

## “Better Death than Humiliation”

"الموت ولا المذلة"

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*What were the opportunity structures that facilitated the development of an insurgent consciousness among students of the collective action protest movement at Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013?*



**Utrecht University**

Ali Aljaseem

5926521

Utrecht University

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Dr. Mario Fumerton

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to dedicate this work to my late brother, Muhammad, whose soul is always present with me. He encourages me to do my best in order to make his voice, and all those who were killed by Assad's deadly regime, heard. Thank you so much for your sacrifice.

Secondly, I would like to sincerely thank my great wife, Deema, and my naughty son, Jousef, who were always my resort in times of despair and depression due to stress I had from study, work, and the circumstances of my family in Syria.

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To all those who still believe in themselves and are sure that one day all their dreams of a better Syria will come true.

*A member of the National Union of Syrian Students executive office who headed a meeting with the social committees of Aleppo University of which I was a member asked: "Do you want to know how we are going to deal with this wave of uprising?" He told us to show him our mobile phones while we were switching them off. "You have the green light to take the ID card of any student that you suspect of being active against the regime. Your job is just to point a finger to any potential protester inside the campus. We will not allow this to happen in the University of Aleppo" he concluded.<sup>1</sup>*

*"I am going to define freedom for you" a security officer told me while he was interrogating me. " You are a young man and future is waiting for you. The only definition of freedom you must have in mind is that you are free to have sex. You must not think of any other kinds of definitions; otherwise you will never get out of here" he proceeded. He told me that the Syrian regime expected Israel to be the enemy, but this time the enemy has appeared from inside not from outside!*

Amer Yousef<sup>2</sup>

*"Did you lose your mind?" A middle-aged doctor asked me worryingly when I arrived to the ER of the University Hospital. "The security forces are roaming the departments checking the patients to see if they had got injuries of participants in the protests because they know the kind of injuries their comrades caused" he added fervently. While he was treating me and providing me with first aid, he was telling me how lucky I was as he came to check me. He told me to leave, without even suturing my cut; otherwise both of us would be arrested if they discovered that he had helped me out without reporting my case to them!*

Memo<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is the author's own experience when he was in a meeting with senior officials of the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS) in 2011. The author himself was a member the 'social committees' inside the dormitory of Aleppo University.

<sup>2</sup> Author's interview with Amer Yousef, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Berlin, Germany, on 26 March 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with Memo, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Hamburg, Germany, on 26 March 2017.

## **Abstract**

*Political opportunity structure theorists have paid more attention to either the structural factors or to the agential ones while studying social movements. Through the nexus of structure and agency this research aims to explain the collective action of the students of Aleppo University as one episode of the Syrian uprising. I argue that structures alone are not enough to facilitate a social movement. It is the agency of the activists 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 regime were not equally significant. I point to the prominence of some properties over others and how these properties eventually led to the end of the movement inside the University in 2013.*

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## Introduction

By the time the Syrian people made it to the streets in March 2011, the adopted mottos and chants were about dignity, freedom, and liberation. This was because of the humiliating acts practiced by the security services across the country against the people. One of the first yells that people chanted was 'better we die than we live in submissiveness' to call for the end of ignominious actions.<sup>4</sup> The Arab Spring has proven that "Arab authoritarian regimes were far less solid than assumed. The demonstration effects emanating from mass mobilization that forced entrenched Arab dictators out of office were powerful enough to help *break barriers of fear*" (Leenders & Heydemann 2012: 141, emphasis added). Dictatorship and one-party state best describe the political system in Syria. Since the six-day-war of 1967 with Israel, there was no power circulation in Syria, let alone regime change. Contrary to the narrative that the Syrian regime has been mobilizing all resources to support the axis of resistance (Hezbollah) to confront outside threats, it was clear that the increasing security and military capabilities were to resist any probable national uprising against the regime. There have been prior attempts to topple the regime, such as in the 1980s when the Islamic Brotherhood Movement tried to lead a popular uprising against Hafez Al-Assad who put down the movement in a violent way (the Guardian 2011). Another mobilization try happened in 2004 when the Kurds protested in the North of Syria where the regime also reacted violently to the protestors (Little 2012). The quick and violent response to both of these events, showed the regime's readiness to oppress any challenging tries. The regime response to the uprisings in 1980s and 2004 is an example of the regime readiness to oppress any challenge that might threaten its existence.

In March 2011, the opportunity opened for the Syrians to take to the streets in the city of Dar'a, and the protests soon began to diffuse to other cities such as Homs and Idlib. This research focusses on the protest movement at Aleppo University. It aims to explain how the change of opportunity structures developed an insurgent consciousness to mobilize and take collective action among the students there. Before the first spark of the Syrian revolution in Dar'a, the presence of security forces was very apparent in the main cities of Damascus and Aleppo, as they were expected to witness the first waves of

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<sup>4</sup> The first adopted motto was 'better death than humiliation' (الموت ولا المذلة) in Arabic. Moreover, the revolution was called 'the revolution of dignity' (ثورة الكرامة) in Arabic.



demonstrations in March 2011. As the protests were expanding in other cities in Syria, like Deir Azzour, Idlib and Hama, Aleppo was yet to join the demonstration movement. From personal experience in Aleppo during that time, I witnessed security forces dominating the main streets to prevent any attempts from the opposition to mobilize. A countermovement to the demonstrations was initiated in Aleppo by the government, to show that the city is loyal to the regime. Such actions by the government agitated the activists in Aleppo who were sympathizing with people in other cities, who were being violently oppressed and shot at with live rounds.

When the mobilization began at Aleppo University, I experienced the first days of the uprising. People could watch clips of the demonstrations through activists' lenses only, for no independent journalists were allowed to be present at that time. The protests waves, which were persistently put down violently, started in Aleppo University on 13 April 2011, almost one month after it started in Dar'a on 18 March.

The most interesting thing about the mobilization in Aleppo University is that it never became an armed one. Instead, the students insisted on peaceful ways to express their opposition to Assad's rule. The situation in Aleppo was drawing little attention from the international media, which depicted it in the New York Times as "less visible", and 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, Syria's commercial hub in the north and a residual bastion of support for President Bashar al-Assad's government" (Saad and Gladstone 2012). This observation was made during the time the UN monitors were present in Aleppo University in May 2012, more than one year after the uprising.

Most scholars, who have applied social movement theories to explain the Syrian uprising, tend to depict the situation there as a civil war that escalated through the violence practiced by the many stakeholders on the ground (Donker 2012). Still, several works examine the onset of the revolt in terms of the political opportunity, threats, levels of repression, and the social networks of the early risers (Leenders & Heydemann 2012). Although the political opportunity structures opened for challengers, the agency of the students was the key that sustained their movement. It is worth mentioning that the students' movement was never detached from the uprising in other cities. Moreover, opportunities were external to the movement; most significantly, the wave of the Arab

Spring that threatened all Arabs dictatorships. The students seized the moment and capitalized on it.

Through the lens of "political opportunity structure", (McAdam 1999; Meyer 2004; Kruzman 1996; Alimi 2015; Tilly and Tarrow 2015), I hope to explain the context which provided the necessary opportunities that allowed the students' movement in Aleppo University to be organized. It specifically seeks to explore and answer the following central question: What were the opportunity structures that facilitated the development of an insurgent consciousness among students of the collective action protest movement at Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013?

Tilly and Tarrow argue that social movements are primarily 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" (2015: 59). Although Tilly and Tarrow's model is designed and suited for democratic and undemocratic regimes, they did not draw a clear line between the two types in both democratic and undemocratic regimes. "Most people who engage in contentious politics see themselves responding to threats they perceive to their interests, their values, or their identities" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 60).

Whereas these properties are structure-focused, the agency of the students is key in taking advantage of the resources available to overcome the problems that faced the challengers during the course of the movement. As Jasper argues, "if structure is one aspect of social life, agency is the other" (2004: 1). Thus, I will be using agency-based concepts to point out the interchangeable relations between structure and agency in the case of the students' movement. I will be building on the work of Alimi (2009) when he looked into the context of the Intifada. The Israeli government's capacities were high, nevertheless, the Palestinian challengers created a window to mobilize and advance their claims. Similarly, through reviewing the political structure of the Syrian regime in the University of Aleppo, I will be highlighting the strategies the students deployed and the resources used to overcome the repressive grip of the regime inside the campus, and in the process created an insurgent consciousness.

## **1. Situating the theory**

### **1.1 Political opportunity structure**

Social and political scientists that study social movements and their interactions with their contexts, tend to focus on the political process and opportunity structures (McAdam 1999; Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Meyer 2004; Alimi 2009; Leenders and Heydemann 2012). Research driven by the political opportunity structure attempt to investigate two main issues, as Alimi postulates it, "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?" (2009: 220) The political opportunity structure theory goes back to the early work of Eisinger, where he pointed out to one of the most important characteristics of the political system that would facilitate a protest movement: "protest is more likely to flourish in relatively open systems where it elicits responses" (1973: 28). In his work, Eisinger reviewed the circumstances within which the American cities witnessed protests, and he looked at how responsive the regime was. Many other scholars have built on Eisinger's work to study social movements in democratic regimes (Kriesi et al. 1992; McCann 1994; Tilly 2007; McAdam 1999; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Social movements in democratic regimes tend to take the form of contention, as challengers advance their claims through legal channels, whereas the same movements in undemocratic regimes might deviate from the line of contention into other forms or confrontations, such as high repression, civil wars, or lethal conflicts.

### **1.2 POS in democratic and non-democratic contexts**

Looking at movements is not merely analyzing the individuals' motives, or the mechanisms they used to explain why they happen. Rather, it is the surrounding structure and the political system that facilitate or render claim-making; "activists' prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilizing supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent" (Meyer 2004: 126). In that sense, regimes, Tilly and Tarrow argue, "vary from one country to the next. Some regimes variations across countries are quite subtle"

(2015: 56). I look at the context here using two characteristics in terms of democracy. If a regime is democratic, this means that "people subject to a given government's authority have broad, equal political rights, exert significant direct influence... over government personnel and policy, as well as receive protection from arbitrary action by governmental agents such as police, judges, and public officials" (Tilly 2007 in Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 57). On the other hand, "a regime is undemocratic to the extent that political rights are narrow and/or unequal, consultation of citizens is minimal, and protections are fragile" (ibid: 57). While Tilly pointed out to the kinds of regimes in terms of democracy, Tarrow noted that "political process models were seldom systematically applied outside the liberal democracies of the West" (1998: 19).

The application gap, I call it, comes from the regimes structures of both democratic and undemocratic states. Contention (hereafter, movements) in the democratic regimes transformed gradually and was, most of the time, compatible with the States' interests. This compatibility and subsequent success can be attributed to the democratic context a movement operated within (the peace movement, ecology movement, humanitarian aid, human rights, the women's rights and the gay movement). Moreover, repression was not high or was almost not present (Kriesi, et al. 1992) because the demands of the challengers were not contradicting the liberal standards of the states in question. When it comes to the Global South, especially the Middle East, the demands of any movement or challenging campaigns are always in contradiction with their regimes structures. Thus, regimes will not respond positively to the demands of the challengers because by adhering to the movements, the regimes will be jeopardized and threatened. Because of the complex contexts of repressive regimes, Alimi observes that "only a small number of studies attempt to apply POS in repressive, authoritarian-like political environments" (2009:219). I argue that it is the nature of the regimes that limited the application of such a theory to explain conflicts or social movements in non-democratic contexts. Most scholars that focused on conflicts in the South were looked at from other angles like social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel 1978), greed (Collier 2000), or grievances (Azar 1990). According to SIT, it is human nature that people feel identified with the groups, whether ethnic or religious ones, that they belong to. At the same time, Collier and Azar argue that we all have grievances, in one way or another, against our governments. However, these are internal psychological factors that people have control on. Thus, there should be an

external facilitator that instigates a movement, which is the political structure of a regime. In the case of high-capacity undemocratic regimes, if the opportunity does not open for challengers, there will be no possibility for mobilization. The realization of the change in the regime structure, or the opening of the opportunity at the same time, is in need of strategic choice by the challengers; the agency.

### **1.3 Structure versus agency debate**

It was Goodwin and Jasper (1999) who were very critical of structuralist theorists that focused solely on the external factors to movements, and that neglected the agency of the activists. At the same time, they were also biased in their criticism of the structural factors that structuralist theorists like Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam highlighted. It is true that the agency of the challengers, insurgents in my research, is key in any social movement because without the agency factor, there would be no meaning attached to the whole movement. However, opportunities mean chances for people to act together collectively. Gamson and Meyer noted the trap which theorists might face when analyzing collective action from the POS perspective, as it will "soak up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment – political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliances, and policy shifts" (1996: 275). This argument was used by Goodwin and Jasper to critique the focus of structuralists on political opportunities rather than the integration of the agency of the insurgents.

The historical evolution of the theory proves that it is not invariant as Goodwin and Jasper (1999) argue, rather, it indicates that it is continuously developing to explain dimensions of conflicts or collective action. At the same time, their critique contributed a lot to the structure-agency debate. It was McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (1999) that promoted the theory massively. In the political process model, McAdam emphasizes that "mobilizing structures" and "cultural framings" are crucial for movements to emerge. Mobilizing structures such as social networks and formal organizations would make collective action more feasible, as these structures and networks will make the opportunities, once they open, attainable. However, this prerequisite of the presence of organized groups of challengers might not be present in every case. For example, in the case of the Arab Spring, many challengers

took to the streets without having previous connections with each other to move collectively (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Sometimes networks are created while rising up to collective action, as a result of identical incentives driving people to mobilize. This leads us to the discussion of repressive responses of a regime to challengers. While McAdam (1996) argues that openness of the regime is a key factor in facilitating collective action in addition to the state's capacity or propensity for repression, others like Kriesi et al. (1992) would argue that the more repressive the responses by regimes are, the more challenge this will bring to the movement to act against oppression.

This mode of thought by challengers is what McAdam calls "cognitive liberation", whereby "challengers experience shifting political conditions on a day-to-day basis as a set of "meaningful" events communicating much about their prospects for successful collective action" (1999: 48). This cultural framing factor adds more value to the model as it tends to bring agency into the structure-focused theory, nevertheless, the theorists of the POS and political process theories (McAdam 1999; Goodwin and Jasper 1999) do not draw a line between the "cognitive liberation concept" and the "insurgent consciousness one". They look at them as synonymous. I argue that consciousness is the state of being aware of an external object, and having specific abilities to face that outer factor within oneself. It is a subjective experience of wakefulness and the awareness that we have, or *can do*, something. While our cognition, on the other hand, might be conscious and unconscious like being able to swim or speaking a language. That is being said, the insurgent consciousness in the context of the social movement of the students at Aleppo University is a complex process that goes beyond the definition of cognitive liberation of McAdam. I will use both concepts to explain the processes that the students went through to come to that level of consciousness of their collectivity.

