



Cities in Revolution

Salamiyah

A Memory Unforgotten

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INTRODUCTION

The city of Salamiyah lies with its back to Hama, at the edge of the central steppe, with Palmyra to its east and Al-Tabqah to its north. Its climate, which used to be ideal for agriculture, has suffered decades of poor rainfall and extreme variability which led to desertification led to many in the city to abandon agriculture as a primary source of income, with most estimates claiming it a secondary source of income at best. Coupled with a lack of development by the state, these climate problems limited the residents' options; their only options were to dream of either leaving the country, which only the lucky could do, or work in the state's institutions as a bureaucrat, which spelt out stability in a world previously ruled by the whim of nature.



Nobody is really sure why the town is named Salamiyah. According to local legend, the city has been demolished many times throughout history, either because of war or the climate. As a result, some believe that the origin of

the city's name comes from two words, "**Salmo Miyeh**" which references a time when a hundred of the city's men were killed in one of the times that the city was demolished. Others think that the origin of the city's name comes from "**Sil Mai**" which means a torrent of water, a reference to the city's historical abundance of water.

Whatever the case, Salamiyah is one of the most ancient cities in Syria. Shemimis Castle, a castle located 5 km northwest of the city, is a testament to the city's age. Built by Sampsiceramus I, the first Priest King of the Royal family of Emesa, a Roman client dynasty, in the 1st century BC, all that remains of it now is its eroded outer wall.

The city of Salamiyah extends over a vast plain and is composed of four main streets that cross in a square in the center of the city. According to the latest census, the population does not exceed 20,000. In recent years, the city had faced some expansion, repurposing agricultural land into residential neighborhoods to account for a swell in population.

The old city of Salamiyah consists of a few key districts. However, the increasing number of residents in the city led to the development of new neighborhoods.

For example, a new neighborhood was created in the western part of the city after the events of the massacre of Hama in 1982, when many displaced people from Hama fled to Salamiyah. This neighborhood is called the "Hamwi Neighborhood" in reference to the neighborhood's population. East of the Hamwi Neighborhood lies the "Qadmasyeh Neighborhood", home to a number of people from al-Qadmus, a city to the west of Salamiyah in the Tartous province. The Eastern part of the town has been settled by the Bedouins, a seminomadic group indigenous to the region. The neighborhood is called the "Mashrafeh" a reference to the clan that makes up the majority of its residents. The southern part of the city, called "Dhar al-Mghar" is inhabited predominantly by Alawites who came to

Salamiyah from the nearby countryside and chose to live in the suburbs as opposed to the city center.

Though the names of these neighborhoods seem descriptive and reflective of the population that inhabits each of them, the reality is that in Salamiyah these neighborhoods are inhabited by the wide spectrum of religions and social strata. The city is inhabited by Ismailis, who make the sectarian majority, but also Sunnis, Alawites, Kurds, Circassians and others across class lines.

Salamiyah has historically been characterized by its demographic makeup; not necessarily due to the diversity itself but due to the coexistence. Though some historical disputes existed amongst even members along the same ethno-sectarian lines, looking at Salamiyah's history suggests an integration so thorough as to eliminate any real distinction between the groups.

Historically, Salamiyah has also been home to a political active population. Since the mid 1900s, a number of prominent political leaders and theorists were born in Salamiyah. Amongst the most prominent of these include the first version of the Ba'ath party, and its offshoots, the National Party of Syria, which drew in many young men from the city, and the Syrian Communist Party. Many in the town embraced the parties opposed to the rule of Hafez al-Assad. Many of these parties originated in the 1970s, and were mostly leftist and Communist parties, such as the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) led by Riad al-Turk.

The residents of Salamiyah wear the slogan, "poverty and philosophy" like a banner; many of the young men and women fathered by the city grew on to be poets, philosophers, politicians, writers and other cultural figures.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a wave of arrests rocked the city; the arrests, carried out by the Assad regime's intelligence forces affected almost every family. Many young men in the city were arrested for their activities and

affiliations in opposition parties. The number of detainees remained imprisoned for record amounts of time; for example, Mustafa Rustum, one of the leaders of the Ba'ath party pre-Hafez al Assad's coup, spent up to 24 years in prison.

The arrests also caused a number of political activists to flee the city to escape the wrath of the security services; the city remained subdued political until 2000, when Bashar al-Assad ascended to the presidency following the death of his father. Following his ascension, he released the majority of the citizens of Salamiyah who had been imprisoned by his father in a time that is now known as the "Damascus Spring." The men who had been arrested returned to the city and began to engage in what was believed to be the signs of political breakthrough and reform that was being championed by the new president.

The era of the "Damascus Spring" in Salamiyah saw the establishment of many cultural forums. The activists in the city received scores of Syrian writers, intellectuals and artists, such as Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, Aref Dalila, Tayyed Tizini, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, and many others; they participated in the seminars, dialogues, and debates and returned to the city a cultural climate. Dozens of groups were formed that included young men and women of different ages and affiliations.

However, Bashar al-Assad turned on his promises of reform, and ordered the mayors of the town to stop the cultural events that were born during the Damascus Spring. This, however, did not stop the groups; they were galvanized and continued to work and pursue their interest in public affairs despite the dwindling numbers of activists and their growing isolation.

The activists would go on to form the nucleus of the revolutionary movement that erupted in March 2011; they would be at the forefront of revolutionary events in 2011, marching in the streets of the city, calling for freedom.

CHAPTER ONE: ERA OF LIBERATION

I. Spring of the City: Spring of Hope

On March 25th, 2011, 30 young men and women found themselves gathered in the city square and shouting, with their highest voices, “Freedom, Freedom... The People Want Freedom.” This came as a total surprise to the shopkeepers, stall vendors, the security and intelligence services. This event was surprising to everyone, including the participants of the demonstrations. History, on this day, was made¹.

On March 15th, 2011 the first demonstration in Syria happened in the center of the capital, Damascus. It broke out near Umayyad Mosque, with the protesters walking through Al-Hamidiyah Souq and Al-Hariqa Square, where they were met by *shabiha*, the regime's thugs. The crackdown by the security and intelligence forces led to the arrest of many of the participants in the protest. Coincidentally, one of them was a young man from Salamiyah.²

“Zahra” said: “I saw them take him in front of my eyes. More than 6 members of the *mukhabarat* (intelligence agents) took him and away and disappeared.”

On March 16th, another protest broke out in the capital's center. It was attended by many of the activists and family members of those detained by Assad. The demonstrators chanted for the release of political prisoners. “Zahra” was there, along with other mothers of detainees. One of the participants in the demonstration said: “I was among those demanding the release of their children, and I was not afraid. I'm a mother, and I called for the release of my son... I have every right to do so.” “Zahra” met young men and women from Salamiyah there, who had come down to take part in

¹ The first protest in Salamiyah, March 25, 2011: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EnR_7F51qg

² This information was obtained by “Zahra”, a woman interviewed by the researchers. “Zahra”, a pseudonym, is the mother of a March 15 detainee.

the demonstration. Nouwwar and Ayham were amongst those participating in the demonstration and wrote about their escape from potential detention on that day.

On March 18th, 2011, the course of the country's future radically shifted; people in Daraa, a city located in the southern part of the country, protested, demanding the release of their sons who were imprisoned by the Syrian security branches. The state security apparatus shot towards the protestors, and the names of young men as the first martyrs were recorded.

At this time in Salamiyah, 100s of kilometers away from Daraa and Damascus, activists were meeting and entering long discussions about what their next steps should be. Their conclusion: go out in protest, on March 25th after Friday prayers. According to "Zahra", there were no illusions about the city's participation in the demonstration, which was to be in solidarity with Dara'a and the first fallen martyrs. However, the organizers all believed in the need to participate and go out in the streets at any cost. "Zahra" was driven by anger over the arrest of her son and the other young men. Those interested in the protests were driven by the revolutions they saw in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and saw an opportunity to launch a similar one in Syria.

The exact details of what happened on that day, however, remain vague. The organizers did not know how to coordinate a protest or how to call for the demonstrations in the city. They told SyriaUntold that it completely spontaneous. M.M., one of the participants in the demonstration, said: "The fact is, we did not know exactly how to make the decision or how it was ultimately made. It was spontaneous and improvised by all those who participated."³ He listed these moments and said, "On March 24, 2011 a Thursday, I was with several of my friends and we met someone we knew who told us 'I heard that tomorrow people are planning a protest near the

³ The research group met Dr. M.M., one of the first participants in Salamiyah's protest, in the summer of 2015. He was arrested several times at the hands of the Syrian intelligence apparatus and was subsequently released.

Imam Ismail⁴ mosque after the noon prayers. Others all over the country are also planning on going out and demonstrating at the same time.’ He asked us our opinion and whether we would want to participate in the demonstration. Four of us answered that we were ready to participate. Most of the people he told about the demonstration responded enthusiastically about the idea.”

Within a few hours, everyone was calling him, especially those who were trustworthy and known for their interest in public affairs. They decided to meet at Imam Ismail Mosque, shortly before the end of the noon prayers.

The next day, the activists went out individually and tried to meet discreetly, so as to not to attract the attention of the security apparatus. When they got there, they were surprised to see that the head of the local security intelligence branch and several agents had preceded the protesters to the agreed upon site. Agents had been deployed at all roads leading to the Imam Ismail mosque’s entrances. There weren’t many attendees, and when the worshippers exited the mosque after prayers, it appeared as though nothing would happen, when one youth emerged, wearing a mask, yelling: “Freedom, freedom.”

