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An episode of the revolution: Aleppo university protest movement 2011–2013

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ABSTRACT

Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theorists have paid attention to either the structural factors or to the agential ones while studying social movements. Through the nexus of structure and agency this article explains the collective action of the students of Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013 as one episode of the Syrian Revolution. I argue that structures alone are not enough to facilitate collective action. It is the agency of the social movement participants that mend the structures to open more opportunities. Through applying Tilly and Tarrow's properties of a regime to the Syrian case I explore the opportunities that the challengers took to advance their claims to sustain their movement for three years. I argue, however, that the properties of the Syrian regime were not equally significant. By capitalising on their agency, I highlight the everyday micro practices of the students in challenging the regimes inside the campus. Finally, I look at the prominence of some properties over others and empirically show how these regime properties eventually led to the end of the movement inside the campus in 2013.

KEYWORDS

Political Opportunity Structures; agency; Syrian Revolution; students movement; Aleppo University

On Wednesday 13 April 2011, a group of university students congregated at Aleppo University in support of the demonstrators in Dara'a, Homs, and other Syrian cities.¹ However, two months later, the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, explicitly thanked the university students for their active and effective role in 'countering the conspiracy the country is facing' and for standing by the side of the Syrian Army,² sidelining completely the reality of earlier student demonstrations against the regime.³ The Syrian regime, together with its affiliate organization, the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS), had mobilized the students in Aleppo to demonstrate the complete loyalty of the city and the university to Bashar al-Assad. Yet the students in Aleppo subsequently assumed

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¹Shaam Network S.N.N, [Arabic] 'Sham, Aleppo—Demonstration of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Aleppo, 13/4/11, Video, 01:45, *YouTube*, April 13, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFvDom0p80Q>. Here is the footage of the first demonstration inside the university campus.

²After the diffusion of protests, the Assad regime, through its official media platforms, focused their narratives around the claim that what is happening is not a popular uprising. Rather, it is an American and Israeli conspiracy aiming to topple the regime because of its stands on the Palestinian cause and the resistance of the West.

³Cflitchannel, [Arabic] 'President Bashar Al-Assad's historic speech', Video, 1:16:08, *YouTube*, June 23, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFkFdrZFICU>. The Syrian President chose to address the people from the University of Damascus to convey a message that students were key loyalists to the regime.

divided, dichotomous positions split between those who supported the regime, and those who supported the uprising.

This article focusses on the peaceful protest movement at Aleppo University against the Assad regime between 2011 and 2013. It aims to contribute to debates on political opportunity structures (POS) and the development of an insurgent consciousness to mobilize and take collective action among the students there. By reviewing the political structure of the Assad regime at the University of Aleppo, I will highlight the strategies the challengers deployed and the resources they used to overcome the repressive grip of the regime on campus.

I was a participant in the movement and witnessed the phenomenon in all its phases. Moreover, I was a member of the NUSS, affording me unique access to information and networks. Interviews are my primary source of data and I use both purposive and random sampling in my research. Purposive sampling took the form of interviews with participants in the movement who immigrated to the Netherlands, Germany, and Turkey, while random sampling was employed to interview academics, university and NUSS officials, and police officers who defected from or deserted the regime. Together with social media posts and footage from the time, and in the interests of data triangulation, interviews with officials enabled me to gain greater insights, and increase the validity of the observations I made while at Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013.

Much has been written on POS and their impact on social movements and their dynamics.⁴ Tilly and Tarrow argue that social movements are, to a large degree, dependent on the change of opportunities within a regime:

Political opportunity structure includes six properties of a regime; namely (1) the multiplicity of independent centers of power within it (2) its openness to new actors (3) the instability of current political alignments (4) the availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers (5) the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making (6) decisive changes in items 1 to 5.⁵

Whereas the properties outlined above are structure-focused, the agency of the challengers is key if they are to take advantage of the resources available to overcome the problems with which they are confronted. As Jasper argues, 'if structure is one aspect of social life, agency is the other'.⁶ Thus, this article uses agency-based concepts to point out the interchangeable relations between structure and agency in the case of the students' protest movement.

Although some scholars examine the onset of the Syrian uprising in terms of political opportunities, threats, levels of repression, and the social networks of the 'early risers',⁷ to date there exist no academic studies that investigate the opportunity structures that opened up to the students at Aleppo University. Nonetheless, the student movement greatly affected the mobilization, both of the opposition and of the Assad regime's supporters, in the country in general, and in Aleppo in particular.

⁴Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann, 'Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat and the Social Networks of the Early Risers', *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 139–159.

⁵Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 59.

⁶James Jasper, 'A Strategic Approach to Collective Action: Looking for Agency in Social-movement Choices', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (2004): 1–16.

⁷Leenders and Heydemann, 'Popular Mobilization in Syria'.

Regime structure and opportunities

Political life in Syria has always been built on the basis of a 'selective relativity' in which judgements and laws are manipulated in favour of their legislatures and applied against those groups that fail to uphold the regime.⁸ In other words, any attempt by a group that tries to organize an event or mobilize themselves or others will meet with disastrous consequences. In 2011, the Syrian uprising emerged within the larger context of the 'Arab Spring'—a groundswell of political dissent that proved that Arab authoritarian regimes were far less solid than assumed. The demonstrative effects emanating from the mass mobilizations that forced entrenched Arab dictators out of office were 'powerful enough to help break *barriers of fear*'.⁹ Since the Six Day War of 1967 with Israel, the administration of power in Syria had become static with no prospect of regime change. Contrary to the narrative that the Assad regime has been mobilizing all resources to support the 'axis of resistance' in order to confront outside threats, it was clear that the increasing security and military capabilities were intended to resist any probable uprising against the regime.¹⁰

Universities in Syria were considered to be loyal to the regime—a reservoir that could be mobilized through a key institution that propagated enthusiastically the speech and discourse of the Ba'athists: the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS). In the following section, I first discuss the structure of Aleppo University. Proceeding, I zoom in, providing information on the structure of the NUSS organization to show how the regime maintained its power inside the universities through the organization micro institutions.