The cultural framing aspect of the political process brings the structure and agency variables one step closer to each other. Hence, the support to social movement is the result of the calculations the insurgents make while evaluating the available opportunities. This is what Meyer refers to as the "consciousness of the insurgents", positing that social movements are not solely dependent on the weaknesses of government structures. He suggests that they are also dependent on the participants' realization of the political context; "movement activists do not choose their goals at random, it is the political context which stresses certain grievances around which

movements organize" (Meyer 2004: 125). Still, we need to know what goes on at the micro level of movements' participants to relate that interaction with the macro level of the movements because these, according to Jasper, "strategic choices are one component of the microfoundations of political action" (2004: 4). Moreover, the strategic choices are not made randomly, rather, they are made "within a complex set of cultural and institutional contexts that shape the players themselves, the options perceived, the choices made from among them, and the outcomes" (Jasper 2004: 5). In what follows, I will be looking at the interaction between structure and agency factors, in addition to focusing on the context of non-democratic regimes.

#### **1.4 The interaction of structure and agency**

I define regimes as structures specifically designed to frame the actions of people under certain legislations. Interactions between regimes and citizens are always happening based on agreement or disagreement. It takes the form of challenge when it comes to disagreement with a certain regime that might result in a regime change or re-merging the challengers into the system. Political opportunity structure theorists (Tilly and Tarrow 2015 and McAdam 1999) argue that every regime, whether democratic or non-democratic, has specific properties that affect the opportunities of claim makers. These properties, according to Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 59), are: "(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; and, (6) decisive changes in items 1 to 5". Almost identical to Tilly and Tarrow's properties, are McAdam's "dimensions of political opportunities" (1) the relative openness or closure of institutionalized political system; (2) the stability or instability of the broad set of elites alignments that typically undergird a polity; (3) the presence or absence of elites allies; and, (4) the state's capacity and propensity for repression (1996: 27).

Although the properties of regimes are universal, the application of these properties to analyze contention and conflicts is almost done in democratic contexts where the opportunities are opening from within regimes (Kriesi et al. 1992; Tilly 2007;

McAdam 1999; Meyer 2004; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). This was the case until Kurzban (1996) applied the theory to explain the Iranian revolution of 1979, where the opportunities were both external and internal. Likewise, Alimi (2009) applied the theory to a fully repressive context, to the case of the Palestinian Intifada, where most of the opportunities were external to the movement. Alimi (2009: 225) argues that "POS operates on various levels (for example, organizational, municipal, national, regional, and international), and that the various levels are nested in their effects...why, and how do movements as well as authorities cope with changes in the specific configuration of the various levels of POS?". Still, coping with the changes is necessarily done through a process of realization and thought of strategies and choices. It is in those choices, Jasper (2004: 10) argues, "we see the cultural meanings, moral sentiments, emotions, and forms of rationality of groups and individuals".

In the case of the Arab Spring, the participation of protesters reflects the cultural meaning and the agency to overthrow authoritarian regimes in the Arab World. While looking at the students' movement in Aleppo University, this research will focus on the agency of the students in evaluating the opportunities to mobilize. I will be using the POS lens to try to explain how students of collective action responded to the repression practiced by the government, while being threatened by arrest and potentially death. Moreover, I will be using Meyer's framework of "insurgent consciousness" in addition to the existence, or lack of, specific political opportunities to understand the choices made by participants in the demonstrations. I will be also applying Tilly and Tarrow's (2015) six properties of a regime to examine the superiorities of some properties to the others while mobilizing to collective action. By using McAdam's "cognitive liberation" concept while interviewing students from Aleppo University, I aim at drawing a line between the cognition factor and consciousness of the insurgents, in order to conceptualize the recognition and agency of their collective action of taking advantage of political opportunities when they were available to them. In the following chapter, I will focus on the analytic frame, the concepts, and the sub-questions that I applied to my case which helped me to answer the aforementioned research question.



## 2 Analytic Frames

### 2.1 Synthesizing concepts and definitions

From the abovementioned theories I will now clarify what elements will contribute to my analytic frames, and thus guide my research. In short, I will look at the students' movement from two angles; structure and agency. Firstly, I will be looking at the political structure of the University of Aleppo and the opening of the opportunities for the students. Then, I will move onto the agency of the students, by seeing how their choices and strategies helped sustain the movement for around three years, from 2011 to 2013.

POS, for Tarrow, are "dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure" (1994: 85). Tilly and Tarrow argue that political opportunity structure includes six properties of a regime, which are "(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 (2015: 59)". I will be examining how the protest movement of the students was dependent on the multiplicity, if there was any, of centers of power within the regime to mobilize collectively as a result of an openness of the Syrian government to the uprising. I am going to investigate how the instability of political alignments within the regime contributed to the student movement. The empirical evidence shows that many voices supported the Syrian uprising at the beginning, when these voices were calling Assad's government to ease the iron grip that was repressing the revolution. I will try to further the understanding about the availability of such allies within the students' movement at that time, bearing in mind the government narrative of the "conspiracy" against Assad's rule by outsiders like Qatar and Turkey.

The debate about the effectiveness of repression is approached from a different angle by Koopmans. He argues that "strong oppression may also stimulate collective action", so rather than stopping a movement, it might actually recruit more people to join and challenge the regime use of violence (Koopmans *in* Kriesi et al 1992: 224). When I was a student in Aleppo University participating in the demonstrations against Assad, the

repression was so high, and every time students were getting arrested and beaten. Although the oppression was high, the students insisted on demonstrating and making claims against Assad's family, who had been in power for more than 45 years. Moreover, the use of violence could give the insurgents "a justification to meet contention with state violence" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 55), and frame their movement as a legitimate stand against oppression and violence.

The second analytic frame I will use focuses on the agency aspect of social movement theory, of which Jasper has greatly contributed to. In a repressive context like the Syrian one, political opportunities are not enough for a movement to appear and continue. There had to be a level of awareness amongst the insurgents who would evaluate the surrounding context within which they could mobilize. This is what Jasper calls strategic choices which are made "within a complex set of cultural and institutional contexts that shape the players themselves, the options perceived, the choices made from among them, and the outcomes" (2004: 5). I will be using some of the strategic choices that Jasper theorized in his work (A strategic approach to collective action, 2004).

Choices are not made haphazardly, rather, they are carefully thought of in a way that reflects the consciousness of the insurgents. In the same line, I will use the cultural framing that McAdam (1999) contributed to POS theory in his political process model. I will use the cognitive liberation concept - which means the ability for those active in the political protest to recognize their collective strength and take advantage of political opportunities as they become available to them. McAdam postulates that "before collective protest can get under way, people must *collectively* define their situations as unjust and subject to change through group action" (1999: 51, emphasis added). Using this concept is going to help me explain the students' realization of their collectivity and the way they organized.

The insurgent consciousness in the context of the student-led social movement at Aleppo University is a complex process that goes beyond McAdam's definition of cognitive liberation (1999). Hence, the support to social movements is the result of the calculations the insurgents make while evaluating the available opportunities. This is what Meyer refers to as the "consciousness of the insurgents" (Meyer 2004: 125). He argues that social movements are not solely dependent on the weaknesses of the government structures, but that they are also dependent on the realization of the participants of the

political context. In his words, "movement activists do not choose their goals at random, it is the political context which stresses certain grievances around which movements organize" (ibid: 125). Thus, I will use the "insurgents' consciousness" concept to explain the processes the students went through to come to the level of consciousness in their movement.

The last set of concepts I will use are those that focus on the organizational strengths and resources that McAdam discusses in his political process model to apply to the context of the activists at Aleppo University. To generate a social movement, McAdam argues, the aggrieved population must be able to "convert" a favorable "structure of political opportunities" into an organized campaign of social protest (1999: 44). It is also very important to emphasize the importance of the social and organizational ties in movement recruitment. Although the repression was high in the case of the Syrian uprising, more people were joining rather than being inactive. By applying Koopmans' concept of the effectiveness of repression as mentioned heretofore, which states that the more repressive the regime is the more determined the challengers become to mobilize, I aim to explore whether the use of violence stopped the movement or mobilized more people to join.

## **2.2 Research puzzle and sub-questions**

With the previously mentioned analytic frames in mind, I have formulated my sub-questions as follows:

### **Political Opportunity Structure:**

- 1) How was the students' movement dependent on the multiplicity of centres of power within the regime?
- 2) To what degree was the regime open to raising voices calling for change?
- 3) How did the political instability of the country contribute to the protest movement?
  - a) How was the movement dependent on elites?
  - b) What roles did the elites play in the mobilization?
- 4) What kinds of allies were there to support the movement and challenge the regime narrative of conspiracy?
- 5) How did the regime respond to the protests?

a) How repressive was the regime?

b) In what way did the regime repression mobilize or stop more students joining the movement?

### **Insurgent Consciousness:**

1) Why did students choose to join the movement?

2) What was the goal of joining the protest movement against the regime?

### **Cognitive liberation:**

1) What were the strengths that the students recognized in the movement to mobilize collectively?

### **Organizational strength:**

1) What were the characteristics of the movement leaders that attracted the students to mobilize and rise against the regime?

2) What were the resources of the students' movement? Were these resources sufficient for the students to join the protests?

3) What were the social and economic characteristics of the movement leaders?

4) What were the tasks of the leaders during the protest movement?

5) How were the protests organized with the high level of oppression by the regime?

6) How did the movement overcome the regime's infiltration of the organizers?

Based on these sub-questions, I have formulated the following research question: "What were the opportunity structures that facilitated the development of an insurgent consciousness among students of the collective action protest movement at Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013?"

The following chapter will explain the political and social environment of the University of Aleppo in order to place the research question into context.

### **3 Aleppo University in context**

Before exploring the students' movement from a theoretical angle, a great deal of explanation is needed in order to understand the social phenomenon under research. Aleppo University is one of only five public universities in the whole country, with over one hundred thousand students from all 14 provinces around the country. Under Assad's rule, students were banned from practicing any political activities apart from promoting the Baath Party ideology, and being enlightened by the innovations of the leaders i.e. the Assads. For this purpose, a headquarters of Al-Baath Party, of which the rector is a member, is installed in the heart of the campus. All activities, unions, and organizations were institutionalized so they could be monitored, and a close eye could be kept on any potential moves by students or lecturers. This chapter will start with the political context of Aleppo University and the structure of the Baath Party inside the campus. The following section will provide details about the National Union of Syrian Students in order to point out to the role of the union in the uprising. Lastly, proceeding with the same line of the university structure, I will be looking at the university presidential council and the bodies that organize lecturers and their activism.

#### **3.1 The Baath Party**

Syria has been under the rule of the Assad family since 1970. In 1973, a new constitution was adopted by the new regime that gave the president a monopoly on power and welded the state apparatus to the Baath Party (Fares 2014). The 8th article of the Syrian constitution states that the Baath Party is the leading party in society and the state. It is one of the basic principles stated in the constitution (Syria Constitution 2010). This entails that any political activity has to be done through the Baath channels. Figure 3.1 shows the structure of the Baath Party; the structure is duplicated in all the cities and universities to ensure that every activity is attached to one of the offices that supervise unions and syndicates in the country. This structure meant that the regime could legally monitor all aspects of life of the population. When the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, came to power in 2000, he claimed he did not have a "magic wand" to change laws because every amendment would need deep evaluation and study. However, the minimum age for a president was forty before Bashar became president, yet it took the

People's House just fifteen minutes to lower the minimum age to thirty-four in order to allow him to take office. A few days later, the Baath Party unanimously elected Bashar as its leader and proposed him as the only candidate for Syria's presidency (ibid: 2014). This was the case because nobody could challenge the regime as everything was, and still is, in the hands of the security services and the army.

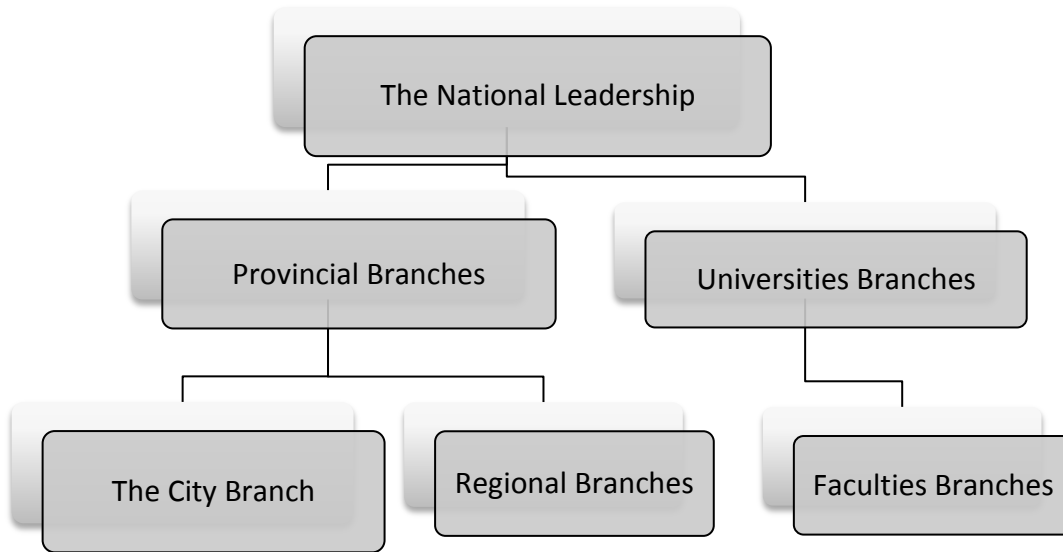


Figure 3.1 The Baath Party national structure in Syria<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to the internal structure of the Baath Party, every Baath branch has offices that are responsible for directing and monitoring the daily activities of the public sector and state institutions. The Baath Secretary, who is the representative of the Baath leadership in Aleppo University, has the leading position of all the officials in the university. According to one of my respondents, who used to be in an official position in the university, all official positions have to be scrutinized and filtered by the Baath leadership and the security services, in order to guarantee that all key positions are filled by people who are loyal to the Baath and its ideology.<sup>6</sup> Figure 3.2 shows the structure of the Baath Party and its offices that supervise all unions and syndicates activities inside the campus.

<sup>5</sup> The source of the figure is the author's own experience as he was a member of the Baath Party back in Syria.

<sup>6</sup> Author's Whatsapp interview with Jamal Nasrat, pseudonym, a professor and ex-Baathist official from Aleppo University, Istanbul, Turkey, on 03 May 2017.

The branch secretary is the highest official position in the university, and he is in direct contact with the Baath leadership in the Capital, in addition to holding the position of the president of the "Crisis Cell".<sup>7</sup> The higher education office is in charge of supervising the activities of the university presidential council and reports college's activities to the branch secretary. The Organizing and Recruitment office is mandated to facilitate training potential Baathist members to join the party. The Culture and Preparation office organizes debates and invites senior Baathists to propagate for the ideology of the party. The Arab and Foreign Students office is responsible for organizing and monitoring their activities. The Syrian Students office supervises the National Union of Syrian Students by dictating the kinds of activities that should be organized, as well as following all issues that are related to students' lives inside the campus. The rector ensures that the Baath policies are well-implemented in all the colleges and the departments, and he also occupies an intermediary position between academics and the political leadership; the Baath Party.

