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Democracy to the Rescue

By Andrew Tabler

MARCH 2006

DAMASCUS, Syria—As I approached the demonstration, I realized that the more things change in Syria, the more the state's reaction stays the same. It was March 9, the 43rd anniversary of the declaration of "emergency law" in Syria. For the second year in a row, members of the Syrian Students' National Union (SSNU) were busy beating up and chasing off opposition figures staging a sit-in in front of the old Ministry of Justice — a stone's throw away from the radio station where martial law was declared in 1963 the morning after the Ba'ath Party seized power in a military coup. Multi-party politics in Syria was suspended that day, all in the



A mob from the Syrian Students' National Union (SSNU) abuse and assault a member of Syria's opposition protesting 43 years of "Emergency Rule" in Syria on March 9.

name of bringing to an end raging political instability that had plagued the country since independence in 1946.

A man with grey hair broke from the crowd of demonstrators, arms waving overhead. Scores of student-union protestors were on him like a swarm of bees, shouting "traitor" while beating him with wooden sticks adorned with Syrian flags. As I took a photo of the melee, colleagues Hugh Macleod, an eager British journalist, and Obaida Hamad, a Syrian reporter, sized up the situation, notebooks in hand.

"Come on, let's go talk to that guy!" Hugh said.

Obaida and I looked at each other. Without saying a word, we understood that the worst thing that could happen to this brave man at that moment would be for two foreigners to ask him how he felt about being abused and beaten up. We probably knew the answer anyway.

"That's the story!" Hugh shouted, eyes opened wide.

In an ideal sense, he was right of course. But in a country where nationalist

sentiments are high due to U.S. and UN pressure, it is often hard to know what to do. If the man wanted to talk to foreigners — and put his neck on the line — that was his choice. But if we approached him, it could be seen as the very treasonous activity of which he was being accused, leading to possible dire circumstances that could prevent him from enjoying the very freedom he seeks — permanently.

We did not have time to mull it over, however, since the students quickly converged on another target — me.

“We are here to support Syria and President Bashar against the traitors!” one protestor shouted as the crowd closed in around us. “The West just wants our oil!”

I could hear someone whispering the word “American” behind me. Suddenly, a sweaty young man with wild blue eyes, short-cropped hair and a Syrian-flag bandanna appeared. “So.... An American!,” he boomed, strutting like a rooster. The crowd roared. Someone started tugging on the belt of my raincoat, which admittedly would have been more appropriate on Dupont Circle than the edge of Damascus’ Old City. I went silent, as did Hugh. Obaida shouted back “We are journalists for a Syrian magazine!” and whipped out a few copies of *Syria Today*, a monthly publication I helped found with a Syrian colleague in 2003. The protestors, most with confused expressions, stared at the magazines’ covers.

Not to be cowed, the blue-eyed man raised his arms above his head. “America.... Fuck America!,” he screamed, throwing his limbs to the earth. The crowd roared again.

Suddenly, a young man appeared wearing a white baseball cap on which was printed “I love Syria” in English.

“It’s OK,” he said, smiling at me. “Please, this way.”

He gave a single hand-motion that Moses might have used to part the Red Sea, and the crowd quickly obeyed. We were escorted to the side, and the mob turned its attention toward its next victim.

I had not bothered to show up for last year’s sit-in. Syria’s illegal-but-tolerated opposition parties are often hard to take seriously. Not because they have not taken their licks from the state over the years, but rather due to the opposition’s stale political ideologies, chronic divisiveness and questions as to their real penetration into society. Marxist parties, for example, which throw around terms used only in North Korea these days, are ironically split along sectarian lines. Sectarian parties, especially Kurds, are divided ideologically. The Muslim Brotherhood, which waged a terrorist war against the state that culminated in the darkest day of Syrian political life — the state’s bombardment of the city of Hama in February 1982 — is strictly outlawed, and its leadership is in Lon-

don. And last, but not least, it is hard to point to a single thing the opposition has done to effectively change political life in Syria for the past four decades.