M.M. said: “At the time, nobody responded to him. I watched the scene 20 meters away. I watched the scene from 20 meters away. There was no trace of a demonstration, because we thought we would go in after the worshippers at the mosque, but we didn’t imagine that something like this happened. There was nothing to differentiate between people who came to the protest or those who had come to the mosque. Everyone was waiting for the signal to start.” The group continued to stand near the mosque waiting for something to start. M.M. said “After a short period, a friend came up to me and said come to the Big Mosque⁵; there’s going to be a meeting. We went, about 30 of us, and found a number of security agents and *shabiha*,

⁴ A very old mosque located in the southern center of the city.

⁵ The largest mosque in Salamiyah’s Center, frequented by Sunni Muslims.

watching the situation with apprehension. Someone suggested that the plans be canceled due to the small number of protestors and the large number of security agents and *shabiha*. Suddenly, someone shouted “Freedom, Freedom” and we all began shouting after him with the highest voices, as if we were trying to conquer our weaknesses and make up for the lack of numbers with loud voices. Our banners were raised suddenly, and everyone else joined us.”

It is worth mentioning that at the first protest, none of the worshippers at the mosque joined in. For subsequent demonstrations, the worshippers at the mosques coordinated their attendance via symbols sent out during prayer. The worshippers blame the planners of the first protest for not informing them of the March 25 demonstration.

II. The Birth of the Coordination Committee

The first protest had a significant impact in breaking the barrier of fear amongst broad segments of the city’s residents and unlike most Syrian cities that rose up at the start of the revolution, the politicized elite played a leading role in the revolutionary movement of Salamiyah. Though the number of protestors did not exceed 30, they were mostly those who had worked in politics previously, and those who had been arrested due to their opposition roles. They played a proactive role in stimulating the revolutionary work in the city and pushed more people to participate in the movement.

After the first demonstration and the crackdown by the security forces and the *Shabiha*, it was clear that something needed to be formed to deal with them and to help the coordination of the movement. Everyone had initially agreed that the first demonstration was spontaneous and that the initiative was fairly individualistic.

According to the eyewitness testimonies, one of the participants of the protests met with a member of the religious clergy in the city, who was

blamed by the Sheikh for not informing them of the demonstration to come out after Friday prayers. They agreed that some form of coordination was needed, and it was decided that the young man and the Sheikh would coordinate on subsequent demonstrations. According to M.M., “after the first demonstration, a sheikh, who leads prayers at the local Sunni mosque and with whom I have a good relationship, came to my house to and lamented the fact that we had not coordinated with him and informed him of the date of the protest. I told me that we went to blend in with the protesters, and that we did not imagine they would want to join us. He responded by saying ‘we did not know about the event.’ I told him that as long as he is in, we will coordinate from now on about who will be attending in the next week and that the next event will be better than the last with better coordination and that I will write some new banners.”

The second protest in the city was on April 1st, 2011⁶. It was more organized than the first demonstration, attracted more attendees, and the protestors suffered a number of attacks from the *Shabiha* and the security agents.⁷

The activists’ days before the second demonstration were filled with intense meetings. Following those discussions, they reached a conclusion to create working groups: one with the political elites from Salamiyah, well-known for their integrity and historical opposition to the Assad regime, called the “Committee of Wise Men” and a second committee for the youth, which originally consisted of 11 young men and women, representing different groups of activists of the city. They were called “The Ground Committee.” A third group was tasked with linking the two committees together. According to the testimonies, the second demonstration (4/1/2011) was very enjoyable. They were able to mobilize a larger number and worked more

⁶ The second protest in Salamiyah, April 1, 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGWl6x9aJPA>

⁷ Videos of the attacks on protestors by the *Shabiha*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giBZEgOmebw>

towards breaking the barrier of fear. The activists were energized, and felt they had the motivation to continue organizing.

Having two committees was to serve a practical purpose: the Committee of Wise Men was composed of people who have experience in political work, as well as the law, and were able to provide guidance, assistance, and feedback to the Ground Committee, composed of the youth. The Ground Committee met with the Committee of Wise Men to discuss the previous demonstration, hear feedback, and plan the following demonstrations on tuesdays. The Ground Committee would then meet on Wednesdays to cast the final decision for the week; they find the location, and inform their members to pass on the information.⁸

The Committee of Wise Men consisted of mostly older men, belonging to different organizations and ideologies. As a result, they had trouble coordinating with The Ground Committee, who were young men and women in the prime of their life who had not yet engaged in organizational work, had not embraced prevailing ideologies, and were tempted by actions on the street as opposed to being boxed into organizational work and specific ideologies.

At the end of April 2011, the Ground Committee, which consisted of men and women of different backgrounds, began the Salamiyah Coordination Committee.⁹ They were tasked with organizing the demonstrations, securing the banners and pictures to use, manipulating the radio and other social media matters. In May 2011, they also launched the Coordination Committee's Press Office, whose mission was to disseminate information about the demonstrations in the city by posting them on the Committee's

⁸ This information is from the gathered testimonies from activists in Salamiyah, including the testimony of Mr. Hassan Zahraa', known as Abu Essam, a former detainee of the Syrian government on charges of belonging to the Communist Labour Party.

⁹ Salamiyah Coordination Committee's Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/Salamiyah.cordinator?ref=ts&fref=ts>

Facebook, YouTube, and liase with the media and others to share the news.¹⁰

Rising popular support, and the downfall of the barrier of fear attracted even more community groups in the city to participate in the demonstrations and the movement. By the end of April 2011, the number of demonstrators had doubled multiple times. On April 17th, hundreds of the city's residents came out to an evening demonstration, where they lit candles and marched in the streets for hours, chanting and raising banners.¹¹ The slogan, "overthrow the regime" had not be been adopted by Salamiyah's activists. According to numerous testimonies, the April 1st protest did not face any retribution from the *shabiha* and the security agents. It demonstrated the power of crowds and how they were able to wield their power. The streets, from mid-April until the end of August that year, belonged to the people.

III. The Start of Popular Anger

Over time, groups from the the countryside near the city began to join the demonstrations. By May, the number of protesters numbered in the thousands,¹² and included a broader range of the social, political, and cultural spectrum.

During this same period, many forms of political and social expressions flourished. The city's walls were jammed with slogans opposing the Assad regime. The young men, aged 15 and younger, used to tease and challenge the security forces in the city, through writing on the walls of the state institutions and facilities as well as burning many of the pictures of Bashar al-Assad that filled the city. The city's streets were filled with political

¹⁰ Salamiyah Coordination Committee's YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMydrnSKJdg>

¹¹ One of the most prominent slogans at the protest was "One... The Syrian People are One. The Syrian State Media is a Liar. We don't want money, we want dignity. Freedom. the people want freedom. O Youth, Freedom is at the door." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46pxSIDZ8Ts>

¹² A mass demonstration in the city, April 29, 2011 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_snHjaugltw

leaflets, data, scrapbooks and all forms of agitprop against the Assad regime. These would be distributed at night in the streets, leaving the Ba'ath party's student divisions and security agents to collect them from the streets the next morning.¹³

In spite of the revolutionary fervor witnessed through the city of Salamiyah, and the slogans and chants which poured out of protestors, they were all of a reformist nature. Those in charge of the protests, the coordinators, had asked for protesters to refrain from calling for the fall of regime, especially since the larger protests drew more *shabiha*. Only at one protest did they call for the overthrow of the regime, and it was at the cultural center of the town.¹⁴

According to eyewitness accounts, on the Friday of Azadî¹⁵, which was May 20, 2011, the demonstrators gathered in the street adjacent to the city's cultural center, the demonstrators were met by a large crowd of shabiha and security forces. According to witness S.A., "We gathered at the Cultural Center's street. As always, there were rumors about the presence of shabiha from the countryside being bussed in to quell the protests which sparked a lot of controversy amongst us. Should we carry on with the demonstration, or move it to another place? We decided to stand our ground, which felt like a challenge." Within hours, dozens of protesters had been injured, mostly a result of stone throwing. Eyewitnesses testify that most of the injuries were head injuries, incurred by the security forces. The head of the military security branch managed to discover the hiding place of the protestors on the roof of one of the buildings. Due to the violence, and the number of the wounded, an intense anger was cultivated amongst the protestors. This changed the trajectory of the town and the protestors: this led people to chant for the overthrow of the regime.

¹³ People freed by the regime : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_znKVbU0Bk

¹⁴ Shabiha attacking demonstrators on May 20, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB8r5LPqqU8>

¹⁵ Kurdish for Freedom

IV. June: Friday of Freedom's Children

Two weeks following this incident, June 3, 2011, the Friday was dubbed Friday of Freedom's Children. As usual in those days, everyone poured into the streets. The protest lasted nearly three hours, and was not subject to any violence at the hands of the *shabiha* and the security forces. The protesters, elated, returned to their homes at around four in the afternoon. There, they received news from Hama. The *shabiha* and the security agents had opened fire, and dozens were killed and wounded.

The mosques of Salamiyah began inviting people to donate blood and provide assistance to the people of Hama who were in distress. The city and the movement leaders responded with gusto, and they went to the National Hospital to donate blood. According to eyewitness A.S.: "There was an overwhelming sense of responsibility brotherhood towards the city of Hama, and the residents of Salamiyah wanted to do anything they can to relieve the pressure on Hama and support them. There was plenty of sympathy from the residents, and the anger was also clear to everyone."¹⁶ In the meantime, dozens of demonstrations broke out in the city on motorcycles and on foot, to spread their rage and to make sure that it is a day that will never be forgotten in the history of the two cities.