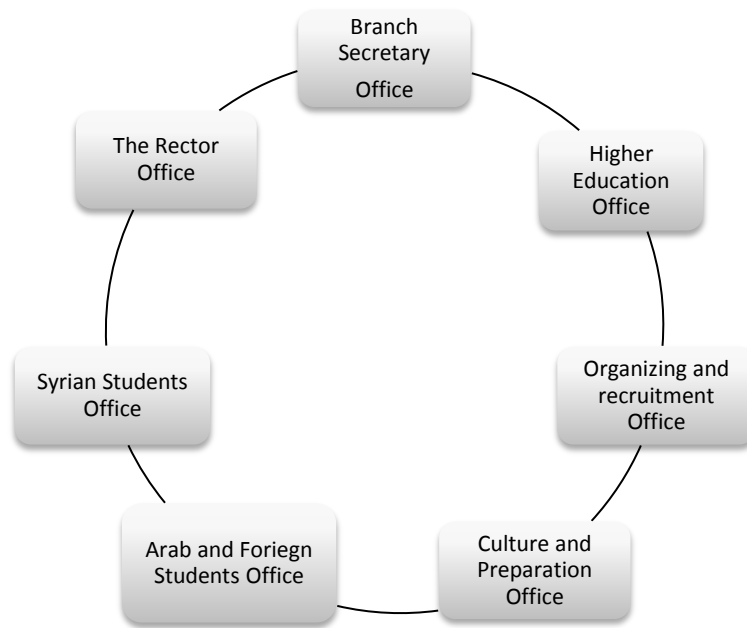
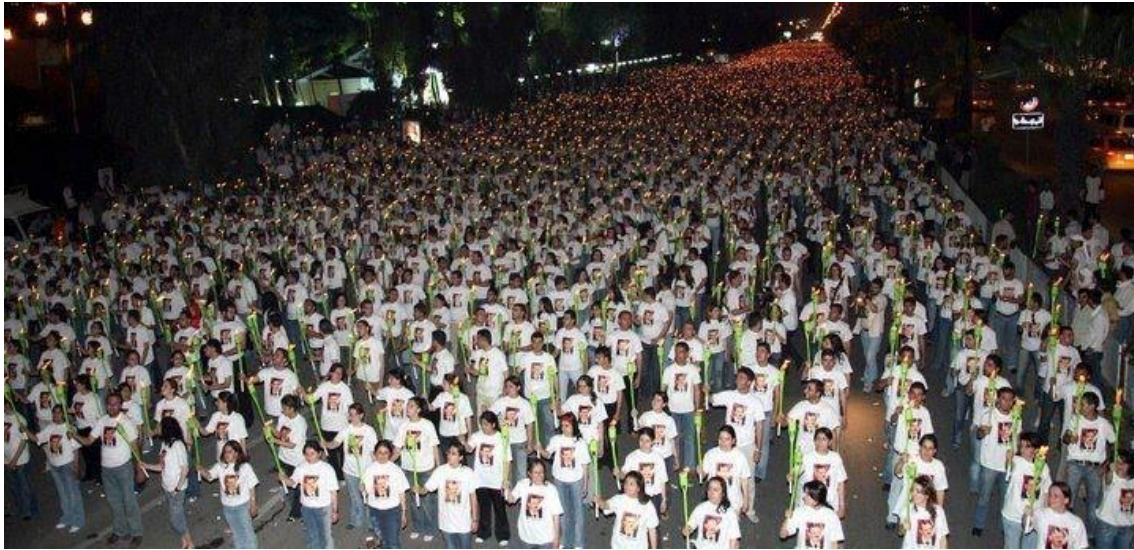


Figure 3.2 The Baath Party structure in Aleppo University<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the uprising, the regime tried to keep the presence of security personnel confronting the protestors to the minimum. To do that, it formed "crisis cells" in all cities that were led by the Baath branch secretary to implement the policies adopted by the political leadership in the Capital. The crisis cell, sometimes it is called the security committee, is led by the Baath branch secretary with the security branches leaders, the police director of the city, and the Mayor as members.

<sup>8</sup> The source of the figure is the author's own experience as he was a member of the Baath Party back in Syria.

### 3.2 National Union of Syrian Students



*The million-student march in Damascus to support the presidency candidate Bashar Al-Assad in 2007(source: NUSS Facebook official page)*

The first student conference held in Lattakia, Assad's home city, in 1950, and, headed by Hafez Al-Assad, facilitated the emergence of the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS) (President Assad 1990). This is a clear indication of what is about and how it will be manipulated as it was structured to serve the agenda of the regime of Hafez Al-Assad when he became the president. The NUSS, of which I was a member, was under total control of the Baath Party. All the activities were directed to praise the party leadership and the axis of resistance; Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, and Hamas before 2011. In all national occasions, the NUSS is responsible for mobilizing the students to march and chant for the President and the achievements of the Baath Party. When I was a student in 2007, we were asked to participate in such a march from Aleppo to Damascus, to support the only candidate for the presidency, Bashar Al-Assad. Marchers wore T-shirts with Assad's photo on, and held a torch that symbolizes the organization. This is only one example of the activities that the NUSS arranged before 2011. In what follow, I will focus only on the clear policy the NUSS adopted towards the protest movement in Aleppo University between 2011-2013, based on my experience during the uprising and the testimonies of NUSS senior members.



### **3.2.1 National Union of Syrian Students in Aleppo after 2011**

When people started to protest in the city of Dar'a in March 2011, a member of the NUSS executive office who was delegated to Aleppo University headed a meeting with the social committees of Aleppo University of which I was a member. He started the meeting by asking: "Do you want to know how we are going to deal with this wave of uprising?" He told us to show him our mobile phones while we were switching them off.

"You have the green light to take the ID card of any student that you suspect of being active against the regime. Your job is just to point a finger to any potential protester inside the campus. We will not allow this to happen in the University of Aleppo" he concluded.

In Syria, the NUSS is the only official organization that represents university students. It is as old as Assad's family in power. Its complex structure and its young educated members, make it the most effective organization when it comes to organizing events and mobilization as it has the necessary and sufficient resources to do so. In Aleppo, there are two branches; one that represents the institutes, and one that represents colleges' students. Every college has a body of 5 to 7 members who would elect the 9 members of the Union branch in Aleppo University. The dormitory has also what was called then "the social committees", whose members were working under the direct supervision of the administration. There were around 350 active members whom the union had direct contacts with. There was an open check for the expenses of the rallies that were pro-Assad. All flags, banners, Assad's photos, speakers, DJs, and transport were free and abundantly provided. According to one of the senior members of the student union, all branches in the country were also asked to organize rallies that were held in Damascus as the faxes and emails that were sent to Aleppo prove that.<sup>9</sup> All the expenses were covered by the union: food, transport, and all required materials. The student union was asked to cooperate and coordinate with other unions, corporations, and syndicates as they also received similar directions from the Capital to participate and

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<sup>9</sup> Author's Skype interview with Khatib Khatib, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Reyhanli, Turkey, on 10 May 2017.

organize pro-Assad rallies.<sup>10</sup> Figure 3.3 shows the complex structure of the organization in Aleppo.

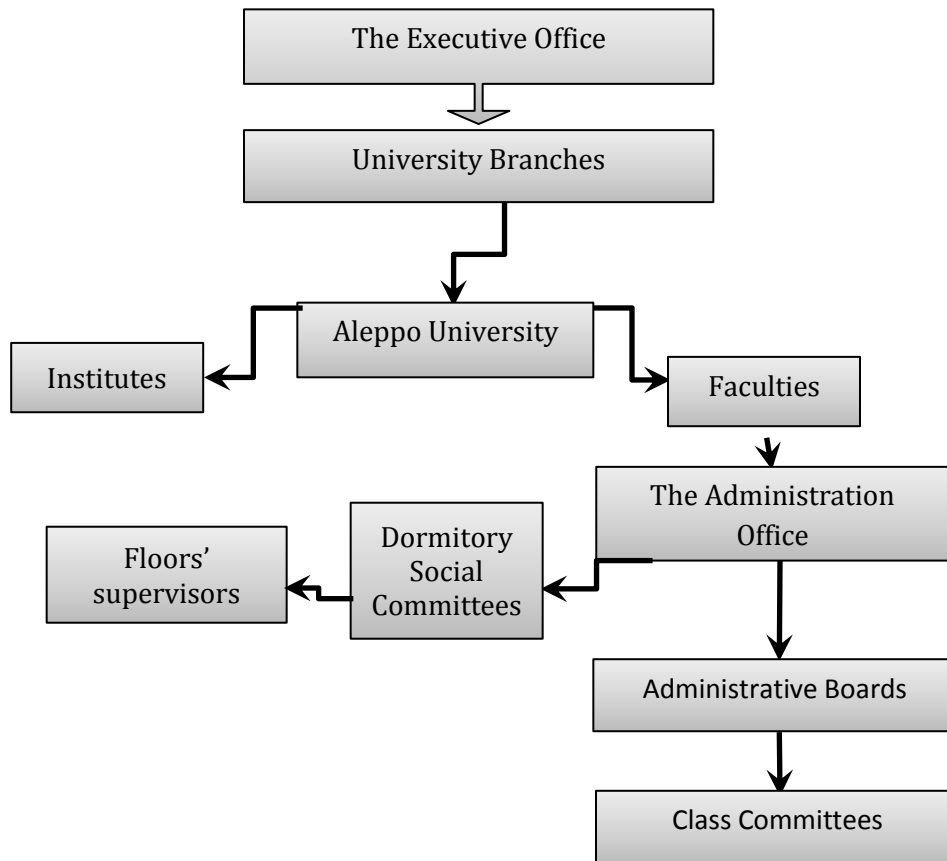


Figure 3.3 The NUSS structure in Aleppo University<sup>11</sup>

The tasks assigned to the student union were changing in line with developments inside the campus. At the beginning of the uprising in the university, the main task was to mobilize students to participate in rallies and prevent any anti-regime protests. After a couple of weeks, the reactions of the union members and their recruits changed to more violent responses and strategies. This was confirmed by one of the senior members who was in the procurement committee in Aleppo branch when he listed the new procedures that members had to follow:

There was an order to purchase cables from the union budget to provide the union members and the new recruits to put down the protests. We were asked to

<sup>10</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

do shifts to help prevent protests and organize pro-government rallies to distract media and counter narrate what was reported. There were instructions from the Headquarter to do whatever necessary to prevent protests. Moreover, in case there was a protest, it was allowed to use all means to deal with it. It was even fine to throw students from 5th or 6th floors in the dormitory if there rooms were identified. After a while of the protests, we were given electrical shock devices to use against the protesters when attacking the protests.<sup>12</sup>

The official narrative of the key officials in the NUSS always mirrored the state TV narrative in the meetings and its media outlets. Officials were talking about the conspiracy against the Syrian regime as it is the only country that stands with the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine. Furthermore, those who were protesting were always portrayed as stupid and deluded. In mid-2012, when the FSA started to have a foot in Aleppo, the NUSS was the first organization that adopted the idea of the Al-Baath Legions, whose members were mainly students and Baathists who were active in Aleppo University. The founder of this body was Basim Swidan, who is a senior executive office member from the city of Tartous, while Omar Arob was his deputy as a gratitude to his efforts in the university.<sup>13</sup> The Al-Baath Legions were first founded in Aleppo University to organize those who were ready to put down the movement and include what we call the thugs in one body (عبد القادر: 2015). Now, it is still one of the most effective paramilitary groups in the country that acts as a back-up for the army.

The security departments asked the students' union to nominate students to get arms officially to join the reserve forces. After founding the Al-Baath Legions, the army started to equip these legions with all the necessary means technically and logistically. This event was preceded by a secret move by the Air Force Intelligence department to arm students loyal to the regime so they could shoot protesters, as most of the protests were organized during the night in the dormitory. In the interviews with Hazem and Khatib, they told that:

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<sup>12</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Author's Skype interview with Khatib Khatib, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Reyhanli, Turkey, on 10 May 2017. See also: <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/76957.html>

The Air Force Intelligence Directorate in Aleppo started to arm Alawite students with guns under the pretext of the dangers of being targeted by some anti-government student. This represented the first crisis that happened between the university authorities and the security forces... By the end of 2012, many officials and academics left their positions and some of them left the country in a response to the policies adopted by the regime. This was also related to the filed developments in the city when the FSA put foot inside the city.<sup>14</sup>

The security services in Aleppo first justified arming the NUSS members and other volunteer students by claiming that this move was intended to lower the military presence inside the campus where the Al-Baath Legions were mandated the same tasks that were assigned to military platoons.<sup>15</sup> This was also claimed by other interviews with NUSS members. Furthermore, the sympathizers with the movement started to be noted so the NUSS leadership, Hazem claimed, adopted a new policy to eliminate all those who were showing sympathy to the movement by firing members or moving them to other institutions or ministries:

Those who were suspected to be sympathizers with the protest movement were fired or forcibly moved to other institutions outside the university. I was personally moved to another institution leaving my position in the university. There were many employees who faced the same scenario. We were asked to hold guns and be on check points inside the campus. All those who rejected were either fired or moved to other institutions.<sup>16</sup>

In that way, the supporters of the movements started to disappear leaving only pro-regime in NUSS leading positions. On the other hand, changes were happening to all official positions in the university institutions. I will move now to the next institution; the

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<sup>14</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

Author's Skype interview with Khatib Khatib, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Reyhanli, Turkey, on 10 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> In an interview with Hazem Ahmad who witnessed that event confirmed that "holding arms started to become normalized and institutionalized through the "Al-Baath Legions" with salaries and official uniform. There was even a big media platform this organization operated through. Here is the Facebook page of the Baath Brigade: <https://www.facebook.com/baathBrigades.aleppouniversty/>

<sup>16</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

University Presidential Council to present its structure and its role in the protest movement.

### **3.3 The University Presidential Council**

When I was participating in the protests in Aleppo University, the role of academics in official positions in the movement was almost absent; this was also confirmed by all my interviewees, for many reasons. The first reason is that the Baath Party and its branch secretary had all the authorities to make decisions and implement policies, before and after the movement, as the rector was like any other Baathist member in the university branch. To illustrate, the rector is appointed by a presidential decree based on a recommendation by the Baath Party National Leadership. This entails that the rector is fully loyal to the Baath leadership. The second reason of the absence of influential academic officials in the uprising is, according to an interview with an academic at Aleppo University:

There were many cases where academics were arrested by the security services when they showed their support to the uprising even before the students movement started in Aleppo University. A colleague of mine, his name is A. D., was in prison for ten years as a result of criticizing the regime in one of his lectures. Moreover, all those in decision making positions were selected based on their political loyalties rather than their academic or scientific contributions. That is why most of the active academics are outside the country.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most important factors is the security services contributing to the construction of Syria as what can only be described as a totalitarian regime. The security services are everywhere in the university and they follow all people's activities in all aspects of life. By the time an academic figure raises their voices, they will be directly arrested or kicked out of their position to limit criticism of the regime in society or among students. This will be discussed in details in chapter five through discussing the factors that led to their absence. Finally, these were some of the factors that prevented academics to be effective in the movement or at least to be neutral and stand up against the violence that was practiced by the regime.

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<sup>17</sup> Author's Whatsapp interview with Jamal Nasrat, pseudonym, a professor and ex-Baathist official from Aleppo University, Istanbul, Turkey, on 03 May 2017.