Aleppo university

The absence of any official political multiplicity within the Assad regime was also reflected in the structure of Aleppo University. In this regard, the structure of Aleppo University is unique compared to other universities. However, the demographic and ethnic diversity of the city made it challenging to have full control of the whole university apparatus by loyalists to the regime like other universities, such as Al-Ba'ath University in Homs or Tishreen University in Latakia. Only a small number of university officials were Alawites and thus generally loyal to Assad's rule. This was a result of the past experiences of the people of Aleppo who had suffered the repression of Hafez al-Assad during the events of the 1980s, when he massacred hundreds of people in the city.¹¹ A key lesson Bashar al-Assad had learned from his father in the aftermath of the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood between 1979–1982 was the need to restructure the outside appearance of power. With both the military and the security apparatuses firmly in his grip, civilian positions in Aleppo were assigned to regional and tribal figures. This was the regime's strategy in the big cities on order to 'contain, empower and build tools of apprehension and control ... by encouraging the regional identity rather than the national

⁸Tayyip Tizini, 'Alhutam al-Araby, rihan khaser' [Arab debris, a losing bet], *Alfaisal Magazine*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.alfaisalmag.com/?p=15302>.

⁹Leenders and Heydemann, 'Popular Mobilization in Syria', 141. Emphasis added.

¹⁰The axis of resistance is the title the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and Iran would ascribe to themselves.

¹¹See the following article, which details the events of the 1980s when Hafez al-Assad massacred hundreds of people. Whilst the article is undated, it mentions that it is the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre, which would suggest that it was written in 2012.

integration'.¹² Although such positions were intended to instil loyalty in those to which they were awarded, they did not include appointments to key security or political authorities.¹³

At the beginning of the uprising, all of the employees and lecturers at Aleppo University were called in to meet the regime. The Ba'athist leadership at the university was instructed as to how it was expected to respond to events that might occur on the campus.¹⁴ Hierarchically, the Executive of Aleppo University Ba'ath Party Branch, who was from Hama city, acted as the head of the security committee inside the university, with heads of security services in Aleppo being members of the security committee in charge of responding to the protests in Aleppo and its university. Security services heads were the masterminds of the responsive plans.¹⁵

Even after the spread of the protests, the situation in Aleppo was drawing little attention from the international media. Indeed, *The New York Times* suggested that 'the strife that has thrown other major Syrian cities into turmoil during the 15-month-old uprising had long been less visible in Aleppo'.¹⁶ This observation was made during the visit of UN monitors to Aleppo University in May 2012. However, what the UN did not know was that during the run-up to the uprising, the university authorities, driven by (crisis cell) orders and directives from Damascus, decreed that lecturing be suspended and that dormitories be closed for 'maintenance works', leaving around twenty thousand students with nowhere to live.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, this decision was carefully considered because the UN monitors planned to visit Aleppo University on 17 May 2012—two weeks after the closure of the university.¹⁸

The National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS)

In accordance with state emergency laws, restrictions on the freedom of persons in terms of meetings, residence, transport, movements, and detaining suspects or people threatening public security and order, were imposed by the military governor.¹⁹ Before 2011, meeting in a group of more than five people would raise the suspicions of one of the many security departments, making those taking part vulnerable to arrest and

¹²Azmi Bishara, *Syria: A Pathway to Freedom from Suffering, an Attempt in Contemporary History (March 2011-March 2013)* (Beirut: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2013), 178.

¹³On the ruralization of power in Syria, see Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁴Naser Ibrahim (pseudonym, ex-lecturer at Aleppo University), interview with author, Istanbul, Turkey, April 2017. The 'crisis cell' and the 'security committees' were in charge of implementing a counter narrative to the activists' propaganda being spread through lecturers and the NUSS. When I met with NUSS members, we were told to adopt the regime narrative of the conspiracy that the country is facing. It was crucial to win the students' hearts to be on the side of the regime. In an interview with an academic from Aleppo University, he explained: 'Our role was to explain to the students that what is going on in Dara'a and at the university in particular is not a popular uprising or a revolution; rather, it is a campaign that aims to weaken resistance to the Assad regime.'

¹⁵There are mainly four security services branches in Aleppo. They are the Air Force Intelligence, the State Security, Political Security and Military Security.

¹⁶Hwaida Saad and Rick Gladstone, 'Students Are Assailed at a Protest in Syria', *The New York Times*, May 17, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/world/middleeast/protesters-set-upon-at-aleppo-university-despite-monitors.html>.

¹⁷Zamanalwsl, 'jami'at halab tatabanna karar almukhabarat.. eikaf alderasa wa ikhlai almadina' [The University of Aleppo adopts the intelligence decision suspending studies and evacuating the city], *Zamanalwsl*, May 3, 2012, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/26326>.

¹⁸Saad and Gladstone, 'Students Are Assailed'.

¹⁹Moh'd Anjarini, 'Oppressive Laws in Syria (1 of 5)', *The Syrian Human Rights Committee*, December 4, 2003, <https://www.shrc.org/en/?p=19812>.

interrogation by the regime. Thus, any forum or union needed to gain the approval of the authorities and the military governor—as was the case with the NUSS.

The NUSS falls structurally under the control of one of the Ba'ath Central Command Offices in Damascus and is attached to the Youth Office, of which Ammar Saati—leader of the NUSS between 1995 and 2020—is the head.²⁰ The Ba'ath Party Central Command is the highest authority in the Ba'ath and the state structures. The NUSS has an executive office that oversees the activities of universities and student institutes through its branch offices inside these education facilities. Hence, the executive office has eleven offices, excluding the executive director, who heads the union. University branch members are elected bi-annually by the members of the General Assembly, who are also the members of faculties units. The election process and lists of candidates are usually arranged along geographical and coterie lines. Clientelism and the appointment of hirelings are the main mechanisms deployed by popular organizations via which people can be selected and gain promotion meaning that a senior Baathist member in Damascus or at Aleppo University Ba'ath Party Branch level should be a protégé of a NUSS member to be appointed. In this regard, the NUSS is no exception.