So why show up this year? Because this ramshackle bunch of Marxists, Communists, Socialists, Arab Nationalists, Liberals, Islamists, Assyrians and Kurds have finally agreed on something — the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change. Announced on October 16, 2005, the Damascus Declaration calls for peaceful and gradual change toward a democratic regime in Syria. With over a thousand signatures to date, the Declaration has united Syria’s domestic and exiled opposition groups for the first time in the country’s recent history.

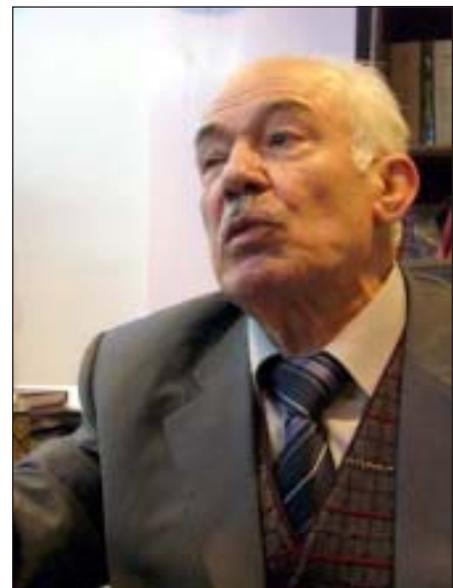
What is behind such rare accord? Strong external pressures, growing nationalist and Islamic sentiments, and a pervasive sense that the regime is simply unable to carry out political reforms promised by President Bashar al-Assad nearly six years ago, has the opposition prescribing democracy as the cure for Syria’s ills.

While the Declaration’s leadership has its act together, they now have competition from an old adversary, former Vice-president Abdel Halim Khaddam, who formed a rival opposition front including the Muslim Brotherhood on March 17. Just who will join what group remains to be seen. Perhaps the biggest question now, however, is how Syria’s opposition can avoid becoming a casualty of the escalating cold war between Damascus and Washington that neither capital can afford to lose.

Power to the People

With opposition protestors duly chased off, we decided to visit the nearby office of Hassan Abdel Azim, spokesperson for the opposition National Democratic Rally — a grouping of five leftist pan-Arab parties — and the Damascus Declaration. It was bustling with activity, packed full of Declaration members I have interviewed over the last two months sipping cups of strong tea to

Hassan Abdel Azim, spokesperson for the National Democratic Rally and the Damascus Declaration, was assaulted during a sit-in, his spectacles smashed to bits before his near-sighted eyes.



calm their nerves. I hardly recognized Abdel Azim despite the fact I had interviewed him only weeks before.

"I can't see you very well. They smashed my glasses," Abdel Azim said, shaking my hand. "They weren't students who beat us, they were just parrots. They don't even know what our Declaration stands for."

Neither do most Syrians. While the Declaration is a mere three pages, single-spaced, the carefully-worded document is a hard read. It is extremely interesting, however; not just as a manifesto for democratic change and a testament to troubled times, but also because of the mere fact that it continues to circulate freely in Assad's Syria. Its preamble begins:

"Syria today is being subjected to unprecedented pressure, as a result of the policies pursued by the regime, whose policies have brought the country to a situation that calls for concern for its national security and the fate of its people.... The authorities' 30-year monopoly over power has built an authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish [*fi'awi*] regime that has led to a lack of societal interest in politics and public affairs. This has damaged the national social fabric, and led to economic collapse that threatens the country... In addition to stifling isolation that the regime has brought upon the country as a result of its destructive, adventurous, and short-sighted policies on the Arab and regional level — especially in Lebanon...

All that — and many other matters — calls for mobilizing Syria's energies, the homeland and the people, in a rescue attempt of change that transforms Syria from a security to a political state in order to enhance independence and unity, so that its people will be able to hold the reins of power and participate freely in running its affairs."

In order to head off what it calls "dangers that loom on the horizon", the Declaration advocates a number of basic points. It calls for the "establishment of a democratic regime" as a "basic approach to plan for change and political reform." Such change should be "peaceful, gradual, founded on accord, and based on dialogue and recognition of the other."

