



# حركة العدالة والبناء

# MOVEMENT FOR JUSTICE & DEVELOPMENT

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## WHY THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION



At their inception, political parties need to make fundamental decisions which will determine their future course. The consequences of these decisions made at an early stage last for the lifetime of the party. Making the wrong decisions could potentially mean the end of the party all together. Bad choices made at the beginning lead to bad results: policy u-turns, infighting and splits endear politicians to no one, and nothing could be more damaging to a political party than the resultant loss of credibility. Nothing is more likely to sap the energies of activists and lead to apathy than a political party wandering aimlessly across the political landscape without a clearly-defined focus or direction established from the outset. Making the right choices at the beginning is therefore essential for a good start in politics.

We in the Movement for Justice and Development had to make a number of important decisions. Do we want to be a mass-movement organization or a party for intellectual elite? Should we oppose the regime in exile or try to operate inside Syria? Should we try to appeal to a wider audience beyond our

## MJD EFFORTS ON EXPANDING ITS INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS

The Movement for Justice and Development played an active participation in the third International Conference for Charitable and Humanitarian Organizations, held in Istanbul between 8<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> September. The conference aimed to foster closer cooperation between organizations and inform the public on the valuable role that these organizations play. The event attracted guests from 56 countries including those from charity, humanitarian relief and human rights organizations as well as high-profile personalities from the cultural and media sectors.

Representing the MJD was Executive Board member Dr. Ibrahim al-Meriy. He utilized this opportunity to introduce the Movement to the attendees, and inform them of the regime's shocking human rights record which include arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial killings. He put forward the case of the ordinary Syrian by highlighting the rampant corruption and poverty in the country, and the total lack of political rights in Syria to effect any meaningful change. The event, and Dr Al-Meriy's statements, were carried live by Al-Jazeera thus ensuring the message hits home where it matters: to the Syrian people.

immediate constituency or should we reinforce our existing support base? Do we try to create a new generation of leaders or settle for available opposition

## MJD ESTABLISHES ITS BRANCH IN THE USA



During the last four weeks a series of meetings and gatherings were held with a great number of Syrian expatriates throughout the United States, which resulted in the establishment of an MJD USA branch. The latest branch to be established consists of well-connected and successful professionals including doctors, architects, management consultants and academics who are based in six different states. The branch also includes Syrian students who are studying at various US institutions. The establishment of a branch in the USA will allow the MJD to expand its pool of resources and expertise, especially given the reputation of professionals in the US as being particularly innovative and enterprising.

figures? Perhaps the starkest choices we were faced with were whether to join the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change or alternative opposition umbrella groups. Given that the task of implementing change in Syria cannot be achieved by one group alone, we had to choose our political allies very careful.

Our decision to join the Damascus Declaration was based on a careful study of all available options. Our conclusion was that only the Damascus Declaration can succeed in bringing about democratic change in Syria.

While it is important not to be prisoners of the past, previous track record is a reliable indicator of future performance. It is important to note in this regard that the pro-democracy movement in Syria was not born in 2005 but in 1963, when the Ba'th Party overthrew the elected government and seized power. From that date there have been honest men and women from different political parties campaigning for democracy. These men and women were not corrupted by the trappings of office nor did they resort to violence in a desperate dash for power. They persevered, mostly in jail, under the most horrendous conditions. It is these men and women who formed the Damascus Declaration, men like Riyadh al-Turk, who spent 18 years in prison for defying the regime when it would have been so easy to acquiesce; and Riyadh Saif, who lost his parliamentary seat and his business empire for exposing corruption when so many would have remained silent. Working with such figures fills us with confidence that they are not cheap opportunists but politicians of conviction.

Operating in exile is often a necessity, but it is no substitute for on the ground presence. The Damascus Declaration is firmly rooted in the internal opposition movement which emerged into the open in what is known as the "Damascus Spring". Real change can only be engendered by activists inside Syria, led by a leadership with an extensive and up-to-date knowledge of the "Syrian street". Mass protests, civil disobedience, and other forms of non-violent action cannot be orchestrated by remote-control from a leadership residing in a different continent. It is morally unacceptable and practically

unfeasible, to expect activists to risk their lives facing the baton charge while "leaders" issue orders in the comfortable surroundings of London or Paris. The Damascus Declaration's opposition methodology is to build democratically from the bottom up. By establishing bureaus in every governorate to promote activists and coordinate opposition activities, and by establishing a general council of respected figures to legitimize these opposition activities, they are actively establishing strong networks of opposition to the regime. The Damascus Declaration still has a long way to go, and the Movement for Justice and Development is playing an active role in that development process through its activists inside Syria and its extensive support capability outside. The fact remains that removing a dictatorship requires a strong internal opposition network and that can only be delivered under the political umbrella of the Damascus Declaration.

Experience has shown that turning points in struggles against dictatorships happen when opposition forces decide to unite. With the Damascus Declaration, that unity has largely been achieved. Political parties, movements, and independent figures from across the political spectrum are signatories to the Damascus Declaration's programme for change, and our entry has added a new political shade and a much-needed catalyst. The Declaration's success in bridging the ethnic, sectarian and regional divides is impressive and cannot be overlooked. That unity is in part the result of a shared belief by all the signatories that no single group or party dominates the Declaration. That places minds at rest that no one side can, or will, steal the fruits of shared labour at a future date. We can therefore work within the Declaration secure in the knowledge that our efforts will be well-rewarded. On the other hand, simply paying lip service to unity while rivalry and mutual distrust loom large will not

make for a successful or enduring alliance. The unnecessary involvement of divisive elements in the Damascus Declaration will be a setback for the Syrian opposition as a whole. This is something which the leadership of the Declaration is well aware of, and is keen to avoid. It therefore follows that unity of the opposition, whilst a necessary goal, should not become an aim in itself. Unity must mean a workable unity, a unity which can endure and produce results.