According to S.A., "We informed everyone to go to the National Hospital to donate blood, and the response to the appeal was more than we expected. But what happened was that the security forces destroyed the donated blood bags in the hospital. In Hama, the security officials cordoned off the Hourani Hospital and prevented donors from reaching it. This prompted the youth to go to Hama through the side streets, avoiding the security checkpoints on the roads, in order to donate at private homes. They communicated with doctors and pharmacists to secure empty blood bags and help those donating private homes. Activists from Salamiyah contacted

¹⁶ The night protest of rage in Salamiyah in response to the massacre in Hama <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMydrmSKJdg>

those from Hama and asked them to come to Salamiyah to pick up the blood bags. We met them at Al-Kafat, a small village west of Salamiyah, and handed over the blood bags and medicine in secret.”

Following these events, overwhelming anger prevailed in Salamiyah. This pushed hundreds of young men and women to go out and express their anger in the streets, and condemn the crime carried out against civilians in Hama.

This anger was expressed by the young men and women in the city's streets, chanting what would become the most repeated slogan: we demand the downfall of the regime. The protesters continued to wander around the city streets until about midnight, and the reaction of Salamiyah during Hama's need was the springboard for future work between the activists of both sides, a show of solidarity and national unity.

S.Y., an eyewitness said, “The Friday of Freedom's Children signified a turning point in the relationships and political action amongst the activists of Hama and Salamiyah. This started the collaborative work amongst the coordination committees. Activists in Salamiyah were now invited to participate in the demonstrations in Hama, sending delegations between the two cities to represent at the protests, featuring banners and flags.

V. Dreams of Liberation

The aftermath of the massacre committed by the Syrian security forces against the civilians in Hama was the opposite of what the Assad regime wanted. The massacre did not break the spirit and the will of the popular movement in Hama; rather, it galvanized it further. The popular movement in Hama reacted with civil disobedience and a general strike that lasted three days, as well as protests during the funerals for the victims of the massacre. Thousands of the city's residents came out, filled the streets, and chanted for the overthrow of the regime.

In mid-June 2011, the city almost liberated from the Assad regime, with most military manifestations gone from the city, including the traffic police, and the activists organizing the affairs of the city through their local councils, organized the largest demonstrations ever known in the history of Syria.¹⁷

A stroll through the city by the authors of this piece, it was noticed the way that the streets were organized and how the state institutions were being protected by the activists of the city, who confirmed that these institutions have been unaffected.

Hama has lived the dream of liberation, without a single shot fired. Many of the activists in Hama stressed their rejection of any acts of violence or the use of arms by the opposition. This has influenced all events unfolding events in Salamiyah.

Between June and August, Salamiyah lived through the most beautiful days: the city bearing witness to demonstrations that slowly turned into celebrations, with the demonstrators singing and giving speeches, shouting for freedom at the top of their lungs, almost capturing it in their hands.¹⁸

The city was alive and reverberating with energy from all its movements: media, political, and civil. There was a hive of activity with discussions and debates, seminars and meetings with all the various activists of the revolution, connecting with their counterparts in different Syrian cities. As a result of this revolutionary fervor, many of the youth civic organizations were born, such as Nabd, Spectrum for Syria, the Revolutionary Students, and the Women's Coordination Committees, as well as political organizations like Mouwtana, the National Bloc, and the revitalization of many of the old political parties such as the Communist Party, the Communist Labour Party, and the Social Democratic People's Party.

¹⁷ The authors of this paper visited Hama in June 2011. This is their eyewitness testimony.

¹⁸ A peaceful demonstration in Salamiyah on July 22, 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rD_nw3MKH1w

The city was living the dreams of liberation, and sought to invent many forms of political and civic expression, releasing the many ideas and aspirations that for decades were repressed and trapped in fear. The city felt emancipated. Fear left the hearts of the activists, who filled the streets with demonstrations and attracted thousands of people from the city from all age groups. It was as if a new era had begun in the city, where the revolted felt as though their abilities to bring about change was effective; they believed in their ability to decide their history and their future and their children's future.

However, this dream was ephemeral; caught between the worries of liberation and the hellish plan the Assad regime was about to unleash on Hama and Salamiyah.¹⁹

In the early morning hours, the Syrian Arab Army surrounded Hama from all entrances, with tanks, heavy weaponry, and hundreds of soldiers and began an assault on the city. Within hours, dozens of civilians were injured and killed. The bombing was of residential neighborhoods, with the focus on the Hourani Hospital. When the residents came out to protest against this barbarism, they were subject to bombing. Security forces opened fire on them, with dozens killed and wounded.

Because of the large number of victims and the extreme heat in August²⁰, many were forced to bury their killed loved ones in public parks,²¹ their homes' gardens, and the hospitals morgues were filled with corpses, with many degenerating. News of this reached Salamiyah, along with dozens of Hamwi families escaping from the hell and destruction. That summer was a summer of donations, bitterness and anticipation from everyone.

¹⁹ Video showing the bombing of Hama by Assad forces on July 30, 2011 30-7-2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Mx-2I5rZt4>

²⁰ Video showing the burial of the victims of Assad's bombings on Hama, August 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvVpnxQvu6E>

²¹ August 2011 the writers of the author witnessed a mass burial in the Saroujyeh Garden

The demonstrations in Salamiyah intensified following these events. There were feelings of anger and fear: anger towards the fascist practices of al-Assad's forces, which claimed the lives of dozens of civilians, and the fear that Hama would fall to Assad's forces, with Salamiyah next, placing an end to the revolution and collaboration between the two cities.

According to many testimonies, the city of Salamiyah channeled their energies to house the displaced and find them security, necessities. They also continued demonstrating and supporting the city of Hama. On August 19th, a Friday, activists called for protests for "the Promise of Victory."²² That Friday, another mass demonstration came out of the newly renamed "Freedom Square" from Jura street in Downtown Salamiyah. There, they were met by army forces, security agents, and *shabiha*. The demonstration was suppressed, with these forces shooting bullets in the air. The security apparatus launched a massive arrest campaign, breaking into the homes of activists, ultimately arresting more than 450 people. Army checkpoints sprung up at the entrances of the city, manned by *shabiha*, and at the major highways. This caused a state of panic to prevail amongst the population, and pushed many of the city's activists into hiding from the eyes of the security apparatus by hiding in the nearby farms, with some leaving the city, thereby ending the era of Liberation in the city, ushering in a new era of Assad control. The activists returned to covert actions.

VI. The Dimmed Prospects of Liberation: The Return of Covert Action

The early months of "liberation" were characterized by political and revolutionary actions done in public and without any sense of fear amongst the activists. They were also characterized by the absence of violence. This all disappeared after mid-August 2011.²³ The activists had to resort to

²² A video showing the protests of the city on August 14, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzzE9bfgL6M>

²³ One of the last major protests in the city, on the Friday of We Will Not Kneel (August 12, 2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9aWr0XCATg>

working in secret. The graffiti artists, “sprayers” returned to the city, filling its walls with slogans against the Assad regime. They returned to burning pictures of Bashar al-Assad which resulted in the deployment of more Assadist troops in the city. Almost every morning, very early, activists published statements and flyers, which they would disseminate in the streets.

The mass protests gradually stopped. Instead, they began to do “flying demonstrations.” These demonstrations, which consist of a few numbers of demonstrators, chanting against the regime for a few minutes before dispersing, opting to hide away from the grip of Assadist forces. Oftentimes, they would be late at night²⁴, or on motorcycles²⁵. All of this was due to the insistence of activists to continue the revolution to constantly challenge the repression of the Assad regime.

After mid-August 2011, many variables contributed to the decline in the forefront of the revolutionary movement on the ground, including the absence of large numbers of activists in the revolutionary movements in the city, where the number of detainees in the city were in the hundreds. Still, the city continued to defy Assad’s repression, and declared their opposition to the Assad regime. During the funeral of the first martyr of Salamiyah, the popular anger against the Assad regime was especially clear.²⁶

June 2012 marked the death of the first martyr from Salamiyah at the hands of the Assad regime. His name was Melham Rustum. He was delivering medical and relief aid to Homs when he was killed. Thousands of people in Salamiyah, at his funeral, denounced the Assad regime and the practices

²⁴ An evening demonstration in Salamiyah, on November 11, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPsSdC27axQ>

²⁵ A “flying demonstration” in Salamiyah on October 10, 2011 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8Wh6Lm0kNg>

²⁶ Martyr Melham Rustum’s funeral <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxF7OsPSEx8>

of the state security apparatuses.²⁷ His fall marked the fall of many others²⁸ as well. Jamal Fakhouri²⁹, was killed a few days later on June 30, 2012. During his funeral, many staged rallies swept through the city. The mourners-turned-protesters came under fire by Assad's forces, and eventually Ali Khatib³⁰, a young citizen of the city, was martyred.

Despite the anger that rocked the city of Salamiyah, despite the insistence of the activists to stick to the revolution, the security forces and Assad's army and militias managed to suppress the civil and peaceful movement in the city. This also caused some of the youth who were at the head of the revolutionary struggles in the city to take up arms and form the first battalions and brigades of the city, which is discussed in length in Part II of the paper.

By the end of 2012, the security and military forces as well as the *shabiha* and Assad's militias, occupied the city gradually.³¹ They erected military checkpoints at all entrances to the city and the public roads, carried out intensive patrols in the streets. They completely usurped the activists of their will and drove them into isolation, searching for new methods in the struggle against the Assad regime.