The NUSS was founded to serve the regime agenda and disseminate propaganda rather than to represent students and guarantee their rights.²¹ Indeed, I was always asked to take part in events to promote the regime's propaganda prior to 2011. Moreover, in an interview with a senior ex-member of the NUSS, he pointed out the main roles that they were tasked to perform, both generally, and specifically during the protest movement:

We were asked to mobilize students for pro-regime rallies to distract the public opinion and give a counter narrative to what was going on during anti-regime protests. The NUSS was providing all resources to the participants of the rallies. Assad's photos, loudspeakers, DJs and transport were free and abundantly available for participants.²²

In April 2011, following the first protest inside the university campus, all NUSS members, those in key positions within faculties, institutes and the student accommodation units were summoned to a meeting with the member of the Executive Office, Omar Aarob, the executive director envoy for Aleppo University. The meeting was held at the Hospitality House (known as unit 20) inside the student accommodation units and involved some forty NUSS members who were to be informed of the new instructions from the leadership in Damascus. Aarob indicated that he was asked by the leadership to 'organize the NUSS to stand in the face of all the turbulences and prevent any attempts to organize anti-government protests at all costs'.²³

With no alternative student organizations, the only option was for students to join the NUSS if they were to have access to resources and networks. Thus, the absence of an alternative created what I call a *polarity orientation*, and what Wedeen has referred to as the politics of what if—meaning that, while members might not agree with the agenda of a given organization, they have no other option but to acquiesce

²⁰Baath Party Syria, 'Central Command members', *Baath Party Syria*, October 17, 2018, <http://www.baathparty.sy/Posts.php?id=2784>.

²¹Khatib Khatib (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Reyhanli, Turkey, May 10, 2017.

²²Hazem Ahmad (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Izmir, Turkey, April 16, 2017.

²³Author's personal notes, observations and communications (meeting of NUSS members, Unit 20, University of Aleppo Accommodation City, Aleppo, April 14, 2011).

and be part of it.²⁴ Moreover, within the NUSS, there were lobbies that connected many groups of students of different backgrounds. Such lobbies were in place before the uprising, and they linked students from the same cities, religions, or faculties and they would come together and coordinate during election times.²⁵ While the official strategy of the NUSS leadership was very clear in terms of containing and eliminating the movement, some members held a positive attitude towards the challengers who, as a result, were assisted on many occasions by NUSS members, whether driven by solidarity, kinship, or friendship.

The NUSS was the most effective organization in promoting the idea of the conspiracy the country was facing because its members were, and remain, solely students, and hence conspiracy narratives would resonate among other students.²⁶ One example is when the regime tried to organize a national dialogue that was held in all universities throughout the country. For example, in July 2011, I participated in the national dialogue at Aleppo University. Even though the meeting was aimed at representing the students by giving them a platform to express themselves, most of the participants were either NUSS and/or senior Ba'athist members who were interviewed by state TV and expressed their satisfaction with the atmosphere of freedom of expression and democracy. Moreover, the university was actually closed at the time, as it was the summer holiday in the university calendar.

Despite the official position of NUSS and the efforts of university officials who were members of the Ba'ath Party to try to mediate to calm tensions and prevent the students from mobilizing at the beginning of the uprising, the student's movement at Aleppo University was making the same demands that participants in the popular uprising in other cities were invoking at the start of the revolution. They demanded an end to the state of emergency that had been in place for forty-eight years, the fighting of corruption and nepotism in the public sector, the release of political prisoners, and a display of solidarity with the city of Dara'a.²⁷ Still, showing solidarity with the revolting cities at that time was considered by the regime a deviant action, and in most cases a crime. Moreover, the chaotic situation inside the University of Aleppo campus created splits within the security departments, who were determined to eliminate the movement by force.

Article 8 of the Syrian Constitution states that the Ba'ath Party is the leading party in both society and the state.²⁸ Although there were some other political parties, the constitution clearly posits that these parties work under the leadership of the Ba'ath

²⁴Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, judgment, and Mourning in Syria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018); See also Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²⁵Hazem Ahmad (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of the NUSS), interview with author, Izmir, Turkey, April 16, 2017. The interaction between the individual students on the one hand, and key people in the organization on the other, simulates Jasper's idea of 'simple and complex players'. See Jasper, 'A Strategic Approach to Collective'.

²⁶I was a senior member in the union, also occupying a key position in the dormitory from 2007 until the end of 2011. We were always asked to promote the idea of the government's openness and the willingness of the regime to listen to the demands of the students if they would stop protesting. However, the only purpose of this was to demobilize the challengers. Basically, the Bandar Bin Sultan plan was a document that went viral in all media outlets to show that what was happening was not a popular uprising; rather, it was a conspiracy that was planned and promoted by the ex-Saudi Ambassador to the United States, Bandar Bin Sultan.

²⁷See Shadi Azzam, [Arabic] 'The first demonstration in the university campus in Aleppo 4-5-2011, Video, 01:17, *You Tube*, July 1, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqIP7nLRtiA>. At the beginning of the uprising, there were no calls by the protestors that demanded the resignation of the president or even toppling the regime. This could be traced back to early film footage of the protests inside the campus. Still, the regime responded violently to the protesters.

²⁸Carnegie Middle East Center, 'The Syrian Constitution—1973-2012, *Malcolm G. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center*, December 5, 2012, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50255?lang=en>.