## **4 Methodology**

The aim of social research is to shine a light on a neglected or forgotten side of a given society and reveal complications around it. Such topics could be sensitive to one side while giving voice to another. And so is my case. Researching one episode of the Syrian revolution; collective protests at Aleppo University, will, for sure, be considered a bias by the Syrian regime. However, bias is something we cannot avoid when dealing with social phenomenon. Besides, truth is the first casualty in war. The key factor here is how we apply proper research methodologies, follow ethical rules of doing a research, and be aware, in the first place, of sensitivity of researched topics. In this chapter, I will explain my choices concerning research design, data collection method, and analysis procedure while researching my topic. I will be talking about the challenges that I had while conducting my research.

### **4.1 Research Design**

As posited in the theoretical chapter, this research revolves around the interactions between structural factors and the agency of the challengers of the Syrian regime inside the University of Aleppo. During my research, I realized how agency of the students was a key to the collective action of the challengers. I argue that structure alone is not sufficient to facilitate collective action. Regimes, Tilly and Tarrow argue, "vary from one country to the next" (2015: 56). This assumption would entail that every weak or open regime would witness collective actions or social movements. Having said that, I argue that the agency of the challengers and their consciousness is what facilitates collective action. In that sense, I am focusing on analyzing the interaction between the regime structure in Aleppo University and the agency of the activists who could mobilize and sustain their movements for three years, from 2011 until 2013.

Firstly, in order to understand how the interaction happened between the regime institutions and the students, a clear picture of the political and administrative structure of the university should be provided. This was presented and explained in the previous chapter. Being a Syrian from Aleppo who studied at Aleppo University for five years plus my participation in the movement gave me a unique position to provide a detailed explanation of the university structure. Moreover, being a member of the NUSS in an

official position for more than two years helped me to establish a deep understanding of the organization besides creating a big network with officials inside the university. Secondly, the six properties of a regime, theorized by Tilly and Tarrow (2015), are examined in addition to cultural factors that agency theorists build on their theories. This requires a multi-layered approach; having access to social media platforms and the footages of the protests and the reaction of the regime, the interviews I conducted with officials who defected or deserted from the regime, and my own participation allowed me to triangulate the data gathered via the above mentioned-tools.

## **4.2 Sampling**

I use both purposive and random sampling in my research. As I was a participant myself in the movement, this made it easier to network and find other participants. However, to avoid bias, I needed to interview participants whom I did not know already. I attempted to do so through random sampling to give more credibility to my findings. So, through random sampling, I could interview movement participants. For that purpose I went to Germany to conduct interviews because of the large number of Syrians living there. I use purposive sampling, on the other hand, to interview academics, university officials, and police officers who defected or deserted from the regime because they were few and getting access to them was difficult. Interviewing officials who are still inside Syria was very difficult to arrange. I tried to interview three officials but only one was willing to participate. In contrast, those who were outside Syria were open to be interviewed. Interviews with officials enabled me to get more insights, and validity of the observations I had while being in Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013, in terms of data triangulation.

## **4.3 Method**

One of the privileges I have is my affinity with the topic of research. This means that I am fully aware of the political, social, cultural context which I presented in the previous chapter. Given that I am researching a focused placed (the university) in an early stage of the Syrian revolution (2011-2013), there is no academic literature that has been published. Consequently, the data is mostly gathered from news articles, government websites, social media platforms, and personal experiences.

Researching the regime structure inside Aleppo University requires several stages. As the Syrian regime is an authoritarian one, this makes the Baath Party the sole ruler and leader of the society and the state.<sup>18</sup> This structure makes it difficult to apply a theory that was basically designed to explain social movements in democratic regimes; Tilly and Tarrow POS (2015). Consequently, I divided my research into different phases to look at the opening of opportunities and their interactions with the agency of students. This enabled me to do a logical analysis of key events during the movement.

### **Phase 1**

Here, I contextualize the research puzzle to draw a picture of the political situation and opportunities by the time the protest movement started in Aleppo University. I use the naturally occurring data by looking back into the videos that were shared at that time and by doing discourse analysis of how the situation was framed by the participants. The importance of this step is to look at the circumstances within which the students rise up against the Syrian regime. What is known about the situation in Aleppo at that time is the heavy security presence to prevent any attempts of student demonstrations. My presence in Aleppo University was very helpful in describing the situation, and to having access to the footage that was taken by activists to depict the atmosphere in the University. Although journalistic reports are also available in abundance that would serve as useful sources in making sense of the situation, I was aware of the validity of the reports by triangulating data with other sources. When I was a student in Aleppo University, I was a member of the NUSS. At the beginning of the uprising in the city of Dar'a, I was called to a meeting with other members to be instructed that we report any potential gathering to the authorities because we were part of what the union call "Social Committees". I had interviewed some of the students who used to occupy high positions in the NUSS- Aleppo who were participating in such meetings, so that I could give background information on the situation in Aleppo University at that time, and the level of the government awareness of the probable collective action.

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<sup>18</sup> This is expressed explicitly in the Syrian constitution of 1973, Article 8, which states that "The leading party in the society and the state is the Socialist Arab Baath Party. It leads a patriotic and progressive front seeking to unify the resources of the people's masses and place them at the service of the Arab nation's goals [sic]". The Syrian constitution is available at: <http://www.icla.up.ac.za/images/un/use-of-force/asia-pacific/SyrianArabRepublic/Constitution%20Syrian%20Arab%20Republic%201973.pdf>



## **Phase 2**

After drawing a picture of the situation of the political opportunity structures in the University of Aleppo, the next step is to investigate how the students responded to the high precautions taken by the government to respond to any potential gathering. Here, I looked at the first onset of the demonstrations of how the students organized and how they evaluated the situation, the calculations that they made while taking action or the first step and the assessment of what might happen; the worst case scenarios. As a participant in the first protest, I could recall my experience of that feeling. I interviewed those who were there to create a typology of feelings of that event in addition to comparing the responsibilities that were assigned by the authorities to the 'Social Committees of the NUSS' to put down the protests and the incentives to take part in the protests against the regime. I, moreover, interviewed officials and police officers who were there and received orders from the Capital to deal with the protesters. Again, the analysis of the videos of the demonstrations, and being a native Arabic speaker, was very important to cross-check the accounts of the students and the officials with the naturally occurring data in the videos.

## **Phase 3**

After describing the experiences of the participants and their feelings of taking part in the first protests, I moved to the next stage: to examine the availabilities of any of the six properties of a regime that Tilly and Tarrow theorized. Through in depth interviews, I questioned those who participated in the protests about their experience of the government's response to ascertain whether it was open to such new acts or it was repressive. I looked at social media accounts and footage of the first protests as I am of course a native Arabic speaker. Moreover, I could recognize the places where people used to gather and demonstrate. Furthermore, from the contacts I have established with police officers and officials who were there at that time and received orders from the regime leadership in Damascus, I could interview them to look at how the regime planned to respond to the protest movement. By triangulation of sources, I could apply the theory to the real situations that were happening at Aleppo University and reflect on how they related to the the analytic frames question here.

#### **Phase 4**

After I collected sufficient data of the students' evaluation of the political opportunities and the experiences of having protested against the Assad regime, I moved to analyze the main focus of my topic; the structure-agency interaction. By now, I also examined how the responses of the authorities were through the interviews with the defected and deserted officials. In May 2012, UN brokered monitors visited the University of Aleppo. I looked at the political developments of 2012 when the UN monitors were there to evaluate and construct an informed account of what really was going on in the cities of Syria, especially those witnessing instability and protests. Through my interviews with participants, officials, police officers, and the news reports of that time, I could draw on the significance of the presence of the UN monitors at that time. My focus was on the students' collective attitude towards having a neutral third party monitoring the situation and whether it changed the situation on the ground or not. Furthermore, I pointed out to the important changes that happened to the movement and the structure of the regime after that visit in addition to the increased level of oppression the regime used to eliminate the movement.

#### **Phase 5**

I continued to use the same six properties of a regime to collect data from the different sources to explore the evolution of and changes within and to the movement. After that, I synthesized the data of the three stages of my research to identify which properties of a regime were more salient and available for the students to take advantage and mobilize collectively. This phase brought together the theories that I was using as my analytic frame and the data collected from the fieldwork. These complementary stages, with analyzing the data, yielded a comprehensive and full of sense body of literature.

#### **4.4 Data collection techniques**

The main source of data in my research comes from my personal participation in the movement and my observations of the behaviors of both the regime and the protesters at that time. This, of course, is not sufficient source to yield a comprehensive and a non-biased piece of literature. I, therefore, used other techniques to give my research more credibility and validity. These techniques are interviews, content research and discourse analysis as I was not able to interview officials who are still in their positions in the

University of Aleppo. Another justification for not interviewing current officials from the Syrian regime is that the time frame of my research is between 2011 and 2013 which means that most of key officials who played significant roles at that time are now out of their positions.

Interviews are forms of "conversation where knowledge is produced through the interaction" (Kvale *in* Curtis and Curtis 2011: 47-48). Knowledge was constructed through interacting with my participants and their discourse. I had prepared an interview guideline with a list of official documents by regime figures like Assad's speeches and interviews with press agencies. As such, I could describe what was being said from the regime side to ask my informants' opinions about the official narrative and the real practices on the ground. This tool was useful because it provided an alternative to gaining accounts from regime officials which was evidently not possible. In chapter two, I included all my sub-questions that lead my topic to get a clear picture of the regime structure inside Aleppo University. In the same set of questions, I focus on the other dimension of my topic; agency. By asking certain questions I could establish a typology of the relationship between structure and agency in the context of my research. Speaking Arabic as my mother tongue was key in accessing online sources and archives besides the originality of the interviews I conducted with my respondents without a translator.

Content research was the second research method that I used. Content research "collects and analyses data from messages that are communicated by newspapers, books, and other physical media and increasingly by digital forms of communication" (Curtis and Curtis 2011: 195). Again, this was a tool to compensate for the absence of interviews with regime officials. I, moreover, used this tool to give a detailed explanation of the regime structure inside the university as there are rarely sources with detailed information about the political and administrative dynamics of Aleppo University. This technique was used to triangulate my personal observations at that time and to reflect on the narratives of the regime officials in contrast to the real practices.

Finally, as a participant in the movement, I tried to stay non-biased in my research. Nevertheless, the chosen analytic frame required a focus on the regime reactions to the protest movement. Through the techniques I used; content research and interviews, I could recognize the bias in my topic and I was aware of it. I used YouTube footages and participants' accounts of the events inside the university at that time. My unique position

of witnessing and experiencing regime violence helped me triangulate my data using different other sources. Still, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, giving a voice to one side would necessarily agitate their opponents and make them accuse the researcher of being biased.

#### **4.5 Data analysis**

To do data analysis, and identify which of the six regime properties contributed to the facilitation of the protest movement, I used Tilly and Tarrow (2015), McAdam's (1999) theories of political opportunity structure and political process, respectively. However, using structural theories alone was not enough to explain how the students sustained the movement for about three years. This necessitated bringing in another analytic frame that could help explain the students' choices and strategies to deal with structural opportunities as elaborated on previously. For that purpose I used Goodwin and Jasper (1999) and Jasper's (2004) analytic frame of agency. I chose to use both analytic frames because neither structure nor agency alone facilitated and sustained the movement. Now, I will explain how I used both frames in my data analysis.

Prior to data collection, I aimed to just look at the structural factors of mobilization, yet whilst conducting the interviews I realized the agency of those involved in the movement. I started to look at Jasper's works on agency. When I started collecting data using the techniques I outlined above, I started to transcribe interviews and write notes to identify patterns and themes in the data. I tried to use analytical induction which means "variables develop as data is analyzed" (Curtis and Curtis 2011: 43). After the first couple of interviews, I started to recognize the significance of agency in the movement interaction with structural opportunities. In the same way, I was identifying patterns by linking the themes that arose from the interviews with the footages of the protests and the content research in addition to my observations at that time.

It is worth mentioning here that while doing data analysis there were some nuances between some concepts that were once considered synonymous. Goodwin and Jasper (2004) pointed out to the concepts of "cognitive liberation" and "insurgent consciousness" without mentioning any differences between the two definitions. In my thesis, I highlight the difference between the two concepts by drawing examples from the context of my empirical situation. Another point to refer to here is the use of the words

"elites" and "leaders". In the analytic frame I use, elite support is very crucial in facilitating a movement, however, the dependence on elites by movement leaders might be vague for the reader if they were not familiar with the Syrian context. As a result, I wanted to point out here that not all movement leaders were part of the elite nor were the elites who supported the protests necessarily leading the movement.

## **4.6 Challenges**

Researching a protest movement is never a partial topic. Once you focus on one part, you will be considered, most of the time, biased by the other. While I was networking to do my interviews, I did not want to focus solely on the participants I knew already, although they were very diverse as I got to know them while living inside the campus. To do that, I tried to reach students in diaspora via Facebook and other friends I met in the Netherlands. Most of the people I did not know already refused to talk about their experiences in Aleppo University claiming that their families were still in Aleppo and they were worried that their participation would endanger their families. It was challenging at the beginning to get responses like these because some of them were suspicious I might be an informant for the regime. This shows how the regime is still intimidating people to criticize it or tell their observations of its atrocities even if they are still far away.

To overcome this dilemma I took advantage of participating in candlelight vigils and protests organized in diaspora to commemorate the sixth anniversary of the Syrian revolution. By joining these events I could engage in informal conversations with activists who participated in the protests on Aleppo University. Furthermore, interviewing people in such events added more diversity to the sampling and validity of my research.

### **4.6.1 Ethical and moral**

Ethical considerations of researching a sensitive topic for my informants had to be taken into account. Ensuring informant safety is crucial in all research, but is exacerbated when researching sensitive topics by interviewing participants with connections with family members who are still living in a conflict zone. The advantage I had while conducting my research was my position as a participant myself in the movement which meant that I was aiming to give a voice to those who had lost the dearest to their hearts and endangered their lives in their participation. In most of my interviews with students, I asked their consent to record the interviews which they agreed to. Most of them, moreover, agreed to

have their real names mentioned. However, based on my judgment as both a participant and a researcher, I made the decision to give them pseudonyms to avoid endangering their families' lives inside Syria.

The final concern worth mentioning is how to present the personal data collected in an ethical way. The researcher, Madison postulates, "is responsible for representing those they study, and for ensuring that their safety, privacy or dignity is not jeopardized" (2005: 5). When I was in Aleppo University, I used to have very good connections with senior officials who were sympathizing with the activists students. I, for security reasons, abstain from mentioning their names or their positions as they are still inside Syria and mentioning their roles in the movement will undoubtedly endanger their lives. Although they played significant roles in the uprising, their safety is evidently more important than elucidating on the role they played in the movement as individuals. Making the voice of the marginalized people heard is what matters in the end. So even though I also hope to add to the theoretical discussion in social research, first and foremost my loyalty lies with the students' stories I studied.

## **5 Exploring the availability of opportunities**

Scholars of political opportunity structure become particularly interested when movement lines start to deviate from the straight path of certain regime-drawn lines. This deviance, which threatens the strict boundaries of the regime structure, indicates that there is a change in the broader (political) structure that will likely facilitate a rebellious action. The equation of  $1+1=2$ ; if there is a change in the political structure, there will be a potential incentive to mobilize, is the basic hypothesis of scholars focusing on social movements in democratic and quasi-democratic regimes of the structure vulnerability.