Activists continued despite the hardships that suffocated the city. Their protests hardly attracted more than a few dozen protesters, that lasted no more than a few minutes. With the start of 2013, the work shifted more towards relief and the support of people in the city. With the growing armed conflict in various Syrian cities, Salamiyah turned into a destination for fugitives fleeing war and destruction. Salamiyah welcomed, with open arms,

²⁷ Melhem Rustum's funeral <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OPBGPK1cw4>

²⁸ Jamal Ali Fakhouri's Funeral <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRITTruH5Ww>

²⁹ A list of the martyrs from Salamiyah, from the VDC <http://cutt.us/AELk>

³⁰ Ali Khatib's funeral, in Salamiyah: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpzHlgjIXIE>

³¹ *Shabiha* and security forces occupying the streets of the city. dated April 20, 2012 www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaVXuSFMP-c

the displaced from Homs, Hama, and the countryside to the east of the city, which will be discussed in Part III of the study. Many Salamiyah families that lived in other parts of the country returned to the city, as the war negatively affected the cities they lived in such as Damascus, Raqqa, Al-Tabqa, etc. The increasing severity of the economic situation across the country, with the collapse of many sources of income in Salamiyah, caused for the residents to be concerned about how best to secure the daily necessities of life for the residents of the city let alone the displaced.

The activists from all the civil and political groups made tremendous efforts in order to secure the necessities. They turned their political activities into aid work. The start of 2014, a new burden was added to the shoulders of the city's residents living under the weight of the collapsing economic conditions and the thuggery witnessed in the city at the hands of the National Defense Forces, an irregular militia formed by the Assad regime, the growing threat of the Islamic State ("Da'esh") which extended its control over the province of Raqqa and extended its military presence until the edge of Salamiyah to the North and Northeast, where they managed to control a group of villages around the town. SyriaUntold surveyed the residents to understand their attitudes and experiences with and the impact of Da'esh. Some felt that Da'esh had no impact on Salamiyah, and that those who were with the regime at the start of the revolution have remained that way and those who were opposed are still oppositionists; they attribute the mass migration of youth out of the city to the regime, and not Da'esh.

One of the residents, however, said "Da'esh is necessarily affecting the attitude of the population, but what is going on from the arms, the killing, the Islamic Factions, and the criminality of the regime has let me become neutral. We don't exist except under the shadow and sounds of bullets."

On the other hand, other residents are convinced that the only reason that Da'esh has not entered the city is due to the Assad regime. Others, still, argue that Da'esh is an extension of the Assad regime.

One activist said: “Most of the leaders Da’esh are the regime’s ex-generals, and when the regime wants Da’esh to have Salamiyah, they will deliver it to them. However, I do think that the regime is the protector of the city, because of the presence of non-Da’esh Islamists in Salamiyah’s countryside.”

The interaction of the political, economic, military, and other factors with each other have had a negative effect on the general mood in the city. These issues have become a source of debate amongst the residents of the city, with some of the residents saying that Assad’s forces and the National Defense Forces are needed to protect the city from Da’esh and the non-Da’esh Salafists. Others, still, think that the city needs to defend itself from Assad’s forces and the NDF and that the Salafist organizations are only a result of the Assad regime’s violence.

whatever the size or nature of the debate and controversy amongst the Salamiyah’s population, the city is now divided between supporters of the Assad regime, those against him, and the remainder of the revolutionary movement. The city has found itself stuck between a rock and a hard place: the Assad regime and its militias on one side, and Da’esh and the Salafists on the other.

CHAPTER TWO: ERA OF CHALLENGE

Salamiyah, with its passion of freedom, was about to be tested. In the Era of Liberation, when the security forces inside the city retreated, the activists truly felt the freedom of expression and movement; these months spurred several groups to develop varying forms of expression, ranging from the political to the civil. The youth contributed the most dynamism to the movement. The civil society work that attracted many young people to work together differed from the classic forms of organizing and their ideology. The youth became involved in a number of different groups of civil action.

I. Civil Society Organizations

a) SPECTRUM FOR SYRIA

Spectrum for Syria, in the context of civil movements³², may be closer to civil society including the political community. According to the testimony of one of the founders of the movement³³, Spectrum for Syria sought to create an overarching framework for the many young men and women involved in the revolution. These youth were yearning to find representation and a way to frame their belonging in the movement. The movement began with about 15 young men and women, who would gather to discuss and debate the definition of their work, setting clear goals ahead of themselves. They continued to develop an identity aligned with the new situation in the country.

Spectrum for Syria kept far away from any ideological doctrine; it offered itself as a democratic forum for youth to contribute to during the process of ongoing change in Syria. As such, the movement was able to maintain its independence and was able to build strong relationships with many of the

³² Spectrum for Syria's Facebook Page https://www.facebook.com/Spectrums.for.Syria/info?tab=page_info

³³ Testimony obtained by the research group from Abdullah al-Sha'ar, one of the founders of the movement, in the summer of 2015

existing political forces in Syria, such as the National Bloc, Nabd, Revolutionary Movement of Raqqa, and others.

Spectrum's activities were extremely varied; they would not only participate in public demonstrations, but that they would also participate in demonstrations all over the country. They would go to different cities and take part in their protests. Abdullah, one of the founders of the movement, said that members of the organization participated in demonstrations in various neighborhoods of Damascus, such as Barzeh, Midan, Kafersouseh, Yarmouk, and Jobar, as well as parts of Homs.

Politically, the movement adopted a list of ideals. The list included a number of issues, including a call for the Syrian army to rehabilitate and be converted into a national institution. Women's rights and the issues of equality also featured high on the list, and the group also had ideas about the nature of diplomatic relationships. Since the end of 2011, Spectrum stressed, across all its literature, its non-violent stance. The movement participated in a number of campaigns that adhered to this ideology, calling for a cessation of violence, such as the "Stop the Killing, We Want to Build a Homeland for All" campaign. The movement launched a similar set of campaigns, the most important of which was "Behind Bars", which demanded the release of prisoners of conscience in Assad's prisons.³⁴ According to the members of the movement themselves, Spectrum called itself a movement for all of Syria. Their motto was, "Working from inside Syria, striving to represent the spectrum of Syrian society on Syrian territory, in order to be an effective partner in building a modern Syria. Syria, Pluralism, Democracy."

Spectrum, like other revolutionary movements in Salamiyah, suffered greatly following the wave of arrests by the Assad regime in mid-August 2011. Many of the movement's members were arrested, and the security

³⁴ Video showing the various activities of the Spectrum Movement in Syria <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VacdVOqQYWM>

organizations began to exert extreme pressure on those who were not arrested. As a result, the movement had to downsize their activities, and organize in secret. Their work became mostly media work. Furthermore, many of the members fled Syria in order to escape the security forces.

b) NABD (PULSE OF SYRIAN CIVIL YOUTH)

Nabd does not differ much from Spectrum; the groups share a cultural identity, political orientation, and a civic nature. However, Nabd was founded by a group of young men and women in Homs, which lies 45 kilometers south of Salamiyah. By virtue of the relationships between the young men and women of Salamiyah and their peers in Homs, due to friendships made in the university and their family ties, Nabd was able to spread quickly in Salamiyah. The group attracted many of the young activists, who were now part of the revolutionary fabric of the city.

Nabd was founded in June 2011 by a group of 15 young men and women from Homs. The ‘founding core’ was made up mostly of university students. This proved to be the most important factor in the group’s spread, as the students were able to mobilize their counterparts in other parts of the country like, Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, and Damascus.

Nabd built upon the ideals and demands sweeping the country: to build a modern civil state. According to the founding statement, Nabd seeks to “work on the transition of Syria into a pluralistic, civil state, where everyone in the country’s social fabric is on an equal footing.”³⁵ The assembly did not adopt a specific political ideology or doctrine, calling for “political neutrality”. However, they denounced all forms of violence and to resist the carrying of weapons. They called for the adherence to national unity, citizenship, and the rule of law.

Nabd’s activities were also extremely varied, and included a broad range of revolutionary works. According to one of the members, “We regulated the

³⁵ From the Founding Statement, July 2011: <https://www.facebook.com/nabd.shabab.syria>

peaceful demonstrations in Homs and attended various other protests in different provinces and cities. We also distributed leaflets, and graffitied slogans. We also provided humanitarian aid, and helped the displaced families. We distributed food baskets to those who were in need. Currently, Nabd is working on establishing a permanent projects in the liberated areas of Syria, specifically projects that focus on citizen development, such as the establishment of schools for children in Aleppo, Damascus, and establishing programs and work projects for women and the displaced.”³⁶ Nabd also played a specific role after the violence increased in the country, particularly in Homs. They established workshops for children that focus on education, entertainment, and psychological support. They also supported the displaced communities, people who were forced to leave their homes due to the intensifying conflict. In Salamiyah, particularly, the group played a large role in relief work helping the exodus from Homs and Hama.

c) REVOLUTIONARY STUDENTS

At the end of 2011, dozens of young men and women in the prime of their life founded the Revolutionary Students movement. The movement was born when 6 students, from different high schools, entered in a prolonged debate about what they should do to take part in the revolutionary spirit sweeping the streets. Ahmad, a founding student, said that “We were a group of students, did not number more than 6 at the time and we formed a group that would be responsible for organizing demonstrations, and informing other students about the dates and times of the protests.”³⁷

The majority of the activists’ actions took place within the city³⁸³⁹. The student activists would hang the revolutionary flag in many parts of the city,

³⁶ “From the founding statement: <https://www.facebook.com/nabd.shabab.syria>

³⁷ Ahmad was a secondary school student when the Revolutionary Student movement was formed. He is a co-founder.