The Damascus Declaration summarized many of the difficult decisions we had to make at the start of our political journey. Yes we would be a broad-based, mass-movement organization dedicated to non-violent change. And yes, our focus would be on the inside: encouraging activism and re-engaging with the Syrian people. We have chosen the Damascus Declaration because we believe it is the ideal vehicle for democratic change. We have made our decision and chosen our course.

## IN NUMBERS

### SYRIA'S POPULATION\*

- **19.1** million is the estimated population of Syria.
- **3%** of the population over **65** years of age.
- **46%** of the population under **15** years of age.
- **2.45%** is the annual population growth rate.
- **23,018,000** is the projected population for the year **2015**.
- **70%** of Syria's people live in Damascus and the six western provinces.

\*UNDP Figures

## OUR ARMED FORCES NEED TO BE REFORMED



Malik  
Al-Abdeh

There was a sense of déjà vu as reports emerged of an Israeli air raid against Syria. Half a dozen jets carrying laser-guided munitions carried out a deep-penetration raid and returned

safely to base without serious challenge. Although the raid appears to be more audacious than before, for Syrians the fundamental issue raised by this gross failure in national defence is the same as it has always been. As per usual, words of condemnation and comically impotent threats were uttered by government officials in Damascus. The reaction on the street however, was utterly apathetic. There were no reports of fervent crowds calling for revenge, or men queuing round the block to enlist in air-defence brigades. In fact, life went on as normal even as a certain corner of Raqqah Province lay smouldering. The Israelis may as well have bombed a site of great strategic importance in the Dominican Republic. What does this tell us about ordinary Syrians? For a start, they have little affinity with their own armed forces.

Granted, the Syrian military is not the most advanced in the world. The vast majority of its hardware is considered obsolete and its Soviet military doctrine is badly outdated. Financial and political pressures have meant that Syria has not always had access to the latest technology or training. Syria, like many an aspiring Third World military power, has had to make do with the poor man's arsenal of SCUDs and Katyushas. No one, least of all Syrians themselves, expected Israeli jets to be dropping out of the sky as soon as they violated Syrian air space. The Syrian man-on-the-street does not hold any illusions about his country's military capability.

But surely a "normal" reaction to an attack upon one's country would be a surge in demands for accountability and greater effectiveness in the armed forces. At moments of military humiliation some people go further by reacting against their rulers; loss in the Falklands War led to the collapse of the Argentine junta and the Kargil War debacle led directly to the overthrow of the Pakistani prime minister. Nothing of this sort seems to be happening in Syria. This points to a deeper malaise afflicting the Syrian armed forces, something which stops them connecting with the people they claim to be defending. Clues to this lie in the precursor to the Syrian Arab Army, the Troupes Speciales du Levant. It was created and led by Frenchmen, but composed almost entirely of Druze, Christian, Circassian and Alawite minorities. The decision by the then colonial power to exclude Sunni Arabs who had supported the claim of King Faisal to the Syrian throne was a classic piece of divide-and-rule strategy. It led to a relatively stable 20 years of French "mandate" over the Levant, but it also led to a long legacy of sectarianism in the Syrian military.

Rather than reverting to a truly nationalist institution, 50 years of independence saw the continuation of the policy of sectarian discrimination. First it was the well-meaning but weak civilian politicians of the 1940s and 50s who were reluctant to reform the army for fear of the coup d'état. Later, more sinister powers were at work, which actively sought to promote and exploit the bonds of sectarian loyalty against a perceived common enemy. That common enemy was none other than the Sunni Arab majority, who were painted as harbouring evil intents to strip away what little promotion and prospects minority groups enjoyed through service in the armed forces.

This largely imagined threat was employed skilfully by certain Ba'th Party military officers in the 1960s to establish a sectarian power base in order to seize power. One of those officers was Hafiz Assad, who for 30 years continued the colonial practise of recruiting from the minorities.

Today, all the critical units of the Syrian army and much of the air force is made up of minority group members.

In the absence of democracy, the role of the armed forces has become that of guarantor of the regime's survival. The armed forces' loyalty lies exclusively with the regime rather than with the general population, a democratic system or "the nation". When the Syrian army parades its tanks on Independence Day, they are as much a threat to the Syrian people as they are to the "enemy". Which Hama resident would dare argue otherwise?

The chasm between the ruling military and society as whole engendered by the exclusion of at least 70 per cent of the population of Syria is no coincidence. It is the deliberate policy of the regime to keep at arms' length any force which may "dilute" the sectarian cohesiveness of the armed forces. That is why military personnel and their families live in purpose-built compounds on the outskirts of major towns, and why military officers only send their children to schools attended by children of fellow military officers. Every year, the number of professional soldiers is augmented by fresh recruits from the coastal mountains. It is a system not unlike that of the Memluk military caste, who ruled Syria for over 300 years but who forever remained foreigners to it.

It is little wonder that the "Syrian street" is more concerned with breaking the Ramadan fast with a hearty meal and watching a soap opera about old Damascene life, than worrying about the state of the country's defences. This is not a healthy state for any society, but as long as the policy of sectarian discrimination continues, it is unlikely that Syrians will ever engage positively with their own armed forces. The fundamental issue here is one of ownership: Who owns the right to work in the military? Who owns the right to use the military? In whose name does the military exist?