"Totalitarian thought" must be shunned, including the use of "violence in exercising political action." The use of force — like that used by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 — is out of bounds.

"Islam — which is the religion and ideology of the majority.... — is the most prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people." This point is qualified in the next paragraph, which declares that "no party or trend has the right to claim an exceptional role" — a obvious olive branch to Syria's minority religions, sects, and ethnicities, estimated at around 35 percent of

the population, that remains highly suspicious of Sunni political Islam.

The Declaration goes on to call for "a new social contract", "freedom of expression", a "just democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria", "suspending the emergency law", repealing Law 49 of 1980 (which makes membership in the Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death), the introduction of a "modern party law" and "respect for human rights."

Not something exactly easy to rattle off. To achieve this tall order — which would be a challenge in any developing country — the Declaration outlines seven points of action. "Channels" must be opened for "equitable national dialogue" to address the need for "radical change", but not that which is "brought from abroad." "Initiatives" should be formed to encourage society to return to politics and "activate civil society." "Committees, salons, [and] forums" should be formed throughout Syria to allow citizens to "vent frustrations" and "unite behind the goals of change." A "comprehensive national accord on a common and independent program of opposition forces" should be forged. A "national conference" is to be convened in which "all forces that aspire to change may participate, including those from the regime, to establish a democratic national regime..." A "Constituent Assembly" should be elected to draw up a "new constitution for the country that foils adventurers and extremists,... guarantees the separation of powers, and safeguards the independence of the judiciary..." And last, but certainly not least, "free and honest parliamentary elections" should be held to "produce a fully legitimate national regime that governs the country in accordance with the constitution."

Shrewd Negotiators

More interesting than the Declaration's text is the story of its drafting and signature. According to spokesman Hassan Abdel Azim, the Damascus Declaration's origin can be traced back to the summer of 2004, when members of his National Democratic Rally discussed the need for a broad coalition to unite the opposition to spur Syria's static reform process.

"When President Assad took power in 2000, he talked about 'recognizing the other' and reform in his inaugural address," Abdel Azim said. "So the opposition said 'hey, let's give him some time.' But the structure of the authoritarian regime in Syria prevented the president from reaching this goal. We got frustrated and lost hope. So we decided it was time to do something."

Exactly what happened next, and exactly when, is not clear. According to Abdel Azim, sometime in February 2005 — the same month former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri was assassinated in Beirut — two unnamed members of the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society flew to Morocco to meet Muslim Brotherhood chief

Ali Sadreddin al-Bayanouni to discuss basic principles on which a united opposition front could be formed. The two returned to Syria with agreement on four broad points: democracy, non-violence, a unified opposition structure, and a commitment to democratic change. Somewhat surprisingly, the two were empowered to negotiate with Syrian parties on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood to forge an accord.

Drafting of the Declaration began. In a speech before Parliament on March 6, President Assad announced that Syria would withdraw its forces from Lebanon in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination. In the speech's closing line, Assad said the upcoming Ba'ath Party Conference "will be a leap for development in this country." Rumors then circulated that members of the Muslim Brotherhood would be allowed to return to Syria without arrest.

The political base of the Declaration started to take shape. Civil-society activists met in the offices of Samir Nashar, leader of the nascent "Free National Party" and a wealthy Aleppo trader whose "discussion forum" was shut down in October 2002 in one of the state's final crack-downs on what is known as the "Damascus Spring" — a period of about two years after Assad's inaugural speech when Syrians met freely and often to discuss the country's problems.

"We met on April 4, 2005 and decided it was time to open dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood," Nashar said. "We needed to bring the exiled and domestic opposition together." On April 17, Abdel Azim's National Democratic Rally announced that it was ready to talk with the Muslim Brotherhood as well.

Things soon got complicated, however.

"Some of the opposition was afraid to include the Muslim Brotherhood because they thought it would cause big problems with the authorities," Nashar said. "They didn't know how the regime would react."