³⁸ Student demonstration in front of the Health center December 11 2012 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RL_3ZeLsDg

³⁹ Testimony from a college student, A.H, who was arrested by the Assad regime and fled Syria shortly after

alongside public facilities. They raised the flag of the revolution above the National Hospital in Salamiyah. They published many leaflets and flyers with anti-regime slogans and distributed them. Some in the movement became graffiti artists and would spray the walls of the city. They documented all the abuses that the students were exposed to at the hands of the *shabiha* and shared them with the media.

The activities that the Revolutionary Students varied widely. They not only did the revolutionary actions, but they also contributed greatly to the relief work by providing aid to displaced people in the city and coordinating with the Coordination Committees. The Revolutionary Students also assisted the displaced students by helping them get their required paperwork in order to pursue their studies. They built strong relationships with the displaced students, and they expanded their activities to Hama, where they joined the Hama Revolutionary Student Union and worked with them. They shared pictures, banners, and some artwork which was published on the Revolutionary Students facebook page and the Student Union page.

According to Ahmad, one of the founding members, the Revolutionary Student body was extremely inspiring to the young students. "We presented a positive image of the youth through our presence in the streets. Our interest in the public affairs and our desire for freedom and dignity was apparent. Many times during the demonstrations, we would be out in the streets and loyalists and neutralists would be standing by, watching. When the security forces would come and attack us, they would sympathize with us and some even changed their positions due to the repression and arrests that they witnessed during our peaceful protests."

The youth were subject to not only the brutality from the security services, but they were subjected to plenty of pressure from their schools and their schools' administration, due to the military nature of the education system in Syria. Many were threatened with expulsion and suspension, and were prevented from pursuing their education in state schools. Because of all

this, the Revolutionary Students movement suspended their work at the end of 2013.

d) THE STREET IS OURS

“The Street Is Ours” campaign began in the last third of 2012. During a time of when revolutionary action was in decline in Salamiyah, this was a new revolutionary movement in the city.

The movement began as a call put out by some activists to meet at a specific time, while wearing specific colors, walking down a specific street without raising any banners or anything. This movement was a reaction to the blatant repression unleashed on the city’s peaceful demonstrations by the security forces after September 2011.

According to activist A.J⁴⁰, “The idea was to walk silently in the streets, without raising any banners or chanting any slogans, in order to raise a new challenge to the security forces that suppressed the demonstrations in the city. The idea of “The Street is Ours” was to organize peacefully the largest number of revolutionaries in one street, at full force, in a surprising manner in order to confuse the security forces and render them powerless amongst the face of the power of the streets. We aimed to mobilize support for the revolution in Syria and to restore the revolutionaries’ morale in Salamiyah. We wanted to challenge the accusations that we were not vandals or violent and pave the way for other, more influential movements.”

“The Street is Ours” was widely accepted by the city’s activists. The movement proposed to walk out twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays. It was also similar to the other revolutionary movements in Salamiyah, as they also adopted civic and non-violent work in the fight against the Assad regime. They renounced violence and stood against carrying weapons.⁴¹

⁴⁰ A.J was one of the activists from Salamiyah who was arrested more than once by the Assad regime, and forced to flee to escape the brutality of the security forces.

⁴¹ The Street is Ours, Salamiyah: December 14, 2011 : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQEMenX98qI>

In addition to the activities that the movement established, they also stood in solidarity with detainees. On “Wednesday of Al Shamma”, which took place on May 23, 2012, The Street is Ours said: “We affirm that we will not forget Al Shamma, we will not forget this family that still sits in the darkness of prisons, for nearly 10 months now. We demand to know what has become of them. We reaffirm that we stand together, hand in hand, until the overthrow of the regime and the liberation of all detainees.” Then, activists from Hama raised a banner that demanded the release of Al Shamma.

The movement was characterized by the instructions that they would give all participants in their activities, such as the demand that they all use the same time. The rationale was “time is power, and without our time the movement would lose much of its power.” They all adjusted their times to the BBC. Another of the rules was that they do not carry pictures or banners, or chant during their marches, in order to preserve the ideas that they wanted to achieve.

Despite the non-violent movement, and the bare minimum that the group did, it did not escape the repression of Assad’s forces. According to A.J., “The last time we went out was mid-2012, in collaboration with other groups in the city. The security forces and the *shabiha* attacked us and tried to arrest some of the youth. We were beaten, alongside some women. It was at the point that we broke our silence and screamed, ‘we demand the downfall of the regime.’ This was the last demonstration put on by The Street Is Ours.”

e) THE WOMEN’S COORDINATION COMMITTEE OF SALAMIYAH⁴²

Salamiyah was characterized by the amount of women’s participation in the revolutionary movements of the city.⁴³ The “Salmooni” women proved

⁴² The Women’s Coordination Committee of Salamiyah <http://cutt.us/YwVz5>

⁴³ A women’s demonstrations in Salamiyah, on August 7, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WYR8GZBitI>

themselves to be present in all arenas of revolutionary activity. Out of 25 demonstrators in the first protest, 6 were women.⁴⁴

Despite all this, women were not represented in the frameworks that emerged at the beginning of the revolution. For example, all the founding members of the Coordination Committee in Salamiyah were male. Zahra said, “the revolutionary movement began in the city, and many women participated but we were not thanked for any political actions we did. We were not present during the establishment of the first Coordination Committee or the ones after even though we would participate in large number in the demonstrations and contribute to the city’s revolutionary activities.”

To protest this marginalization, a group of women decided to put on a silent protest. They donned black, to mourn the souls of the martyrs of the revolution. When the protesters gathered at the location, a representative from the Coordination Committee came out to try to stop the protest as it was taking place outside of the Coordination Committee’s framework.

After this, and other similar incidents, the female activists of the city decided to form a body that reflected their political will and to help with the organization of their activities. Thus was born the “Women’s Coordination Committee of Salamiyah” which was composed of women from different ages and backgrounds, all of whom were introduced to each other via various demonstrations and other actions.

In a short period of time, the Women’s Coordination Committee was able to attract a large number of women in the city, who were drawn to a body that worked with their affairs. This led to an increase of activity, and organizing. There would be weekly women’s demonstrations, sit-ins in the public square, demanding the release of detainees, and they would write and distribute political statements in the streets and online.

⁴⁴ The information in this paragraph was obtained by the research group via a testimony from H.D., one of the activists of the city and founders of the Women’s Coordination Committee.

When the major demonstrations in the city stopped due to the repression suffered by the activists, women were the ones who returned to the streets.⁴⁵ Women began to carry out silent sit-ins, carrying banners and slogans of the revolution, and oftentimes demonstrations. This encouraged the youth in the city to return to street protests. On March 21, 2012, which was the Mother's Day Festival in Salamiyah, the women met in the public square of the city with their children and demanded the release of the detainees. They were attacked then, by the head of the local security forces. The women managed to defend themselves and fought back against the security forces.⁴⁶

The women's intense actions continued in Salamiyah until the end of 2012, when the revolutionary actions in the city declined. This coincided with the height of repression, with arrests and violence haunting the activists of the city. The security services and the *shabiha* numbers multiplied sharply, which led to more activists been arrested, beaten, and tortured.

Because of this repression, the women had to be creative and find other ways of self-expression. This was when they came up with the idea of the 'house sit-in'⁴⁷. They held these sit-ins weekly, as well as meetings where the activists would discuss what's going on across the country. After these discussions, they would write banners, paint pictures and write political statements that would be read at the sit-ins. They also would record the sit-ins and publish them online. Each sit-in rallied around a different situation in the country, to send a message of solidarity to those inside the country, and a message about the status of the women to those outside of Syria.

⁴⁵ Women's Coordination Committee demonstration, "Proud Raqqa on the Road to Freedom" February 22, 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bvefe1ID-1Y>

⁴⁶ An interview with female activists who were witness to this sit-in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FYZku2HDB4>

⁴⁷ Women's sit-in in Salamiyah, November 2, 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyjohbUfrGk>

After a while, the Women's Coordination Committee began to work outside of the city too. They extended their network to include other revolutionary groups from nearby cities. According to K.D., "After a time of the women coordinating with other groups, we formed, in Damascus, the Coalition of Women. It, was composed of assemblies of women from Damascus, the Damascus Suburbs, Sweida, and Salamiyah. The Women's Coordination Committee of Salamiyah called for this model to be replicated across the country."

At the time of writing, the Women's Coordination Committee is still working on revolutionary action in Salamiyah, and it could be argued that it is the last remaining movement in Salamiyah.

In addition to the aforementioned groups born in Salamiyah, other groups also participated in the revolutionary movement. These groups, like the Local Coordination Committee, the Media Office, and the Free Guerrilla Movement, were also affected by the security crackdowns and repression.

II. Political Organizations

Before the revolution, there were several political groups that were active in the city. However, once the revolution started, these political groups were re-energized and emerged anew. The most important of these groups will be discussed in this section.

a) NATIONAL BLOC⁴⁸

The National Bloc, founded on May 15, 2011, was an attempt by some political activists to revive the spirit of the National Bloc, which was founded in Syria 1926, during the French Occupation.⁴⁹ Iqab Yahya, Ziyad al-Fil, and Musafa Rustom, from Salamiyah, were at the forefront of this movement. They were a group of politicians from the Ba'ath Party who had been

⁴⁸ The National Bloc's facebook page <http://cutt.us/LfSY3>

⁴⁹ The first statement of the National Bloc <http://cutt.us/N1Mey>

arrested after Hafez al-Assad's coup and ascension to power.⁵⁰ The party describes itself⁵¹ as "A national framework comprising of all segments of Syrian society, across ethno-sectarian, and linguistic lines. There will be no discrimination between its tribal groups, the Arabs, Kurds, and other ethnic groups. Additionally, the members of this organization, who come from different families engaged in the historic national struggle, various social and religious backgrounds, stand unified to ensure the unity, security, and freedom of Syria."