Party, which the constitution describes as the ‘National Progressive Front’. This means that any activities or policy recommendations by other parties must first be verified by the Ba’ath leadership. Article 8 of the constitution was a double-edged sword for the regime. On the one hand, it tied the hands of officials who were expected to respond to protesters demanding basic rights, such as freedom, political pluralism, and reform. The officials themselves could not argue against such calls, for they knew that the regime needed reform after forty years without any change to its laws. Furthermore, the Ba’ath Party itself states that ‘freedom is sacred for the masses’.²⁹ On the other hand, the regime put pressure on the officials by forming what it called the ‘security committee’ to contain the protests in order not to incite other potential challengers in the city of Aleppo.³⁰

The university, the police, and the security forces

The political structure of the Assad regime makes any opportunity to challenge the system very unlikely, because all key institutions of the state and the system are in the hands of the security forces. Hence, the strategy of challenging the system from within was the only possible way to effect change. This was confirmed when defections started to take place when the oppressive grip of the regime reached those who were helping or sympathizing with the challengers. Although defection was hard, it was difficult to control the flow of information between the security forces personnel and the challengers. Based on my personal experience of participating in the protest movement and the interviews I conducted with participants who experienced detention and direct contact with police personnel, there was a chance of release, depending on the political views of the police officers involved.³¹

Empirical evidence of the aftermath of the 2012 ‘Crisis Management Cell’ explosion in Damascus—which resulted in the death of many senior security figures—indicates that the regime was determined to put an end to the growing movement.³² In an interview with former prime minister Riad Hijab (who defected two weeks after the explosion), he quotes the Minister of the Interior’s evaluation of the event as an ‘assassination operation’.³³ An explosive device was planted under the table in the meeting room by a security agent under the command of Ali Mamlouk—then Head of National Security.³⁴ Hardcore senior figures, including Assef Shawkat, Bashar al-Assad’s brother-in-law and Deputy Minister of Defence; Dawood Rajiha, Minister of Defence; Hasan Turkmani,

²⁹Baath Party, ‘General Principles’, *Baath Party*, August 21, 2015, http://www.baathparty.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7614:general-principles&catid=307&Itemid=327&lang=en.

³⁰The security committees work in parallel with the crisis cell in Damascus. At the beginning of the uprising, the crisis cells in the cities were formed to avoid interaction between the security services and the protesters. The security committees, however, used to present policy recommendations to the crisis cells that were headed by the security services officers who meet regularly with Bashar al-Assad. In July 2012, a deadly attack targeted a meeting of the crisis cell, leaving the closest officers to Assad killed. See The Guardian, ‘Syria crisis: chaos in Damascus as Assad loyalists killed—as it happened’, *The Guardian*, July 18, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2012/jul/18/syria-crisis-assad-loyalists-killed>.

³¹Memo (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University), interview with author, Hamburg, Germany, March 26, 2017.

³²Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How one family's lust for power destroyed Syria* (New York: Little and Brown Company, 2019). See also Rula Amin, ‘Analysis: A deadly blow to Syria’s regime’, *Al Jazeera*, July 18, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/7/18/analysis-a-deadly-blow-to-syrias-regime>.

³³Bishara, *Syria: A Pathway*.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 260.

Assistant Vice President; and Hisham Ikhtiar, Head of the National Security Bureau, were killed. Thereafter, the regime deployed air force constantly when any major reshuffle or changes took place in the military and security apparatuses.³⁵ Orders were given to shoot at protesters in order to intimidate them and deter them from mobilizing against the regime. All those who were caught sympathizing with the protesters or refusing to shoot at them were either summarily executed or imprisoned for not following the orders and shooting at protesters.³⁶ The case of Aleppo University was no different. Violent responses increased when defection became possible, and only those who were trusted by the regime were deployed to the university campus. In an interview with the former General Director of the Crime Investigation Department in Syria, who defected in the summer of 2012 and was in a key position in the Aleppo Police General Directorate at the beginning of the uprising, he described the regime's strategy concerning the protests on the campus as follows:

The police officers deployed to the university were not from Aleppo. This means that there will be a high chance that those people will be repressing students from their hometowns or those whom they might know personally. A lot of police personnel had positive attitudes towards the uprising students. To overcome this dilemma, the regime started to form what it called 'popular committees' to be deployed to the students' accommodation where there is no one from the city of Aleppo.³⁷

The movement started to gain public support, not least as the growing debate among the officials themselves provided an opportunity for the students to advance their claims. In the absence of any political multiplicity, the activists adapted to the changing narrative and attitudes of Ba'athists officials. Protesters took this opportunity to address, not only bystanders, but also officials and members of the regime.

Some of those who were occupying official positions within the Ba'ath Party or NUSS, and who were not necessarily distant from challengers or regime members per se, could support the movement from within without drawing the attention of supporters of the regime.³⁸ This was made possible, for example, by face-to-face communication. Often, these officials were the ones responsible for calming down the students, and when they did so, they would take the opportunity to give them 'inside' information about regime plans, such as warnings about future arrests or harsh repressive actions. Despite being totally uncoordinated with the protestors themselves, this approach posed a very effective challenge to the regime, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and loss of trust within its ranks.³⁹ In this way, the challengers managed to behave unexpectedly, thus taking the regime by surprise. This was before the regime drew a clear, polarizing, dividing line between the two sides—placing people either with the regime, or with those conspiring against it. This was clearly reflected in Bashar al-Assad's speech in 2012 at Damascus University, in which he stated: 'There is no grey area when the state is experiencing and going

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Nick Meo, 'Syria Sniper Shot High When Officers Ordered Him to Kill', *The Telegraph*, January 7, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9000184/Syria-sniper-shot-high-when-officers-ordered-him-to-kill.html>.

³⁷Awad Al-Ali (Brigadier General, ex-General Director of the Crime Investigation Department Syria), interview with author, Istanbul, Turkey, May 4, 2017.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Author's own experience during his participation in the protest movement.

through these events.⁴⁰ This meant in effect giving the green light to deal with all of those who were against the regime's strategy for dealing with the uprising.