It wasn't long before they found out. On May 24, eight members of the Atassi discussion forum — the only group that remained open after the Damascus-Spring crackdown — were arrested when civil-society activist Ali Abdullallah read aloud a statement from the Muslim Brotherhood's Bayanouni. This followed the possibly unrelated disappearance and murder of Kurdish Sheikh Ma'ashouk Khaznawi, whose body was found with signs of torture on May 11. Nashar claims Khaznawi had an "open dialogue" with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Syrian state denies any culpability in the murder, which has since been attributed to a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist who had earlier branded Khaznawi an apostate. Human-rights activists announced on Arab satellite TV that Brotherhood members would be arrested if they returned.

Because of fear of state persecution or hope that Ar-

title 8 of the Syrian Constitution — which says that the Ba'ath Party must lead the state and society — would be repealed at the party's conference the following month and a new "parties law" would be introduced that would allow Syria's opposition to officially participate in political life, Abdel Azim decided not to rush things.

"Our idea was to establish a narrow coalition that could be expanded," said Abdel Azim. "We had to talk to a lot of parties. The Muslim Brotherhood was outside Syria as well. So we decided to postpone."

June's Ba'ath Party Conference delivered only limited changes and fell well short of expectations. The Ba'ath would continue to lead the state, since Article 8 remained intact. There were some signs of hope, however. The conference's final statement read that a new-parties law would apply to the 2007 parliamentary elections. It said in order to "guarantee national participation in political life on the foundation of boosting national unity," parties based on ethnicity or religion would be forbidden. The issue of Syria's Kurds, some 200,000 of whom lack full citizenship, would be addressed in the near future. And finally, Syria's emergency law would be reviewed and eased.

Work on the Damascus Declaration continued. In the summer and early autumn of 2005. Negotiations began



Samir Nashar, founder of the nascent "Free National Party of Syria" was a key intermediary between domestic and exiled opposition leaders.

with Syria's eight Kurdish parties, and the tribal-based Future Party led by Sheikh Nawaf al-Beshir, as well as some of some of Syria's most prominent independent opposition figures, including the outspoken, and then-imprisoned, Riad Seif.

"Hassan [Abdel Azim] came to visit in September," Seif told me in an interview following his release last January. "He is my lawyer, and it was easy for him to see me. We need to unite the opposition, and he gave me a full picture of the Damascus Declaration. I accepted immediately."

On October 5 and 6, negotiations with what would be the last holdout to sign the Declaration, the ethnically-based Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), founded on the Declaration's references to Islam as the "religion and ideology of the majority" and its mention of the Kurds as the only ethnic "issue" in Syria.

"We were convinced that they mentioned Islam in the document simply to attract Islamists," said Bashir Ishaq Saadi, Secretary General of the ADO. "Second, we said 'hey, you mentioned Kurdish rights. What about Assyrians?'"

Time was running out, however. In neighboring Lebanon, Detlev Mehlis, the chief UN investigator into the Hariri assassination, was due to give his first report on October 19. Sources quoted in the Lebanese press said the investigation was pointing fingers of blame toward Damascus.

"We wanted to announce the Declaration before the Mehlis report," Nashar said. "We didn't want people to say we were taking advantage."

To avoid the same kind of leaks that were undermining Mehlis' investigation, Abdel Azim kept the only signed copy of the Declaration in his pocket. In the end, five parties and eight opposition figures came on board.¹ On October 16, Abdel Azim held a small press conference in his office to announce the Declaration.

"Mukhabarat [intelligence services] showed up," said Abdel Azim. "I tried to call the Ministry of Information, but the minister was not in. The interior minister, Ghazi Kanaan, had committed suicide a few days before. Who could I call? We had invited the satellite TV channels to cover the event. So I went upstairs and announced it to the world."

Two hours after the Declaration's announcement, the Muslim Brotherhood — which had been party to the negotiations from the beginning — became the first to sign



Bashir Ishaq Saadi, leader of Assyrian Democratic Organization, refused to sign the initial declaration because of its references to Islam and its singling out of Kurds as the only ethnic issue in Syria.