According to R.D., the group started at the end of April 2011. The Bloc, led by Ziyad al-Fil, began recruiting youth to join the bloc and work with them. They held a number of debates and discussions at this time, and managed to attract some youth to join their ranks. The Bloc adopted a nationally inclusive speech and sought to adopt slogans of the revolution as a springboard for their mass actions.

The National Bloc built on the demand of the 'civil state' and demanded democracy. The group, through their various statements and charter, expressed their will for a Syrian state built on a democratic republic parliamentary system. They also adopted principles of nonviolence and stressed the need to continue the political, civil, and nonviolent work for the overthrow of the regime. One of their main objectives was to "achieve representative justice and equality in all public duties and rights, regardless of an individual's race, religion, or sect, so that every citizen feels responsible for the safety, present, and future of the nation and contributes to its climate of freedom."

However, the Bloc had many shortcomings, which contributed to the reluctance of the young activists from joining them. According to

⁵⁰ This part of the Ba'ath party was known as the 'Democratic Ba'ath' and they were well known amongst the activists. The majority of this wing were arrested and prosecuted after 1963. Mustafa Rustom, specifically, was detained for more than 24 years.

⁵¹ National Bloc's Charter <http://cutt.us/WPpB>

testimonies,⁵² the National Bloc stood against the protests, stating that political action is more important than activism. Over time, the National Bloc limited their work on activism and relief work, instead focusing on assisting outside organizations who helped secure for the displaced food, clothing, medicine, and other necessities. According to R.D.'s testimony, most of the youth cadres did not work with the Bloc for various reasons, including the Bloc's inability to keep up with the changes in the youth's moods and attitudes, and the Bloc's insistence to impose political actions and to devise new mechanisms, and of course, the arrest of a number of the youth.

b) MOUWATANA MOVEMENT⁵³

The Mouwatana's Movement was born in 2011 in Damascus, at the start of the revolution. A Syrian political organization, its founding members were political activists who had experience with organizing political actions, being prosecuted and detained. A number of them participated in the demonstrations and sit-ins and took part in media activities to support the revolution. Soon, Mouwatana expanded to several areas in Syria and a number of revolutionary young men and women joined, despite having a lack of political experience.

The political vision of Mouwatana was accepted by most of those living in Salamiyah, and large segments of the activists were attracted to its ranks. As such, it became a mainstream movement. They believe that the future Syrian state must be a democratic, and pluralistic, with no sectarian or ethnic quotas, and that the Syrian state must not be a regional state. Mouwatana also worked to adopt legitimate rights and protections for the nation's minorities. However, the most important characteristic of Mouwatana was its position on the "Free Syrian Army", which started as opposition to the Assad regime. Despite the Movement's support of

⁵² Young activist and former detainee A.K. (as well as the author) was a witness to discussion with one of the most prominent founders of the National Bloc

⁵³ Mouwatana Movement's Facebook Page http://www.mouatana.org/?page_id=7

nonviolent work, and the insistence that it was crucial, they did not stymie outspoken support of the FSA “as it was a revolutionary armed movement, that was forced on Syrians. Civilians and military defectors took up arms in the face of the machine of terrible repression, which provided no other option than to counter the violence against the people” according to the movement’s documents.

Since the formation of Mouwatana Movement in Salamiyah, was able to attract many of activists to the city, especially those who lived in Damascus. Through these ties, forged by the founders of the movement and activists in the city, a number of meetings were held between the different factions of the city and the representatives of the movement. While many of the activists in city welcomed the movement and took part in the political debates, the numbers of those who joined the organized remained small. The majority of those who joined the movement were middle aged, between the ages of 35 - 45. Even today, Mouwatana Movement continues to work, hosting political seminars and meetings in the city.

In addition to these new political groups in the city of Salamiyah, many of the older parties, present in the city before 2011, experienced a revitalization such as the Communist Party and the People’s Party (Riad al-Turk’s Branch).

III. Armed Groups

Despite the violent repression of the city’s activists at the hands of the Assad regime, with hundreds detained and many martyred, most of the political and revolutionary groups adopted a radical stance against taking up arms, rejecting them because they believed in the crucial importance of peaceful struggle. This, however, did not stop many of the youth from engaging in armed actions against the Assad regime. Several military battalions and brigades were formed in Salamiyah, whose work was focused mostly in the Eastern and Northern rural countryside surrounding the city.

At the end of 2011, the repression in Salamiyah was intensified and people became more serious about bearing arms. Most of the political and revolutionary forces in the city's opposed an armed solution to the struggle, but many of the young men of the city felt forced into this option for various reasons. At first, many began to carry weaponry after being wanted by the regime, as a means of self-defense. After that, many of the youth began to resist the forced conscription in the regime's army, preferring instead to join the opposition forces and their military battalions. These groups also proved a haven for military defectors from Salamiyah. Thus, the military battalions formed in Salamiyah were filled with groups of different people, including civilians who wanted to protect their town, those escaping mandatory service, and defectors.

The most important military formations in Salamiyah were the Free Men of Salamiyah Battalion, Steppe Shield Battalion, Youth of Salamiyah Battalion, and the Martyrs of Salamiyah Brigade.

a) FREE MEN OF SALAMIYAH BATTALION

The first battalion formed in Salamiyah was the Free Men of Salamiyah. It was first launched as the "Clandestine Yusuf Azmeh" led by Omar Askar, whose kunya is Abu Mahmud. When Abu Mahmud was martyred in battle, Hassan Da'as was invited to command the battalion, and he remained in charge until the battalion was disbanded.⁵⁴

According to testimonies,⁵⁵ "the formation of the Free Men of Salamiyah in the Eastern Countryside was formed as a safe haven for the young men wanted by the security and intelligence forces in the city, the young defectors from the regime's army, and the refuseniks." Young men from Salamiyah made up a third of the fighters in the battalion, while the rest of the fighters were from the countryside around the city."

⁵⁴ TV Report on the Free Men of Salamiyah Battalion, on Orient News from November 8, 2013 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcNx_1ZmNHs

⁵⁵ The information in this paragraph was obtained by the research group from dissident Abu Ahmed (not his real name), a resident of Salamiyah who had defected from the Assad regime.

Abu Mahmoud was able to foster many relationships with other armed factions in Syria, most notably the Farooq Brigades operating in Homs and Salamiyah, receiving support from those battalions. The Free Men of Salamiyah Brigade participated in several battles and raids with al-Nusra and others in the area. The Free Men of Salamiyah had a good start, with a good amount of arms and disciplined members.

After Abu Mahmoud was killed, the political orientation of the battle changed into an Islamic one. This was strange for many of the young fighters from Salamiyah, which led to the emergence of sharp differences amongst the youth. They withdrew from the battalion towards the end of 2012, and formed their own, Steppe Shield Battalion.

b) STEPPE SHIELD BATTALION

The Steppe Shield Battalion was one of the first battalions formed in Salamiyah,⁵⁶ formed at the end of 2012. The leader, Maher Matar, was Abu Hisham and Mohamad Zahra, the field commander, was known as Abu Hassan.⁵⁷

The battalion consisted of a few dozen fighters from Salamiyah, with the number of members in the battalion not exceeding 50 people.⁵⁸ The battalion's actions were limited to reconnaissance, monitoring the public roads the movements of Assad's forces and military convoys. They also focused on assassination operations against those affiliated with the *shabiha*.

The battalion possessed light weapons, like pistols, automatic rifles, grenades, some cars and motorcycles, and one anti-air tank known as a "Shilka" which enabled them to down a plane piloted by someone from

⁵⁶ Al-Jazeera TV report on the Steppe Shield Battalion <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lbiTwLPQzA>

⁵⁷ Announcement of the Steppe Shield Battalion, led by the martyr Maher Matar (October 1, 2012) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1-TfmtChrM>

⁵⁸ The information in this paragraph was obtained by the research group from a photographer of the battalion.

Jinan, a village in Hama. The battalion deployed its forces in the Northern countryside, alongside the international highway that ran through Raqqa and in the northeastern countryside near the Sheikh Ali countryside.

The commander of the battalion, Maher Matar Abu Hisham, was martyred while returning from the city of Rastan to Salamiyah, near the village of Jinan. According to the novel, "Abu Hassan," he was martyred while trying to down a MiG attempting to land at the nearby military airport of Ayn al-Niser. He shot the Shilka, which he had with him, and downed the MiG successfully. However, this caused for Assad's forces to retaliate with heavy fire; they shelled the source of fire, resulting in the fatal injury of many. Abu Hisham died on impact.

After Abu Hisham was martyred, the battalion persevered for a month, before it ultimately was dissolved and the fighters left for other groups.

c) YOUTH OF SALAMIYAH BRIGADE

The Youth of Salamiyah Brigade was founded in April 2013, after the dissolution of the Steppe Shield Battalion, when a group of fighters from the battalion gathered to create a battalion that represented the youth of Salamiyah. This battalion, then known as the Youth of Salamiyah Battalion, would later expand its work and rename itself Youth of Salamiyah Brigade.