The main strategy the regime used on the campus at the beginning of the movement was to take disruptive actions intended to inhibit the protestors. For example, the security platoons that were present on campus facilitated pro-regime rallies while simultaneously preventing demonstrators from organizing counter demonstrations. Moreover, employees were asked to take shifts in the main squares to chant for the president if protesters did demonstrate.⁴¹ Later on, the situation inevitably started to escalate as more students joined the movement. New strategies emerged, such as distributing electrical shock devices, cables, and batons.⁴² This escalation was facilitated by those within the security department who recruited students loyal to the regime. In addition to these disruptive actions, Air Force Intelligence started to arm some students so that they might participate in putting down the protests.⁴³ However, because NUSS members who were asked to join the security forces to participate in repressing the protests could not refuse, they instead made excuses in order not to be present in the main squares where protests were being held. According to one of the NUSS members:

After the UN monitors visit, sympathizers with the movement were fired or forcibly moved to other institutions outside the university. I was personally moved to another institution, leaving my position at the university. There were many employees who faced the same scenario. We were asked to hold guns and be part of check points inside the campus. All those who rejected were either fired or moved to other institutions.⁴⁴

Students' agency in the movement

Although the majority of officials were Ba'athists, most of them were against the use of violence inside the campus. This initial openness of at least some officials to the first wave of protests helped the students to mobilize. In an interview with a participant of the first protest on the campus, the role played by some Ba'athist officials who opposed the deployment of the riot police and the *Shabbiha* onto the campus to oppress the students, was emphasized.⁴⁵ The students could easily 'victimize' themselves in a creative way to these Ba'athist officials because, at this point, their only weapon was their voice, which gave them a window to advance their claims.

Social media was the most effective tool for disseminating the protest movements of the Arab Spring. Aleppo University was no exception, even though such media were also available to the Assad regime. The absence of international independent media was advantageous for the regime, as most Syrians were not familiar with

⁴⁰See Al Jadeed News, [in Arabic] 'Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's speech in the People's Assembly', Video, 48:33, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S89q-tVZp0o>.

⁴¹Khatib Khatib (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Reyhanli, Turkey, May 10, 2017.

⁴²Hazem Ahmad (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Izmir, Turkey, April 16, 2017.

⁴³Hazem Ahmad (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Izmir, Turkey, April 16, 2017.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Yassin al-Haj Salih, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017), 71. Al-Haj Salih defines the *Shabbiha* as a 'raw force which mirrors the structure and goals of the regime whose aim is to accumulate personal wealth and ensures its own survival at all costs.' In a forthcoming article, I cover the phenomenon inside the campus during the protest movement.

Facebook and other social media outlets.⁴⁶ Official state media framed the events as being incited by ‘the enemies of the resistance’ and ‘mercenary spoilers [who] were fulfilling the enemies’ agendas’.⁴⁷ To overcome this dilemma, activists from Aleppo placed significant dependence on the diversity of the students who played such an important role in mobilizing other students:

I have a lot of friends from Homs, Idlib and Deir Azzor whose families and friends were undergoing the worst of times ever. Without them showing us the reality through their mobile phones’ cameras, we would not believe what was going on.⁴⁸

The role of such students was to raise awareness through direct contact with their trusted colleagues, and by showing them videos of the agonies their friends and families were facing in their hometowns. As a result, the motivation and will to stand up against the regime grew. At the same time, the increased attention the regime was paying to the media in some instances backfired, pushing people to seek other avenues where they could get another version of the narrative—for example, empirical stories from the people of Aleppo itself. Hence, the success of social movements is not solely dependent on the weakness of government structures. They are also dependent on the realization by their participants of the deeper political context. For example, the visit by UN monitors to the university indicated the importance of the student movement. That act, despite lectures being suspended and dormitories closed, provided a crucial moment for the students to advance their claims.⁴⁹ The presence of the UN signalled a shifting political condition and was one of a set of meaningful events that increased the prospects for successful collective action. This becomes clear in the empirical evidence that proves the significant change in the mobilization and participation inside the university where both parties—the regime and the opposition—tried to mobilize their supporters to push for their own case and narrative.⁵⁰

The protests were inherently peaceful, as the students did not have any means to use violence.⁵¹ The regime, however, was able to use all possible means to stop the movement from spreading to other neighbourhoods of the city. Yet this strategy backfired, because some Ba’athist figures at the university opposed the use of violence inside the campus.⁵² This crisis between the university officials and the security forces gave the students the opportunity to advance their claims, because the former’s violent methods gave the students a justification to challenge state violence. However, an interview with a Ba’athist professor reveals the instructions that were given to the officials and lecturers at the university:

⁴⁶It was until February 2011 when the Assad regime unblocked Facebook and other social media outlets.

⁴⁷See Enab Baladi, ‘al’asad yasif althuwwar b “al’hathalata” wayatabanaa mustalih “alithawarat” [Al-Assad describes the revolutionaries as “scum: and adopts the term ‘revolution’], *Enab Baladi*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/169024>. Assad constantly attacked the protesters and the opposition in his speeches from day one of the uprising. In a Stalinist style, he used terms like germs, traitors, and scums to describe his opponents.

⁴⁸Wajd (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee), interview with author, Bonne, Germany, April 6, 2017.

⁴⁹Zamanalwsl, ‘The University of Aleppo’.

⁵⁰See SyAlepRev1, [in Arabic] ‘Aleppo, University Square, an important area for the media—a very massive demonstration in the presence of observers’, Video, 1:42, *YouTube*, May 17, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SlbDGsUln0>.

⁵¹British Broadcasting Service (BBC), ‘Syria protests: Thousands of students rally in Aleppo’, *BBC*, May 12, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13370913>.

⁵²Memo (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University), interview with author, Hamburg, Germany, March 26, 2017.

At the beginning of the uprising, staff members were asked through their programme coordinators, who were informed by Ba'athist officials, to raise awareness and point out the conspiracy the country was facing, and to focus on the reforms the government is determined to make. This was meant just to demobilize the students and control the situation.⁵³

Although Ba'athists were not able to officially oppose the regime strategy, they could challenge both the use of violence, and the tactic of the security forces to enter the dormitories, which were the most active sites inside the university.⁵⁴ However, opposing the use of violence by officials did not deter the regime from deploying their usual violent strategies. The students challenging the regime benefited from these internal disagreements, considering them an opportunity via which to mobilize further. With this alignment between the students and some officials, and the uncertainty of the position of some officials at the beginning of the uprising, both in the country in general and the University of Aleppo in particular, challengers responded to threats they perceived to their interests and their values. This process, of evaluating the situation and taking the strategic decision to continue challenging the regime, reveals the profound imbalance between the agency of the students and the vulnerable structure of the regime.