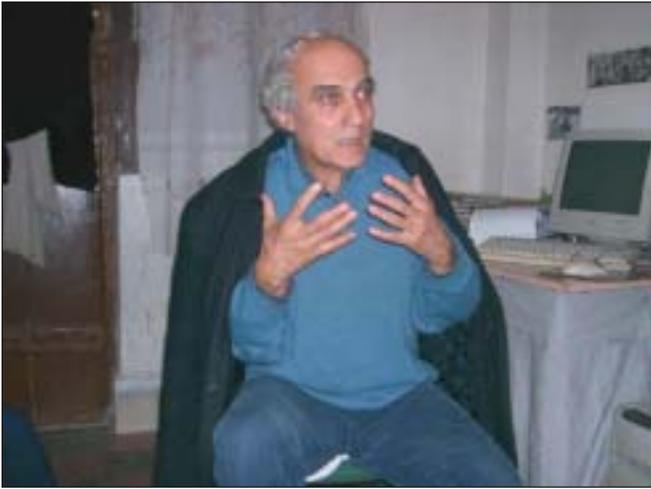
onto the accord following its announcement. While Abdel Azim was unclear with me as to motive, a number of opposition figures told me that he arranged the timing of the Muslim Brotherhood's signature so the Syrian authorities could not say the Declaration was spawned by the Brotherhood, and therefore subject to the state's strict ban on the organization.

Gathering Strength

Since the Declaration's announcement, members of the Syrian opposition have slowly come on board as the Assad regime has weathered the heavy political storm of the Hariri investigation. External international pressure, combined with the regime's lack of a political-reform plan, has old foes putting differences aside and overcoming deep-rooted suspicions.

"If you look at the names who signed the Damascus Declaration, all but one is a Sunni Muslim," said Fateh Jammous, leader of the Communist Labor Party and an Alawite Muslim — the same sect from which the Syrian

¹ The initial signatories of the Damascus Declaration were the NDR, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance, the Kurdish Democratic Front, the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society and the Future Party. Prominent opposition figures included Riad Seif, Jawdat Sa'id, Dr. Abd al-Razzaq Id, Samir Nashar, Dr. Fida Akram Hourani, Dr. Adil Zakkar, Abd al-Karim al-Dahhak, Haitham al-Maleh, and Nayif Qaysiyah.



Fateh Jammous, leader of the Communist Labor Party and a member of the ruling Alawite Muslim sect, says that the regime's apparent inability to reform led him to overlook reservations concerning the declaration's references to Islam.

leadership hails — who signed in the days following the Declaration's announcement. "We don't accuse them of being sectarian, but we objected at first to the Declaration's references to Islam...The Syrian bureaucracy is corrupted, and cannot be reformed. We don't need slow reform, we need a rescue operation."

It was the Declaration's appeal to moderate Islamists in an increasingly Islamized environment that seems to be giving it staying-power.

"We have liberal Islamists, political Islamists and fundamentalist Islamists in Syria," Nashar said. "The difference between them is difficult to distinguish. We need to gather the first two together, as the fundamentalists cannot live with others. They see only in terms of black and white, believers and apostates."

And with bloodshed in neighboring Iraq filling TV news reports every day, a more liberal-based opposition lacks considerable appeal.

"We tried to organize a parallel liberal rally alongside the Damascus Declaration in November and December," said the ADO's Saadi, who finally signed the Declaration in February 2006. "Liberal parties in Syria are now very weak. Some of the Kurdish parties were demanding 'self-determination' as well. We couldn't support that."

After lying low for a few months as the Hariri investigation blew over, and the Assad regime vented its fury over former Vice-President Abdel Halim Khaddam's dramatic "defection" to the opposition on Saudi Arabian-owned pan-Arab Al-Arabiyya Satellite TV on December 30, the Declaration's leadership began to organize. On January 18, a 20-member transitional committee was formed, including 13 domestic and seven exiled opposition groups. On January 29-30, Samir Nashar and other

members of the transitional committee attended a Syrian opposition conference in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Syrian National Council in the United States and the Syrian Democratic Assembly of Canada. Farid al-Ghadry, the head of the Bush-Administration-supported Reform Party of Syria (RPS), was not invited. Receiving foreign funding emerged as a fault line in the opposition.