Scholars typically attempt to explain the Syrian revolution by depicting the situation as a “civil war” that escalated through the violence practiced by the many stakeholders on the ground (Donker 2012). Although some scholars look at the onset of the uprising in terms of political opportunities, threats, levels of repression, and the social networks of the early risers (Leenders & Heydemann 2012), to date there exist no academic studies that investigate the opportunity structures that opened up to the students movement in Aleppo University. This is surprising considering the movement there greatly affected the mobilization of protest in the country in general, and in Aleppo in particular. In the course of this chapter, I will be exploring the interaction between the structural opportunities and the agency of the students during the timespan of the movement at the University.

### **5.1 The absence of the official multiplicity of centers of powers within the regime**

The 8th article of the Syrian constitution states that the Baath Party is the leading party in society and the state. Although there were some other political parties—like the Communist Party, the Unionist Socialist Party, and similar—the constitution clearly posits that these parties work under the leadership of the Baath Party, which the constitution depicts as the “Patriotic Progressive Front” (Syria Constitution 2010). What this means is that any activity or policy recommendations by other parties have to be verified by the Baath leadership.

When it comes to the movement in Aleppo University, it was making the same demands that the popular uprising participants in other cities were invoking at the start

of the revolution: ending the state of emergency that has been in place for 48 years (Anjarini 2003), fighting corruption and nepotism in the public sector, releasing of political prisoners, and showing solidarity with the city of Dar'a.<sup>19</sup> Still, showing solidarity with the uprising cities at that time was considered by the regime as a deviant action, and a crime. Moreover, the chaotic situation inside the University of Aleppo campus created cleavages amongst the security departments, which were very determined to eliminate the movement by force. By contrast, the University officials of the Baath Party and the National Union of Syrian Students opted to try to mediate in order to try to calm tensions at the beginning of the uprising.

### **5.1.1 The Baath Party**

Article 8 of the constitution, which made the Baath Party the sole ruler of the country, was a double-edged sword for the regime. On the one hand, it tied the hands of the officials who were expected to respond to protesters demanding basic rights, such as freedom, political pluralism, and reform. The officials themselves could not convincingly argue against these calls, for they knew that the regime needed reform after 40 years without any change to its laws. Furthermore, the Baath party itself states that "freedom is sacred for the mass" (Baathparty 2011).

On the other hand, the regime was putting pressure on the officials through forming what it called the "security committee" to contain the events in order not to incite other potential challengers in the city of Aleppo.<sup>20</sup> The following excerpt from an interview with a professor, who was a Baathist too, reveals the instructions that were communicated to the officials and lecturers in the university:

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth mentioning here that at the beginning of the uprising, there were no calls by the protesters that demanded the resignation of the president or even toppling the regime. This could be traced back in the first footages of the protests inside the campus. Still, the regime responded violently to the protesters. Here is a video of the first demonstration inside the dormitory: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqIP7nLRtiA>

<sup>20</sup> The 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 the interaction between security services and the protesters. The security committees, however, used to present policy recommendations to the crisis cell that was 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. More details about the attack are available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2012/jul/18/syria-crisis-assad-loyalists-killed>



At the beginning of the uprising, staff members were asked through their program coordinators who were informed by Baathist 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.

The protests were inherently peaceful as the students did not have any means to use violence (BBC 2011). The regime was in the position to use all possible means to stop the movement from diffusing to other neighborhoods of the city. This strategy of the regime backfired because there were some Baathist figures in the university who were opposing the use of violence inside the campus. This crisis between the university officials and the security forces gave the students the opportunity to advance their claims because the violent methods gave the students "a justification to meet contention with state violence" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 55).

Although the Baathist members were not able to oppose the regime strategy officially, they could challenge the use of violence, and the security forces entering the dormitory, which was the most active spot in the university.<sup>21</sup> Still, opposing the use of violence by officials did not deter the regime from deploying their usual strategy of using violence. Furthermore, the students challenging the regime benefited from this by considering the cleavages as an opportunity to mobilize further, what Jasper calls a "strategic interaction: players, with a range of preferences and actions to choose among, arenas that determine what actions and interactions lead to which outcomes" (2004: 3). With this alignment, and the uncertainty of the officials' positions at the beginning of the uprising in the country in general and the University of Aleppo in particular, challengers "see themselves responding to threats they perceive to their interests, their values, or their identities" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 60). The process of evaluating the situation and taking the right decision to go on with challenging the regime, shows the high level of interchangeability of the agency of the students with the vulnerable structure of the regime, which was represented by the Baathist officials and other security personnel.

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<sup>21</sup> Author's Skype interview with Saleh Ali, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 04 April 2017.

### 5.1.2 National Union of Syrian Students

According to the state emergency law, restrictions on the freedom of persons in terms of meetings, residence, transport, movements, and detaining suspects or people threatening public security and order, are imposed by the military governor (Anjarini 2003). Before 2011, having a group of more than five people would make that meeting suspicious by one of the many security departments and those people might be vulnerable to arrest and questioning by the regime. So, any forum or union has to be approved by the authorities and the military governor, as in the case with the NUSS. This union was founded to serve the regime agenda and disseminate propaganda rather than to represent students and guarantee their rights. I was a member of that union and was always asked to be in events to promote the regime propaganda before 2011. Moreover, in an interview with a key ex-member of the NUSS, he pointed out the main roles they were tasked to do in general and 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 of 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.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, students did not have any other alternative because it was forbidden to join any organization without getting the green light from the authorities. However, the absence of an alternative for the students to organize created a *polarity orientation*, meaning members might not agree with the organization agenda, but still they do not have any other option but to be part of it as it was my case. So despite these students not being able to directly or publically join the movement, in their positions within the NUSS they were able to indirectly facilitate the movement, and thus were challenging the system from within.

Within the NUSS, there were lobbies that connected many groups of students to different orientations. These lobbies were in place before the uprising, and they

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<sup>22</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

connected students from the same cities, religions, or faculties and they would come together and coordinate during election times.<sup>23</sup> This interaction between, on the one hand the individual students, and on the other hand key people in the organization, simulates Jasper's idea of having *simple players* and *complex players* (2004). While the official strategy of the NUSS was very clear in terms of containing the movement and eliminating it, some members had positive attitudes towards the challengers who were helped out in many occasions by NUSS members whether driven by solidarity, kinship, or friends' networks.

### **5.1.3 Police and security forces**

The political structure of the Syrian regime makes the opportunity of challenging the system very low, because all key institutions of the state and the system are in the hands of the security departments. Again, the strategy of challenging the system from within was the only possible way to attempt to make 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. Before defection was possible, it was difficult to control all the networking between security forces 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 were chances of getting released depending on the police officers' political views. As my respondent Memo explained:

When the corporals who were beating me took me to one of the buses where they overfill them with students and drive them to one of the security sectors, they passed by an officer who told them to hand me to him. There was even a hot argument between the officer and the corporals whom they suspected that this officer is going to set me free. Apparently, he had done this before because they were refusing to hand me into him as they suspected him to be a sympathizer with the protesters. This

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<sup>23</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

is what happened in reality when he told me to disappear after they had left.<sup>24</sup>

Although I was not able to interview officials who are anti-regime and still in their positions, nevertheless, based on interviews I conducted, I had the chance to interview key officers who had defected as a result of the regime policy of narrowing down the avenues for challenging the regime and supporting the popular uprising.

The empirical evidence of the aftermath of the 2012 explosion in Damascus that left senior security figures dead indicates that the regime was determined to put an end to the growing movement (Amin 2012). 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 protesters were either shot at while doing their duty or prisoned (Meo 2012).

The case of Aleppo University was no different. The violent response was increasing when defection became possible, and only those who were trusted by the regime were deployed to the University campus. In an interview with the general director of the Crime Investigation Department in Syria, who defected in the summer of 2012 and was in a key position in Aleppo Police General Directorate in the beginning of the uprising, he described for me the strategy the regime was following concerning the protests in the campus:

The deployed police officers 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 they might know them 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 student accommodation where there is no one from the city of Aleppo.<sup>25</sup>

The movement started to gain public support as the debate amongst the officials themselves was an opportunity for the challengers to advance their claims. The

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<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Memo, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Hamburg, Germany, on 26 March 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Author's Whatsapp interview with Awad Al-Ali, a Brigadier General, ex-general director of the Crime Investigation Department- Syria, Istanbul, Turkey, on 04 May 2017.

oppressive mode and structure of the regime did not stand having people challenging it, especially since the country did not witness such a movement for a long time.<sup>26</sup> With the absence of the political multiplicity, the opening of opportunities for the activists adapted to the change of narrative and attitudes of Baathists officials. Protesters captured this opportunity to address not only bystanders but also the officials and members of the regime who became the audience of the challengers where, according to Jasper, "actions of activists are aimed at producing effects in a number of audiences" (2004: 6).

The absence of the official political multiplicity within the Syrian regime was reflected in the structure of the University of Aleppo too. Some of those who were occupying official positions within the Baath party or NUSS, who were not necessarily distant from challengers or regime members per se, could support the movement from *within* the structure without being noticed by regime supporters. 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 this opportunity to give them 'inside' information about regime plans, such as warnings about future arrests or harsh repressive actions. This was happening without coordination with the protesters. However, it was very effective in challenging the regime, and it also created an atmosphere of uncertainty and loss of trust within the regime. As Jasper postulates, the creativity of strategic players is when they "manage to break with expectations and make another choice, taking their opponents by surprise. This is how structures change, after all" (2004: 7). This was the case through the time period I am researching, from 2011-2013. This was before the regime drew a clear, polarizing, dividing line between the two sides: either one is with the regime, or with those who are conspiring against it. This was clearly reflected in Bashar Al-Assad's speech in 2012 at Damascus University: "there is no grey area when the state is experiencing and going through these events" (aljazeeraonline 2012). It was a green light to deal with all those who are against the regime strategy of dealing with the uprising.

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<sup>26</sup> At the beginning of the uprising, the officials started to recall the events of 1980s when the Islamic Brotherhood movement tried to mobilize using guns from the first day. That mobilization was violently put down resulting in massacres in both cities of Aleppo and Hama and other cities that tried to join the uprising. 2011 movement is considered the biggest uprising since that date.

## 5.2 Regime openness for change

On the night before Assad showed up for the first time in the People's House after the protest movement was ignited in the city of Dar'a, one of his advisors, Buthaina Shaaban, had appeared on state TV reading a long list of reforms the regime was planning to implement (al-Arabiya 2011). The first one on the list the president thought of, Shaaban confirmed, was *considering* lifting the state of emergency that has been in place since 1963. Another key government reform proposal was working towards the legislation of new media law and freedom of press (RT 2011). The empirical evidence shows that the state of emergency was never lifted and protests remained prohibited, although the regime media propaganda claimed that the contrary was happening. Instead, quite the opposite was happening; more troops were deployed to the University of Aleppo and other places where there were protests.

Although no change happened on the ground in terms of repression and the decrease of violence exercised by the regime and its paramilitary groups, these shifts in the political structure incited the students challenging the regime to mobilize and advance their claims that they are acting in accordance with the new mindset of the regime, and its openness to the voices calling for change. Students were not satisfied with the regime policies even before the uprising. Nevertheless, challenging the regime by using its own narratives of “openness” and “willingness to change” was a strategic choice to advance their claims in a legitimate way. The students' interactions with the political opportunities were always retrospective in terms of the interchangeability with the official rhetoric of the regime.

In the next section I will review the narratives of President Bashar Al-Assad, of the state media outlets, and of the University officials' narratives. I will go on to consider how these narratives interacted with the students' framing, and responses to the claim of the regime openness.

### 5.2.1 Assad and state media narrative

From the first day of the protests, most people were looking forward to an official statement by the president, Bashar Al-Assad. By the end of March 2011, Assad showed up in the Parliament (a.k.a the People's House) to talk about a conspiracy that was targeting

the whole country. He described the protest participants as spoilers, in the pay of conspirators (aljazeeraonline 2011). On the ground, his speech backfired as he did not address the main issues people were asking for, like the security's excessive use of violence, and sacking those who were responsible for the killings of protesters and the torturing of children in Dar'a (Leenders & Heydemann 2012). Instead, he was confirming that Syria is not like the other countries that were affected by the Arab Spring, and it is ready to fight back if people are determined to go on with the protests.

In addition to the way Bashar Al-Assad responded to the events by ignoring the agency of the challengers who he alleged were only receiving orders from outsiders, the security services and the state institutions organized what they called "a spontaneous reaction" of the president's supporters to take to the streets and chant their willingness to sacrifice their lives for him (HananNoura 2011). Such actions incited the students to mobilize and also to refute the allegations of being tools in the hands of foreign governments (syrianagent2011 2011). In other words, this first official response by Bashar al-Assad, who holds the highest position in the state, signified a change in the attitudes of students and bystanders who decided to respond and take action. This mirrors McAdam when he postulates that "*any* event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities (McAdam 1999: 41). The empirical evidence, hence, proves that the Syrian regime was not open to new voices that were calling for change although it was focusing on a new stage the country is going through by broadcasting, via state TV channels, talk shows, interviews with officials and pro-Assad marches to counter narrate the presence of instability in the country.

### **5.2.2 University officials' framing**

Universities in Syria were considered to be loyal to the regime and a reservoir that could be mobilized through the enthusiastic speech and discourse of the Baathists and their institutional tools: the NUSS, and the Teachers' Syndicate. At the beginning of the uprising, all employees and lecturers were called to meet the regime political leadership in the University to be instructed on how to respond to the events that the University of

Aleppo might witness.<sup>27</sup> In an interview with an academic from Aleppo University, he said that:

Our role was to point out to the students that what is going on in Dara' and in the university in particular is not a popular uprising or a revolution; rather, it is a campaign that aims to weaken the resistance aspect of the Syrian government.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, in March and April 2011, the university billboards were full of documents that show how big the international conspiracy is against Syria in addition to the webpages and Facebook groups that were dedicated to frame the uprising as a conspiracy.<sup>29</sup> The NUSS was the most effective organization in promoting this idea because the members are solely students so the narrative of conspiracy would resonate amongst other students. Although I did not have the chance to interview many NUSS members, I was a senior member in the union and occupying a key position in the dormitory from 2007 till the end of 2011. We were always asked to promote the idea of government openness and the willingness of the regime to listen to the demands of the students if they stop protesting. The purpose of this was only to demobilize the challengers. One example is when the regime tried to organize a national dialogue that was held in all universities throughout the country. In July 2011, I was participating in the national dialogue in 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 NUSS and senior Baathists members who were interviewed by the state TV and expressed their satisfaction with the atmosphere of freedom of expression and democracy. Moreover, the university was closed at that time and it was the summer holiday in the university calendar. When asking one of the NUSS members about the

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<sup>27</sup> The "crisis cell" and the "security committees" were in charge of implementing a counter narrative to the activists' propaganda through the lecturers and the NUSS. When I was meeting with NUSS members, we were told to adopt the regime narrative of the conspiracy that the country is facing and the importance of not winning the students' hearts in order not to protest.