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An activist from Salamiyah, known as "Abul Kheir" contributed, alongside his comrades, to the formation of the the brigade. According to to the testimony of Abul Kheir, the brigade succeeded in attracting the largest number of revolutionaries from Salamiyah and its countryside. The brigade quickly expanded the areas it worked in to include the countryside and several key fronts which pushed the brigade to its full potential. He said, "members of the brigade participated in several pivotal battles alongside the Free Syrian Army, the most important being "Regiment 46" in the

⁵⁹ The founding statement of the battalion <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMpEek1EDoQ>

Western countryside of Aleppo, near al-Atareb which took place at the start of 2014 alongside the Al-Faruq Brigades. In the Eastern countryside of Aleppo, members of the organization fought against Da'esh alongside the Front of Syrian Revolutionaries. They managed to beat back Da'esh to the border of Raqqa. During these battles, the brigade suffered a great loss of lives and materials.”

In March 2014,⁶⁰ members of the Brigade went to Northern Homs with a number of arms, ammunition, and medicines in order to open up the road between Homs and its northern cities, which had been under siege. The brigade remained there for 8 months, in Talbiseh and Dar Al-Kabira, which became their headquarters. After 8 months in the countryside of Homs, under siege, they were able to leave to Hama, on foot, 120 kilometers away, leaving their weaponry and gear in the Northern countryside of Homs. Fighting broke out in the northern countryside of Hama. Members of the Brigade were stationed in Al-Lataminah, where they participated in the most important battles in the region, such as the liberations of checkpoints in Masasinah, Shloyet, Zilaqiat, Zlin, and the liberation of Helfaya.

At the end of 2014, when the city of Murk fell, members of the brigade moved to Khan Sheikhoun, where they were stationed nearly the “Reservoir Checkpoint” where they had worked in a limited capacity in Murk, and in the battles of liberation in Wadi al-Daif and Hamidiyeh. The members of the brigade joined in repelling a regime convoy that was withdrawing from the military barracks towards Murk. The brigade members were able to collaborate amongst the most important factions of the region, including “Soqr Al Ghab” to seize a number of armored personnel carriers and light weapons. The battle lasted a month, and when it was over, the brigade's headquarter's were raised by al-Nusra Front and the brigade commander was arrested alongside 7 fighters, and all contents of the headquarters were confiscated. Their light weaponry and anti-air vehicles as well as a

⁶⁰ The information from this paragraph was obtained by the research group from the Testimony of Fwader Zuwaida, the Youth of Salamiyah Brigade's commander's wife.

quantity of ammunition were also confiscated. The brigade commander and the fighters were detained for nearly a month.

d) MARTYRS OF SALAMIYAH BRIGADE

This brigade was formed in the Northern Countryside of Homs, near Zaafarana, led by a retired pilot known as Abu Ali, and worked to attract defectors to their ranks. According to testimonies, this did not prove effective especially since much fighting broke out during its formation, specifically the battle of Qadmoon, which led other groups to try to lift the siege on Homs. When writing and researching, we found no documented history to indicate that the brigade functioned, with the exception of one video announcing their formation on YouTube.⁶¹

The brigade disbanded after a few months due to varying differences between it and the other groups in Salamiyah city, a lack of funding, and a lack of financial transparency regarding its financial support to the fighters. Most of its members have left Syria.

⁶¹A statement declaring the formation of the Martyrs of Salamiyah brigade September 3, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKCMfiWCHMQ>

CHAPTER THREE: ERA OF DISPLACEMENT AND AID

I. Salamiyah Accepts the Displaced

Since June 2011, the city was witness to several waves of displacement. The first displacement took place in Hama, after the Assad regime committed a massacre on the Friday of Freedom's Children (June 3, 2011). The displacement from Hama escalated and reached its peak when the city was shelled by regime forces, and stormed the city. This was followed by waves of displacement from the Homs, when the nonviolent movement armed itself in late 2011. This was followed by waves of displacement from towns and villages located east of Salamiyah following many battles between opposition fighters and regime forces, aimed at breaking the siege of Homs. Many displaced people also arrived from Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa's countrysides, especially since the latter is under the control of Da'esh.⁶²

War forced thousands of Syrian families to leave their homes in an exodus to safer areas. In Eastern Salamiyah, who were displaced to live in Salamiyah city, the number of displaced people was about 50,000 according to most estimates.

a) HAMA'S DISPLACED

A few weeks after the first demonstrations in Syria broke out, the revolutionary spirit reached Hama. Hama is a city that experienced violence, when Hafez al-Assad punished the city. This violence is still present in the city's memory.

⁶² Refer to [العلاقة بين سكان مدينة السلمية والنازحين إليها قسراً، مركز دراسات الجمهورية الديمقراطية](#), published on April 7, 2015

The regime of Bashar al-Assad dealt with the revolutionary movement in Hama and every other city in a way that is no different than his father. The regime sent army troops, militias, *shabiha*, and the intelligence forces to suppress the movement. The first massacre against civilians took place in Hama.

On June 3rd, 2011 a Friday called the Friday of Freedom's Children, demonstrators took to the streets, holding olive branches in their hands, with their children on their shoulder, in an expression of revolutionary movement.⁶³

Meanwhile, Assad's forces opened fire on the demonstrators, causing dozens to be injured or killed. The number of dead reached 60.⁶⁴ This violence displaced dozens of Hamwi families to various places near the city of Hama, including Salamiyah.

The trade and the economic ties between Hama and Salamiyah, which played a role in building relationships between the two towns, were significantly affected by the displacement. The August following the Assad regime's attack on Hama, the number of displaced families in Salamiyah from Hama rose greatly.

Because of the complex nature between Hama and Salamiyah's populations,⁶⁵ there was a popular movement to help the displaced Hamwi families in Salamiyah. Activists even went out of their way to break the siege of Hama in order to remove some families from danger's way in Hama.

⁶³ Testimonies obtained by the writer during his visit to Hama in June 2011.

⁶⁴ For details about this massacre, please see: "جمعة أطفال الحرية تشهد مقتل العشرات في أكبر المظاهرات"، سميح الأدهمي، الشبكة العربية العالمية dated June 4, 2011

⁶⁵ The information in this and the following paragraph was taken from the testimony of Maher Esber, an activist and former prisoner of conscience in Assad's regimes. It was done in Beirut 2015.

Several days later, people were able to leave Hama more freely and they headed towards Salamiyah, where they were received by the activists and residents of the city. The work being done was spontaneous and popular. At this stage, there were very few NGOs and civil society organizations to bear the burden of the displaced, which is why the residents and activists of the city stepped in.

The Coordination Committees also worked diligently to secure the needs of the displaced. According to a founding members of the first coordination committee, they partnered up with local charities in an “act of righteousness” where the associations provided aid and donations, and the activists coordinated their distribution.^{66 67}

Initially, they housed the displaced in houses and farms that were available. Many residents had empty homes which they donated, and many others still donated furniture and household clothing. About 20,000 people were provided for by the activists.⁶⁸

Around August 2011, Salamiyah was still outside of the grip of the regime, and the civil society organizations were still able to work at their full capacity. They did not intervene in the people’s affairs like the security forces and the *shabiha*.

The activists of the city played an important role in preventing Hama from being isolated by the Assad regime’s intervention, especially when the *shabiha* and thugs set up roadblocks preventing the displaced people from accessing Salamiyah. A group of young activists from Salamiyah found a way to break the potential siege and aided the displaced.

⁶⁶ The Women’s Coordination Committee of Salamiyah helping the displaced <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6p3fYPIYFQ>, August 28, 2012

⁶⁷ A testimony the writer gathered in a meeting with the founders of the committee, in Beirut in 2015.

⁶⁸ Refer to "تلازم الوطني والإنساني"، عبدالله الشعار، جريدة الحياة اللندنية" dated June 4, 2012.

At the time, Salamiyah's activists were pre-occupied with nonviolent organizing and massive demonstrations⁶⁹ and sit-ins. Their evenings were filled with political speeches, chants of the revolution, and the like... The storming of Hama was a dark cloud hanging over the feelings of the activists, which provoked enthusiasm amongst the youth.

The position of the displaced Hamwis in Salamiyah was a form of political struggle; the Assad regime's rhetoric in the early days of the Syrian revolution was to label all those rebelling as terrorists and *Takfiris*, and the regime championed itself as the protector of the minorities in Syria. The fact that the displaced Hamwis found refuge in Salamiyah, full of religious minorities, and the fact that it was the activists of Salamiyah who broke the siege on Hama, showed what post-Assad Syria was capable of.

b) HOMS'S DISPLACED

In late 2011, the situation in Homs, southwest of Salamiyah, deteriorated quickly. Many of the neighborhoods involved in nonviolent actions turned to armed revolt after Assad's forces repressed the demonstrations in the most violent of ways.

From the end of 2011 until February 2012, tens of thousands of people were displaced from Homs. A large portion of them headed towards Damascus and its countryside, while others still went to Homs's countryside. Dozens of the family's, however, went towards Salamiyah.

In March 2012, after a series of massacres committed by the the regime forces and its militias against civilians, most of the residents of Homs, in neighborhoods like Baba Amr, Bab Seba, Bab Dreib, Hamidiyeh, and Old Homs, were forced to flee their homes. Their neighborhoods stood totally deserted and uninhabited.

⁶⁹ Refer to *مجلة سنديان*, "ثورة مدينة السلمية"، Sendian; dated October 6, 2012

In Salamiyah, activists sought to bring in Homs families who were affected and displaced by the hell that Homs had become. However, this came at a time when the repression of Salamiyah was at full swing, with dozens of activists arrested.