The day following the conference, the Damascus Declaration issued its first follow-up statement rejecting foreign pressure on Syria, declaring Syria to be part of the Arab Nation and clarifying that the Declaration's references to Islam were not limited to Sunni interpretation.

"More people signed after that," Abdel Azim said. "The demands came from Declaration signatories. They said to be silent on Iraq and Palestine was dangerous. We certainly don't want the Iraqi, or even the Lebanese scenarios in Syria. We need democratic change to strengthen nationalist forces to face external pressure."

On February 18, the transitional committee began work on the formation of a 50-member National Council, with representatives from all of Syria's 14 governorates. Its members were to be announced on April 6.

Toeing the Nationalist line

Both the Syrian government and Washington have responded to the Damascus Declaration selectively. The regime seems to be giving Abdel Azim considerable leeway in carrying out the accord's activities, despite the fact that the regime's nemesis, the Muslim Brotherhood, is one of the Declaration's primary supporters.

Drafts of a new parties' law currently making their way around Damascus indicate that the regime is not making much space for opposition parties. Sami Moubayad, a Syrian commentator who has seen the drafts, has reported that while the parties' law will be



The ever-pensive Riad Seif, one of Syria's most outspoken regime opponents. Since his release from prison on January 18, he has borne the brunt of the regime's opposition harassment.

issued within the month, it will not accept parties whose “behavior is opposed to the Revolution of March 8 [the day the Ba’ath took power].” Parties that are “chaotic, terrorist, fascist, theocratic, religious, ethnic, sectarian, tribal, etc” will be denied license — leaving little room for many of Syria’s opposition parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kurds, to formally join political life. Not surprisingly, foreign funding is strictly forbidden as well.

In the meantime, the regime seems to be going after outspoken Declaration members to force the opposition to toe the nationalist line. Riad Seif, who was released from prison on January 18 — the very day the Transitional Committee on which he now sits was formed — has borne the brunt of regime harassment.

“On February 14 [the first anniversary of Hariri’s assassination], there was a decision to contain all the Syrian opposition,” Seif said. “I am one of the primary names on the Damascus Declaration, so they arrested me again.”

He was released the next day. On March 12, during a rally supporting Kurdish rights, the same thing happened.

“If they arrest and hold me, I will be a hero, and they don’t want that. They cannot get rid of me other ways, because that would be costly. So they try to scare me so that I am unable to think,” said Seif, whose son disappeared under mysterious circumstances in 1996. “They warned me not to talk to foreigners or diplomats. They follow me everywhere. They tell my neighbors not to talk to me. I was less isolated in jail.”

The problem, according to Abdel Azim, is a stark contradiction between the leadership’s words and regime’s actions.

“In his last two speeches, the President says the national opposition that doesn’t take foreign funding should be respected,” Abdel Azim said. “But on the street, two days later, they call us traitors and beat us.”

Washington seems to be struggling to find ways to handle the Damascus Declaration as well, especially in light of rising Syrian nationalist sentiments resulting from the US occupation of Iraq, Washington’s strong alliance with Israel, and the Hariri investigation.

“I told the Americans that they will get more credibility if they focus on corruption and the regime’s crimes in the 1980s,” Nashar said following his return from the Washington conference. “On these issues the regime cannot defend itself.... The human rights associations have a lot of files [on corruption and human rights abuses]. If America concentrates on this, Syrians will emerge from fear. Look at what happened in Lebanon. Do you think that a million Lebanese could have protested on March 14, 2005 [demanding Syria’s with-



Opposition figures cannot understand why they continue to be harassed after President Assad declared in two recent speeches that opposition parties that did not accept foreign funding should be respected.

drawal from Lebanon] without international cover?”