<sup>28</sup> Author's Messenger interview with Karam Hameed, pseudonym, a professor from Aleppo University, Antakya, Turkey, on 05 May 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Basically, 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. [https://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group\\_102274609856470](https://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_102274609856470)



outcomes of the dialogue meetings in general and Aleppo University in particular, he said that:

The thing is that there were rarely students who were against the government participating in these meetings because there was no trust in such initiatives by the regime as students were suspicious that they will be tracked because of their political views. Still, the regime wanted only those people who object some economic policies and some constitution articles that should be reviewed again and replaced with the presence of the same officials and government figures. Security, the president position and the army were red lines that were not allowed to be discussed.<sup>30</sup>

During the run-up to the uprising, the university authorities, driven by the (crisis cell) orders and directions from Damascus, decreed lecture suspension and the closure of the dormitories for 'maintenance works' leaving around twenty thousand students without a place to live (Zamanalwsl 2012). Undoubtedly, this decision was deeply thought through because the UN monitors planned to visit the University of Aleppo on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2012, (The New York Times 2012) two weeks after the closure of the university.

### **5.2.3 The role of students' agency in overcoming the problem of openness**

The structure of Aleppo University is unique from other universities. The demographic and ethnic diversity of the city made it next to impossible to have full control of the whole apparatus by loyalists to the regime like other universities of Al-Baath in Homs or Tishreen in Lattakia. Only few university officials were Alwaites who were generally fully loyalists to Assad's rule. This was a result of past experiences the people in Aleppo had from the repression of Assad senior during the events of 1980s, when he massacred tens of people in the city (syrianleaders 2012).<sup>31</sup>

Although all officials were Baathists, most of them were against the use of violence inside the campus. This initial response of the officials to the first protests helped the

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<sup>30</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

<sup>31</sup> In this article, details about the events of 1980s are presented when Hafez Al-Assad massacred hundreds of people. The article does not have a date but it mentions that it is the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre which entails that it was written in 2012.

students mobilize and build a narrative that is based on the openness of some officials. In an interview with a participant in the first protest in the dormitory, he pointed out to me the role played by some Baathist officials who were opposing the deployment of the riot police and the *Shabbiha* into the campus to oppress the students. The students could easily 'victimize' themselves in a creative way to these Baathist officials because, at this point, their only weapon was their voice, which gave them a window to advance their claims (Jasper 2004). In what follows, I use the cognitive liberation concept and the level of awareness the students had to overcome the increased level of oppression exercised by the regime, and its strategies to silence the students and erase their agencies.

### **5.2.3.1 Collectivity; cognitive liberation**

Social media was the most effective tool in diffusing the protest movements of the Arab Spring. Aleppo University was no exception, even though, it was available to the other party; the Syrian regime. The absence of international independent media was advantageous for the regime as most of the Syrians were not familiar with Facebook and other social media outlets.<sup>32</sup> The official state media was framing the events as incited by 'the enemies of the resistance' and mercenary spoilers were fulfilling the enemies' agendas. To overcome this dilemma, activists from Aleppo depended a lot on the diversity of students who played a great role in mobilizing the students:

I have a lot of friends from Homs, Idlib and Deir Azzour whose families and friends were undergoing the worst of times ever. In some cases, there were not able to bury the dead bodies of their family members because of the intense military presence in the cities. Without them showing us the reality through their mobile phones cameras, we would not believe what was going on.<sup>33</sup>

The role of those 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 home towns. As a result, the motivation and will to stand up against the regime grew.

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<sup>32</sup> It was until February 2011 when the Syrian government unblocked Facebook and other social media outlets (Preston 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Author's Skype interview with Wajd, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Bonne, Germany, on 06 April 2017.

At the same time, the increased attention the regime was paying to the media backfired in some cases and pushed challengers to look for other avenues where they could get another version of the narrative; for example, empirical stories from people from Aleppo itself. This is also what Meyer refers to as the "consciousness of the insurgents", where he posits that social movements are not solely dependent on the weaknesses of the government structures. He suggests that they are also dependent on the *realization* of the participants of the political context. "Movement activists do not choose their goals at random, it is the political context which stresses certain grievances around which movements organize" (Meyer 2004: 125).

The UN monitors' visit to the University indicated that the student movement was very important as it was included in the agenda of the mission to visit the university and evaluate the situation there. That was the moment for the students to advance their cause and claims, in spite of lectures being suspended and dormitories closed (Zamanalwsl 2012). This signaled a 'cognitive liberation' event, meaning the students saw the opportunity to take advantage of the presence of the third party UN monitors, by organizing the biggest protest in the history of the movement. The presence of the UN is, as McAdam describes, a "shifting political condition", that is one of a set of "meaningful events" that increases prospects for successful collective action (1999: 48). This was clear through the empirical evidence that proves the significant change in the mobilization and participation in the University where both parties, the regime and the opposition, tried to mobilize their supporters to propagate for their case and narrative (SyrAlepRev1 2012).

### **5.2.3.2 Transnational advocacy networks**

The broader approach of transnational advocacy groups has not been to simply force their way into international politics-as-usual. Rather, they have sought to change the way the game is played in international politics. They reshape the terms of international debate. They redefine and sometimes create the issues that gain international attention. They work to realign alliances and coalitions of powerful players. In short, they change fundamentally the way that international policy and practice occurs (Keck and Sikkink 2014).

The Arab Spring would never have been able to succeed in Tunisia and Egypt without the support of the international public opinion, and the government's calls to the leaders of these respective countries to step down. This research is focused on the repression at Aleppo University, and can therefore not make generalizations to other parts of the country. However, students at Aleppo University were very diverse in terms of what cities in Syria they came from, therefore their personal stories of the repression experienced in other cities were often told. These stories supported the idea of identical occurrences of regime responses to peaceful protests.

The students had the notion of the level of international support for the uprising, in a similar fashion to what happened in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The realization that if more people protest, there is a higher chance that pressure from the international community will increase, reflects the strategic choices the students were making.

In all my interviews with participants and officials of Aleppo University, I found that the motive was to incite the international community to support the uprising and show solidarity by forcing Assad to step down and not just *call* him to do so. "We thought that the UN monitors will be our messengers who will deliver our messages to the international community and incite the governments to take action against the dictatorship in Syria".<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the presence of the UN monitors was seen by the challengers as a political opportunity that is external to the movement; they understood its effectiveness and tried to capitalize on it. Activists in Aleppo University also became aware of the internal divisions of the regime members and the active defections that were happening around that time specially the defection of the Prime Minister, Riad Hijab, that was framed as a loss of the regime legitimacy (BBC 2012).

### **5.3 Political alignments and elites' roles**

Officially, the political structure of the Syrian regime bans the existence of any effective political rival in power to challenge it. The Syrian constitution is explicit in defining acceptable political life in the country. Article 8 of the constitution states the Baath Party

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<sup>34</sup> Author's Skype interview with Kais Aloush, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 03 April 2017.

as the sole leader of the state and society (Syria Constitution 2010). With the presence of the state of emergency, political activities rarely existed. If they did, they were private and on a small scale. There were some attempts in 2005 through what is known as 'Damascus Declaration' demanding a multiparty democracy in Syria. It called for a gradual and peaceful transition to democracy and the equality of all citizens in a secular and sovereign Syria (Carnegie 2012).

Although the harsh response to the Declaration members and the ban of their activities proved that change cannot happen by such attempts and plans, these activities were precursors for future movements and a realization that there should be something done to change the current situation. The shifting political conditions created by the uprising in 2011 signified to the challengers in Aleppo University that "the political system is becoming increasingly vulnerable to challenge" (McAdam 1999: 49). In what follows, I will be looking into the ebbs and flows of the official response to the movement, the implementation of the regime instructions, the agency of the students, and the strategies followed to overcome the problem of elites' absence.

### **5.3.1 The absence of elites and the role of institutions**

Since the opportunities were external to the movement, it was crucial for activists to sustain the movement by attracting elites and inciting them to join the uprising through, for example, solidarity or framing the case as a righteous. The regime was always attentive to the roles of the academics that have a critical stand of the regime. Because of the leading role of the Baath Party within the state structures and in society, assigning key positions in the university was always based on loyalties to the Baath and the leadership of the regime. So, the effective opposition figures to the regime were isolated and kept at the margins far away from the spot light. In an interview with one of the academics who fled the country to Turkey, he talked about the 'state of alienation' the academics were living in because of the regime policies to marginalize their role in the political life:

A colleague of mine who was imprisoned for ten years because of an article he published was an example of the regime messages to potential activists even before the uprising. The elites were not given any role to participate in the decision making

process in the university in order not to deviate from regime lines.<sup>35</sup>

Academic activists had limited options of where to stand in the uprising. The first option was to risk their lives and to support the uprising, which meant that they would be pointing the fingers to themselves to be arrested or harassed. The other option was to leave the country which was very difficult as every step was being watched and getting arrested was a high possibility by any one of the border crossing points.<sup>36</sup> The last option was to stay silent and look at how the movement develops in order to free-ride when possible, which was the most reoccurring behavior of the academics preferring not to take sides in the conflict. McAdam refers to this as a realization of interest: "the factor affecting the response of the other parties to insurgency is the degree to which the movement poses *a threat or an opportunity* to other groups in terms of the realization of.. interests" (McAdam 1999: 57, my emphasis). Indeed, by the time the UN monitors left the Aleppo University in mid-2012, many officials and academics had either resigned or left the country thinking that the UN mission would make a change to the situation on the ground as the regime looked weak at that time.

### **5.3.2 Regime's framing of opposition elites**

The political opportunity structure model suggests that in order for a movement to sustain and diffuse, there should be instability of political alignments in the conflicted arena of the movement context (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). In a televised speech, Bashar Al-Assad pointed to the majority of people who stayed silent and described them of being 'loyal and patriotic' because they did not protest and revolt against the regime (antiwhabi33 2011). This accusation against the protesters was premised on the lack of elite support and the absence of organization.

Undoubtedly, the organization factor is true because of the high level of repression practiced by the regime towards the protesters, and the ban to institutionalize any political campaign or event. Moreover, the regime was organized in a way that portrayed

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<sup>35</sup> Author's Whatsapp interview with Jamal Nasrat, pseudonym, a professor and ex-Baathist official from Aleppo University, Istanbul, Turkey, on 03 May 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Author's Whatsapp interview with Jamal Nasrat, pseudonym, a professor and ex-Baathist official from Aleppo University, Istanbul, Turkey, on 03 May 2017.

the other party as nonexistent. When the regime started to mobilize its supporters as a counter movement to the protests inside the campus, it correlated with McAdam's idea that "organized groups are expected to respond to pressures in a fashion consistent with their own interests" (McAdam 1999: 56). One of the problems that was related to the existence of opposition elites, is that all elites were outside Syria because every active social figure was arrested.

At the beginning of the uprising, the state TV channels were focusing on showing and depicting the people who were inciting people to mobilize as being deceived and paid for by foreign governments.<sup>37</sup> The absence of opposition elites was not a big problem for the movement internally as the students and academic figures were aware of that dilemma as the regime would not allow this to happen. According to one of the students, who was detained because of her activism, the absence of elites could be attributed to the risks those elites would face if they supported the movement:

We, young people, did not have anything to lose like the elders who are in positions that they have been promoting for so long. Pro-regime themselves are pro the excellences they will gain and the positions they will have. Yet, there were sympathizers and implicit calls for protests in addition to the objection of the presence of the security forces inside the campus.<sup>38</sup>

Although the movement was noninstitutionalized, it had to depend on institutionalized tactics in institutional power positions (McAdam 1999). While the official narrative of the regime claims that there were no public figures and academics supporting the movement, the empirical evidence indicates that, through the interviews I conducted with participants and officials, protesters were helped out by people in official positions like

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<sup>37</sup> Because there was no escape for activists, the regime was forcing social and religious figures, who played important roles in the uprising, to show up and say that foreign governments are inciting people to protest (FreeMediaSyria 2011). When the same people could escape outside Syria, they showed up again telling their experiences with the pressure the regime had put on them to demobilize. Here is an interview with the same person with another TV channel telling how he was forced to tell what the security forces dictated him: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMMN2ucATHA>

<sup>38</sup> Author's Skype interview with Wajd, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Bonne, Germany, on 06 April 2017.

police officers, Baathists and even security personnel, which is an indication of a support and alignment to the movement.<sup>39</sup>

### **5.3.3 Insurgents' recognition of the absence of opposition elites**

SMT theorists stress unanimously on the importance of elites in social movements to give the movement more credibility and dynamism (Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Kurzman 1996; McAdam 1999; Jasper 2004; Meyer 2004). Political life in Syria has always been built on the basis of what I call *selective relativity* where judgments and laws are manipulated for the favor of its legislatures and applied against those non-regime-heeding groups. That is to say that any group that tries to organize an event or mobilize will pay back with disastrous consequences. The examples, including but not limited to, Damascus Spring 2001 and Damascus Declaration 2005, (Donker 2012) illustrate the Syrian regime reactions to opposing voices.

In democratic governments, elites play crucial roles in social movements and mobilization because of the availability of the democratic horizon they frame their claims within, however, in authoritarian contexts, like Syria, it is different. What is worth mentioning about the students' social movement in Aleppo University is that the uprising was an extension to what was happening in other cities; what developments arise in any city will be reflected in the case of the University.

At the same time, participants realized the absence of elites in the movement and attributed this to the oppressive nature of the regime and how it is impossible for elites to support the movement publicly. Still, the lack of elites did not come out of nothing. There was great pressure practiced 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 reconsidering the citizenship regulations and denationalize those inciting people to mobilize and stand up against the regime (قارصلي 2013). It is no surprise that this has been the case with the Syrian political life for the last forty five years. However, students have depended on other alternatives to overcome the problem of the lack of elites within the movement. In what comes next, I will be reviewing the

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<sup>39</sup> Author's Whatsapp interview with Awad Al-Ali, a Brigadier General, ex-general director of the Crime Investigation Department- Syria, Istanbul, Turkey, on 04 May 2017.



strategies the students resorted to in order to cope with the lack of 'traditional' concept of elites in the movement.

### **5.3.3.1 Depending on alternatives**

By the time the regimes of Tunisian President, Ben Ali, and the Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, were toppled, some Syrians attempted to mobilize by calls on Facebook for a “day of rage” for the Syrian people. Yet, it proved unsuccessful because of the high levels of security presence and oppression (Donker 2012). This shows the weakness, or absence of, opposition elites trying to incite people to take to the streets as every step was being watched by the many security departments. "Elites" does not equate to movement leaders; rather I use it to refer to prominent societal figures that can inevitably add visibility and prestige to public actions, without *necessarily* leading or directing these actions. Aleppo University was no exception when it came to the roles of elites and academic figures. In the context of totalitarian Syria regime, it was next to impossible for elites to show up and support the movement. The students therefore came up with other ideas; either to ignore the elites' roles or to make use of other possibilities that would benefit the movement, as the students were worried of the probable co-optation of the movement by elites. McAdam argues that "elite involvement would seem to occur only as a response to the threat posed by the generation of a mass-based social movement" (1999: 26). In an interview with one of the participant students, he described the role of elites in the University saying:

There were some Baathists figures who were trying to protect the students from the regime violent reactions but he could not. How can a Baathist challenge the Baath?! They were swinging between the students and the security forces to save themselves from both sides.<sup>40</sup>

It was clear how elites were very careful in dealing with both parties, the regime and the opposition, to save a seat for themselves in the aftermath of the unpredictable events by claiming that they were with one side not the other. The empirical evidence

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<sup>40</sup> Author's Skype interview with Saleh Ali, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 04 April 2017.

shows that many figures inside the University diverted and changed their stands towards the uprising. I tried to interview academic and official figures who used to support the movement but now have different attitudes, but they refused to be interviewed or 'speak politics'. Nevertheless, students could make use of some official positions in the University and the security departments to find an avenue to support their claims.

