Coordination Committee in a certain area. This office is involved in setting the conditions of membership and admission. Omar Edelbi, an LCC spokesperson, explains that:

'the task of the membership office is to verify very significant information relevant to the safety of the person and the coordination committee that wants to join and to make sure that they have not been infiltrated by the security apparatuses. It also has to verify this person's and this group's belief in peaceful revolution, non-violence, rejection of foreign military intervention, rejection of sectarianism and civil war. We are very sensitive to these issues. These principles cannot be compromised'.⁷

The LCCs have different spokespersons. As previously mentioned, the most prominent spokesperson is Omar Edelbi. Other prominent

⁶ Interview with al-Akhbar daily on 1 October 2011: www.al-akhbar.com/node/22610.

⁷ Author's interview with Omar Edelbi.

figures are Razan Zaytounah, Manhal Barish Rima Fleihan, Mourad al-Shami (pseudonym), Fares Mohammed (pseudonym) and Rafif Joueijati.

Logistical activities

The LCCs define themselves on their website as small groups formed across Syria to organise and coordinate peaceful protest in the field. With the unfolding events, these committees sought to better organise themselves and establish an umbrella organisation for the LCCs.⁸ Compared to other opposition groups, the LCCs do not get prominent media coverage. Neither do they achieve high numbers of followers on social media, compared to the websites and Facebook pages of the Syrian Revolution, General Commission and the Federation of the Coordination Committees of the Syrian Revolution. That said, the LCCs possess considerable influence in the field, which is not limited to organising demonstrations, documenting human rights violations and media activism.

Citizen Journalists

Media activism is the most important and centralized activity undertaken by the LCCs. The LCCs have gained global credibility in respect of relaying news and, in particular, providing statistics to international media on daily events of the revolution.⁹ The LCCs media office issues a daily report entitled 'Syria Today' that provides a round-up of daily events.¹⁰

In March 2012, the LCCs were awarded the 2012 Reporters Without Borders Netizen Prize, sponsored by Google. Reporters Without Borders correctly said:

'Syrian journalists and bloggers are threatened and arrested by the government. International news organisations are, for the most part, kept out of the country. In their absence, the committees are almost the only way to keep the world abreast of the violence wracking the country. They emerged spontaneously following the start of the Syrian revolution last March,

bringing together human rights activists and local journalists, and now are found in most cities and towns across the country. Informants on the ground send information and the committees confirm it from multiple sources. A third group translates the news into English and distributes it on the group's website. Videos and pictures are posted on Facebook and on a photo blog'.¹¹

The LCCs' media activity started as a small news agency that seeks to collect and disseminate news. The Coordination Committee in Daraya, and later that of Homs, were the first committees to start covering the daily events of the revolution. In the second week of the revolution in 2011, there were only 22 activists involved with these Coordination Committees.¹²

Most of the LCC media activists are young, highly educated internet savvy activists with no classical professional journalism experience.¹³ The news gathered by the LCCs goes through several stages before it reaches international media. First it is picked up and checked by activists on the ground, then it is relayed to the media office for verification; this involves contacting several parties on the ground. The process of checking and double-checking information mimics procedures adopted by international news agencies. Media activists contact the source of the information, other people in the area and the local committee. In addition, the information is shown to a person who knows the area where the event took place in order to verify the picture, the video, the date and time of the event. In cases of deaths, contact is made with the family of the deceased in order to document the personal information, the place where the victim was killed as well as the manner in which the killing occurred. This information is then sent to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria.¹⁴

The news coming in from different committees is formulated as a news item and then translated into English and emailed to more than a thousand addresses of international media

⁸ www.lccsyria.org.

⁹ www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/straight_news_from_the_citizen.php?page=all.

¹⁰ www.lccsyria.org/ar/.

¹¹ <http://en.rsf.org/syrie-syrian-citizen-journalists-and-12-03-2012,42093>.

¹² www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

¹³ <http://en.rsf.org/syrie-syrian-citizen-journalists-and-12-03-2012,42093>.

¹⁴ http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/straight_news_from_the_citizen.php?page=all.

outlets.¹⁵ The activists meet daily via Skype at 10am. Activists inside Syria and abroad log in simultaneously and the meeting sets the agenda, work plan and relay of news.¹⁶

The escalation of fighting between regime forces and the armed opposition has made the task of citizen journalists much more difficult and risky. Great sacrifices have been made in order to relay the news. Moreover, working in devastated areas is immensely difficult as communication with the media office and international media outlets is hampered by the disruption of the internet. Lately, activists have been accompanied by the armed opposition for protection; despite this, several fatalities have been reported among media activists as a result of shelling or armed clashes.