Most scholars who focused on the onset of the uprising in Syria concluded that established networks and the clan ties of early risers played an important role in the uprising.⁵⁵ Aleppo University was not an exception when it came to organizing protests, strikes, or acts of solidarity. For those who were not using social media applications, they were connected with each other through a network of so-called 'focal point people'—movement members who are well connected, both to regime figures and to movement organizers:

I was not interested in knowing who is organizing the protest as I was in contact with a good friend of mine who was a member of the coordination committee. Furthermore, I was interested in participation, not the participants as a whole. Some people used to have contacts with police officers and some security personnel who were passing information about the movements and orders that were executed to target activists. This was the case before defection was possible.⁵⁶

This was like a spider web: Every group would have a leader who kept his group members informed and updated about the new strategies and opportunities of the movement. These networks were based on geography, kinship, and field of study. To conclude, the necessary resources were always there, but access to these resources, officials, and social media was the key to the protestors' ability to take action.

Political alignments in the absence of elite support

The students' social movement at Aleppo University was an extension of what was happening in other cities and hence, developments in other cities were reflected in

⁵³ Author's Skype interview with Naser Ibrahim, pseudonym, an ex-lecturer at Aleppo University, Istanbul, Turkey, April 2017.

⁵⁴ Saleh Ali (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University), interview with author, Gaziantep, Turkey, April 4, 2017.

⁵⁵ Teije Hidde Donker, 'No Way Back: Actors, Structures and Mobilization Opportunities in the 2011–2013 Syrian Uprising', *European University Institute, Cosmos Centre on Social Movement Studies Working Paper 15*, 2012; Leenders and Heydemann, 'Popular Mobilization in Syria'.

⁵⁶ Saleh Ali (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University), interview with author, Gaziantep, Turkey, April 4, 2017.

Aleppo. At the same time, participants realized the absence of the elite in the movement and attributed this to the oppressive nature of the regime and how it was impossible for the elite to support the movement publicly. Great pressure was brought to bear on opposition figures inside and outside the country. After the first months of the uprising, pro-regime media outlets and even parliament members started to raise the issue of revoking the citizenship of those inciting people to mobilize and stand up against the regime.⁵⁷ This is unsurprising, as this has been the case in Syrian political life for the last fifty years. Given this problem, students sought alternatives in order to overcome the problem of the lack of elite support within the movement.

Everything in Syria is constrained and institutionalized which makes the masses control very tight. However, students participating in the protests found new ways to overcome the dilemma of the missing elite and leadership by leading the movement via their own networks in the different institutions of the university. The demographic makeup of Aleppo was reflected in those holding official positions within the university. Many protestors had relatives or good connections with people inside the regime occupying important positions upon which they could call in case of detention or threat of arrest. Aleppo University was no exception when it came to the roles of the elite and academic figures. The NUSS, the Ba'ath Party, and even the security departments that maintained a physical presence inside the campus, used to have people in key positions who were cooperating with the protestors—albeit very much on an ad hoc basis. As the Syrian political climate made it next to impossible for the elite to support the movement, the students came up with other ideas: to simply ignore them. Moreover, the students were worried that the elite might co-opt the movement. A participating student described the role of the elite within the Aleppo University as follows:

There were some Ba'athist figures who were trying to protect the students from the regime's violent reactions, but they could not. How can a Ba'athist challenge the Ba'ath?! They were swinging between the students and the security forces to save themselves from both sides.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, students could still make use of some official positions within the university and the security departments to find avenues in support of their claims. Throughout my interviews with ex-NUSS members, there were similar examples of officials notifying relatives and acquaintances who were students of potential threats by the security forces. This was done, for example, when the security departments were pursuing activists inside the campus, sending lists of students' names to the NUSS and asking them to provide details of the students and their places of residence, etc.⁵⁹ Internally, the movement needed supporters that could help the protestors in critical situations in case they were caught demonstrating or otherwise detained. Moreover, the protesting students had many supporters at the beginning of the uprising when deployed platoons happened to be originating from same towns and villages of protestors. However, this internal support was not enough to sustain the movement all the way to 2013. There were also significant external factors upon which the movement depended. This was reflected in the statements of the international community.

⁵⁷Jamal Karsli, "iisqat aljinsiati alsuwriati khatwat liltaqsim 'am litazwir al'iintkhabat!' [Dropping the Syrian nationality, a step for dividing or forging elections], *Orient News*, November 25, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2NMqPdY>.

⁵⁸Saleh Ali (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University), interview with author, Gaziantep, Turkey, April 4, 2017.

⁵⁹Hazem Ahmad (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Izmir, Turkey, April 16, 2017.