### ***Allies***

As it is explicitly stated in the constitution that any political activity has to be under the umbrella of the Baath Party; the state of emergency was the executive tool to implement this in society. Because everything in Syria is institutionalized, participating students found ways to overcome this dilemma through using their own networks in the different institutions of the University. The demographic structure of Aleppo was reflected in the official positions inside the University which means that many challengers had relatives or good connections with people inside the regime occupying positions that they could depend on in case of detention or threat of arrest. The NUSS, the Baath Party, and even the security departments that have physical presence inside the campus, used to have people in key positions who were cooperating with the protesters but these were individual cases. According to one of the students who was detained during her activism in the university:

There were some cases where people were helped out and saved by official figures and elites occupying key positions in the regime, but all these cases were individual ones. There were students who have connections or relatives working with those people. These people were passing information to the students to notify them about regime plans to take precautionary actions.<sup>41</sup>

Through interviewing ex-NUSS members, there were similar examples of officials notifying students of potential threats by the security forces. This was done when the security services were stalking activists inside the campus through sending lists of

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<sup>41</sup> Author's Skype interview with Wajd, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Bonne, Germany, on 06 April 2017.

students' names to the NUSS to provide the security services with details of the students and the place of residency and so forth.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Internal and external supporters***

What characterizes the Arab Spring, which the Syrian uprising is part of, is the spirit of the youth that was demonstrated when the young took the lead in protesting in the streets. During my participation in the movement in the University, and my interviews with other participants, there was a consensus among the participants that the uprising does not need the elites' support to get *legitimacy*; the forty five-year dictatorship of the country was a sufficient indication:

When some military and political figures like the Prime Minister Riad Hijab and the Colonial Manaf Tlass who is a very close friend of Assad's family defected, they did not affect the regime as they were only criticizing the government. The regime was not affected by defection at all, politically and militarily. The regime did not need to be criticized as it is very clear the picture of the regime and the level of repression it had against the movement.<sup>43</sup>

Internally, the movement was in need of supporters that could help the protesters out in critical situations in case they were caught demonstrating or detained for the same reason. The deployed platoons to the campus were diverse and coming from different cities across the country, which means that they were dealing with students who were probably coming from the same cities. Consequently, there were many supporters to the protesting students in the beginning of the uprising till defection was possible in 2012. However, the internal support was not enough to sustain the movement all the way until 2013. There was the external factor the movement in general was dependent on, and this was reflected in the statements from the international community.

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 the peaceful demonstrators. This was done through different political and media channels. Politically, many governments sanctioned and boycotted the regime

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<sup>42</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Hasson Leila, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Berlin, Germany, on 25 March 2017.

as a reaction to its atrocities and there were cases of embargo too (Warrick and Sly 2011). Moreover, the media coverage was an important factor in supporting the uprising and denuding the Syrian regime. The Aljazeera news network played a great role in the uprising, to the extent that some students saw its role more effective than many foreign governments. Another external supporter was the UN brokered monitors. Although the mission was impartial, the participating students unanimously perceived this as a golden opportunity to advance their claims against the regime that was refuting the narratives of anti-regime protests or oppression. 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 (SyrAlepRev1 2012). All these internal and external opportunities helped mobilize and recruit more people to the movement. Now, we come to the organizational part to examine the capacities of the challengers, and the strategies they used to overcome the high levels of oppression the movement faced.

#### **5.4 Organizational Strengths**

To generate a social movement, McAdam argues, "the aggrieved population must be able to "convert" a favorable "structure of political opportunities" into an organized campaign of social protest" (1999: 44). When the uprising was ignited in the city of Dar'a and started to diffuse to other cities like Homs, Idlib, and Deir Azzour, Aleppo stayed calm during the first month. As Aleppo is the economic hub of the country, the Syrian regime paid particular attention to it, by forcibly mobilizing the school students and the employees to support the regime and chant for the president Bashar Al-Assad (الشرق 2011 الأوسط). What is important to mention here is that all the rallies organized by the regime were on official working days and none were organized on the weekends. In the interviews with students and officials from Aleppo University, they confirmed this by saying that all lectures had to be suspended on the days the regime intended to organize rallies. Now, the question is how were students able to mobilize considering all the precautionary procedures by the regime inside the campus and, how later on, did protests diffuse to other neighborhoods in the city? In what follows, I will be reviewing the factors that helped activists facilitate and sustain the movement for almost three years. McAdam (1999) listed what he theorized as "indigenous organizational strengths" that include

four crucial resources; members, established structure of solidarity incentives, communication network, and leaders. The focus is going to be on organizers' charisma and social network, political and governmental ties, and resources. I will be adapting these theoretical concepts to the context of Aleppo University.

### **5.4.1 Organizers' charisma and social network**

SMT theorists have pointed to the importance of the social and organizational ties in movement recruitment (McAdam and Paulsen 1993). The University of Aleppo is characterized by its student diversity. Before the first protest inside the campus took place, students from other cities like Dar'a, Homs, Idlib, and Deir Azzor played an important role in raising awareness and circulating videos of the first protests in their cities, and showing how repressive the regime was to the peaceful demonstrations. Their narratives were contradicting that of the official media and state affiliated channels. By hearing real stories from people who were living the suffering and going through hardships, the mass base of the uprising started to increase which resulted in the first demonstration in Aleppo University (ShaamNetwork S.N.N 2011).

So, organizers had the charisma of being known amongst their colleagues and enjoyed the credibility of reporting what they and their families were facing; the violent regime repression. That is to say, the narrative was not like that of the regime which was describing those people of having ties with the Israeli government and other "imperialist governments" conspirators (Marsh and Chulov 2011). Moreover, the first participant students who incited others to mobilize were the hardworking ones and those who were committed to their studies not those who were just 'hanging out', which means that they knew exactly what they were doing.<sup>44</sup>

McAdam and Paulsen state that "without structural factors that expose the individual to participation opportunities or pull them into activity, the individual will remain inactive" (1993: 644). In this case, structural factors started to become available to challengers at the same time social networks were gradually increasing, and students

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<sup>44</sup> Author's Skype interview with Wajd, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Bonne, Germany, on 06 April 2017.

were becoming more organized after establishing contacts with each other during the protests.

#### **5.4.2 Political and governmental ties**

As a rule of thumb in the University, every student has to join the NUSS. Not all students had to join the Baath Party, however, if students wanted to get any privileges, it was then their only option. Inevitably, the great majority of students were therefore Baath Party members. The membership was cleverly used by protesters, as they were organized in patrician groups and these groups were attached to hierarchy within the Baath Party in the University. These connections, which in most of the cases were based on kinship or friendship ties, created an aisle for activists to operate and organize within. For instance, I used to have very good connections with key figures in the Baath Party and the NUSS. I was always notified about the security forces plans and the secret posts they were receiving so I could take precautionary actions and circulate the information amongst my friends who, in their turn, would pass this on to their friends.

Until May 2011, after one month and a half of the uprising in Dar'a, only two protests had been organized; one in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the other in the dormitory (syrianagent2011 2011). What was circulating amongst students at that time was the phrase '*we broke the barrier of fear*' that all Syrians have been living for decades under the rule of the Assad family. From this point, the students were protesting almost every day, especially in the dormitory. What facilitated this increase in the participation was the careful strategy the regime was following at the beginning inside the University and the objection of many academic and official figures, including some Baathists, to the implemented policies inside the campus. When students were arrested in the protests, other students would keep protesting the whole night and through the course of the week until their friends and colleagues were released. Furthermore, university officials were most of the time involved in the negotiations between the students and the security departments which indicates that the opportunities were in favor of the challengers. This was the case until mid-2012 when the UN brokered monitors visited the University of Aleppo. This led to significant changes in important

positions, and key officials who were accused of 'collaboration' with the protesters were fired, paving the way to create opportunities to protest.<sup>45</sup>

Koopmans argues that "strong oppression may also stimulate collective action" (Koopmans in Kriesi et al 1992: 224). The empirical evidence shows that repression did not reduce the number of participants or stop them from protesting; rather, it led to recruit more people and incite those who experienced torture and detention to become more involved. As one of the participants says:

Before detention in July 2011, I had participated in a couple of protests. After I experienced detention and torture, I realized that I could survive the repression practiced on me. So, if I am detained again, I will feel pain for a while but then my country will be free. Freedom has a price, an expensive price.<sup>46</sup>

Now, I will move to the resources the students were resorting to in order to organize protests.

### 5.4.3 Resources

As there were no elites leading the protest movement, the empirical evidence indicates that organizing protests was spontaneous and did not need sophisticated arrangements and resources to mobilize the masses. This is because the protest movement in the University reflected what was simultaneously going on in other cities. Social media was a revolutionary tool in the Arab Spring, including in the Syrian uprising. By the time the Tunisian revolution succeeded in toppling that regime, the Syrian regime blocked nearly all social media outlets, while allowing access to some institutions like the NUSS to create pro-regime platforms in case of a probable anti-regime mobilization.<sup>47</sup> In a later stage, after the creation of some Facebook pages, like " الثورة السورية 2011 " and Local Coordination Committees in Syria, that were used as umbrellas for the whole movement across the country, the students were part of

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<sup>45</sup> This was confirmed by all my informants, academics, and students. As a participant myself in the movement, I noticed the significant change that happened after the UN visit to the university at that time.

<sup>46</sup> Author's interview with Amer Yousef, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Berlin, Germany, on 26 March 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

these networks where they coordinated protests and used these platforms to frame the grievances to mobilize against the regime.<sup>48</sup> Because these new techniques and technology were new to the Syrians as they have always been blocked by the government, activists were primarily dependent on other alternatives such as 'community and students networks'.

#### ***5.4.3.1 Community and students networks***

Most scholars that focused on the onset of the uprising in Syria concluded that established networks and clan ties of early risers played an important role in the uprising (Donker 2012; Leenders and Heydemann 2012). Aleppo University was not an exception when it comes to organizing protests, strikes, or solidarity activities. For those who were not using social media applications, they were connected with each other through a network of *focal point people*. Focal point people were well-connected movement members to both regime figures and movement organizers. One of the respondents talks about his experience and participation with one of these people:

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.<sup>49</sup>

This was like a domino game; every group would have a leader that kept his group members informed and updated about the new strategies and opportunities of the movement. These networks were based on geography, kinship, and fields of studies as discussed above in details; these networks are described by McAdam as

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<sup>48</sup> The Syrian Revolution 2011 'الثورة السورية ضد بشار الأسد' was created before the onset of the revolution in Dar'a to be used as a platform to organize and give names to Fridays as the biggest protests were organized then because people were already gathering for the Friday prayer. In a later stage, the "coordination committees" were created to assemble people on a lower level; cities, universities, neighborhoods, and even diaspora community. Here are the links to these platforms: <http://www.lcc-sy.com/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/LCCSy/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolutiion/>

<sup>49</sup> Author's Skype interview with Saleh Ali, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 04 April 2017.



"interorganisational linkages characteristics". He postulates that these characteristics "facilitate movement emergence by providing the means of communication by which the movement, as a new cultural item, can be disseminated throughout the aggrieved population" (1999: 47). To conclude, the resources were always there but the access to these resources, officials and social media, was the key for challengers to take that opportunity.

#### **5.4.3.2 *Government narrative; conspiracy theory***

By the time the protests diffused to other places in the country, the Syrian regime started to think of a narrative that could refute what was being circulated among the citizens and the anti-regime mainstream media. The first strategy the regime followed was distorting the picture of participants and those who were inciting to more protests. In an interview with a senior member of the NUSS, he pointed out the instructions they received to give a counter narrative to the protesters and to isolate them:

We received an official letter from the headquarter in Damascus to promote a Facebook page/group the union created as a preemptive step to any probable calls for protests in Syria. The page name was 'Nations burn themselves to change its presidents, while the Syrians burn themselves to keep their president'. We were receiving loads of faxes to organize rallies pro the government and the president Bashar Al-Assad.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, in his speeches and interviews, Bashar Al-Assad accused the protesters of being "conspirators incited by foreign governments" to protest and conduct terrorist attacks (Marsh, and Chulov, 2011). The official media outlet was promoting a campaign that was allegedly made up in the security departments which talks about some governments that were allocating resources to mobilize the Syrians to topple the regime. This campaign was called "the Popular Campaign against Bandar Ben Sultan".<sup>51</sup> In a

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<sup>50</sup> Author's Skype interview with Khatib Khatib, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Reyhanli, Turkey, on 10 May 2017. Here is the link to access the group that my informant mentioned in the interview: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/149225478506146/>

<sup>51</sup> There were many Facebook groups in addition to other news and media channels which used to focus solely on the alleged narrative of conspiracy and explaining the aim and the content of this plan to 'destroy Syria' (الحدث نيوز 2012).

televised speech in Damascus University, Bashar Al-Assad highly appreciated the role of what is called 'the Syrian Electronic Army' - a group that was very active in hacking activists' accounts and opposition pages, in addition to circulating the regime narrative of what was happening inside the University and other places in the country. By adopting the narrative of the regime and the state media, the officials inside the University started to set boundaries of *political identities* that separate pro-regime from the challengers and the relations within their boundary (Tilly and Tarrow 2015).

### **5.4.3.3 Challengers' narrative**

The political context of Syria, as is the case with most authoritarian regimes, made activists outcasts to any participation in power, many people had to leave the country. These figures played an important role in challenging the regime from outside as they could organize. Through diaspora connections with their families, friends and activists on the ground, the uprising started to diffuse by *streams of contention* where movements' participants depend on individuals that share the same ideas but they are in different locations or occupying different positions. The participants, moreover, depended on their international supporters through the interaction between the diaspora and the international community (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). This contact between diaspora and activists on the ground was framed by the regime as a 'conspiracy', while the challenging students call it an extension of 'collaboration and support'.<sup>52</sup> The students were always calling for a third party to be present to record and report independently what was happening on the ground which happened in April 2012 when the UN brokered the monitors a mission to monitor Syria through resolution 2043 (UN 2012).

Although the regime was peddling the narrative of the presence of foreign people whose role was to lead and incite people to mobilize, I question here whether this would erase the agency of the students who were directly affected by experiencing direct threats of death, arrest, torture and loss of families. According to one of my respondents who has relatives outside Syria, digital cameras were not available to challengers and printing

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Here is a link to one of these groups that were created for the above mentioned purpose: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/102274609856470/>

<sup>52</sup> Author's interview with Akram Akram, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Utrecht, the Netherlands, on 26 May 2017.

leaflets was impossible.<sup>53</sup> Because not all social groups controlled the same types and amounts of resources, and not all individuals within a given social group had equal access to group resources (Edwards and McCarthy 2004), the lack of the availability of local resources necessitated the dependence of challengers on outsiders; family members, friends and activists networks. Moreover, there were a lot of businessmen supporting the challenging students in the uprising by hosting them and covering the expenses of the treatment when they get injured and cannot go to hospitals because of the threat of arrest. When I was there, in addition to the narratives of participants, there were a lot of cases where doctors were treating students' injuries without any payments.<sup>54</sup>

## 5.5 Regime infiltration of protesters

Interaction, Tilly and Tarrow theorize, "does not occur only among those who demonstrate. On the margins of demonstrations appear onlookers, sympathetic, *hostile*, or indifferent" (2015, 98 emphasis added). When the first demonstrations were organized inside the campus, the regime deployed the strategy of distracting the challengers and public opinion by calling its network of supporters, mainly NUSS and Baathists members, to assemble around and within the protesters with the pictures of Assad printed on their T-shirts that are covered by normal clothes on top of them.<sup>55</sup> 'This was meant to: (a) isolate the challengers in order not to spread 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'.<sup>56</sup> This network of supporters is those on the "margins of demonstrations", as Tilly and Tarrow describe above.