Engaging and reaching out to international media is one of the achievements of the Syrian revolution. Syrians have lived for more than 40 years in media isolation. According to Syrian law, it is forbidden to use satellite dishes that receive the broadcast of international TV channels. The Syrian national television limits its news bulletins to the activities of the President, the resistance against Israel and the Palestine issue. Therefore, the proliferation of media outlets and citizen journalism and informing outside world about the conflict is a unique achievement of the revolution. Citizen journalists use simple and limited equipment, but they have managed to gain international credibility; indeed, they are seen as a more credible source than the regime's official media.¹⁷ In addition, the national character of citizen journalism has managed to link committees from remote and neglected areas with big cities. Syrians started to hear the names of towns and villages that they had never heard before, like Kafr Nabl in the country side of Idleb. Kafr Nabl has gained international attention due to the innovative and witty slogans and banners of its inhabitants.¹⁸ Hence, the revolution and citizen journalism has (re)connected Syrians from different regions and backgrounds.

¹⁵ Interview conducted by International Monte Carlo Radio with activist Ola al-Barazi, 13 March 2012.

¹⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

¹⁷ Abou Hamed, Amr. *An alternative reality: Shahinaz' understanding of the Revolution*, 31 January 2012. [Maalouma/hbf](http://maalouma/hbf).

¹⁸ <http://beta.syriadeeply.org/2013/03/kafranbel-witty-slogans-encroaching-islamists/#.Us7Q3p1gV9A>.

Organisation of Demonstrations

The second level of the LCCs' logistical work is the organisation of demonstrations. Activists became increasingly involved in protests and were not limiting themselves to relaying news and making photographs. These activists are part of their local communities and well known at the local level. This is in contrast to opposition figures abroad who were appointed as representatives of the revolution outside Syria.

There is a high degree of coordination and synchronisation between citizen journalism and organising demonstrations. For example, on Fridays, protests take place across Syrian cities and villages under a collective name. On other days, demonstrations are held under different names. The assigning of names to demonstrations is voted for by different communities on social media. The locations and timings of demonstrations are planned in a way that prevents the risk of being fired on by security forces¹⁹

The LCCs convey their political messages to the media via banners raised during demonstrations. These banners are prepared one or two days before the protests in field centres set up by the youth in the revolutionary neighbourhoods. Generally, these banners draw attention to two themes, i.e. the peaceful nature of the revolution and denouncing the regime's brutality.²⁰

The LCCs' work intersects with the work of local protest groups that belong to different political backgrounds, since they are all fighting for the same goal. One LCCs field activist, Ammar (pseudonym), says:

'We collaborate with other committees by co-organising demonstrations, mobilising and calling on people to participate in demonstrations. We may have our own banners and [political] orientations in the demonstrations, but, in the end, everybody goes out in one demonstration. There is nothing called a demonstration by the 'x' group'.²¹

¹⁹ Assi Abu Najm in Al-Akhbar daily: *Coordination Committees: Underground new-born* 19 September 2011, www.al-akhbar.com/node/22408.

²⁰ Unified messages from Local Coordination Committees in Syria (al-Manshour), February 2013. <http://al-manshour.org/node/3519>.

²¹ Author's interview with activists in Douma in Reef Dimashq.

Demonstrations are filmed and sent to the media office, which distributes the video clips to media outlets. In cases where technical equipment is available, the demonstration is broadcast live. The LCCs invented the idea of 'unified messages', where banners with the same content are raised in several governorates.

Or, demonstrators in diverse locations simultaneously raise a banner containing one word of a unified message; these images are then merged into one picture that is broadcast via media outlets and social media networks. A recent banner highlighted women's rights on the occasion of International Women's Day. The unified banner is a smart idea that combines citizen journalism and the organisation of demonstrations and it is an attempt by the LCCs to unify the Syrian people around civil and democratic slogans.²² The committees in the street can be compared to a beehive; namely, continuous and persistent work by young activists who have left their jobs and universities and dedicated themselves to the revolution. Activist Ammar says: 'Sometimes we spend more than 20 hours straight on the internet to relay the news around the clock. Others spend the same time in the streets with demonstrators, assisting the wounded and engaging in civil society activism'.²³

Relief Work: Alternative (Civil) Society

In addition to citizen journalism and organising demonstrations, the LCCs play an important role in providing relief to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) particularly in respect of providing food baskets, income support and healing for the devastated areas. They have also established civil society organisations that are engaged in the rehabilitation of devastated areas and providing support for children.

The LCCs call these relief projects 'Syria in Colours' (*Souriya bil alwan*). Three projects are worth mentioning. The first is 'Tomorrow is Ours' (*Boukra llna*). Within this project, civil society specialists provide training to young activists who, in turn, provide entertainment, organise parties and games for children. The second project, called 'Winter Is Back' (*Rij'it el-Shatwiyyeh*), provides blankets, mattresses and clothes to IDPs during winter. The third initiative of 'Field School' (*al-Moudarasa al-Maydaniya*) was

²² www.facebook.com/LCCSy/timeline/.