The role of the outside forces: the Syrian diaspora, the United Nations, and global media

Externally, the movement needed the Syrian diaspora to mobilize the international community to stand against Assad and raise awareness about the level of oppression the regime used against peaceful demonstrators. This was at the forefront of the first conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People in February 2012, in which more than sixty countries and international organizations participated.⁶⁰ The participants condemned the atrocities of the Assad regime and the excessive use of violence. Moreover, they threatened to cut diplomatic ties with the regime and impose sanctions if violations continued.⁶¹ As a result of the increasing use of excessive force against peaceful protests, politically, many governments adopted a threatening tone towards Assad. Indeed, many governments enforced sanctions and boycotted the regime as a reaction to these atrocities.⁶²

Social media

The mainstream media and social media were important factors in supporting the uprising and exposing the Assad regime. The Aljazeera News Network played a significant role in the uprising, with its extensive live coverage of daily events. Some students considered it more effective than many foreign western governments. An example of this was the visit of the French and US ambassadors to Hama in July 2011—a move that was interpreted as supporting the protestors.⁶³ However, they could not prevent the crackdown on protesters there. It took the Assad regime two weeks after the Ambassadors' visit to hail the main square of the city (Al-Assi) with heavy weapons and the army.⁶⁴

As no one from the elite stepped up to lead the protest movement, and as indicated by the empirical evidence, the protests were organized spontaneously, needing neither sophisticated arrangements nor resources in order to mobilize the masses. This is because the protest movement in Aleppo reflected what was simultaneously occurring in other cities. Social media was a key revolutionary tool in the Arab Spring. By the time the Tunisian revolution succeeded in toppling the head of the regime, the Assad regime had blocked nearly all social media outlets, albeit while allowing access to some institutions such the NUSS to create pro-regime platforms in case of a large scale anti-regime mobilization.⁶⁵ Later, a number of Facebook pages, such as 'The Syrian Revolution 2011' (Althawra al-Suryia ded Bashar al-Assad) and 'Local Coordination Committees in Syria' (Lijan al-Tanseeq al-Mahalyia), were created and used as umbrellas for the whole movement across the country.⁶⁶ The students who were part of these networks used them to

⁶⁰Bishara, *Syria: A Pathway*.

⁶¹Dagher, *Assad or We Burn*.

⁶²Bishara, *Syria: A Pathway*.

⁶³Dagher, *Assad or We Burn*.

⁶⁴Bishara, *Syria: A Pathway*.

⁶⁵Hazem Ahmad (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Izmir, Turkey, April 16, 2017.

⁶⁶The Syrian Revolution 2011 (Althawra al-Suriya dhid Bashar al-Assad) was created before the emergence of the revolution in Dara'a and was intended to be used as a platform via which to organize and mark Fridays as the largest protests. These were organized because people were already gathering for the Friday prayer. In a later stage, the 'coordination committees' were created to organize people on a more local level—cities, universities, neighbourhoods, and even diaspora. <https://syriauntold.com/2013/06/24/local-coordination-committees-of-syria/>

coordinate protests and to frame the grievances, calling for a mass mobilization against the regime.

The UN and the Arab league

Another external supporting factor was the joint Arab League and UN monitor mission to Syria—an initiative that emerged following two failed Arab-led initiatives in October 2011 and January 2012.⁶⁷ The mission was meant to visit all provinces and designated ‘hot spots’—those in which protests were demanding the toppling of the regime—and report the findings to the Security Council. As part of the plan, UN monitors visited Aleppo and its university in May 2012. Although the mission was conceived to be impartial, the students participating in the protests unanimously viewed it as a golden opportunity to advance their claims against a regime that was strongly refuting narratives of the presence of anti-regime protests or oppression. Indeed, the empirical evidence shows that the number of participants in the demonstrations doubled compared to other times when there was no external third party present.⁶⁸ Together, all of these internal and external opportunities helped mobilize and recruit more people to the movement.

Passive resistance: the everyday micro practices of pull and push between the regime and the opposition on the university level

When the first demonstrations were organized on the campus on 13 April 2011, the regime deployed a strategy of distracting the challengers and public opinion by calling on its network of supporters, mainly NUSS and Ba’athists members, to assemble around and within the protesters with pictures of Assad printed on their T-shirts hidden beneath their everyday clothes.⁶⁹ The idea was to (a) isolate and contain the challengers to prevent them from spreading out to other places and to prevent others from joining them; and (b) disturb them until the security forces arrived to arrest as many participants as possible before they ran away.⁷⁰ This network of supporters were those on the ‘margins of demonstrations’ who appeared to be sympathetic, hostile, or indifferent people.⁷¹ However, these live shows strength and perseverance were, in an already crowded space, very much two-sided. On the one hand, they proved the challengers’ narrative of the use of violence by the regime that led to the movement recruiting more people. On the other hand, they intimidated bystanders and hesitant people to join because of the level of repression that was practiced by the regime and its supporters. Moreover, this

⁶⁷Bishara, *Syria: A Pathway*, 450–55. The mission was mandated to monitor a ceasefire and the return of the military and its hardware equipment to their barracks. A comprehensive roadmap was drawn for a gradual peaceful transition in Syria, where Assad would pass his powers to his deputy to form a national unity government. Although the initiative did not oppose the participation of regime figures in the transitional period, it did not have the means to execute the plan and force the regime to comply. As a result, the Arab League had no other option than to refer the initiative to the UN Security Council in order to give it an international dimension and avoid the country descending into a bloodbath. However, the Arab initiative was vetoed on 4 February 2012 by Russia and China.

⁶⁸See SyrAlepRev1, [in Arabic] ‘Aleppo, University Square, an important area for the media. A very massive demonstration in the presence of observers—photo elevated—5/17/2012, Video, 01:42, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlbDGsUln0>.

⁶⁹Khatib Khatib (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Reyhanli, Turkey, May 10, 2017.

⁷⁰Hazem Ahmad (pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS), interview with author, Izmir, Turkey, April 16, 2017.

⁷¹Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 98. Interaction does not occur only among those who demonstrate. It includes also fence sitters.

infiltration did not stop there. Rather, it continued, taking other forms, such as having regime informants within protest coordination and social media.