However, these live shows were, in an already crowded place, two-sided. On the one hand, it proved the challengers' narrative of the use of violence by the regime that led to the movement recruiting more people. On the other hand, it intimidated bystanders

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<sup>53</sup> Author's Skype interview with Saleh Ali, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 04 April 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Author's interview with Memo, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Hamburg, Germany, on 26 March 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Author's Skype interview with Khatib Khatib, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Reyhanli, Turkey, on 10 May 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

and hesitant people to join because of the level of repression that was practiced by the regime and its supporters. Moreover, this infiltration did not stop at this level; rather, it exceeded this to take other forms of interactions and challenge like having regime informants within protests coordinators and social media. I will briefly review both contexts within which most of infiltrations were taking place; social media and Coordination Committees.

### **5.5.1 Social Media**

The role of social media in the Arab Spring was one of the top resources which protesters depended on to advance their claims. However, it was also available to countermovement supporters in all contexts of the uprisings. Activists created platforms where they could raise awareness, challenge the regime's narrative and organize protests in Aleppo University. The regime at the same time started to use the same means and strategies to counter narrate the claims of the students. As Tilly and Tarrow state, "counterclaims do not occur randomly; they take their shape from surrounding regimes, cultures, and institutions" (2015: 111). According to the participants' input, regime forces were most of the time present in the place that it was planned to witness a protest which is a clear indication of the regime infiltration of the organizers. Facebook and Skype applications were the main sources the students used to organize protests; 'since most of the activists, especially the organizers, were not using their real names, it was easy for security personnel to create fake accounts with revolutionary names to join the groups and pass information to their leaders'.<sup>57</sup> In a later stage, I will review the strategies the students resorted to in order to overcome the infiltration problem.

### **5.5.2 The demonstrations**

The main strategy the regime was using at the beginning of the movement inside the campus was the disruptive reactions where these actions were "intended to inhibit or upset the lives of target" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 128). For example, the security platoons that were present inside the campus were facilitating and protecting pro-regime rallies while preventing demonstrators to organize. Moreover, employees were asked to be in

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<sup>57</sup> Author's Skype interview with Kais Aloush, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 03 April 2017.

the main squares in shifts to chant for the president once protesters demonstrated.<sup>58</sup> Later on, it started to escalate as more students joined the movement, which resulted in new strategies like distributing electrical shock devices, cables and batons. This was facilitated by the security department's figures who were recruiting students that were regime loyalists on a sectarian basis, as their attempts to do so with NUSS members failed because many members were not following the orders of repressing the protesters.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the disruptive actions, the Air Force Intelligence started to arm some students in order to participate in putting down the protests.<sup>60</sup> Because NUSS members who were asked to join the security forces to participate in repressing the protests could not oppose the orders, they started to make 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, those who were suspected to be sympathizers were fired or forcibly moved to other institutions outside the University. I was personally moved to another institution and leave my position in the university. There were many employees who faced the same scenario. We were asked to hold guns and be parts of check points inside the campus. All those who rejected were either fired or moved to other institutions.<sup>61</sup>

In what comes next, I will be reviewing the strategies students used to overcome the high repressive response of the regime and the infiltration of the organizers' networks.

### **5.5.3 Students strategies to overcome infiltration**

So far, all preceding evidence shows that the circumstances the protests were organized within were extremely difficult and the regime was never open to hearing those voices calling for change. This indicates that the students used unusual strategies to overcome the high levels of repression and infiltration of organizers and protests. There were many

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<sup>58</sup> Author's Skype interview with Khatib Khatib, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Reyhanli, Turkey, on 10 May 2017.

<sup>59</sup> When I was present in the University I witnessed this and it was also mentioned by my NUSS informants.

<sup>60</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Author's Skype interview with Hazem Ahmad, pseudonym, a student and ex-member of NUSS, Izmir, Turkey, on 16 April 2017.

strategies that students resorted to in order to organize. I will focus on three of these strategies; the use of *focal points people*, *scapegoating* and *flash mobs*.

One of the organizing tactics was the "*focal points people*", where each group of activists has one trustful representative who would pass information to his group face-to-face rather than online.<sup>62</sup> Another way of organizing protests was, after there was a mass base for the movement not only in the campus but also in Aleppo neighborhoods, the *scapegoating strategy* where organizers would announce many locations for the protests with small groups present in these places. 'When the security forces rush to put the protest down, students join other group in a different place. With this strategy participants could protest and get their messages heard in public in addition to distracting the security forces'.<sup>63</sup> The third tactic was *flash mobs* or, as I call, *a pilot protest*. A *pilot protest* is a protest that takes place in a spontaneous way to test the readiness of the students and the response of the regime depending on the contexts of that time when a lot of students were always ready to protest even for two minutes. The regime was using heavy weapons in other big cities like Homs, Dar'a, and Deir Azzour, therefore students were responding in a more challenging way to the regime. As Brockett (2005) posits "if state violence is increased after a protest cycle... is well underway, this repression is more likely to provoke even higher levels of challenge, both nonviolent and violent, rather than deter contention" (Brockett in Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 175).

The student movement in Aleppo University witnessed a lot of ebbs and flows during the timespan of the uprising between 2011 and 2013. The Syrian regime is known for being an authoritarian one and fatally repressive towards challengers. Nevertheless, people revolted and the students challenged it in the University of Aleppo to certain levels. In what follows, I will be reviewing the key events in the movement and the regime repressive actions and strategies to stop the movement inside the campus and make a turnover.

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<sup>62</sup> Author's Skype interview with Saleh Ali, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 04 April 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Author's Skype interview with Kais Aloush, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University, Gazi Antep, Turkey, on 03 April 2017.

## 5.6 Regime repression and the dynamics of the movement

The basic assumption of POS theory is that social movements are contingent on the opening of opportunities and the availability of resources (McAdam 1999). Hence, the resources would enable the insurgents to exploit the opportunities. It is a mutual relationship that depends on the availability of resources while the structure of the regime is inclined to open for insurgents. In the context of my topic, I argue 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. This was confirmed by one of my respondents, who was detained several times, when he talked about his experience:

The Military Security officer told us that although we were breaching the law by protesting in public places without prior official approval, the government would be merciful to us. When I was released, I realized that there were new laws the government adopted concerning protests regulations. This meant that we could, in principle, get a permission to organize protests. Yet, this never happened.<sup>64</sup>

These strategies that were adopted by the regime contradicted completely what was practiced by the different security services on the ground in addition to the experiences I had while being in the NUSS social committees in the dormitory. In all the meetings that we had, the instructions were to face all tries and do our best to prevent any protest tries inside the campus. At the same time, strategies were changing in all the phases of the movement in relation to the density of the participation in the uprising between 2011 and 2013. In the previous chapters, I have presented the structure of the regime in Aleppo University in addition to the adopted policies by the regime to put down the movement. Now, I will list the key events of the movement (Figure 5.1) from the first protests in 2011 until it stopped in 2013.

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<sup>64</sup> Author's interview with Akram Akram, pseudonym, a student from Aleppo University and ex-detainee, Utrecht, the Netherlands, on 26 May 2017. This was Akram's first experience after the movement started.

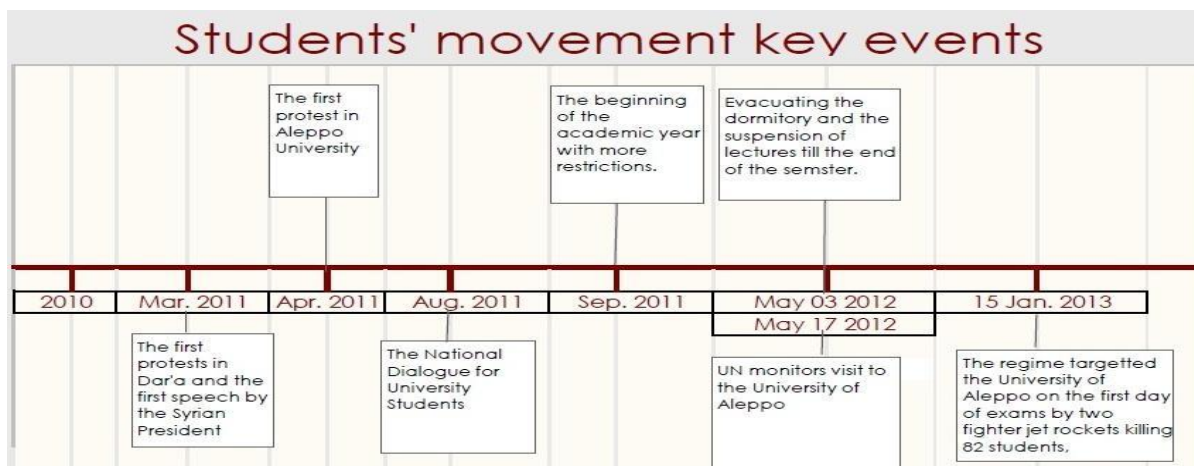


Figure (5.1) key events of the students' movement in Aleppo University between 2011 and 2013.<sup>65</sup>

There is almost a consensus amongst social movements' theorists that protests fade out when they are faced with high levels of repression that would disperse activists and force them to take different routes (Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Kriesi et al 1995; Alimi 2009). It is worth mentioning here that the students' movement was never detached from the uprising beyond the walls of the university. As a result, the developments that happened after the UN visit to Aleppo University in May 2012 created new paths for the movement. Firstly, the levels of repression increased with the formation of the Al-Baath Legions in addition to the expulsion of the officials who were suspected of collaboration with the challengers. Secondly, the closure of the dormitory in front of around 20 thousand students that was a big platform for active students to mobilize in addition to the suspension of the lectures that gave the regime an opportunity to reconsider the old strategies and adopt new ones that resulted in targeting the university on the first day of examination to send a clear message for those who were planning to protest again.<sup>66</sup> Finally, the Free Syrian Army took control of more than seventy per cent of the city of Aleppo by the end of 2012 that provided a safe haven for activists to move and transform their contention to the FSA controlled neighborhoods as they could protest freely and openly.

<sup>65</sup> This is based on my own observations of the key events of the movement when I was in the university in addition to the confirmation of my participants on these events.

<sup>66</sup> I was in the university on that day when I witnessed the attack on the Faculty of Architecture and the Unit 9 of the dormitory that used to host IDPs as the regime evacuated the students justifying that IDPs were a priority who fled the fighting in the Eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo. The attack left 82 people dead and more than 200 injured. It is worth mentioning that the regime took advantage of the FSA entering the neighborhoods of Aleppo in the summer of 2012 to open the dormitory doors for the families and close them for the students, who did not stop protesting the previous two years (See appendix i).



## **Conclusion**

The aim of this research has been to explain the circumstances and the political opportunities the activist students of Aleppo University took to mobilize and advance their claims against the dictatorial regime of Bashar Al-Assad. Through the lens of political opportunity structures, I narrowed down my focus on exploring the regime's properties that Tilly and Tarrow (2015) and McAdam (1996) theorized. I focused primarily on the interaction between the agency of the students, and the regime structure inside the University of Aleppo that was connected to other institutions like the Baath Party Leadership and the National Union of Syrian Students executive office in the Capital.

In the first core chapter, I presented the political and institutional structure of the University of Aleppo, where the regime put extensive restrictions in place to control and ban all activism and mobilization. The mono-party political system that makes the Baath Party the sole leader of the state and society in Syria was a tool to institutionalize any sort of activities under the umbrella of the Baath Party ideology. Only pro-regime rallies were allowed, and they were facilitated by the unions and syndicates that were supervised by the only political party and the security services. In a top-secret leaked report that was published in an article by The Jerusalem Post (2011), the strategies adopted by the regime to face the popular uprising, were explained. Although the report was not directed to the situation in Aleppo University, it highlighted the brutal strategies the regime adopted across the country.

In my second core chapter, chapter five, I explored the availability of opportunities through tracking the regime properties in the context of Aleppo University. As there was no official political multiplicity, the challengers had to navigate their activism through their personal networks with officials inside the university to be able to advance their claims. On the other hand, the students' movement benefited from the regime claims of openness, and used the new laws and legislations to support and defend their stance while confronting the repressive machinery of the regime. The students, furthermore, depended on the regional and international opportunities presented by the Arab Spring and the pressure practiced on the Syrian regime to ease the grip on the protestors in all over the country.

In order to understand the relationship between the structure and agency of the students in the movement, I needed to explore the roles of elites and the institutions in the movement. The empirical evidence indicated that the challengers did not need the elites' support to start the movement. However, it was crucial for the movement to have elites present in order to sustain the movement and further advance the insurgents' claims. I also presented some strategies and alternatives the challengers adopted to overcome the absence of elites and institutions' support. I used McAdam's organizational strength debate to draw a picture of the insurgents' agency to "convert" a favorable "structure of political opportunities" into an organized campaign of social protest" (1999: 44).

Finally, I have focused on what was happening when students were protesting and organizing their protests. These details were drawn based on my own experience and participation in the movement. Through introducing new concepts that helped explain the strategies used to overcome the regime's infiltration of the protests, I aimed to contribute to the theoretical debate about the salience of some of properties that Tilly and Tarrow (2015) theorized. By focusing on the agency of the challengers I have looked beyond the structural factors of the regime and their roles in the movement, to fill an empirical gap of one of the episodes of the Syrian uprising.

Although this thesis has demonstrated what factors contributed to the rise and the fall of the students' movement in Aleppo University, as the crisis in Syria continues further question arise. For example, what routes did the movement participants take? Did any participants choose to join an armed group and if so why? Or did they flee the country and are they, like myself and many of my informants, openly challenging the regime? Here we can look into how political opportunity structures affect the mobilization of diaspora populations. The third option for movement participants would be reintegration into the regime, begging the question why - why would former student activists choose to demobilize?

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## Appendix I

- i. *i. The moments a fighter jet fired missiles at Aleppo University in 2013.*<sup>67</sup>



ii.

- ii. *The aftermath of the Syrian regime attack on Aleppo University in January 2013.*<sup>68</sup>



<sup>67</sup> A man looking at the fighter jet that just fired missiles at the University. The source of the photo is a friend of mine who took this photo when he was there on that day. I received it by Whatsapp on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Source of the photo is the (Atlantic 2013). Accessed on 29 July 2017. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/01/syria-bombs-aleppo-university/319456/>



This photo was taken in a protest in Boustan Al-Qaser neighborhood- Aleppo 18-01-2013. It translates literally into “ He (Assad) shelled Aleppo University because intellect scares him more than arms do”

**Boustan Al-Qaser – Aleppo Pulse** (Source: Syriauntold)<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.syriauntold.com/ar/2013/02/جامعة-الثورة>