²³ Author's interview with activists in Douma in Reef Dimashq.

set up in *Reef Dimashq* (the countryside of Damascus) where children cannot go to regular schools. In addition, it includes awareness-raising campaigns on different dimensions of civic activism.²⁴ The LCCs' relief and executive offices seek to find means of communication, such as broadcasting equipment to cover demonstrations and satellite phones for activists. They also cover the expenses of the full-time activists in the local committees. The LCCs are funded by Syrian expatriate businessmen and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO).²⁵ Furthermore, they publish monthly narrative and financial reports.²⁶

The relief workers are known among the Syrian opposition as the unknown soldiers, since they work undercover. Moreover, LCCs have paramedics and volunteer doctors who aid and treat the wounded. The LCCs were the first protest group that called for a general strike in order to put pressure on the regime by paralysing the economy and winning over the merchants. They launched the 'Strike of Dignity' (*Idrab al-Karamah*), which they hoped would eventually lead to a general nationwide strike. However, the strike failed to win over the traders in big cities in the north and south who were terrorised by the regime. But it was more successful in the countryside. The regime repression and the militarisation of the uprising prevented the peaceful protests of LCCs and, thus, their ability to broaden the strike to major cities.²⁷

The LCCs has published a bi-weekly newspaper called 'Freedom! Here we Come' (*Tli'na A'l Horriyeh*), which is distributed across Syria.²⁸ This newspaper pays attention to human rights, civil society and relief work. A phrase from the project Syria in Colours succinctly summarises the alternative society the LCCs have created in liberated areas:

'We cleaned our street, we distributed a newspaper, we decorated a wall with expressions of freedom based on our revolutionary activities. We are starting as of now to [re-]build what the regime is destroying. Signed: young men and women of the Local Coordination Committees'.

²⁴ www.syriaincolors-lcc.com/ar/.

²⁵ Local Coordination Committees of Syria, Carnegie Middle East Center, 20 December 2012 www.carnegie-mec.org/2012/12/.

²⁶ www.syriaincolors-lcc.com/ar/relief-reports-2/.

²⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=EON0GWdn50k.

²⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sMKZMjNnks.

LCCs and Politics

As mentioned, the first LCCs were not politically active. They aimed primarily at enhancing coordination between committees in order to demonstrate to the Syrian people that what was happening was an organised revolution and not a disorganised transient uprising. Indeed, the LCCs leaders shunned the idea of political activism and, until the establishment of the Syrian National Council in August 2011, the LCCs remained outside the political opposition.

Before presenting its political vision paper, LCCs issued two political statements. The first of these, issued one month after the start of the revolution, was considered the first political statement by revolutionary forces. In this text, the LCCs introduced their slogan 'Freedom. Dignity. Citizenship.' While the statement did not directly call for the overthrow of the regime, it did, however, include demands for a series of reforms that the regime had to undertake in order to make a peaceful transition to democratic rule.

A similar statement was issued in the third month of the revolution. This second statement emphasised the impossibility of dialogue while the killing continued. It also highlighted the sectarianisation of the revolution without condemning a particular party. It is noteworthy that, at this time, the LCCs were composed of 12 Coordination Committees.²⁹

Both statements were followed by a political position paper that set out the LCCs' political vision for resolving the conflict. This did not mean, however, that the LCCs were engaging in political activism. Rather, the aim was to clarify the position of revolutionary youth on the ground and, at the same time, to provide the political opposition with a workable policy document.

Omar Edelbi, the LCCs spokesperson, says: 'We presented our political vision for the solution of the crisis and for the future of Syria on 10 June 2011. We distributed a statement to all media, Facebook and on our website and Twitter. All the conferences and councils that are being formed derive their ideas from the vision we set. It was a founding paper for solving the Syrian crisis. We withdrew from our political role after we presented this vision so that the opposition in Syria has some material to work on. We returned,

in fact, to our work addressing concerns in the field, and we gave the opposition the chance to complete its alliances and consensus to form a council or a political commission that would represent the revolution'.³⁰

This vision paper, entitled 'The Vision of LCCs for the Political Future of Syria' was issued in June 2011. At that time, the number of victims was not more than 1,500 people. The acts of violence were limited to the regime's security apparatus and some army divisions. This vision paper was considered a sign of political maturity without being engaged in politics. It held the regime and the president accountable for the violence, sectarianisation of the conflict and its impact on social peace. According to this paper, the only way out of the crisis is a peaceful negotiation with the regime that 'transforms the regime to a democratic and pluralistic one, based on free elections.' Furthermore, it underscored the need for 'an end to the mandate of the current president' via a national conference that brings together all Syrians representing the opposition and those with no blood on their hands. The conference would determine a transitional period for the handover of power'. The statement also underlined the non-violent nature of the revolution and the rejection of foreign intervention. These positions evolved and changed as the conflict unfolded.