However, the revolutionary relationship between Homs and Salamiyah helped a lot. It began in the second half of 2011, when Salamiyah's activists worked to coordinate with the activists of Homs, smuggling in food and medical aid to the besieged neighborhoods in Homs, and its countryside like Rastan and Talbiseh. This boosted morale with all parties involved, and helped those whose conditions were worsening with time.⁷⁰

In Spring of 2012, Salamiyah fell to the grip of the security forces and *shabiha*, arresting hundreds of youth and activists. As with other towns in Syria, the municipality Salamiyah opened a people's committee for the unemployed and former business owners, which was a pretense that turned into these people being arrested and kidnapped these people for ransoms. Many of young girls were abducted and hundreds imprisoned.⁷¹ This caused the town's revolutionary spirit to decrease greatly. It was under these circumstances that the activists from Salamiyah attempted to receive families displaced from Homs and to insure their security as the *shabiha* treated the displaced as their enemy.

The deteriorating economic and security situation in the region, and the increasing number of displaced people resulted in difficulties at the level of integrating the newly displaced people.

As a result, the activists in the city had to transform some of the schools into receiving centers for the displaced. As a result the countryside began absorbing the displaced. The village of Tal al-Toot and the neighborhood of

⁷⁰ The information in this paragraph comes from an interview with the founders of the coordination committees in Salamiyah.

⁷¹ Refer to [أخبار الآن](#)، سلمى الحموي، "سندان الأمن"، مطرقة الشبيحة وسندان الأمن، dated March 15, 2014

Al Sabeel, west of the city, began to absorb some of the displaced. At this point, there were about 10 to 15 thousand displaced people from Homs and its countryside in Salamiyah.

c) EASTERN COUNTRYSIDE'S DISPLACED

In April 2013, the armed opposition launched a series military campaigns led by the Islam Brigade and the Islamic Farooq Brigade, and others, the most prominent of which was Battle of One Body in the Eastern Countryside of Salamiyah. The goal of the battle was to block access to the Salamiyah-Raqqa Highway, to try to lift the siege on Homs.

The excruciating battles between the opposition forces and the regime forces led in the destruction of various villages in the Eastern Countryside. More than 10 villages were destroyed in full, with another 15 partially destroyed, including Hai Um Mil, Alhardaniyeh, Abu Hbeilat, Abu Haniyeh, Masoud, Alkharbijeh, Hamadi Amr, Souha, Akkash, Abu Dali, Qalib Altour, Um Touniyeh, and Alfah.⁷² 40 thousand were displaced as a result from these battles. A large portion of them went to Liberated Idlib's countryside, others to Turkey, and Salamiyah.

This new displaced population joined the rest of the displaced people in Salamiyah, and were absorbed across society, including familial relationships, aid and relief organizations, and other civil society organizations. They were overwhelmed by the growing number of displaced people in the city, whose numbers had reached about 50 thousand, a number that differed according to each source and their respective biases.

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II. Relief Work and the Activists' Endeavours

⁷² Refer to "الريف الشرقي لحماية بعد معركة الجسد الواحد"، محمد صافي، عنب بلدي - العدد 75 the July 28, 2013 edition

⁷³ The information in this paragraph was taken from S.J.'s testimony, one of the activists from the Red Crescent in Salamiyah. He asked for his name to not be shared.

The term “relief” began to appear with the increasing violence and repression at the hands of the security forces and *shabiha*. At first, relief was limited to medical work, insuring medications, instruments, and equipment for field hospitals in order to treat the wounded demonstrators. In Salamiyah, this medical aid was aimed towards cities closest to Salamiyah, such as Hama, Homs, and their countryside.

As noted above, the distribution of aid to Hama and Homs enabled the activists of Salamiyah to build strong relationships with activists from Homs, specifically those from Rastan and Talbiseh after the uprising bore arms. The city welcomed several waves of displaced, due to the increasing violence in the surrounding areas. This led to the mobilization of most activists and groups in the city in order to provide for the displaced.

Relief operations were no longer medical needs, but they also housing for the displaced, basic foodstuffs, and other necessities. A large number of activists in the city contributed to this effort, including organizations that operated without an official license, such as the Coordination Committees, the Women’s Coordination Committee, Spectrum for Syria, and licensed groups such as the Red Crescent, the Aga Khan Foundation, The Society of Friends and others.

According to the testimonies obtained by the researchers, the Women’s Coordination Committee played an important role in supporting the displaced.⁷⁴ They were essential in securing the schools for the displaced families to stay in and shielding them from constant surveillance from the *shabiha* and intelligence forces. The Women’s Coordination Committee secured the necessities for these families, and formed relationships with the displaced women involving them in the city’s activities.

The Red Crescent also helped the displaced greatly, receiving support from the Red Cross. Their support was logistical, providing food baskets and

⁷⁴ See for example support activities at Salamiyah schools <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6p3fYPIYFQ>

necessities such as blankets and toiletries. When Rastan's water supply was cut, the Red Cross, in conjunction with Oxfam, built water tanks. They brought in water from Hama to fill them. The Aga Khan Foundation also established several water tanks in the public gardens, and delivered water to remote neighborhoods near the city.⁷⁵

III. The *Shabiha's* Occupation of the City

Since the first day of the revolution in 2011, the Assad regime's security forces broke into activists' homes to arrest and harm them and their loved ones. This coincided with a regime-imposed a siege on the city at the start of August 2011. Hundreds of activists were detained when the security forces stormed their houses, with many activists beaten in front of their families.⁷⁶ Many shops and farms belonging to activists were burned and destroyed.⁷⁷

Demonstrations still went on, however, until mid-2012. They would come under fire by the *shabiha*, and many were beaten and assaulted, with the number of martyrs increasing. In this charged climate, the first local militias began appearing. They were composed of families from outside of Salamiyah, who were related to a high-ranking member of the regime's Air Force Intelligence.

Dozens of young men from Salamiyah's countryside were recruited by Saleh al-Salama as volunteers. This militia set up roadblocks at the entrances to the city and its main streets, which meant the city fell to the authority of Salama and his relatives and superiors.⁷⁸ These militias later

⁷⁵ The information in this paragraph was obtained from the testimony of S. J., a resident of Salamiyah and one of the relief workers in 2015.

⁷⁶ The information in this paragraph was obtained by the researchers from Zahra, an activist who was arrested and beaten by Assad's forces.

⁷⁷ Video showing the burning house of an activist in Salamiyah, dated July 27, 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NK4Z-HI8Dmo>

⁷⁸ About Al Salama and the other militias. Refer to the report: تورط عناصر النظام بخطف المدنيين وتصفية بعضهم بريف حماه، على موقع السورية نت Dated April 6, 2015 <http://cutt.us/vwH2>

joined the *shabiha*, who supplied them with arms and ammunition alongside monthly salaries.

These groups managed, effectively, to eliminate the nonviolent movement in Salamiyah. As a result, the city was emptied of many revolutionary and political activists. After they achieved this step, these militias turned towards terrorizing the residents of the city in order to subdue them, by overseeing a wave of kidnappings, armed robberies, and lootings. The *shabiha* would kidnap people in the city and hold them for ransom. According to some sources, the number of abductees reached 650 during the first half of 2015 alone, targeting men, women, and children from different communities and social groups in the city.⁷⁹

Today, Salamiyah is under pressure from the terror and panic that these militias have spread amongst the civilians. It does not matter whether the residents were sympathetic to the opposition or with the regime, they have all been targeted and exposed to abuse and exploitation at the hands of these militias.

⁷⁹ Refer to "الخطف في مدينة السلمية" .. عقوبة الثورة أم ويلات النظام", موقع "كلنا شركاء" الالكتروني dated July 17, 2015

CONCLUSION

Salamiyah lived a revolution against a regime, a revolution that nobody thought was possible. This revolution, like in other parts of the country, had a fundamental affect on the mood of the population, their relationships, and the nature of their political and social expressions.

The city was tested with moments of Liberation, though short lived as they were, and proved that they were able to channel their nonviolent activities and their activists to mobilize effectively in order to demand change. The city reverberated with all forms of revolutionary activities, from youth organizations to inclusive organizations. It shaped the newborn Syrian civil society, and helped form political parties and forces that will ultimately be a partner in shaping the future of Syria. Salmooni women showed their prowess and revolutionary efficacy, and showed their will to design their and their children's futures.

However, this dream was barely manifesting when it was crushed by the Assad regime and forces, who wreaked terror on the city. Sticking to nonviolent ideals was not a tactical move by the activists in the city; it was a collective decision, so that the activists did not lose their moral and revolutionary highgrounds. Activists of the city also insisted on adhering to the first slogans of the revolution, and stayed away from the sectarian speech and practices that began to infect Syrian society.

Today, Salamiyah is a city of broken hearts, filled with the memories of youth who are now missing in prison, disappeared, killed, displaced, or in exile out of fear for their lives and the lives of their families. The city continues to pay for challenging Assad's rule, and for daring to dream of freedom and justice for the future.

The city is dealing with the pressure of the economy, with very poor living conditions. The city's population only has access to potable water two or three times a month, with frequent electricity cuts resulting in the town only having a few hours of electricity a day. The living conditions of the town are akin to collective punishment, with massive shortages. The residents of the city now live in a nightmare that is plaguing the rest of the country, with Da'esh and the Assad regime looming out at the time. The Assad regime has imposed on the town two options: either accept the rule of the Assad militias, security forces, and intelligence agencies or Da'esh, an organization that would massacre the town. These two options are viewed with bitterness by the residents.

Despite the gloomy outlook, many activists from Salamiyah still remain hopeful to their dreams of change and the fall of the Assad regime. Many activists are still within the city, working until they no longer can. Their steadfastness was noted in many of the testimonies gathered, with one noting that their hellish circumstances have helped them appreciate things better.

Just as Egyptians are committed to their revolution, so are the people of Salamiyah. We dedicate this work to the memory of the city, her residents, and their work.