Students started to use new strategies to combat the highly repressive response of the regime and the infiltration of their organizational networks. While the students employed many strategies, I will focus on three: the use of 'focal point people'; 'scapegoating'; and 'flash mob' demonstrations. One of the organizing tactics was the use of so-called 'focal point people' in which each group of activists had one trusted representative who would pass information to his or her group face-to-face rather than online.⁷² Once there was a sufficiently large base for the movement, not only on the campus, but also in the various neighbourhoods of Aleppo, another way of organizing protests was the 'scapegoating strategy'. In this approach, organizers would announce many locations for the protests with only small groups present in each place. When the security forces stepped in to suppress a given protest, students simply joined another group in a different place. In 2012, the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and the Faculty of Sciences provided the main theatres for regime challenging protests. Thus, in order to distract the *Shabbiha* and security forces, rumours would spread that there would be a protest at the Faculty of Sciences. Instead, a group of fifteen to twenty students would chant revolutionary slogans in front of the Faculty of Sciences, while the main protest would be at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. This gave other faculties the chance to participate in relative safety. Via this strategy, participants could protest and get their messages heard in public, as well as distracting the security forces.⁷³ This became a recurring event every Tuesday during 2012, lasting for between 15 to 20 minutes. The third tactic was 'flash mob' demonstration or a 'flying' demonstration (*muzahara tayyara*). Flying demonstrations were spontaneous protests that took place to test the readiness of the students and the response of the regime. These occurred depending on the particular context at the time—one in which a large number of students were always ready to protest, even if only for two minutes. This strategy was mainly deployed inside the University's Accommodation City, where the *Shabbiha* and the security presence was very high. Inside the Accommodation City, students were able to protest late at night when identifying protesters was difficult. Sometimes students could organize flying protests three or four times a day. Although the regime was using heavy weapons in other large cities, such as Homs, Dara'a, and Deir Azzor, students were responding in a more challenging way to the regime. Despite the fact that the Assad regime is known for being authoritarian and fatally repressive towards challengers, the people still revolted, and the students, on many levels, mounted a serious challenge to it at Aleppo University.

Conclusion

Scholars of Political Opportunity Structures (POS) become particularly interested when movements begin to deviate from the pre-defined, straight path laid down by ruling regimes.⁷⁴ This deviance, which threatens the strict boundaries of the regime structure, indicates that there is a change in the broader (political) structure that would be likely to

⁷²Saleh Ali (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University), interview with author, Gaziantep, Turkey, April 4, 2017.

⁷³Kais Aloush (pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University), interview with author, Gaziantep, Turkey, April 3, 2017.

⁷⁴See Eitan Alimi, 'Mobilizing Under the Gun: Theorizing Political Opportunity Structure in a Highly Repressive Setting', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (2009): 219–37; See also McAdam, *Political Process and the*; David S. Meyer, 'Protest and Political Opportunities', *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 125–45; Charles Kurzman, 'Structural Opportunity and perceived Opportunity in Social-Movement Theory: The Iranian Revolution of 1979', *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 1 (1996): 153–70; Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*.

facilitate a rebellious action. The notion that if there is a change in a given political structure, there will be a potential incentive for the opposition to mobilize, is the basic hypothesis of scholars focusing on social movements in democratic and quasi-democratic regimes.⁷⁵ POS theorists aim to probe two interrelated questions:

First, why is it that people lend their support to social movements during particular historical periods and not in others? Second, how can students of collective action account for the shift from a sporadic, short-term form of contention to a sustained, wide-scope, and long-term form of contention?⁷⁶

The support given to a social movement is the result of calculations the protestors make while evaluating the opportunities available to them. This is what Meyer (2004) refers to as the 'consciousness of the insurgents', which he takes one step further by positing that social movements are not solely dependent on the weaknesses of a given government's structure.⁷⁷ He suggests that they are also dependent on those participating becoming aware of the political context: 'Movement activists do not choose their goals at random, [rather] it is the political context which stresses certain grievances around which movements organise'.⁷⁸

There is almost a complete consensus among social movement theorists that protests fade out when they are faced with high levels of repression that disperse activists and force them to take different routes.⁷⁹ It is worth mentioning here that the student movement was never detached from the uprising beyond the walls of the university. As a result, the developments that transpired following the 'Crisis Management Cell' explosion in Damascus and the appointment of figures who were in favour of a security-led solution to the uprising, and the UN mission visit to the university campus in May 2012, created new challenges for the movement. First, levels of repression increased with the formation of the Ba'ath Legions, in addition to the expulsion of those officials who were suspected of collaborating with the challengers. Second, the closure of the dormitory, which provided such an important platform upon which the students mobilized, in addition to the suspension of the lectures, gave the regime an opportunity to reconsider the old strategies and adopt new ones, resulting in the targeting of the university on the first day of examinations—a move that was clearly intended to send a message to those who were planning to protest again.⁸⁰ Finally, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) took control of more than seventy per cent of the city of Aleppo by the end of 2012. This provided a safe haven in which activists could move freely and express their opposition to the regime, albeit not on campus.

⁷⁵Edward E. Azar, *The management of protracted social conflict: theory and case* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1990); See also Donker, 'No Way Back'; Kriesi et al., 'New Social Movements'; Leenders and Heydemann, 'Popular Mobilization in Syria'; Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷⁶Alimi, 'Mobilizing Under the Gun', 220.

⁷⁷Meyer, 'Protest and Political Opportunities', 125.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹See Alimi, 'Mobilizing Under the Gun'; Kriesi et al., 'New Social Movements'; Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*.

⁸⁰See Mariam Karouny, 'Explosions kill 83 at Syrian university as exams begin', *Reuters*, January 15, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis/explosions-kill-83-at-syrian-university-as-exams-begin-idUSBRE90E0V820130115>.

I was at the university that day when I witnessed the attack on the Faculty of Architecture and Unit 9 of the dormitory that used to host IDPs. The attack left eighty-three people dead and more than two hundred injured.

The basic assumption of POS theory is that social movements are contingent on the opening of opportunities and the availability of resources.⁸¹ It is a mutual relationship that depends on the availability of resources, while the structure of the regime is not inclined to open for challengers. In this article, I argued that the regime structure itself did not change for the challengers. Rather, it was the agency of the insurgents who created an opening in the structure that helped them advance their claims. The new strategies that were adopted by the regime contradicted completely what was practiced by the different security services on the ground. At the same time, strategies were changing in all phases of the movement in relation to the level of the participation in the uprising, from the very first protests in 2011, until they came to an end in 2013.

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⁸¹McAdams, *Political Process and the*.