The paper presented a vision for the future Syrian state. This vision was pioneering and unprecedented at a time when the Syrian opposition groups abroad were struggling to form a unified opposition front. The vision paper defined Syria as a republic and a civil state that is owned by all Syrians and not by individuals or a family or a political party, and it should not be a hereditary republic. But the paper did not specify how to achieve and build such a state.

The vision paper pays special and detailed attention to the concept of citizenship. It considers citizenship as the solution to sectarian and ethnic divisions. It also addresses the Kurdish issue and civil principles such as justice, tolerance, rule of law, and patriotic principles such as state sovereignty, fair distribution of wealth. The paper concludes with the reaffirmation that the 'popular revolution is the

²⁹ www.lccsyria.org.

³⁰ Interview with al-Akhbar daily, 1 October 2011: www.al-akhbar.com/node/22610.

source of the political legitimacy in the country, and it will go on until the Syrian people's objectives of freedom, equality and dignity are attained.'

Despite some reservations about the way the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed as well as its working and its representativeness, in July 2011 the LCCs joined the SNC with 120 seats in the Council allocated for revolutionary forces on the ground.³¹

The LCCs remained a member of the SNC and supported its political stands until a crisis of confidence erupted between both groups, leading to the LCCs suspending their activities in the SNC. Protesting the undemocratic renewal of the term of Bourhan Ghalyoun's presidency of the SNC and the domination of SNC by the Muslim Brotherhood, the LCCs suspended its membership and did not participate in the Rome conference of the Friends of Syria Group in February 2013.

Joining the SNC moved the LCCs from the field of civil society into political society. It became a link between the revolution on the ground and political opposition. This is in stark contrast to the traditional political opposition, which suffers from disconnect with revolutionaries on the ground. The LCCs became the link between the revolutionary street, on the one hand, and the Syrian opposition and the world, on the other. However, having joined the political opposition, the LCCs started to suffer from the same problems that have been battering the opposition; namely, the lack of political decision and increase of media appearances by opposition members. Furthermore, the LCCs did not produce a significant follow-up to its vision paper. The emergence of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) pushed the LCCs to change its position on the non-violent nature of the revolution. In the face of the brutality of the regime, the LCCs had to recognise the FSA as a defender of the revolution and, finally as a means to overthrow the regime by military rather than peaceful means.³² However, the LCCs managed to convince some armed groups to sign a document

that committed them to respecting human rights and the rights of detainees. This way, the LCCs managed to keep a critical distance from both armed groups and the militarised uprising. Moreover, the LCCs' representatives deny any connection with the arming of the Free Army or its military operations. The LCCs' political positions have evolved throughout the conflict but they have remained committed to the non-violent nature of the revolution and civility of state, rejecting sectarianism and the division of Syria.

Conclusion

The Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) are a new and pioneering experience for the Syrian society that demonstrate the strength and commitment of Syria's revolutionary youth and civil society to engage in peaceful protest against a brutal dictatorship. They form a break with classical civil society and political activism. The LCCs provided a political vision for future Syria long before the opposition did so. At the same time, the context in which they have emerged and evolved shows the limits of non-violent activism in an authoritarian atmosphere as well as complex regional and international contexts. Regime repression led to militarisation and radicalisation of the revolution. The peaceful revolution has been hijacked by the regime, jihadis and geopolitics. Due to these factors, at the time of writing, LCCs have been considerably weakened. Some activists have been killed by the regime or by jihadis and others have had to flee the country. The Syria of 2014 is very different to the Syria of 2011 when the revolution started. Yet, no matter what the outcome of the conflict, the role of LCCs and other peaceful revolutionary youth groups will be crucial in rebuilding Syria. In the short term, the LCCs are, understandably, concerned with survival. In the long term, the biggest challenge they may face is how to deal with Islamists and develop an advanced political vision that addresses the rising sectarianism, cultural and ethnic divisions of society.

³¹ www.understandingwar.org/report/syrias-political-opposition.

³² Local Coordination Committees of Syria, Carnegie Middle East Center: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/20/local-coordination-committees-of-syria/evqy>.

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About the Authors of Introduction

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About Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia

Hivos and the University of Amsterdam, Department of Political Science, initiated the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia in 2008. This academic activist initiative ended in 2011 and generated insights on the role of civil society actors and Western donors in democratisation processes in Syria and Iran. As of January 1, 2012 Hivos co-produces policy papers, policy briefs, briefing notes, working papers and special bulletins with think tanks, experts and activists mainly in MENA, but also in the US and EU. These in-depth insights deal with dignity revolutions (Arab Spring) and transition challenges and how Western donors can accompany transitions through insider knowledge.

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