All this is rather new to Washington, since until very recently, its demands on Syria only concerned the country’s foreign policy. Last fall, the State Department’s democracy chief visited Damascus for the first time. Who he met, and the subject of the conversations remains unknown. Just like the embassy’s 4th of July celebrations, I was not invited to the party.

Perhaps with Nashar’s nuanced advice in mind, on February 18, the same day work on the Declaration’s National Council began, Washington announced that \$5 million from the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) would be earmarked “to accelerate the work of reformers,” including “build[ing] up Syrian civil society and support organizations promoting democratic practices such as the rule of law; government accountability; access to independent sources of information; freedom of association and speech; and free, fair and competitive elections.”

A week later, the Damascus Declaration’s leadership predictably, but kindly, turned Washington down.

“The Damascus Declaration refuses foreign funding, including the \$5 million from the U.S. State Department for the Syrian opposition,” read the group’s statement a week later. In a follow-up report by Reuters, Abdel Azim said that while “support by international powers for democratic change in Syria is welcome”, financing is out of the question. “It means subordination to the funding country,” Abdel Azim said. “Our project is [for] nationalist, independent democratic change in Syria, not through occupation or economic pressure, as we see the United States doing.”

How to help?

With lofty goals and good intentions, the Damascus Declaration seems a big step forward for democracy in

Syria. With regime-change à la Iraq serving as a daily lesson in what not to do, Washington's dilemma is now how to promote democracy in a country whose people are deeply distrustful of American intentions. Almost all opposition figures I interviewed said that help from the European Union, which most Syrians believe is more sincere and has a balanced regional policy, is more palatable than support from the United States.

"I differentiate between the European and American discourse," Nashar said. "Before about five months ago, the US never mentioned Syria's internal affairs. It was always about demands on its regional and foreign policy. Syrians remember this."

How that could happen with Syrian nationalist and Islamic sentiments running high and the regime cracking down on media and civil society following Khaddam's announcement is anyone's guess.

Making things more complicated, Khaddam and the Muslim Brotherhood's Bayanouni announced in Brussels on March 17 the formation of a "National Salvation Front", a group of 17 exiled opposition parties that call for "democracy" to replace the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Another opposition meeting, sponsored by the Aspen Institute [officially dubbed a "small and informal meeting with oppositionists from Syria" on the sidelines of a conference on "Civil Society in the Greater Middle East"], was held in Doha, Qatar on March 22. A few days later, as Khaddam reportedly met with the virulently anti-Assad Lebanese politician Walid Jumblatt, Bayanouni announced that his organization has in fact had contacts with Khaddam since 2003 — some two years before the former vice-president left office. How the front's formation will affect the Damascus Declaration — especially in light of the Muslim Brotherhood's inclusion in both groups — remains to be seen.

"The Damascus Declaration has no value without the Muslim Brotherhood. I am a liberal, and I am responsible for my words," said Nashar, who was arrested and then released three weeks after my interview. "I saw them in Washington. They have a democratic awareness — perhaps more than the Syrian intelligencia."

While Abdel Azim said that the new front had "nothing to do with the Damascus Declaration." Riad al-Turk, a member of the Syrian Democratic People's Party, one of the five parties included in Abdel Azim's National Democratic Rally, blamed him for dividing the opposition.

"The formation of the [National Salvation] Front is because of the backwardness, slowness and hesitation of the Damascus Declaration's leadership," Turk said in an interview with the pan-Arab daily *Al-Hayat* on March 20. "The basic conflict is now between external opposition representing America and the domestic opposition representing the regime. The hope is that there is a liberation front that will support a general political line calling for democratic change and preserving national independence while not falling into a severe crisis like in Iraq."

So for the moment, as Syria's opposition sorts things out, perhaps the best way for the US to help democracy in Syria is to leave well enough alone, but lend a helping hand at the right moment.

"We want the world to know that there is an opposition in Syria, that we have a position, and that they can help us," Abdel Azim said after the sit-in. "But do me a favor," he said, handing me a copy of the Declaration's latest statement. "Remind me to get this thing translated into English." □

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